



Reflections
OF THE HEART

A PRIORITY-1 PUBLICATION

REFLECTIONS
OF THE HEART

BY RABBI SHAYA COHEN

*In Tribute to **Michael Diller** ob”m*

On July 11, 1981, the 10th of Tammuz, 5741, Michael Diller was tragically killed. Though Michael was only 23, his incredible kindness and love for everyone set him apart and made him special. Michael never had an unkind word for anyone and didn't know the meaning of improper language.

He was truthful and careful never to hurt the feelings of others. In his actions and conversations he was trusting and had the unique ability of always giving his friend the benefit of the doubt. He derived great joy from helping others.

On the occasion of his twenty-fifth Yartzheit, Priority-1 is proud to present this expanded collection of essays re-dedicated in memory of such a beautiful young man whose character can be an inspiration to all.

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Reflections of the Heart

Introduction

The Rabbis tell us (Midrash Rabbah: Bereishis 44) that the reason the Torah and its commandments were given, is to purify and perfect mankind. “Does it make a difference to G-d how we slaughter an animal or whether or not we wear Tefillin? It can only be that the purpose of the Mitzvos is to purify mankind.”

The totality of the commandments governing man’s relationship to his fellow man together with the full gamut of Jewish living experiences – Shabbos, Yom Tov, reactions to joy and tragedy, faith and trust, the dynamics of the Jew’s home life and his love of Israel – join together to help the Jew achieve ever higher levels of character development, human perfection and closeness with his Creator.

To explore the multitude of avenues the Torah offers to reach the Jew’s aspiration of perfection would be to study the entire Torah. However, a few of the basic approaches can be outlined to enable at least the beginning of an understanding of how the mitzvos form the steps of the infinite climb to *shleimus* (perfection).

This is, in fact, what Hillel told the gentile who approached him with the request to learn the whole Torah while standing on one foot (Shabbos 31a). Hillel told him, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend. This is the entirety of the Torah. The rest is only explanation. Now go and study it.”

Rashi offers two explanations. One is that the majority of the commandments of the Torah deal with man’s relationship with his fellow man. This, then, is the essence of Torah, but he must now study to know the specifics. Rashi offers another explanation. The friend referred to is man’s true friend, G-d, and Hillel tells the gentile that that which is hateful to you, that is, someone hurting you, do not

do to G-d. Rashi explains that this means to follow all of G-d's commandments. However, Rashi points out the reason for referring to G-d as "your friend," because you know the pain of a friend that hurts you.

It seems that without the proper relationship between us and our fellow man, not only are we missing the major portion of Torah, but we cannot even have a relationship with G-d. We must appreciate mankind in order to relate to G-d. Even the aspects of Torah that deal with man's relationship with his Creator cannot be fulfilled unless man's dealings with his fellow man are in proper order.

On the other hand, we find that that Avraham Avinu feared he would be murdered by King Avimelech and that his wife, Sarah, would be taken simply because he thought there was "no fear of G-d in this place." Without fear of G-d, Avrohom could not trust Avimelech to refrain from even the worst of crimes. Without a true relationship with G-d, man is not assured of continually proper behavior at any level. On the other hand, without the proper relationships with man, no real relationship with G-d is possible.

The Torah is a total unit. It must be strictly adhered to in all of its aspects. If one is lacking a commitment to any portion of the Torah he cannot be considered a committed Jew. He may look like a pious man and dress like a pious man, but unless he acts with true piety in all of his personal, business and social endeavors, he is not a committed Jew and bears no resemblance to true Jewish piety.

The Torah provides us with vivid examples of lifestyles of true piety to emulate. Yaakov's dealing with his wicked and deceitful father-in-law, Lavan, provides a classic example of the utmost in business ethics.

Yaakov had worked seven years in order to marry Rachel, the woman of his choice. Then, at the last moment, he was fooled into

taking her sister, Leah. To marry Rachel, he was forced to work another seven years, just to get what he had contracted for originally. He worked with total integrity as if he was under proper contract, never allowing the grave injustice to affect his work. He then worked another seven years for an agreed-upon salary, but Lavan always changed the conditions anytime Yaakov was about to benefit. Yaakov did not allow these constant changes to affect his devotion to his work. He spent sleepless nights working and bore all of the losses himself, even though he was not obligated to and in spite of the fact that his boss was constantly cheating him. Yaakov set an example for his children in the utmost of integrity even under the most unfair conditions.

One need only catch a glimpse of our more recent sages' personalities to further realize the essence of Torah. The greatest giants of Torah knowledge, who towered above their contemporaries in brilliance and wisdom, stood out as shining examples of kindness and sensitivity. The famed Vilna Gaon, the greatest Torah giant in nearly one thousand years, suffered abject poverty and deprivation for himself and his family rather than simply confronting an individual who was stealing from him each week — for fear of shattering the man completely in a confrontation with such a great person. Reb Chaim Soleveitchick of Brisk, a giant of his generation, was known as the address where countless unwanted babies could be dropped off and raised by him and his wife. The Chofetz Chaim, the teacher of his generation, spent all of his energies responding to the material, political, social and spiritual needs of his people. The warmth of the personalities of these greatest of Torah giants serves as an example of the effects of true Torah living.

The Vilna Gaon is quoted as saying, “If not for the development and perfection of character, what purpose do I have living?” The Gaon himself, who dwarfed a generation in scholarship, wisdom and

piety, could find no purpose in his life other than *Tikun Hamidos* (character development).

An incident, one of millions, in the lives of Torah giants, portrays with simplicity the image of a true Torah personality. Rabbi Yisroel Yaakov Lubchanski was the Rabbi of Smilovitz. It was his custom to come to shul very early each morning to light the stove so that the shul would be warm when everyone arrived to *daven*. Once he was bent over the stove close to the flames and someone, who must not have realized who he was, gave him a kick. The Rav, afraid of embarrassing the man, remained with his head inside the stove, in danger of his life, rather than embarrassing the man. When he was finally able to take his head out, his beard was burned off, but Reb Yisroel Yaakov was very happy having truly fulfilled the words of the Talmud, “It is better for a person to put himself into a burning furnace than to embarrass his friend in public.”

The Torah offers infinite systems to help man achieve its lofty goals for human perfection. One example of a major system to achieve this coveted goal is the Torah directives regarding forbidden speech — *Lashon Hora*.

David Hamelach says (Tehillim 34): “Come my children, listen to me. I will teach you reverence for G-d. Who is the man that desires life and loves long days of happiness? Keep your tongue from evil.” It seems that the foundation of *Yiras Shamayim* (fear of G-d) and the source of a long life full of all benefits, is one’s guarding his tongue from *Lashon Hora*.

Observing the laws of *Lashon Hora* can transform a person’s level of concern for his fellow man. If he refuses to speak against him, truth or other, refuses to even believe any bad spoken against him and won’t even listen to such speech, he develops a unique sense of care and concern in dealing with his fellow man. To enforce and enhance this effect, the Torah even places two extra positive

commandments (to remember the incident of Miriam and to watch oneself from the plague of *Tzoraas*) to insist that man be constantly on guard every moment of the day and night, not to dare come to speak *Lashon Hora*.

If a Jew trains himself to be so careful as to avoid any contact with forbidden speech, he paves for himself a path toward total harmony with his fellow man. If he won't even allow himself to believe bad words spoken about someone, certainly he will be careful in his actions toward his friend.

It is no wonder that the great Chofetz Chaim expended so much effort in his lifetime to enhance the observance of the laws of *Lashon Hora*. This observance has the power to lead to the heights of human perfection, affecting all aspects of our behavior with our fellow man and to bring an end to this *Galus* (exile) of close to 2,000 years.

The following essays are intended to enhance the effects of the varied aspects of Torah living upon the Jew ever-aspiring to higher levels of perfection and closeness with his Creator.

The Eternal Relevance of the Commandments

Questions dealing with the relevance of those commandments that seemingly defy logic have long been associated with an attempt to escape the demanding lifestyle of Torah-observant Jews. Today, however, many honest and sincere people are posing these questions in their attempt to incorporate Torah into their own lives. We therefore feel obligated to clarify this controversial issue in a manner that reflects the true ideals of the Torah.

There are two distinct approaches that have traditionally been used to deal with this sometimes explosive topic. One is to take each commandment and offer a rational reason for its observance, thus portraying the system of the Torah as logical and reasonable in all its facets. A problem that exists with this approach is that at times, people might not be satisfied with the explanation of a certain commandment and might thereby reject its observance.

The other possible method is to expound on the deep moral sensitivity that is conveyed through the Torah's precepts as a whole rather than concentrate on each individual mitzvah. This way, we can develop confidence in the Torah as a total unit, and failing to understand a particular commandment becomes less of a factor in determining our attitude toward fulfilling it. This process however is quite lengthy because one must first study a large segment of the Torah in depth before any meaningful effect can be expected. Unfortunately, there are many people who aren't concerned or motivated enough to find the time for such a rigorous and time-consuming endeavor, so it is necessary to develop a third approach.

In the introduction to the *Sefer Hachinuch*, written by a great Torah scholar as a gift to his thirteen-year-old son, the author writes that the reasons he gives in his book for the various commandments were not intended to be the definitive exposition of the Torah's laws. On the contrary, he expects his son to eventually argue with some reasons and question others. He grants his son the possibility that he might have to fulfill certain commandments without fully understanding them, but he nevertheless felt it important to explain all of the mitzvos to insure that his son's first encounter with Torah was an intellectually pleasant one. If he learns to appreciate the unique moral beauty that is related to us by the Torah's laws during his initial study of those laws, all questions that might later arrive will not challenge his belief. He might not always understand, but he will forever know where the truth lies.

This same concept can be found in the *Malbim* in his explanation of the verse, "I am the Lord your Doctor." In expounding upon why the Creator is compared to a doctor, he tells us that a physician who is known to his patient can prescribe a certain remedy without being questioned as to what the medicine is comprised of or how exactly it will cure the illness. The patient has a trust and confidence in the doctor and therefore follows his advice without necessarily understanding it. The *Malbim* explains that we should have the same attitude towards G-d and His Torah. Because of the great confidence we have in the Torah we should be ready to accept even the directives that don't comply with human logic. The only question remaining is how exactly do we build up this confidence without an exhaustive study of Torah? In what manner can the average Jew go about acquiring the proper appreciation of the greatness and depth of Torah that the *Sefer Hachinuch* says is so important?

Rabbenu Bachaya, in his commentary on Torah, explains a very puzzling sentence. The *Posuk in Dvorim* says, "Torah is your wisdom

and understanding in the eyes of the world...” and goes on to say that when these nations will hear the *Chukim* of the Torah, the commandments whose reasons we do not know, they will say “This is the way of a wise and perceptive nation.” How do our *Chukim* give other nations the impression that the Jewish people are wise and perceptive? If anything they should instill feelings of cynicism and skepticism as to the relevance and viability of the Torah. *Rabbenu Bachaya* says the Torah means to tell us that after the nations of the world will examine our *Mishpatim*, our laws that one can understand, after they appreciate the deep moral sensitivity that is conveyed through those laws, they will be overwhelmed and convinced that there is enormous depth even in the *Chukim*. They will feel this so much that they will attribute their failure to understand them to a deficiency in their own comprehension.

This verse reveals a key in approaching the system of the Torah. The moral code of the Torah carries with it so much beauty, so much depth and so much sensitivity that even the nations removed from Judaism will be convinced of its total and absolute truth.

A prime example of a law that carries with it profound moral ramifications is the prohibition of *Loshon Hora* (evil speech). A Jew is not merely forbidden to speak negatively about his fellow man, but even one who hears such talk is forbidden to believe it. In fact, one is not even allowed to listen to such speech even if he doesn't accept it. Would we in our wildest imagination be able to conceive of a law that demands so much moral discipline? If one trained himself to follow this precept and not believe any slander about any Jew, would that person ever entertain cheating or harming someone? A person who has developed the deep moral conscience that is necessary for observing the laws of *Loshon Hora*, will no doubt have cultivated a love and concern for his people that transcends conventional moral standards.

There is another Halacha of the Torah that in essence establishes new guidelines for our interpersonal relationships. The Mishna tells, us that when one hires workers and sets a salary he should specify what kind of food they will be getting for their meals, instead of just stipulating generally that meals will be included. The reason for this law, the Mishna explains, is that if he just tells them they will be getting meals, even if he feeds them a feast befitting King Solomon it would not be sufficient. They are the children of Avraham, Yitchok and Yaakov and nothing he could give them would fulfill his obligation to supply “meals.” The Mishna seems very difficult to understand. Why shouldn’t they be satisfied with such a grand feast? We are dealing with even poor workers who definitely wouldn’t expect a lavish meal. So why shouldn’t the employer have fulfilled his obligation? Rabbi Nosson Zvi Finkel, known in the world of Torah as the “Alter of Slabodka,” explains this puzzling Mishna. He says that although the conscious needs of these people would most certainly be satisfied by a lavish meal, the subconscious needs would not. In the recesses of every Jew’s heart there’s a feeling of royalty and honor that demands far more than anything we could offer. We learn a very important lesson from this Mishna, explains the “Alter.” We must not only be concerned for the conscious feelings of an individual but we must also strive to accommodate even his subconscious needs. This, too, is a level of human conduct that is foreign to the outside world, but to a Jew this seemingly pious behavior is so basic it is even incorporated into his contractual obligations.

Another intriguing commandment dealing with the feelings of our heart is “judging our neighbor righteously.” If one sees a fellow Jew doing something questionable, an act that can be interpreted in one of two ways, it is incumbent upon that Jew to assume that the person did absolutely nothing wrong. He must remove all feelings of ill will toward that individual and the failure to do so constitutes a

transgression for which he will be brought to task. In the secular world there is no correlation between action and feeling. You can't punish someone without proof, but you are free to believe what you want. In the Torah's view, if one wants to control his actions, he must also control his emotions.

These are but a few examples of the deep love and concern the Torah demands of us. It should serve to inspire in us the realization that the Torah's laws are aimed at developing the highest levels of human perfection and every one of its laws is integral in achieving that lofty goal.

If one, however, analyzes the Torah further, he will find that Mitzvos which heretofore were beyond his understanding actually carry with them very basic and comprehensible lessons in human conduct. An example of this is the prohibition of placing two different types of animals under the same yoke when plowing a field. On a superficial level, we would not be able to see the point of such a commandment, yet the *Sefer Hachinuch* offers a simple rationale. The Torah, he explains, is attempting to sensitize one to the instinctive discomfort of animals. Most animals feel more comfortable when around members of their own species and we are to be aware of that fact and act accordingly. Through the observance of this mitzvah we will also refine our actions towards humans and become more aware of their psychological and instinctive displeasures.

Another example of a mitzvah that takes on a new meaning when we begin to learn more about it is the prohibition of "cooking a goat in its mother's milk" (cooking meat with milk). The *Ramban* explains that the act of cooking the goat in its own mother's milk is a merciless one and might cultivate negative character traits. This *Ramban* is difficult to understand. Is this truly a callous act? Does it indicate a lack of mercy? Who knows about it? Who feels it? Yet

there is a deep, abstract sensitivity involved in refraining from such an act. True, the goat and the kid do not experience any pain but the Torah wants to cultivate feelings within us that go far beyond the scope of even the greatest “moralist.”

Our Rabbis too, went to great lengths to instill in us sensitivities consistent with the Torah’s view. The age-old custom of covering the *Challah* when reciting *Kiddush* on wine is one such case. Rightfully, the blessing on the *Challah* should be recited first, but since the wine enhances the glory of the Shabbos meal, its blessing proceeds the *Challah*’s. We, therefore, cover the *Challah* so that it should not witness this embarrassment. Obviously, the *Challah* itself has no feelings, but if we are aware of the proper order and etiquette of even inanimate objects, it becomes so much easier to project that awareness onto our fellow man. If every Shabbos we were cognizant of this concept when we cover the *Challah* it would no doubt have far-reaching effects in our daily lives.

It should be made clear that no commandment should be observed for the sole purpose of developing one’s character. Furthermore, no reason, no matter how deep and how inspiring, can be given as the unequivocal motivation for a mitzvah. The motivation of our observance of the Torah must be only because G-d commanded us to do so on that eventful day at Mount Sinai. As for the commandments, they are the expressed Divine Will and by definition will never be fully understood.

If we appreciate this and use it to enhance our observance of the Torah’s laws and our commitment to the Torah’s truths, we will never be concerned about the lack of understanding of any commandment.

The Jewish Woman

The Jewish woman is a mystery. She seems to have supernatural power and strength paralleled by none. She is renowned for her intelligence, perceptivity and sensitivity and is the pillar of the Jewish home and thereby, of the entire Jewish people. In an age with so much discussion of women's rights and the equality of the sexes, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon called "the Jewish woman" can shed much light on those deliberations.

The woman's role in the observance of the commandments seems to be somewhat paradoxical. The prohibitions or limitations that the Torah places on man are applicable to woman as well. Yet, when it comes to the performance of many of the positive commandments, and the obligation to study Torah constantly, the woman has been excused. This exception is often misinterpreted as depriving her of privileges while never lifting for a moment any of the restrictions for her benefit.

We must consult the words of our Rabbis to comprehend her role. The Avudraham, in a famous comment, explains why women have been excused from those commandments which are limited by time. He explains that if the woman would find her time limited by those commandments she would often find herself in grave trouble. What would she do when the service of her Creator conflicted with the service of her husband or family? She could not win.

The implication is, of course, that the woman has been relegated to caring for the needs of the home. Many, however, in our day and age, are of the feeling or conviction that that task, in itself, to which woman has been relegated, is menial, belittling and limiting in the development of her personality and that it sets strong restrictions on the fulfillment of her potentials as a human being and her desire to

develop, to excel, to learn, to grow, to challenge and be challenged by the world at large. The question arises as to the exact nature of her role and its suitability to her potential. A tragic error, all too often made in our society, is belittling the importance of the home. A stable home life is the basis for feelings of security, for developing sensitivity, having a sense of purpose in life, and the foundation of all healthy learning processes. Society today is accepting many substitutes, trying to delegate to others the task traditionally accorded to mothers, trying to share her historical role with services, baby sitters, maids, etc. Fathers as well are shirking their traditional responsibilities. The necessary ingredients for a proper home must be understood. The Torah tells us (Parshas Ki Tisa), “The women, wise of heart, wove with their hands for the Mishkan (Tabernacle).” Why does the Torah mention the women “of wise heart?” We need only know that the women wove for the Mishkan.

This teaches us that the appropriate application of the great wisdom, which is the treasure of woman, is for the needs of her husband, family and household. The Rabbis continue to tell us that this is the reason the woman is excused even from the great mitzvah of studying Torah. Her home needs the fullness of her wisdom, understanding and concentration. She is excused from any other taxing mental responsibilities to have the full capacity of her mental prowess to dedicate to the stability and advancement of her home.

What a far cry from the mistakes so many of our people make today. The running of the home, preparing meals, cleaning house, taking care of the children’s needs are often considered mundane and unchallenging, and not in need of ingenuity on the part of the homemaker. Yet the Torah considers this responsibility so challenging that it excuses the woman from the all-important mitzvah of Torah study to permit the full use of her keen mental capacity for the betterment of her home.

The home deals with eternity. The character traits developed in children, the emotional stability implanted within them, the security with which they grow up, the system of values developed, all of these are factors with eternal ramifications for generations to come. When we involve ourselves in professional pursuits, hobbies and personal fulfillment, all of which can find their appropriate place in the life of a family, we must remember that we are involved in ephemeral activities as opposed to the involvement with our families, implanting them with values to be passed on to future generations.

When the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, first the women were taught everything and only later, the men. Rabbenu Yonah explains that in reality, the women are those who are responsible for the future of the Jewish people. It is the mother who will implant the most basic values and sensitivities, and develop the emotional stability of the child at the most tender years. It is this which is in reality most fundamental in the continuity of Torah for the generations. It is these values, sensitivities and this stability which enables the child in future years to take part in that great heritage which comes to him from his ancestors, to further it and to pass it on to those after him. It is the major portion of this responsibility that the Jewish mother bears and therefore, the women were taught the Torah on Mount Sinai before the men.

Many often wonder about the heavy responsibility placed upon the woman without being privileged with all of the spiritual safeguards with which the man surrounds himself. He is obligated in the mitzvah of Tzitzis and Tefillin. He is obligated in the constant remembering through these mitzvos and others of the exodus from Egypt and the basis for our obligations to our Creator. He is obligated in the commandment to study Torah constantly. In fact, the Rabbis tell us that a person with Tefillin on his head, Tzitzis on the corners

of his garments, a mezuzah on his doorpost, and with the words of Torah in his mouth, is sure that he will not sin.

The woman is not obligated in any of these assurances except for mezuzah. Are we not concerned with her future? Are we not concerned with her spiritual development? Are we not concerned with what type of a slate she will come to the next world?

On the passage in the Talmud, "The promise which is promised to women is even greater than the promise to men," the Vilna Gaon explains that because of the unique and essential role that the woman must have in the future of the Jewish people and the stability of the home life which is the foundation of its future, she is promised a more special treatment.

Everything in terms of reward in the World to Come, that man must toil so hard to deserve and earn, that requires all of the traditional benefits of the many commandments which enable him to fulfill his role and assist him in achieving such reward, the woman is virtually assured of without all of the varied efforts and accomplishments that man must achieve to receive the same reward. Without the woman, Klal Yisroel would not continue to function and the future would be dismal. The fundamental unit of the family, which perpetuates the existence of the Torah in Klal Yisroel and the stability of Klal Yisroel itself can only be achieved with the complete and total devotion of all of the efforts, concentration and wisdom of woman. Because of the totality of effort needed for this goal, assistance and privilege in areas that she was not able to focus on is provided by G-d.

One might question that despite the significance of her task, do not the menial aspects of her role belittle her and the status which she has in our society? When we analyze the respect that our Rabbis enjoin us to accord the Jewish woman, the question takes on a different perspective.

Our Rabbis tell us that although one is commanded to love his wife as he loves himself (no normal person can love someone more than himself), he is obligated to respect her even more than himself. If he can afford to purchase only one garment, it must be for her, since “any blessing which exists in his home is only in the merit of his wife.” All that he has in his home and family is in her merit and therefore, she deserves this extra measure of respect. Her status is not belittled by her role; rather, the contrary is true.

Her total involvement with her home, to the limitation of the extensive outside involvements that engage her husband, provides an additional benefit to her and to her husband. Man is involved in many complex outside pursuits, which often tend to confuse his thinking. He becomes too involved and sometimes loses a clear perspective. His wife, not so directly involved in these outside pursuits, but caring for him so fully, can often offer advice and counsel with a less clouded version of the situation. He can serve a similar role for her with her responsibilities. Thus, the division of responsibility allows clear analyses of problems and clearer direction in their solutions.

There is another aspect of the role of the Jewish woman which deserves some attention. The Rabbis tell us (Meiri) that although a man is obligated to provide his son with a means of being able to support his family, a mother is excused from this obligation. The reason is most interesting. It states in Tehillim, “The glory of the daughter of the king is inside.”

If a mother were obligated to teach her son a profession, she would have to go out and take him to school and be involved in many outside activities not respectable enough for her. What is not respectable in going out? The queen does not go to people, they have to come to her palace. A woman obligated to run around outside the palace, which is her home, is being degraded. To avoid this, she is

even excused from such an important obligation as providing her children with the proper education, and therefore the obligation is placed solely on the father. This queen, the Jewish woman, must be treated as the most distinguished royalty, at all costs.

Another insight into the glory of the modesty of the Jewish woman can be seen from the Torah's discussion of Bilam's efforts to curse Klal Yisroel. Bilam was ready to curse the Jewish people until he saw their modesty; their houses did not open facing each other in order to avoid anyone seeing into his neighbor's house. This glorious tznius (modesty) melted his hatred and motivated him not to curse them.

Bilam was overwhelmed with appreciation for the beauty and glory of Jewish modesty. This beauty is seen constantly in the Jewish woman's role in the development of her family, and it inspires the greatest respect.

The Jewish woman, by the essence of her role and her nature, finds herself the pillar of the Jewish community. The future of our people is assured through her efforts and commitment. Her specific obligations in the fulfillment of the mitzvos may be limited, but the effects of her role in the cycle of Jewish life are eternal.

The Road To Human Perfection

It is well known that the most effective way to teach someone an idea or concept is by setting a living example for that person to learn from and emulate. We are aware that children learn more from their parents' actions than from their admonitions and even their beatings.

This is because things that are conveyed to us through sight and communicated through specific illustration make the most lasting impression on us. Sight is the most vivid and realistic sensory perception. It follows then, that if we are constantly exposed to certain actions, they leave an indelible imprint upon our minds and cause us to act in a similar, if not identical, manner. If we are constantly surrounded by deception and lies, we imbibe these attributes into our very being, and truth becomes meaningless to us. On the other hand, if we see integrity, honesty, sensitivity and concern for our fellow man, these characteristics become the elements that we absorb into our beings. As the *Rambam* writes in *Hilchos Dayos*, the natural course of human nature is to be most influenced by those with whom we come in contact, not so much by what they tell us, not by how they reprimand us, but more than anything else, by how they act.

All of us realize that our goals in life are to strive for the highest levels of human dignity and perfection, and to shun those influences that would rob us of the values and ideals we hope to attain. However, we not only need to avoid negative influences to achieve these goals, we also need positive influences to define and illustrate what our accomplishments can and must be. We face, however, a

difficult dilemma. Where do we find this perfect model? Who can we use to guide and direct us?

The Torah provides the solution to this problem with the unique mitzvah of “*Veholachto Bidrochov*” (to emulate Hashem’s ways). Only Hashem, the ultimate in perfection, can be used to furnish the supreme definition of any characteristic or trait. To emulate man, with all his frailties and imperfections, will lead one to stray from the path of proper development. (We are, however, commanded to follow in the ways of Tzadikim, for they perform the mitzvah of “*Veholachto*” and their actions are a reflection of Hashem’s.)

Although sight is the most effective form of communication, it is obviously not possible in our relationship to G-d. However, one can spend his life analyzing and studying the ways of Hashem and becoming intimately familiar with His attributes, so that in a sense, he actually sees Him! When our Avos (forefathers) walked in the ways of Hashem, although there was no actual visual contact, they could feel the warmth of His being and they could perceive with complete clarity, the beauty of His kindness. We now have the perfect example, the ultimate representation of what truth is, what justice is, and what love is. By following in His ways, there is no longer any fear that we are compromising our goal.

The initial response most frequently displayed by those learning this mitzvah for the first time is one of complete and total futility. Who is man to try to emulate the Almighty Himself?

How can the human, with his weaknesses and inadequacies, even hope to grasp something that is so far beyond his reach? Hasn’t the Torah charged us with a task beyond our scope and capabilities, thereby rendering this mitzvah completely obsolete?

In truth, this mitzvah can be the greatest morale booster and the most powerful source of encouragement to us. If Hashem has

commanded us to reach for the stars, then obviously we possess the ability to do so! We have been informed that we can potentially reach levels of perfection and purity that can almost be equated with those of G-d Himself. In fact, Chazal teach us that were it not for two seemingly extraneous words in the Torah, we would actually equate the holiness man is capable of reaching with that of the Almighty Himself. The Torah states, “*Kedoshim tihyu... ani Hashem...*” (You shall be holy ... I am G-d). Chazal interpret the words “Ani Hashem,” I am G-d, but you cannot be G-d. Hashem Himself has to show us that there is a boundary, that our ability is not limitless. The apex of kedusha is beyond our grasp. It is reserved only for G-d, but we can come very, very close. The Divine spirit (*Tzelem Elokim*) implanted in our souls is an awesome source of energy. If we harness this power properly, if we utilize our strength to the utmost, we can become beings of even greater kedusha than the Malachim (angels) themselves. True, there are other driving forces within us that can swing the pendulum to the other extreme, but let us not underestimate our potential for greatness and thereby minimize our chances of actually reaching that goal.

There is a very significant side effect and benefit from the mitzvah of emulating G-d.

The Rambam, in Hilchos Purim, tells us that on Purim, if one wishes to add to the observance of Mishloach Manos or Matanos L'evyonim he should sooner engage in the gifts to the poor, for they will bring him greater Simcha. The reason the Rambam offers is that there is no joy like the one who feels he is following in the ways of His Creator. Much like a young child whose greatest joy is being like his parent, so it is with man and his relationship with his G-d.

Following in the Divine ways can then be not only the ultimate cure for the moral decadence of our society, but a solution to the depressions and empty feelings so familiar in our world today. It is

only through the study of Torah, the Creator's gift to man, revealing to him the essence of His pure and holy ways, that man can achieve significant insights into the attributes of G-d, thus enabling him to emulate His ways and benefit from the serenity and joy that it can bring to his existence.

The Sefer Torah

The Sefer Torah is referred to by the Torah as “The Testimony.” Rashi explains that it serves as a testimony between G-d and the Jewish people that He commanded them the laws therein.

How does the Sefer Torah testify to its own authenticity? The answer is simple: To the Jew it bears real testimony. When we merely gaze upon the Sefer Torah, it touches something within us powerfully. It is as if the millions of people who actually witnessed that fateful day at Mount Sinai thousands of years ago were to come and offer sworn testimony of its authenticity. It penetrates the Jewish heart with unparalleled confidence in the truth of its eternal message.

This is the power of the Sefer Torah and the extent of its influence upon us. Throughout the ages, its mere presence has inspired and strengthened the Jew as a written testimony that G-d Himself has commanded him the Mitzvos. It has inspired him to limitless spirituality and helped overcome the most insurmountable difficulties.

The Torah instructs every Jewish man to write a Sefer Torah. If he cannot write one, he must have one written for him or at least purchase a Torah. Traditionally, everyone is given the opportunity to fulfill this great mitzvah when a Torah is dedicated to a community institution, either by finishing a letter or word or by purchasing the same.

Interestingly, the Halacha indicates that even if one has inherited a Sefer Torah from his father, he is nonetheless obligated to write another Torah himself. Imagine a person inheriting a Torah from his

father. Imagine that this Torah was a family heirloom, passed down from father to son for many generations. With it, this person inherits the knowledge that his ancestors believed in these same truths that he is living today. Could any Sefer Torah bear a more powerful message of authenticity?

Yet, the Torah, in its infinite wisdom, tells us that even under such circumstances, the greatest effect will only come to this person when he personally writes one for himself. When the Jew writes or purchases a part of the Torah himself, his personal involvement expands the ability of its testimony to affect him.

The Torah is read in public every Shabbos, Monday and Thursday, so as not to allow three days to pass without hearing its words. The Talmud tells us that we derive this practice from an incident that took place just as the Jewish people left Egypt. After having seen the greatest of miracles in Egypt and the Red Sea, three days passed and they found no water to drink. These great people, who had achieved such spiritual heights through the miracles they had witnessed, began to complain to Moshe about the lack of water. For people of their stature this was considered improper.

The Rabbis indicate that the cause of their improper action was that for those three days they were without Torah study (which is compared to water). Therefore, the Rabbis instituted that the Torah should be publicly read on Shabbos, Monday and Thursday so that three consecutive days never pass without hearing its words.

The people who witnessed the greatest revelations of all times and whose belief was so complete, were not strong enough to withstand the effects of three days without Torah. A fixed schedule had to be established to constantly reinforce its lessons. We see that the few lines that we read from the Torah every week seem to carry more meaning than even experiencing the greatest miracles.

The words of Torah that we hear and study call out to us with the message of Sinai and sustain in us an unswerving loyalty to our Creator. The words of the Sefer Torah can reach the Jewish heart in a way that nothing else can.

Tzedaka and Maaser: Keys to the Gates of Mercy

“On Rosh Hashanah it shall be written and on the Day of Atonement it shall be sealed. How many are to pass on, how many are to be born... Who shall live and who shall die...”

In what is quite possibly the most moving and dramatic prayer of the High Holiday services, the inherent frailty of man is brought into sharp focus, causing even the most stoic of individuals to experience the inexorable fear associated with a confrontation with one's own mortality.

The precious gift of life, a commodity taken for granted more than any other, cannot be guaranteed. Great wealth is powerless to acquire even one second of added existence, and a clean bill of health from the doctor's office does not ensure longevity. It is Hashem alone who judges mankind and His verdict is utterly concealed from man's view.

Yet, the G-d of Justice is a G-d of Mercy, and in His benevolence He has given man the means to control his own destiny, to become a partner in determining his very fate. The epilogue of this most solemn prayer is one of hope and inspiration, for it reveals the existence of three keys that unlock the gates of mercy: “But Teshuva (Repentance), Tefila (Prayer) and Tzedaka (Charity) can avert the severe decree.”

So man, grateful for the opportunity to merit a reprieve from harsh judgment, sets his mind and heart to the task at hand. Three, only three, small hills to climb for yet another year of life and

prosperity. With no alternative options available, it would seem to be a foregone conclusion that each and every believing Jew, sincerely concerned with his and his family's future, would strive for and achieve his goal of Teshuva, Tefila and Tzedaka.

Sadly, more often than not, man falls far short of his intended destination. Teshuva, Tefila and Tzedaka are not mere hills, but rather formidable and imposing mountains that defiantly challenge the essence of man's courage and integrity.

Teshuva, literally translated, means "return." It is insufficient to merely regret the iniquitous act performed against G-d, for that only succeeds in demonstrating the extent of remorse, not change. In order to consummate a true "return" one must reach a state of being that will prevent a recurrence of the same wrongdoing, should the opportunity to sin once again present itself. Therefore, only Hashem knows whether or not a person has accomplished real "Teshuva" in his Yom Kippur prayers (Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva), for only Hashem can gaze into the heart and see if indeed this transformation has occurred. So not only is Teshuva a most difficult endeavor, it leaves the "returnee" unsure as to whether his Teshuva is genuine enough to alter or defer a harsh decree against him.

Tefila is described by the Torah as "Avodas Halev," a duty or service of the heart. While all commandments are measured by Hashem for the degree of feeling and sincerity that accompany them, Tefila is by definition, exclusively a process of the heart. Thus, Tefila seems to fall within the same category as Teshuva, in that it can only be evaluated by Hashem. The mere mouthing of words is by no means security that the standard of Avodas Halev has been reached.

While it is imperative that every Jew strive for true Teshuva and Tefila, to fail in the performance of the third category, Tzedaka, would be virtually tantamount to criminal neglect. Specific guidelines

governing the laws of charity do exist and therefore it is a mitzvah that can be measured and evaluated. One need not struggle with doubt and uncertainty as to whether “Tzedaka” has been achieved. One need only study the laws and contribute the necessary amount of Maaser to the types of worthy causes outlined in the Shulchan Aruch. With so much at stake, literally a matter of life and death, it would be folly to ignore the golden opportunity presented by the Almighty, to merit the promise of life that Tzedaka assures.

The following essays outline the requisite of giving Maaser, a tenth of one’s income, to Tzedaka. If this formula is adhered to, one can be confident that the blessing “Tzedaka Tatzil MiMaves – Charity saves one from death” (Mishlei 10:11) shall be granted to him.

A Responsibility and an Investment

Giving Tzedaka is popularly perceived as an act of benevolence toward those in need or in disfavor. It is viewed as something an individual does beyond the call of duty or perhaps it is the response of those who, being pained at the misfortune of others, empathize with their less fortunate brethren by conferring upon them some of the material benefits that they enjoy. Although taken within this context, the individual who gives charity certainly demonstrates a nobility of soul and character, to the Torah-oriented Jew the concept of giving charity includes an added and more meaningful dimension. Giving charity is more than a reflection of one’s generosity; it is an educational experience that beckons an individual to the fundamental truth that he lives in a world that belongs to G-d. We are simply the executors of the Divine plan to confer upon others the same kindness that Hashem has showered upon us. The world and all its components are Hashem’s and man receives only to give to others and further the sanctification of His name. The heightened

awareness of this fact will foster a social climate permeated with a feeling of love and concern for our fellow human beings. A person is reminded that he does not live in a vacuum. It is not only his needs that become the focus of his energies. He earns a livelihood not only for his family but also for his neighbor's family, because, after all, we are all the children of G-d, and who would willingly close his hand to one of G-d's children in need? If we become sensitized to the fact that we are all G-d's children, we will take heed to respect the rights and feelings of our fellow man in order to please our Divine Father in heaven.

The Talmud (Bava Basra 10a) relates a fascinating dialogue between Rabbi Akiva and one of the tyrannical Roman rulers under whom many Jews had been mercilessly subjected. With scathing cynicism the Caesar asked Rabbi Akiva, "Why do Jews take care of the needs of their poor? If a king banished one of his subjects and decreed that hardship and pain be inflicted upon him, which loyal subject would dare extend him compassion or assistance? If G-d has ordained that certain individuals live deprived lives, how dare the Jews endeavor to alter His Divine master plan?" Rabbi Akiva immediately responded, "If a father were to expel his son from his home, wouldn't he nonetheless feel profoundly indebted to one who offers his incorrigible son food and shelter? We are all G-d's children," continued Rabbi Akiva, "and we only comply with the Divine plan when we answer the pleas of those who seek our help."

In the Book of Devarim, when Moshe exhorts the Jews to organize and establish a judicial system within the local communities of Israel, he proclaims, "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* — you shall surely pursue justice." Interestingly, the word "tzedek" in this instance denotes justice, yet "tzedek" is the root of the word "Tzedaka", commonly understood to denote something beyond the call of duty, and not simply justice in its strictest sense. The truth is, however,

that the acts of charity we perform are in fact the justice that legitimizes our claim to the possessions and wealth we enjoy. We are faithfully acknowledging the will of our Creator to share with others what He has bestowed upon us. Performing the mitzvah with this perspective will inspire and uplift a charitable benefactor and spur him on to continue his pious and generous deeds.

Give and You Will Receive

Rabbinic literature tells us that poverty is a phenomenon that escapes no one. This means that even the wealthiest of families will eventually be stricken and left to the mercy of others. If it doesn't occur to the grandfather, it will undoubtedly occur to his grandson or perhaps his great-grandson. It is a cycle that affects all, knowing no biases. Our Rabbis assure us that those who give Tzedaka will ensure that years later a needy relative will be the beneficiary of someone else's generosity. The great Rabbinic commentators point out that the word "*Venasnu*," meaning they shall give, referring to the obligation of the Jews to contribute to the Holy Tabernacle, is spelled the same way whether written forward or backward. The idea thus expressed is that an act of giving actually results in an act of receiving. Aside from the eternal bliss earned from the great mitzvah of giving charity, one's descendants gain the help they need in difficult times, becoming the recipients of goodwill because of the thoughtfulness of their ancestors. It is in this vein that the Talmud (Shabbos 151) relates that the great Rav Chiya would remind his wife to offer food and alms to the poor, and assure her that the kindness that she displayed would alleviate the difficult times that might befall her children and grandchildren.

King Munbaz, a king during the Talmudic era, once spent the entire royal fortune plus all his inherited wealth during years of

famine to help the needy. His family approached him to question his actions. They protested, “Your forefathers built up this magnificent treasury and you are squandering all the money!” He answered, “My forefathers had a worldly treasure; my treasure is a spiritual one. Their treasure sees no fruition. My treasure has its rewards. They saved money while I save souls. They saved for others while I make a treasury for myself. My forefathers made a treasury in this world. I am preparing a treasury in the world to come.” (Bava Basra 11)

“The law says that Tzedaka is a high duty and the repudiation of this duty can bring serious consequences, even death. Nobody becomes poor through Tzedaka and G-d has proclaimed, ‘Never will Tzedaka become the cause of any grave suffering or misfortune.’ To him who has compassion for the poor, G-d will also show compassion; as you wish G-d to hearken to your prayers, so shall you hearken the prayers of the poor. Give, and neither to your children nor to your grandchildren, not even to your remotest descendants will help be refused when they are in need, for riches and poverty come round in their circle and there is never a whole succession of generations that entirely escapes poverty. It is your finest deed. As long as you practice it, misery and suffering, hunger and death will not come near you. Even the custom of vowing Tzedaka in memory of the dead makes sense. If they have been charitable in heart and deed and you feel yourself spurred on to good works by their memory, you are enabling them to do good even after their passing; and by continuing their good work, which had come to an end, you render them immortal. The surest way to get rich is to do good with that which is in your keeping, for then G-d is glad to make you the custodian of His gifts.”

(Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch – Horeb)

It has been suggested that to strengthen the observance of this important mitzvah, groups be organized to meet each month, where

one can attend lectures and hear words of inspiration concerning Tzedaka. If only a small nucleus of a few dedicated individuals would commit themselves to regular attendance to these groups and at their conclusion write out their charity checks for ten percent of their income to the charity of their choice, they would generate within the Jewish community a new wave of commitment to the holy task of caring for the needs of our people.

The laws dealing with giving charity in its most precise and halachically prescribed manner are very complex, varying with a multitude of situations that may arise. The best approach is to calculate and set aside 10% of one's income for Tzedaka, commonly known as Maaser.

The following guidelines and suggestions for properly determining and distributing Maaser funds have been taken from "Ahavas Chesed," the monumental classic of the great Chofetz Chaim that deals with laws of charity. They should prove useful for those who have not yet had the opportunity to give proper time and attention to the study of these laws.

How To Fulfill One's Obligation

1) At the time one undertakes to observe the mitzvah of giving Maaser, he should declare that he is not binding himself to any vow. This will save him from a Torah transgression if he inadvertently miscalculates or misappropriates his Maaser funds.

2) To begin, one first sets aside 10% of his total capital for Maaser. After that, he separates 10% from all future earnings. Those who begin by setting aside 10% from only their profits, without first separating 10% from their present assets, are not properly fulfilling their obligation. For individuals finding it difficult to put out 10% of their capital, it is advisable to set aside that money for interest-free

loans for those in financial straits. He may even lend the money to himself on the condition that should someone in need approach him, he can borrow the amount he has lent to himself and advance it to the needy individual. However, there are some stricter opinions that permit this practice only if this condition was expressly stipulated when he originally began separating Maaser.

3) In general, it is advisable to distribute $2/3$ of one's Maaser for charitable gifts and $1/3$ for interest-free loans.

4) One should keep a meticulous tally to assure an accurate record of the Maaser funds he is obligated to disperse.

Order Of Distribution

1) Poor relatives take precedence over strangers. As such, one may allocate Maaser funds for his older children, whom he no longer is obligated to support, if they have no means of supporting themselves. He may do so even if he can provide for them from other sources.

2) If his own relatives are not in need, it is preferable to use Maaser funds to support those who study Torah.

3) Maaser funds can be used to enable a groom and bride to marry, if they could not do so otherwise. The same applies to a Bris Milah or the purchasing of seforim to be lent to others who otherwise could not afford them. You must indicate that these books were bought with Maaser funds so that the donor's heirs cannot claim them after his death.

4) According to all opinions, one may buy the right to be called to the Torah or any other honor, if the money will be used for the needs of the poor. According to the Aruch HaShulchan, he may even do so if the funds will be used for the Bais HaMedrash or those who serve it.

5) One may not deduct tuition payments for his children's education from Maaser funds. However, donating Maaser funds to defray the tuition expenses of the needy is permitted and considered a great mitzvah.

6) Some authorities declare that although the contribution of 1/5 of one's earnings is regarded as exemplary, but not strictly required, this applies only where there are no immediate cases of poor people in need of food and clothes. However, if one knows of widows, orphans or the like, one is duty bound by law to separate 1/5 of his possessions. This is the opinion of the Vilna Gaon. This responsibility is only in effect if the donor is capable of contributing such a proportion of his earnings. One need not experience undue hardship to give this second tenth.

As we perform our charitable acts with a newfound sense of enthusiasm and purpose, let us remember the eternal words of the prophet Isaiah, "צִיּוֹן בְּמִשְׁפַּט תִּפְדֶּה וּשְׁבִיָּה בַצְדָקָה – Zion shall be redeemed with justice and they that return to her with the merit of Tzedaka."

Shabbos: The Eternal Source of Strength

Shabbos is the most enigmatic of Jewish religious experiences. Not only can an entire people adhere to such a restrictive doctrine, but the Jewish nation, through the very difficulty of Shabbos observance, has derived such conviction, faith and love for the Creator, that even under the most torturous conditions, survival has been not only possible, but inevitable.

The observance of Shabbos is a testimony to the creation of the world by a single G-d in six days and its completion on the seventh. This testimony was given to us by G-d Himself, as a sign of His special relationship to His people.

It is not just for those who lack spiritual vision that Shabbos plays such an important role. Any Jew, no matter how pious, must constantly reinforce within himself the realization that there is a Creator constantly watching, judging and protecting him. It is in this capacity, as a reminder of G-d's current activity and concern in our world, in addition to His activity at its inception, that Shabbos is so vital.

The message of Shabbos is driven home by abstaining from the thirty-nine melachos of physical activity that were performed in the Mishkan. Rabbinic laws also exist as a means of protecting the sanctity of the day. However, the correlation between refraining from these activities and commemorating Hashem's rest remains ambiguous when examined against the fact that Hashem's rest was anything but physical in nature. The "rest" of the seventh day was a state of completion, not relaxation. Only after His creation was

complete did Hashem rest, as we say in the Shabbos prayers: “On the seventh day He arose and sat on His Throne of Glory.” Hashem existed as the King and Creator of the entire universe only with the completion of creation.

By living in a state of total preparedness and completion on His day of completion, the Jew indelibly imprints upon his mind and heart the belief that Hashem completed the world on the seventh day. The thirty-nine categories of melacha are constructive acts of preparing and completing. Food to be eaten must be previously harvested and cooked. Garments to be worn must be previously woven and sewn. Even objects needed in one place must be brought there prior to the Shabbos. By emulating Hashem and living in a state of completion, the Jew testifies to the world and to himself the truth of Hashem’s creation.

Affecting not just our physical state, abstaining from work on Shabbos succeeds in putting every Jew in a unique and coveted state of mind. Rashi tells us that through the observance of the Shabbos laws we are able to actually feel that the work we have to do is completed. We might toil for six days, but when the Shabbos candles are lit on Friday afternoon, we can transform our world into one of peace and tranquility. So great is this inner calm that the Torah tells us a person awaiting execution should not be killed on Shabbos so that he, too, could enjoy the serenity of Shabbos before departing from this world. Despite the fear and anguish that no doubt grip a person on the verge of death, the Shabbos is still able to penetrate his heart and put him at ease during his final day on earth. It is in this special state of both physical and mental “rest” that all Jews have the potential to go far beyond their previously conceived spiritual capabilities.

The real deterrent to spiritual growth on the part of any sincere Jew is the clouding of the mind by the mundane, albeit important,

activities of the week. It is only on Shabbos, when no worldly interference is allowed to enter our thoughts, that we are able to expend all our energies on spiritual pursuits. This is why Shabbos has been designated as a day for increased Torah learning and spiritual growth. In fact, the Jew actually lives the greatest lesson of Bitachon when he stops pursuing his livelihood on Shabbos. What greater way to demonstrate his belief that all is from Hashem than by abandoning his livelihood for a full day. It's no wonder that so many Jews anxiously, almost desperately, await the Shabbos, so that they may once again serve G-d with a joy and vibrancy that could not possibly exist during the rest of the week.

This point is vividly illustrated by the following story:

A wealthy German official would often visit the residents of his community to maintain his popularity among the townspeople. One Friday night, he came to the home of a destitute Jewish family, their tattered clothes and meager meal bearing witness to their desperate situation. The official, expecting the mood of Shabbos to be somber at best, was privileged instead to see a family filled with joy and exuberance befitting the most royal of households. When he heard the old father, so weak after six days of fruitless labor, sing the Shabbos zemiros with a kind of love and dedication he had never seen before, he was inspired to offer this old man anything he wanted. In response, the old man paused suddenly from singing his beloved song, Menucha V'Simcha, and asked the officer if he would straighten out a bent candle that threatened to blow out early and disturb the peace and light of the Shabbos meal.

Within the old man's grasp was the opportunity to alleviate all his pain and suffering but it was incomprehensible to him that anything was lacking in his world of totality and serenity on Shabbos. The only thing to be rectified was the bent candle that he was forbidden by the laws of Shabbos to move; a bent candle which

might disturb his tranquility by burning out too early.

Originally written by a famous poet, this story demonstrates the extent by which one can feel the serenity of Shabbos. Even as we face hardship and uncertainty during the week, on Shabbos we can experience such completeness that all we can ask for is more Shabbos. Of course, this poet did not know that even asking a non-Jew to fix a bent candle is forbidden by the laws of Shabbos, but the message of the story is still true: observing Shabbos has the ability to put us in a unique state of mind. It is a state of mind that has us feeling that our lives lack absolutely nothing and longing for that feeling not to end.

Reflections of Yom Tov

Rosh Hashanah - Yom Kippur: Days of Development

The secret of the Jewish personality is: Never to be complacent with any level of achievement, rather, to be constantly upward bound. The days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur provide a unique system for spiritual development.

The Jew, no matter how committed, finds himself challenged by all sorts of temptations; in business, at home, in dealing with his fellow man and within the inner recesses of his own personality. There must be a time devoted to serious introspection and dedicated to major efforts at self-improvement.

The knowledge that the Creator Himself sits in judgment of mankind on Rosh Hashanah, making decisions to determine his collective and individual fortunes in the year to come, sobers the Jew to begin serious contemplation. The prayers solemnly uttered on Rosh Hashanah enhance the Jew's awareness that the judgment is real and so are its dangers. He is moved to improve, to regret and to pray for an improved future. As he proclaims the Almighty as King, and relives the occasion of His coronation, so to speak, he deepens his realization that he is only a servant, dutiful to obey the directives of the Torah and mold his personality in the values and traits taught therein.

The piercing sound of the Shofar is deeply interwoven with these themes. The Shofar comes to awaken the Jew from his slumber and to alert him to the seriousness and urgency of the moment. It is a call to battle, a battle with those forces within himself which operate to dissuade him from his religious commitments. It reminds him of

the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and of the obligations then incurred. With the Shofar, the Jew also invokes the memory of the greatest test of Avrohom, that of bringing his son as a sacrifice, and asks the Almighty to have mercy on us in that merit.

“On Rosh Hashanah it shall be inscribed, and on the fast of the Day of Atonement it shall be sealed.” The Jew hopes and prays that the judgment of Rosh Hashanah should at least be favorable enough to give him the ten days until Yom Kippur to do Teshuva – repent - and to merit a judgment in his favor.

The ten days are called the ten days of Teshuva (Repentance) and the mood is one of change. The Jew is to realize his mistakes, regret them sincerely, and commit himself not to be caught in the same situations ever again. He feels the closeness of his Creator, coaxing him to return, giving him the opportunity and anxiously awaiting his efforts.

The Jew comes to the synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur worried, but overwhelmingly happy. The past day was spent in festive meals in preparation for the fast. The dress is festive too, and the feeling conveyed is one of great confidence. The fear and concern are real, but he has deep trust that the One who sits in final judgment loves us and truly cares. This trust is expressed itself in a joyous mood.

The fast removes our minds and hearts from the mundane and allows us to elevate ourselves spiritually. The prayers are for forgiveness and full with admission of our guilt. The expressions of the errors of the past are no news to the Almighty, but their specific mentioning in the confessions of Yom Kippur serves to focus on a realization of our shortcomings.

The goal is to achieve a closeness to the Creator, unmarred by transgression and permeated by the love of that relationship. The

bond is to enable the Jew to continue to function at the heights of human perfection during the year to come.

The spiritual elevation and experience lingers on and the Jewish character is nurtured from this moment until the same time the following year. The secret of constant growth, encouraged by the deep bonds forged with the Almighty, enables man to attain and maintain great levels of perfection and moral commitment.

The opportunity is available to all; the Creator is anxiously awaiting our awakening. “Open for Me an opening as wide as a needle, and I will open for you an entrance the size of a palace.”

The Festival of Succos

A Time of Rejoicing

One of the seemingly most abrupt changes in the spirit of the Jewish calendar is the change of mood upon the ending of Yom Kippur and the beginning of the Succos Festival. Succos, according to the Torah, is the time for the greatest rejoicing. Every day is spent in festive activity and lavish meals. It is an age-old custom to have a “Simchas Bais Hashoava,” a special joyous party which takes place every night in the Succah. The festivity, the joy, the seeming lack of earnest and serious activity is quite a contrast to the Yom Kippur experience of pensive contemplation, introspection, and remorse for the sins that we have committed in the past.

The contrast is compounded by the teaching of our Rabbis that although the judgment concerning the lot of every Jew for the coming year is signed and sealed on Yom Kippur, it is not delivered until the last day of Chol Hamoed Succos, the day of Hoshana Rabbah. The permission to enact any decrees of punishment is not granted until the following day, Shemini Atzeres. So, we find that the Succos holiday serves as an opportunity for Teshuva (repentance), a chance to rescind the judgments which are unfavorable to us. Yet the Succos mood is so joyous that it seems that the seriousness of this final opportunity to do Teshuva is neglected.

However, if we were to stop and analyze the Succos Festival more carefully, we would find that the joyous spirit of the holiday is not a contradiction to the mood set by Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. To the contrary, it further inculcates the feeling and thought we developed during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Rosh Hashanah is a time of enhanced recognition of the reign of Hashem and His sovereignty, and the necessary subservience to the will of the Creator of the universe. Yom Kippur is a day devoted to introspection, repentance and remorse, to declare commitment and improvement in the future. Both of these concepts are very far-reaching and cannot be completely developed in a period of a few days. The Succos holiday and the days in between Yom Kippur and Succos serve to expand these realizations.

Upon the close of Yom Kippur, each Jew immediately proceeds to prepare for the upcoming festival. He spends the four days between Yom Kippur and Succos constructing a Succah in accordance with the prescribed measurements and details of Halacha, and he puts in painstaking effort to acquire his Arbah Minim (four species). The Jew's involvement in the seemingly trivial details of the observance of the mitzvah of the Arbah Minim, searching for the most proper and beautiful combination, or his engrossment with the construction and decoration of the Succah, perhaps even in neglect of other pressing matters, is the greatest sign of his recognition of the Almighty as Creator and Ruler of the entire universe and his subservience to His will. The effort expended in preparation of these mitzvos attests to the Teshuva experience on Yom Kippur.

On the first evening of the holiday, upon returning from the synagogue, the entire family moves into the Succah. There is a certain strange feeling in leaving the luxury, the security and the comforts of his home as the Jew enters the Succah to eat, sleep and live for seven days. He is directed by the Halacha not only to be aware of the exact and proper observance of the mitzvos related to dwelling in the Succah, but also to its purpose and meaning.

The Pasuk says, "In the Succos you shall dwell for seven days... *Ki Basuccos Hoshavti Es Bnai Yisroel.*" The Gemorah cites a difference

of opinion in the meaning of “*Basuccos Hoshavti*.” Rabbi Akiva maintains that the huts in which we live are facsimiles of the huts in which the Jewish people lived in the desert. Dwelling in the Succos enables us not merely to verbalize, but to relive the Jewish people’s experience in the desert. For forty years they lived under the unstable conditions of desert life; heat during the day, extreme cold at night, and little protection from the natural dangers. They were able to endure all this through no strength or skills of their own, but rather, through the loving care of the Creator, who guided and protected them and who compensated for the lack of natural protection.

Rabbi Eliezer maintains that these huts are to remind us of the Ananei Hakavod, “those glorious pillars of clouds that the Almighty protected and guided us with for forty years in the desert.” He personally supervised every step of the journey, covering and warming us in the night, cooling us throughout the day, and keeping out all dangers and threats to our existence. The Jew’s feeling of total security during those forty awesomely dangerous years in the desert was only through the knowledge that this protection was provided by the Almighty Himself. When the Jew not only discusses this or reads it in the Torah, but leaves the security of his home to live in the Succah for seven days and relives that experience, he is inspired with a deepened trust and faith in his Maker. The impact of the realization of the love and concern that the Almighty always had and will have for us is so overwhelming that it solidifies the Teshuva process of Yom Kippur and enables it to take root in reality.

When the Jew awakens on the morning of the first day of Succos, another mitzvah awaits him: the mitzvah of taking the four species. It is a mitzvah for which painstaking effort was spent in order to secure the species which are halachically valid for the performance of the mitzvah, as well as the most beautiful possible.

Chazal tell us that when the Jew takes the four species together and recites the blessing in performance of the mitzvah, he again reinforces and strengthens the message of Rosh Hashanah. The Medrash says that the “esrog,” which resembles the heart, “the lulav,” which resembles the body, the “hadassim,” the eyes, and the “aravos,” the mouth, join together to fulfill the sentence in Tehillim, “All of my bones and organs will declare ‘Oh Lord who is like You?’”

On Rosh Hashanah, the Jew declares his belief and his acceptance of the kingdom of the Almighty. He declares his faith and trust in the Creator and Master of the universe. However, the declaration may not be complete, for it is by word only. It may not be subscribed to by every organ of his being, by every aspect of his existence. When Succos comes, the Jew is in grave danger if this commitment is not total. Traditionally, it is a time of the ingathering of the harvest, when the Jew feels a natural security. The crops of the spring and summer have flourished. He feels well protected for the months to come. At such a time, there might be a tendency to feel so secure in his wealth and good fortune that he might forget where his real source of security is. He can think so highly of himself that he may forget his Creator. At such a time, especially, he must be reminded by a specific lesson, by focusing his heart, body, eyes and lips, represented by the four species, on the thought that there is no one like his Creator, that He has total control and dominance over everything that exists. When the Jew recites the Hallel and praises G-d and ascribes greatness to His name, he realizes that all of his blessings and security come from Him. However, when he focuses his heart and his body, his lips and his mouth on that realization, his understanding deepens and is expanded.

Hoshanah Rabbah, the last day of Chol Hamoed Succos, is a day which is deeply interwoven with the Yom Kippur experience. On Yom Kippur, the decree of the fate of the Jew has been decided. The

Rishonim tell us that on Hoshanah Rabbah, this decree is given into the hands of those agents who deliver it, and on the following day, Shemini Atzeres, it is delivered and permission is granted for it to be carried out. Hoshanah Rabbah is observed as a final day of penitence. The age-old custom of spending the night engaged in Torah learning is a preparation for this awesome moment. The prayers of Hoshanah Rabbah revolve around this theme, coupled with the praying for water, upon which is based the entire sustenance of mankind. Many of the customs closely resemble the Yom Kippur observance in order to establish the solemn atmosphere that is necessary at this final opportunity to repent.

We therefore find, after a closer analysis of the Succos festival, that amidst all of the rejoicing and merriment, there are deeply rooted tones of seriousness, awe and solemnity. On the surface, it would appear that these two moods are in contradiction and would detract from one another, but our Rabbis teach us that, to the contrary, they complement and enhance one another. Together, they instill within one's being a sense of true inner happiness and a profound feeling of satisfaction, coupled with a feeling of overwhelming warmth and closeness to his Creator.

The Mishna says, "Anyone who did not see the Simchas Beis Hashoava, never saw true rejoicing in his lifetime." The Simchas Beis Hashoava, a party which commenced upon the conclusion of the first day of Yom Tov and was continued each evening of the Succos holiday in the Holy Temple, was attended by all levels of the Jewish society.

The celebration revolved around the greatest Torah scholars and Tzaddikim dancing and singing praises to the Almighty, accompanied by a complete orchestra. The general populace who did not perform would observe and marvel at the festivities. The atmosphere was one of total ecstasy and euphoria. Yet, the Gemorah

relates that the nature of the praises which the sages sang focused upon the theme of repentance. Those that refrained from sin even in their youth would proclaim, “Happy is he who did not sin and he who sinned and was forgiven.” Why did these Tzaddikim select such a solemn theme in a time of such rejoicing?

“One explanation is that there can be no true rejoicing in this world, no complete Simcha, unless it revolves around, and is the culmination of, a Mitzvah - spiritual achievement. Any other Simcha can only be temporary and fleeting. Furthermore, even a Simcha or Mitzvah cannot be total and perpetuated if not tempered by dosages of seriousness and awe-inspiring thoughts. And, when it is complemented by these thoughts, it perpetuates the Simcha and increases it to unparalleled levels. Although Simchas Beis Hashoava was such a joyous event to the extent that Chazal said that anyone who did not see it never experienced true Simcha, nevertheless, if the scholars and Tzaddikim who conducted the festivities would not have interjected those shades of seriousness, it could not have brought pure, everlasting inner satisfaction and happiness.

The expanded development of our relationship with the Almighty and the joy experienced in partaking in His mitzvos on the Succos holiday, culminate in the festival of Shemini Atzeres, which takes place the day after Hoshanah Rabbah. It is an independent holiday that is not part of the Succos festival. It is also observed as a time of Simchas Torah, the day of rejoicing upon the completion of the reading of the Torah.

Shemini Atzeres is a most unique holiday. The Medrash says it is to be compared to a king who hosts great festivities for seven days and as they come to a close and those dearest and closest to him begin to leave, he begs of them, “It is very difficult for me to bear your leaving. Please remain one more day.” This is the concept, Chazal tell us, that the Jew is to feel on Shemini Atzeres. The

Almighty, in His deep love and devotion to Klal Yisroel is, so to speak, so moved by the expressions of love on their part during the seven days of Succos, that He finds it difficult to allow them to leave and begs of them, “Please remain with Me one more day for the observance of another special festival.”

It seems uniquely appropriate that the day of Shemini Atzeres, the day which expresses the depth of the dimension of the relationship between G-d and His people, should have been chosen by the Rabbis to be the day when we rejoice in the completion of the Torah. Chazal tell us that there never has been a greater expression of the Creator’s love for His people, Israel, than in His giving them His Torah, privileging them with the Divine blueprint of life and the most basic directives for proper living. This expression of love was made on Mount Sinai, not through agents, not through representatives, but by direct communication between the Almighty and His people. This expression of His love is unparalleled in the history of the Jewish people and it is most appropriate that the joy of completion of the Torah should be experienced on the day which is in itself a most unique expression of that relationship.

The Succos holiday, followed by Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah, serve as an opportunity to solidify the commitments that were made on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and to strengthen our bond with the Creator. The warmth and closeness experienced through the performance of the mitzvos during these days inspires the Jew to further commitment and strengthens him to be able to face the challenges of life.

Simchas Beis Hashoeva: Rejoicing as a True Servant of G-d

Chazal tell us that although the decrees for the coming year are sealed on Yom Kippur, they are not given to the heavenly agents to carry out until Hoshana Rabba, the last day of Chol Hamoed Succos, a day of prayer and atonement comparable to Yom Kippur itself.

This presents a perplexing situation. It is true that the Jew spends the few days between Yom Kippur and Succos in busy preparation for the mitzvos of Succos and has little time to think of anything else. But, when the Succos begins, it would seem that his time be best used in Teshuva and introspection and continuing the process of the ten days of penitence - yet an entirely different scene presents itself.

In the Beis HaMikdash, every evening was spent with the Simchas Beis Hashoava, an elaborate party lasting from afternoon until dawn. The festivities were unbelievable. All sorts of instruments were played, there was singing and dancing and all forms of acrobatics and entertainment by none other than the greatest sages of Israel.

The common man was only permitted to observe the festivities. The activities of the entire night culminated in the drawing of the water from the well of the Shiluach. The water was later poured on the mizbeach as part of the morning sacrifice.

The Chazal tell us that one who did not witness the Simchas Beis Hashoava never witnessed Simcha in his life. What was so special about the drawing or the pouring of the water on Succos that it merited such festivities? Were not such festivities contradictory to the mood of seriousness that should have prevailed through Hashanah Rabbah?

The Maharsha in Sukka (50b) seems to indicate the answer. The mitzvah of pouring the water was a pure and simple act of fulfilling a mitzvah solely for the purpose of abiding by G-d's command. Most mitzvos offer the Jew great benefits, either directly or indirectly, or are at least relevant to some deeply significant message. When the Jew thus performs these mitzvos, he may be distracted from his ultimate purpose of purely fulfilling the will of his Creator by the benefits or purposes.

When the Jewish people performed the mitzvah of gathering the water and pouring it on the mizbeach, there were no such benefits or purposes. It was purely because G-d so commanded. The Simchas Beis Hashoava thus afforded the Jew the opportunity to reach unprecedented levels of purity in the fulfillment of the Almighty's will. However, the extensive rejoicing carried the message much further. The Jew was assisted in realizing the extreme joy of fulfilling a mitzvah purely for the mitzvah's sake.

The Talmud says that the reason for the great rejoicing was also simply because the Torah says, "And you shall draw water with rejoicing." Even the Jew's emotional state of mind is directed by the Torah. The Torah says to rejoice especially in this simple mitzvah, so he does.

Thus, the mitzvah of Simchas Beis Hashoava provides the Jew with at least a glimpse of the ultimate in the service of his Creator: Every act, every word, even every emotion is to be controlled by man based on G-d's directives. This then provides the ultimate picture of a servant of G-d.

The story is told that a group of Chassidim once came to their Rebbe for advice, and said, "We need great help from the Almighty for our difficulties." The Rebbe told them to pay special attention while saying the words of King David in Hallel, "Please G-d . . ."

Some time later, the group returned, even more distressed. They related to the Rebbe that they had followed his advice, with no results. The Rebbe asked them, “To which words of ‘Please G-d’ did you pay special attention and utter with extra feeling? Their answer was to the words, “Please G-d, save us. Please G-d, bring us success.” The Rebbe looked at them in admonishment. “That’s not the one I meant. I meant you should pay special attention when saying the words, “Please G-d, I am your servant.” The Rebbe’s message was now clear. The most successful approach in asking G-d for help is coming before him with the realization that, “I am your servant.” He helps us in the merit of that realization and to the degree that it is real.

The commentaries explain the sentence, “Please G-d, I am your servant, your servant the son of your servant, you have opened my bonds,” to mean that King David thanked G-d for having freed him and proclaimed that he merited His help only because he realized that he is only a servant of the ultimate King, a servant who is comfortable with his servitude as a servant, since he is the son of a servant, born and bred in servitude.

The Simchas Beis Hashoava affords the Jew the unique opportunity to deepen his realization of his true and total servitude to G-d. The days of total Simcha develop in him the awareness that even his innermost emotions are bound to the service of his Creator and what a joy that realization is.

Thus, the rejoicing of Simchas Beis Hashoava serves to complement the mood of Yom Kippur, to refine the Jew’s understanding of his commitment to his G-d and prepare him for the final stage in the Divine judgment of Hoshaha Rabba. The merit of his realization of his role as being obligated totally to his Creator entitles him to the most favorable results in the final stages of the days of awe.

Chanukah and Assimilation

Throughout Jewish history, especially when the physical existence of our people was not threatened, its spiritual well being was invariably under siege by the pressures of assimilation. This ever-present threat to Jewish survival has all too often almost succeeded at undermining the Jewish people and virtually extinguishing any remnant of our glorious past. Yet miraculously something happens, someone or some group rallies and all is never lost.

What is the secret of Jewish survival? What have we that allows us to endure as a vibrant nation, in the throngs of the greatest pressures of assimilation and efforts aimed at blotting out the last breath of Jewish life? What do these individuals have that enables them to resist all efforts and bring so many to their support? What does the Jew have within himself that forever assures his spiritual and national survival?

The answer may be found in the observance that celebrates the most amazing feat of Jewish spiritual survival against the greatest odds. Great miracles occurred to end the Greek occupation of Israel and undercut their concerted effort of snuffing out Jewish religious commitment. A small band of Jewish people rallied to evict the greatest power of the civilized world. The result was unbelievable.

Another seemingly less significant miracle occurred at that time as well. When the Beis Hamikdash was cleansed and only a small bottle of pure olive oil was found to fulfill the Mitzvah of lighting the menorah, it miraculously burned for eight days until new pure oil could be prepared.

What is strange about this entire event is that for more than 2,000 years the Jewish people have commemorated the miracle of the lights year after year, by lighting the Chanukah candles. Why is the emphasis placed on this part of the Chanukah story? Isn't the miraculous victory over the Greek Empire more significant in the scope of Jewish history? Does not the victory of the Chashmonaim, which literally saved the Torah and the Mitzvos from being forgotten, deserve more attention on Chanukah?

The Rambam indicates that it is necessary to appreciate the miracle of the oil in order to appreciate the other miracles that took place (Hilchos Chanukah). This poses some difficulty. The survival of our people, the defeat of the Greek armies and the re-establishment of the banner of Torah and Mitzvos seem much more easily appreciated and understood than the miracle of the menorah. If the lights did not burn for eight days, it would have been no one's fault. In fact, the menorah could have even been lit with the impure oil – pure oil is only a *hiddur*, the preferred manner of performing the Mitzvah. The whole miracle seems almost inconsequential.

Why does the fact that one Mitzvah was miraculously fulfilled in its preferred method overshadow the virtual spiritual survival of our people?

The Rambam is teaching us that unless we appreciate the overwhelming importance of simply observing even one commandment, we cannot truly appreciate the spiritual survival of our people. Year after year, we must celebrate that our people were able to, in fact, completely fulfill, rather than be excused from lighting the menorah or lighting it in a less-than-perfect way.

Many speak about Jewish eternity, many are concerned about assimilation, many are worried about lost Jewish identity. Without a deep appreciation for even the seemingly small aspects of Torah observance we cannot appreciate the true spiritual destiny of the

Jewish people. . What is the purpose of Jewish existence, if not to fulfill the Torah's commandments? Who ordained Jewish destiny if not the One who commanded us to fulfill His Mitzvos?

Our people are caught in the throngs of assimilation and plagued by identity crisis because they have never learned to appreciate the exacting observance of even one commandment of our Torah. Only with this appreciation can the Jew look forward to an understanding of Jewish destiny and a true concern for our Jewish identity. Only with this awareness, can our people assure their spiritual survival.

Purim: An Insight into the Eternity of Israel

Purim is recognized as the happiest of all holidays and festivals. It is filled with joy and merriment, dance and song, and specially prepared meals for all to enjoy. Its festive spirit far surpasses any of our other holidays and is somewhat not attuned to other festivals on the Jewish calendar. Why this distinct difference? What makes Purim so unique in this respect?

In the answer to these questions lie not only the true meaning and significance of Purim but also the meaning of Jewish existence in the Diaspora; the relationship of the Jewish people to the Almighty and His relationship to them. Herein we shall attempt to answer these questions, hoping to bring new meaning regarding Purim and its impact on our lives as Jews.

The Megillah of Purim seems to be a jigsaw puzzle with unrelated parts. Achashverosh, mighty King of Persia, makes a special feast. His queen, Vashti, disobeys him and is executed. After an extensive search for her replacement, Esther is chosen as queen. While this is happening, the wicked Haman is elevated to a high position in the kingdom. Haman is enraged when the Jew Mordechai refuses to bow down to him. This is the same Mordechai who had earlier saved the king's life when he heard some of the king's officers planning to assassinate him. This incident is then recorded in the king's chronicles. Haman, assured of his power and influence, builds the gallows on which to hang Mordechai, and when he seeks permission to carry out this dastardly deed, the king is reminded that it was Mordechai who had saved his life. The unrelated pieces of the

jigsaw puzzle are now connected. Haman is hanged and the Jewish people are saved.

Purim and the salvation of the Jewish people from certain annihilation was a miracle, but it was different than other miracles. We are familiar with the miracles of Passover, the ten plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea and the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. These were miracles clearly visible for all to see. But the miracles of Purim were hidden behind curtains of what at first glance seems like a series of unconnected events. The Vilna Gaon, in explaining this strange phenomenon, makes the following analogy. He compares the story of Purim to that of a King whose son commits a crime and the King is forced to evict his son from the palace because of the seriousness of the crime. The son, broken-hearted by this rejection from his father, flees to the forest where he is attacked by wild beasts. He is miraculously saved by the king's soldiers, who happen to come along. Similar attacks on the son continue to occur, and the son continues to be saved by his father's soldiers, who just happen along. The son then realizes that the coincidence of the soldiers being there was not by chance. His father had planned it that way. He had sent his soldiers to watch over his son and protect him. This enabled him to realize even more that his father still loved him very much in spite of the banishment. Similarly, the Jews in the time of Purim came to the same realization after experiencing the strange set of circumstances and discovering through them that it was the hand of the Almighty directing all events. Even in times of despair, facing death, G-d is protecting them and watching over them. This is the lesson for all generations of the Diaspora. When the Jew is exiled, seemingly removed from the presence of his Creator, when all hope of salvation seems lost, he discovers G-d is still with him, still watching over him, still protecting him. It is this realization that rekindles the Jew's belief and faith in his destiny.

The Rabbis tell us that on Purim, the Jews accepted the entire Torah without any doubt or hesitation, realizing that even in the seemingly rejected state of Galus, Hashem truly cared for and loved them. They became confident in their own ability to abide by the laws of the Torah, even under the most trying conditions.

On Purim, the Hallel is not recited. The Rabbis explain that the Megillah reading is in fact the Hallel of Purim. The meaning of this comment becomes clearer upon analyzing the purpose of Hallel. The Jew says the Hallel as a praise to his Creator, to deepen his own faith and belief in Him (Ralbag). The Purim message is one of deepening faith, not through revelation of miracles, but through the self-discovery of the miracles that occurred. Reading the Megillah and coming to the realization that the events were far more than coincidental, allows the Jew to discover for himself that Hashem cares for his every need and truly loves him and is always there to watch over him. This is the function of the Purim observance.

On the Jewish calendar, Purim is a time of great Simcha. This state of joy allows the message to penetrate the depths of one's very being. To witness obvious miracles, any state of being suffices, but for discovery of hidden miracles, the more joyous the state of mind, the more vivid the realization!

The festive Purim meal and the customary drinking are aimed at using the material props of this world to assist in achieving this state of being.

Now that we have established the reasons for the great amount of joy and happiness evolved from the discovery of hidden miracles, one must ask what role and for what purpose were the Mitzvos of Shalach Manos and Matanos Levyonim instituted.

The Rambam says that there is no Simcha like the joy of one who rejoices the hearts of the downtrodden and brokenhearted, for

one who does so is emulating the Creator Himself. Thus, gifts to the poor, Matanos Levyonim, rejoice the heart of the donor. Shalach Manos, sending the parcels of food to one's friends, deepens the bonds between brothers and enhances the Shalom, which in turn brings deeper Simcha. To achieve the highest levels of Simcha, the relationships between man to man must be expanded and these two Mitzvos fulfill this purpose.

When the Jew listens to the Megillah and marvels at the seemingly coincidental events, when he deepens his enjoyment through the festive Purim meal and drink, and when he expands the deeper spiritual Simcha in benefiting others with Shalach Manos and Matanos Levyonim, then he derives a unique strength and fosters an unswerving faith in the Creator and his commitment to sustain him through the Galus under the most adverse conditions.

This faith is fundamental to the continued existence of the Jew and the key to his survival.

Even more than the great miracles of the Exodus from Egypt, the hidden miracles of Purim have given the Jew the faith and courage to face the uncertainties of the Diaspora in the face of the greatest tragedies. When the presence of the Almighty seemed to be missing, the Jew has remained steadfast in his belief that G-d is there caring for him and watching over him. It is the lesson of Purim that has given our people this unyielding faith and confidence in the Divine guidance of the Almighty.

The Pesach Experience

The history and plight of the Jewish people have long been a wondrous and thought-provoking phenomenon that has startled observers to this very day. One of the most outstanding features of that history, one that has raised many an eyebrow, is the meticulous and unyielding exactness with which the Jewish people have observed the “Pesach.” The image of a mother or grandmother on her hands and knees scrubbing some obscure corner of the house making everything “Pesachdik” is one that has been indelibly inscribed in most of our hearts and has inspired Jews throughout the ages.

What is even more interesting than Pesach’s unique effect on the observant Jew is the way it has left its mark on even the most removed and apathetic portion of our people. It seems that while Shabbos and Kashruth have tragically become obsolete in our “modern, more sophisticated society,” the traditions of the Passover seder, be it the recital of the Haggadah or the eating of the Matza or Moror, have been repeated year in and year out. Why? What is it about Pesach that motivates the Jewish father and mother to expend their last ounce of energy preparing for it? What is it that brings Jews in all corners of the world together to share in what seems to be a mere ritual, and, finally, what is it about Pesach that touches the heart of even the most skeptical and distant Jew to recount to his son the glorious story that begins, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.”

To understand this we first have to delve into the ultimate meaning and message of Pesach. The Ramban in the Chumash comments that before the Jews were witness to the miracles that occurred in Egypt, the human race had never directly seen G-d’s all-

encompassing creative powers. There were, of course, many men who, through their intellect and awareness, came to a recognition of G-d and even to His “Hashgacha Pratis,” the Divine involvement in every minute detail of man’s existence. But never was it so clear to so many and in such dimensions, that Hashem was in total control on earth. Faith in Hashem, as human experience will bear out, must be constantly reinforced.

The Ralbag explains that the purpose for which the Jewish people sang the Shira (the song of praise sung at the Red Sea) after the splitting of the sea was to reinforce and enhance their faith in Hashem. Even after seeing miracles of such magnitude, there still remained an aspect of their faith that needed to be strengthened. A strengthening that could only come from ideas as spiritually uplifting as were expressed in the Shira.

Just as the Jews who were let out of Egypt by G-d felt that it was necessary, through the Shira, to imbed even deeper in their hearts what was already so clear in their minds, so, too, is it incumbent upon us to do the same. It is in this respect that Pesach serves as a present day song of praise. By recalling the redemption in all its splendor, from the might that was displayed during the plague of the firstborn to the love that was expressed through the protecting cloud, the Jewish people reawaken and rejuvenate their faith and trust in G-d - a faith and trust that has no doubt given them the strength to survive this long exile with all of its horrors.

There can be no greater source of inspiration than to relate the intricate details and amazing precision with which the plagues were meted out. A glass of blood in the hands of an Egyptian became water when touched by a Jew. Darkness, so thick it was paralyzing, was non-existent for the Jews, who walked about in sunlight. These events clearly illustrate G-d’s constant control over nature. They serve to remind us that every occurrence is a direct result of G-d’s

will; and when we need help, there is but one direction to turn. This is the message that Pesach carries, and it is our obligation to respond to it properly. But the Torah, with its infinite wisdom, felt that purely remembering was not enough. In order for this message to be understood to the fullest, there had to be more.

Basic human nature prevents a person involved in one matter from concentrating on another. Were we to celebrate Pesach while involved with everyday matters, we would no doubt be less than receptive to the high ideals the holiday tries to convey. It is only when we refrain from work and clear our minds of all worldly matters that we can hope to elevate ourselves to the level expected of us. It is for this reason that the element of Chag (festival) is such a vital one. It is the first step in the Torah's system to prepare us for this eventful week.

The mitzvah of cleaning the house of all chometz, in conjunction with the obligation to eat Matzoh, is essential in helping us actually relive history. By eating the same Matzoh they ate, by being deprived of chometz just as they were, we acquire a greater appreciation of Hashem's love for the B'nei Yisroel. They serve to remind us of the speed with which the redemption came. Although we were already enslaved for two hundred and ten years, when the moment of redemption came, Hashem made it happen immediately. To spend just a few extra hours in a land as depraved as Egypt was unthinkable if it could not be justified by some Divine will. Not only did Hashem not delay the redemption, but our Sages tell us He was anxiously waiting for that moment to come when he could finally establish the Jews as a nation guided by Torah. To such an extent was Hashem determined to take us out immediately, that He did not allow the Jewish people enough time to bake their bread. It is this message of Hashem's love that the unleavened bread conveys.

The eating of Matzoh and the absence of chometz, is just the first step in our attempt to relive the Exodus. Almost every law connected with the seder night in some way serves to place us in Egypt and makes us feel that we, too, were redeemed along with the rest of our brothers. Be it the salt water, symbolic of the tears our forefathers shed, or the moror, reminiscent of the suffering, or any of the other various laws and customs of the seder, they all instill within us a greater sense of what transpired with our forefathers.

What makes these laws and the preparation that goes with them all the more noteworthy, is the awe and precision with which they are fulfilled. The way a Jewish mother cleans the house and the way every halachic provision is met with the most scrupulous care is something that might even appear as bordering on neurosis! This care, however, can be explained by the Jewish people's appreciation and understanding of the importance of these concepts. An importance that is also borne out and enhanced by the great emphasis the Torah places upon the observance of these mitzvos. It becomes clear, therefore, that only when we can, to some measure, experience the awe of the moment, can we honestly say that we know what Pesach is all about.

There remains, however, one other mitzvah involving Pesach which could well be the most powerful of all. The Torah commands us, "and you should tell your child on that day..." It is apparent from the Rambam that the purpose for this telling is not only for the child's sake but also for the father's. When a man, whether he is thirty or eighty, relates this story to his child, he becomes linked to a heritage that goes straight back to that glorious day some three thousand years ago. The recital of the Haggadah and the remembrance that this is the same story his father told him, which he heard from his father, onward through the ages, fills him with a confidence that cannot help but spur one on to greater spiritual

heights. It is a staggering thought that not just one person can boast of this uninterrupted transmission through the centuries, nor is it limited to one country. Rather it extends to all corners of the world — from America to Ethiopia, from Russia to Australia. Millions of Jews in all walks of life, who have nothing more in common other than their coveted heritage, gather in their homes on one special night. Generation after generation, they tell a story they have heard so many times before. This is without a doubt the greatest living testimony to the truth and relevance of our age-old Haggadah. What an awesome responsibility the Torah entrusts us with, when it asks us to keep up this heritage. How careful we must be to carry out this obligation considering that the future of the Jewish people depends upon it.

If we approach Pesach with these thoughts in mind; if we fulfill its halachic requirements with the care and precision it deserves; if we are aware of our responsibilities in teaching our children the Passover story, then Pesach has the potential to change our lives. We need only to take advantage of this rare opportunity.

Pesach: Foundation of Faith

The redemption from Egypt is the foundation of the faith of the Jew. Chazal tell us that it took place in four stages: “And I will take you out, and I will save you, and I will redeem you and I will take you to me as a people.” These are the four phrases with which the Torah describes the Geula (redemption). The Seforno explains that first the slave work ceased, then the Jews left Egypt, they then crossed through the Red Sea, and last, they received the Torah and became the nation of Hashem.

Each step involved a major set of miracles, a revelation of G-d’s powers, and His concern and love for His people. Each one was a major event worthy of great Hallel (praise). To enhance our appreciation for every aspect of the redemption, the Rabbis instituted the four cups of wine, one representing each stage.

When we remember each development individually and lift up our cup of wine in praise for each, our gratitude and Simcha are deeply expanded. The recognition of all of the miracles and the expression of G-d’s love and dedication to us are a major part of the Pesach experience. This is actually the idea behind the often misunderstood “Dayenu.” We recite a list of all of the miraculous events and seem to say that even if only one of them had occurred, it would have been sufficient. Would it have been enough if we had only been redeemed from Egypt and not passed through the Red Sea, or not received the Torah? Would that really suffice? “Dayenu” means that each and every miracle in itself would have been reason enough to utter great praises to Hashem. How much more so for the totality of the miraculous events which occurred.

The deepened faith and belief which the Jew develops on Pesach, and the enhanced appreciation for his Creator, are an eternal source of strength to our people.

There is an additional source of strength derived from the exodus from Egypt. Rashi explains the Pesukim of Shir Hashirim that the nations of the world asked the Jewish people: “Wherein lies the source of your strong commitment to your G-d, that you will even allow yourself to be burned or crucified, rather than forsake your loyalty and commitment to Him?”

The Jews answered that, “He revealed Himself to us as the One who redeemed us from Egypt. His first introduction to us included an expression of our obligation to serve Him. ‘I redeemed you from slavery to be to you a G-d.’” The legal obligation, the condition upon which we were redeemed, seems the crucial element in our loyalty and commitment.

Does not the love expressed in the great miracles inspire our great commitment to Him? Does not His role as Creator and Ruler of the Universe demand deep, unswerving loyalty? It most certainly does; but the only assurance of permanent commitment, the only force powerful enough to sustain our dedication in the face of the greatest challenges and torture is the absolute realization of our complete obligation to Him as His servants. This has been the major factor ensuring us of endless strength in the pursuit of our spiritual obligations under the most adverse conditions. This is the fundamental lesson of Pesach, and this is reemphasized throughout the year in all of the Mitzvos that commemorate the exodus from Egypt.

The answer to the nations is that our undaunted strength comes from the recognition of the condition upon which we were redeemed from Egypt - to be His servants and He our G-d.

The Festival Of Shavuos: What is Torah?

The Festival of Shavuos, the commemoration of that eventful day at Mount Sinai when the Jewish people were privileged to receive the Torah, carries with it no specific acts of commemoration as do the other Jewish holidays. The acceptance of Torah, the commitment of the entire Jewish people in unison to abide by all the precepts and ways of Torah, cannot be commemorated by any specific act. It can only be relived by the complete and total dedication of the Jew to the ways of Torah and through his adherence to every last detail of its laws.

The transmission of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai has far-reaching and infinite ramifications. It is a vivid expression of G-d's boundless love for His people. The Divine blueprint for creation in which every secret, every dimension, every aspect of the universe is contained, was therein revealed to the Jewish people. They were taught its ways, its directives and its system. Furthermore, they were given total control and authority to decide upon all questions of its observance.

In order to fully appreciate that unique expression of love that was manifested by the giving of the Torah, one must first appreciate the effects of Torah upon those that are fortunate to come in contact with it. The Talmud tells us that G-d said, "I created the evil inclination in man and I created for it a cure, Torah." G-d created man with evil tendencies, with the intention that man should seek perfection of character and deed. This, however, the Rabbis tell us, can only be attained by using one formula as his base, the study and involvement in Torah.

Often, we feel that there are many aspects of human behavior in which our minds and hearts guide us and place us upon the right path. We do not need the study of Torah to help us discern between right and wrong. Yet, the Rambam in Mishnah Torah indicates that there is grave danger in this seemingly simple realization. He says that the reason the prophets describe the Almighty in terms of merciful, kind, truthful, patient, etc., is to teach us that these are positive, proper attributes for one to follow. It would seem that man is always aware that these are positive and appropriate character traits, and would not need a special lesson to teach him that message. Yet, the Rambam tells us that although man has a very great capacity to realize truth, he also has the capacity to confuse his mind and his heart to become completely blinded to the most elementary truths of life.

Man can bring himself to the belief that good is evil and evil is good, that kindness and mercy, truth and compassion are human weaknesses, rather than the greatest strengths of character. We have seen in the history of mankind such philosophies, and we need Torah to indelibly and eternally impress upon us that these are traits to be coveted, traits to be developed, and they are ultimately true good.

Rabbenu Saddia Gaon explains that even though so many of the commandments of the Torah can be understood with Sechel, the human intellect, the Torah expands upon this understanding and adds to it dimensions that the human Sechel would not have been able to achieve.

Sechel forbids us to kill, but the Torah tells us that embarrassing another human being in public falls in the same category. Sechel teaches us not to steal, but the Torah tells us that when we deprive an individual of any word, of a “good morning” in response to his, then we, too, are involved in stealing.

Reb Yisrael Salanter explains that the study of the laws pertaining to a specific area of observance will obviously have a very profound effect upon those observances. When one studies a specific area of Torah he becomes sensitized to the observance of those precepts. The Mishna tells us that Torah study has such a tremendous impact upon the personality that it not only gives it inner strength to ward off the temptations and challenges to the adherence of those regulations, but it further moves the mere thought of violating them out of the mind, altogether. It becomes part of his nature not to even begin to contemplate or be tempted to violate those laws.

Torah study has a spiritual effect as well. The Chazon Ish writes that one's total involvement in Torah is the key to perfecting one's character and altering one's evil tendencies. The study of Torah, that involvement in those sublime beautiful concepts which unlock the mysteries and secrets of creation, that involvement in seeking to understand the will of his Creator, has a purifying effect upon one's entire being.

So overwhelming is the impact of learning Torah that Chazal say that the Almighty would not object, "If only they forsake me but yet guard my Torah." If His people were to abandon Him but would keep His Torah, the light within the Torah would bring them back. Learning, alone, can awaken those dormant cells embedded within the Jew to bring him back from the furthest distances.

G-d tells the Jewish people that as a prerequisite and condition for His bestowal of all the riches and goodness of this world upon His nation, they must first follow the ways of Torah. Rashi explains that the mitzvah of, "If you will follow My statutes," implies the involvement in Torah study, not only for the sake of being aware of all the precepts in order to be able to fulfill them properly, but refers to one's being involved in the perplexities and intricate labyrinths of

Torah. It means searching, delving, scrutinizing, seeking to unveil the inner secrets and truths hidden in Torah, just for the sake of being engrossed in Toras Hashem – the wisdom, the treasure, that G-d gave His people.

The Pasuk continues, “And if you do not listen to Me and do not perform these commandments, and if you reject My statutes, etc., so, too, I will do the same to you.” Rashi continues to explain that, to the contrary, if one does not labor himself over Toras Hashem, this alone will start an inevitable chain reaction that he will gradually stop performing Mitzvos and he will move further and further away from Torah until he will ultimately deny the existence of his Creator. This, Rashi says, is brought about not because Klal Yisroel did not learn Torah, but rather, because the Jewish people are not saturated and totally immersed in understanding Toras Hashem. This alone causes the downfall of the Jewish nation.

Furthermore, we find in the annals of our nation’s history periods in which our people were involved in Torah study, but there was a slight lack of appreciation of Torah. It was studied and treated as any other science or discipline of knowledge. This, too, brought doom to our nation.

The Talmud relates that when the first Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people were exiled from their land, the prophets and leaders of the nation were perplexed and confused. The Pasuk says, “Why was the land lost?” G-d answered, “Because they have forsaken My Torah.”

The prophets could not explain why the land was destroyed, for throughout the centuries the Jewish people sinned occasionally, but were spared because the merit of their learning Torah had protected them. Why were they not spared this time? Why didn’t their involvement in Torah save them once again? The Pasuk tells us, “G-d said, because they have forsaken My Torah.” The Almighty in His

Omnipotence, who knows and understands the innermost feelings of every being, detected that although the Jewish people were studying Torah, they approached it as one would approach any science or wisdom. They did not recite the blessing of the Torah before learning each day in appreciation of the fact that the Torah is a G-d-given gift, not merely wisdom. We can imagine that if the prophets, with all their sagacity, could not perceive this defect, how infinitesimal that lack of appreciation for Torah must have been. Yet, we see that that alone was rendered so grave a sin that all the learning done could not protect the nation from the impending tragedy. This is because Torah is unique and stands on a pedestal above and beyond other wisdoms. If not appreciated as such, the ramifications can be catastrophic.

When on the festival of Shavuot we observe the anniversary of the eventful day at Mount Sinai that the Torah was given to the Jewish people, it serves as a source of strength and renewed commitment to the learning of Torah and acceptance of its ways.

When the Jew is aware of the power of Torah, the uniqueness of Torah's ability to elevate and perfect the human character; when the Jew realizes that Torah is the blueprint to the entire creation and to human existence and realizes the extent and the share which he is granted in that Torah, then the love of the Almighty to His people expressed at Mount Sinai becomes a reality in his life. That "kiss," as it is referred to by King Solomon, mouth to mouth, the closest, most profound expression of the loving relationship between the Creator and His people in giving to them His most coveted and prized possession, is genuinely felt and appreciated.

In this context, the festival of Shavuot takes on added meaning. With it, the festival of Shavuot can inspire new dimensions of elevation and commitment to Torah and its ways, which can uplift and sustain the Jew for the years to come.

However, just as one's total involvement in Torah study has such a tremendous effect on the entire being, to the contrary, how detrimental are the ramifications of any breach therein.

The Gemorah relates that Reb Yermeyah and Reb Zeyra were studying together. Reb Yermeyah suddenly jumped up. It seems that it was late for the afternoon prayers. Reb Zeyra sensed in his jumping something ever so slightly amiss and said to him, "About you, it is written, 'one who turns his ear away from the words of Torah, also his prayers are abominable'." The Ralbag explains that the meaning of this sentence is that not only when he closes his ears to the words of Torah are his character and actions and all of his thought processes affected, but even his prayers cannot be as they should. And yet, we see from this passage in the Gemorah that Reb Yermeyah, on his high level, for ever so slight an infraction or a break in his deep involvement in the study of Torah, is also considered affected by the concept of "turning one's ear from the words of Torah."

If merely the practically indiscernible act of getting up too quickly to do a mitzvah which was fully and totally his obligation at that moment is deemed to have such far-reaching implications, how awesome must be the influence of Torah and how harmful the effect of any breach therein. It is no wonder that Yaakov Avinu, upon his decision to move to Egypt, first sent ahead Yehuda to establish a Yeshiva, a place of Torah study and teaching. Yaakov and his family had already been granted permission to live in the land of Goshen, purposely set apart from the influences of the immediate surroundings of Egypt. They would not have been that exposed to the negative environment.

Yaakov was traveling with his small group of 70 people, all Tzadikim, great saints and scholars. Certainly, with his guidance and strength he would have kept them in line. If there were to be any

problems, Yosef, who was virtually the all-powerful ruler of Egypt, certainly could have interceded for them. They had the greatest political clout of any group. It may even be that by sending Yehuda, Yaakov's trip to see his son that he had not seen for 22 years was somewhat delayed. Yet, he could not take his family, he could not expose these great Tzadikim and scholars to any place, unless first the Yeshiva, the center for teaching and studying Torah, had already been established.

Reb Chaim Volozhiner, in his famous work, *Nefesh Hachaim*, expands upon the concept that the Jew, through his closeness with the Almighty's Torah, his deep involvement with comprehending its concepts and its ways, is, in essence, involved in an intimate and profound relationship with the Creator Himself.

The dimensions of this relationship are varied. Rashi says in *Shir Hashirim* that when one plunges into the depths of Torah and unravels its inner truths, he is, in effect, reliving the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai.

Chazal tell us that Torah wisdom, the privilege to unveil the hidden secrets embedded in Torah is a G-d-granted gift, and the study is a condition without which this gift is not granted. Each and every time the Jew involves himself in the intricacies of Torah and G-d grants him understanding, he is actually experiencing again that momentous event at Mount Sinai. Although the discovery of the wisdom of Torah is a Divinely-granted gift, the Rabbis speak about it in another sense, as well.

The Talmud relates that Eliyahu Hanavi was once questioned as to what the Almighty is doing with His day. He answered that He is studying the passage of Pelegesh Begivah and is saying, "Thus says My son Evyasar and thus says My son Yonoson." It seems as if to say that the Almighty Himself, when He studies the Torah which was given to Klal Yisroel here on earth, studies it with the thoughts of

Rebbi Evyasar and Rebbi Yonoson. The Gemorah says, “Both of these are the words of the Living G-d,” but since the man Evyasar and the man Yonoson have been privileged to decipher these inner meanings of Torah, they are credited with the discovery, even by the Almighty Himself.

When one studies G-d’s Torah to discern and discover its secrets and realizes that this is the Divine directive for mankind, he realizes that his mind is not great enough to comprehend its secrets without the Divine gift of understanding. Yet, after that understanding has been achieved, his creations, his comprehensions, his discoveries, are totally accredited to him.

Aside from all the benefits that one reaps from learning Torah, it seems that there is a separate Mitzvah to saturate oneself with Torah study for no other reason than to involve oneself in Toras Hashem, the Almighty’s Torah. The Torah says at the end of Vayikra, “And if you follow My statutes and guard My mitzvos and perform them, I will send rain in its season, etc.”

“And You Shall Rejoice in Your Festivals”

Although each of the festivals, Pesach, Shavuot and Succot, have their own specific mitzvos and customs, there is one mitzvah that they have in common: the mitzvah of rejoicing. The rejoicing is a unique blend of the material and the spiritual which simultaneously assists the Jew to experience the Yom Tov in a state of physical contentment and emotional enrapture, while enabling the spiritual message of the festival to be most deeply appreciated.

The Rabbis tell us that the Jew is to divide the day of Yom Tov, devoting half of his time to the service of his Creator and half towards his personal enjoyment. The latter includes the partaking in festive meals, at which meat and wine are obligatory. New clothing for the women and special games and treats for the children all enhance the Simcha.

The Rabbis tell us that no matter what level of spirituality the Jew may be on, nevertheless, the heights of spiritual elevation that are achieved on the festival are a factor of the material joys of the Yom Tov. The physical rejoicing establishes a feeling of contentment and happiness which enable the Jew to freely and happily devote his thoughts to his Creator and to thereby experience the true meaning of Yom Tov.

We say in all the prayers of the festival, “And the people of Israel shall rejoice in You.” The rejoicing on Yom Tov is in the realization of the unique relationship that exists between the Almighty and Klal Yisroel. The Jew reaches a state of ecstasy by basking in the warmth of that mutual love.

Traditionally, a festive meal does not pass by without the singing of the verse which is recited in the prayers of the Yom Tov, “You have chosen us from amongst all of the nations. You loved us and desired us. You elevated us above the tongues, and You have sanctified us in Your commandments and You have drawn us close to Your service and You have called us by Your awesome and holy name.”

The essence of the Simchas Yom Tov is a spiritual one. However, the Torah, in understanding the human side of man, requires him to partake in material acts of rejoicing, so that he can appreciate the spiritual Simcha

The level of the Simcha that the Torah requires the Jew to reach on the festival is uniquely conveyed by the Abarbanel. He points out that the mitzvah of rejoicing on the festival is mentioned more than once only by the Succos holiday. He explains that only after the ingathering of the crops, only after the tangible assurance that during the winter months he will have proper food and nourishment, can the Jew fully experience the Simcha of Yom Tov.

A question arises in understanding the words of the Abarbanel. Chazal tell us that on the night of Passover, “Every person is obligated to view himself as if he was redeemed from Egypt.” The Torah demands of every Jew to inspire himself on the night of Passover, to the highest levels of faith and trust in his Creator, as if he himself had just participated in that awesome event. If so, should it be all that difficult for the Jew to have confidence and faith on Pesach or Shavuos that the crop that will be harvested after the summer will be plentiful? Is it really a doubt that will disturb his equilibrium and make him unable to feel true Simcha?

The answer lies in understanding that the level and height of Simcha that the Torah demands of the Jew on the festival is beyond our comprehension. It is a complete Simcha; one that is not

interrupted by the slightest disturbance. Even though the Jew is full of trust and faith that the crop will be plentiful, nevertheless, if he does not have that tangible assurance, then somewhere in the inner recesses of his being there may lie an uncertainty, and that doubt can disturb him from truly experiencing the level of Simcha that the Torah desires of him in rejoicing in the festival. When the true meaning of Yom Tov is attained, when the Jew, through the aid of the material enjoyments and relaxation is able to experience true Simcha in that unique status of being chosen as G-d's people, then the Yom Tov serves to rejuvenate his faith, his commitment and his relationship with his Creator, and it enables him to face the challenges which life places upon him and to rise to the highest levels of human perfection.

Moadim Of G-d

“These are the ‘Moadim of G-d’, called holy, that you should set at their appropriate times” (Vayikra 23-4).

The word “Moed” refers to a festival set at a specific time. These are the special days on which the Almighty has commanded His people, Israel, to relive the events which form the foundation of their faith. On the festivals, we rejuvenate our faith in Him, thus experiencing again the miracles of our glorious past.

The strange thing about the concept is that the Jewish people set the times for them, as it states, “that you should set them.” They are G-d’s festivals and it is His command that enjoins us to experience anew the glory of the past, yet He invests the right of setting the time with us. It is the Jewish Court (Bais Din) which will ultimately decide the exact days of Pesach, Shavuos and Succos — the special festivals of G-d.

This concept, in very simple terms, describes a unique dimension of the relationship between the Jew and His G-d. The Medrash relates that as the day of Rosh Hashanah approached, the Almighty commanded His heavenly court to take out the books of judgment, as “We are going to sit in judgment of the world today.” Suddenly, He ordered them to postpone the judgment day, with the explanation that, “My children (the Jewish people) have decreed that Rosh Hashanah will be tomorrow.”

G-d sits in judgment of His world and commands us in the fulfillment of His laws and the observances of specific festivals at exact times. Yet, Klal Yisroel sets these times through the Torah and the Halacha which He gave them, and retains ultimate authority over them.

This depicts a very special type of relationship and gives us some insight into the nature of the servitude of our people to its Creator. “You have chosen us from all of the nations.” We have been chosen to serve Him. However, it is the greatest privilege. We are bound to His service and the total fulfillment of His commandments. Yet, through His Torah and its commandments, He has elevated us almost to the status of His “partners” in the virtual ruling of His universe.

The observance of the cycle of the festivals, with the expanded relationship that develops between the Jew and his Creator during the year, as he passes from Pesach to Shavuot to the Yamim Noraim and Succot, nurtures a bond between them that defies all logic. A bond between the omnipotent Creator and His servants, so full of love, respect and stature that the servants themselves are so elevated, as we say, “and you have elevated us above all tongues.”

This is but one dimension of the spiritual nourishment derived from the “Moadim of G-d.”

Israel: Mourning for the Destruction, Yearning for the Redemption

The Jewish people were exiled from Israel for close to 2,000 years. We were dispersed and made to wander to the far-flung corners of this planet. Even though unprecedented numbers of our people have settled in Israel in recent years, the vast majority of Jewish people are still far from return

The Midrash brings a statement from Rebbe Levi: “All good, blessing and consolation that the Almighty is destined to give the Jewish people come only from Zion (Israel).” Zion is the Jew’s source of all good.

Our Rabbis describe for us the spiritual loss of living outside of Israel. “One who dwells outside of Israel is compared to one who has no G-d.”

Israel is more than the source of all good and the spiritual foundation of the Jewish people. Only in Israel can a Jew experience true happiness. The blessing of the congregation by the Kohanim (priestly family) takes place every day, even on Tisha B’av, in Israel, while it may only be recited on Yom Tov (festivals) outside of Israel. The blessing requires a unique state of Simcha (happiness).

The implication is astounding. The Jew living in Israel can feel more joy, even on Tisha B’av, the fast day on which we mourn the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash (The Holy Temple), than his brother living outside of Israel can feel during the entire year, except possibly on Yom Tov. It is no wonder that the period of the Three Weeks, when the Jewish people mourn the destruction of the Beis

Hamikdash and the exile from Israel, is the saddest period in the Jewish calendar.

Yet, our generation seems to have lost the yearning of our people of the past 2,000 years for the return to Zion, the coming of the Moshiach (Redeemer), and elimination of Jewish suffering. We have become oblivious to the tears of our Bubbes (grandmothers) constantly beseeching G-d to bring His Moshiach and the closing words of virtually every Jewish sermon throughout the ages.

Why have we lost this yearning? Have we seen an end or even a relief from our people's suffering? Why are we satisfied merely to visit Israel on occasion? Why are those who do live there happy, despite the lot of so many of our brethren who cannot even visit? How do we tolerate the desecration and the denial of our right to exist by terrorists' acts?

The Rambam (Perek 11 of Hilchos Melachim) indicates that one who is aware of the suffering of the exile and the historic plight of the Jew, and yet does not eagerly await the redemption, denies belief in that redemption. Our complacency indicates more than just a mere adjustment to a status quo. It indicates our having given up hope in the future. Are we prepared to forfeit the prophecies of generations? Are we ready to give up the tears and prayers of our afflicted brethren? The story is told that early in the twentieth century, the great sage, the Chofetz Chaim, cried bitterly upon hearing of a Maskil who was looking forward to "the establishment of an independent Jewish state similar to that of Bulgaria when it became independent from the Turkish Empire." The Chofetz Chaim was disturbed: "Is that what he is ready to settle for? Is that the fulfillment of 2,000 years of exile and torture? What about the glorious visions of the prophets?"

Are we ready to compromise? Are we to be complacent and settle for whatever the nations of the world are willing to grant us?

Can an Israel in turmoil and danger, beyond the access of so many of us, be the total fulfillment of our dreams?

We must realize that redemption comes in stages. The Talmud says that first the produce of Israel will become plentiful. Then her doors will be open to the ingathering of Jews from the four corners of the earth. Only then the final stage will come - the restoration of the Jewish court and the Kingdom of David. In our day, Israel flourishes for the first time in over 1,000 years and her doors are permanently open to all Jews. We are living through the first two stages. We must never cease to yearn for that final scene.

It may be that the Chazon Ish was addressing this danger when he enjoined his generation not to call the establishment of the Jewish state the beginning of the redemption but rather, the end of the Galus (exile). We must continue to yearn, to pray and to await eagerly the coming of the Moshiach.

The laws of mourning observed during the Three Weeks are to aid us in focusing on the causes of the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent Jewish exile. We bear full responsibility for the Jewish plight. The improper actions of our people are the cause of all tragedy. Only our Teshuva (penitence) can bring an end to this situation.

We must strengthen Israel and the Jewish people with a deepened commitment to Torah and Mitzvos, which provide the only Zechus (merit) to sustain us and bring the Moshiach. We must strengthen the security of Israel so that it can serve as a haven for all Jews and a beacon of spiritual light for the entire world, but we must realize that its security is assured only by Torah and its observance.

Israel must continue to blossom through a renaissance of Torah learning and commitment, the true secret of Jewish invincibility and the survival of our people.

We must toil diligently to bring about the fulfillment of the promise: “And the land will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the water covers the sea.” This, according to Rabbi Yonason Eibishitz, is a prerequisite for, not a result of, the redemption. We must continue to yearn, for the ingathering of the entirety of our people to Israel and the fulfillment of the words of the Navi, “For a split second I have forsaken you and with great mercy, I will gather you in.” According to the Radak, this means that when the Jewish exiles are finally returned to Israel, all the 2,000 years of suffering will seem to us as a fleeting moment in time.

May we be worthy of this prophecy in our time.

Reflections of Bitachon

Bitachon: Faith and Trust in G-d

The life of a “Baal Bitachon,” one who has total trust and confidence in his Creator, is a life that is covered by all. It is a life without any fear or worry about the present or future, for the “Baal Bitachon” lives with total peace of mind, knowing that the Almighty is looking after him. What is the “formula” of Bitachon which affords one this rare luxury? In what ways does Bitachon alter one’s lifestyle and outlook on life? Is true Bitachon in Hashem beyond the average person’s reach? Are there any techniques which could aid one in developing his Bitachon?

Rabenu Bachaya explains that Bitachon in Hashem is the realization that He is in total control of everything and that nothing happens by chance. The more the Jew focuses upon this truth, the more profound is its effect. Eventually, his confidence in the Almighty’s powers, coupled with his recognition of His love and kindness for him and the fact that special favors are bestowed upon those who trust Him develops to the extent that he has total trust and faith that Hashem definitely will save him and guide him through all of his problems.

A story is told about Reb Aryeh Levin, zt”l., the famous Tzaddik of Jerusalem.

During World War I, there was a period in which he was in dire need of money. He went to a friend whose practice it was to lend money in those trying times, but to Reb Aryeh’s dismay, the friend refused to grant him the loan. When he came home and told his wife the shattering news, she said that it is obvious that since the man normally lends money to people and there was no logical reason as to why he did not do so this time, that Hashem saw fit that

the money should come from elsewhere. Reb Aryeh realized that his wife was right and regained his strength. A short while later, the postman came to their home with a letter from America.

Reb Aryeh had met an individual several years before who knew and admired Reb Aryeh's grandfather, and therefore, left in his will a sum of money to be sent to Reb Aryeh. The realization that the lender's refusal to lend them money could not have happened by chance, for Hashem totally regulates every act and happening that transpires in the world, gave Reb Aryeh and his wife the strength and confidence that Hashem, with his love for each and every Jew, and even more so for those who trust in Him, will definitely help them and bring their sustenance through some other means.

We find in Tehillim a chapter in which Dovid Hamelech is running for his life and is beseeching Hashem to spare him from the impending doom. "Lighten up my eyes lest I will die." He was hiding in a cave and his enemies had him surrounded. He begged the Creator of the Universe to save him. He then concluded his prayer by saying, "I have trust in Your kindness, my heart rejoices in Your saving."

In the midst of the pursuit, in the same breath in which he was praying for his very existence, he was rejoicing in the Simcha of his being saved as if it had already taken place. Dovid Hamelech, through his Bitachon, was not only confident that the Almighty definitely would save him, but he was further able to reach a state of total Simcha and ecstasy in his being saved even while his life was still seemingly in grave danger.

We find another unique quality in the life of a "Baal Bitachon."

The Pasuk says, "Cast your burden upon Hashem and He will sustain you." The implication of this verse is that when one is confronted with a problem, not only can he feel secure that Hashem

will help him deal with and overcome it, but he can take that problem and, so to speak, “throw it upon Hashem.” He can relieve himself from the worry and anxiety caused by it by “casting it upon Hashem,” so that he can feel that it has now become Hashem’s burden and not his problem any longer.

We further find the verse, “Behold, I will trust in G-d, my Savior, and will not fear, etc., and I will draw up water from the wells of salvation.”

The Radak explains that the well of water is a parable to illustrate Klal Yisroel’s Bitachon. When one draws water from a well which is connected to all the springs in the world, he does so knowing there is a limitless source. He takes one bucketful and then another and then another.

When a person has Bitachon, not only can he feel that his problem is already solved before the solution comes, not only can he take his worries and “cast them upon Hashem,” but he can feel at the moment of need that there is a well in front of him, a spring of salvation with the solution of his problems and every problem that ever was and will be, and all that he must do is draw it up, “and I will draw up water from the wells of salvation.”

The attainment of these lofty levels is not restricted to great Rabbis or Talmudical scholars, and in certain situations, we find that their total acquisition can be reached more readily by the simplest person.

There is a famous story told in the name of the Alshich Hakadosh, one of the great Mekubalim (mystics), who was discussing the powers of Bitachon.

He said that if the Jew puts his total trust in Hashem, he can be sure that He will send him his needs and he need not even work for his sustenance. A poor Jewish farmer heard this and proceeded to

sell the donkey, with which he worked, went home, and began reciting Tehillim. His family asked him how he was going to support them and he confidently told them what the Alshich had said.

A Gentile who had bought the donkey was traveling on a road and struck upon a treasure of gold. He loaded the gold onto the donkey and as he completed the task, he tripped and fell off the cliff and died. The donkey was frightened and ran back to the home of the Jewish farmer. The family realized that the Alshich was right.

When the students of the Alshich heard of the happening, they asked the Alshich why was it that the simple unlearned Jew's Bitachon worked so well for him while they, who studied Torah and Mussar for so many years, never had such success? The Alshich replied that the Jew, who wasn't aware of all the intricate questions involved in the concepts of Bitachon, was able to have a simple and total trust that Hashem will help him, while a learned person who is involved with the intellectual complexities of Bitachon, its specific laws and differences of opinion, sometimes finds it harder to divorce those thoughts from his mind and just simply place his total trust in Hashem.

There is a similar story told about Reb Yisroel Salanter which clearly conveys the message that if one has total Bitachon in Hashem, then he will be granted all of his desires, providing the Bitachon is total, without any trace of insecurity.

Reb Yisroel advised a man to buy a lottery ticket and to have full Bitachon that he will win the full sum, and then he assured him that if he does so, he will definitely win.

The days and weeks passed and the man did not win the money. He went to Reb Yisroel to find out what had happened. Reb Yisroel offered him half of the sum for the lottery ticket and he happily agreed to the deal.

Reb Yisroel then explained to him that his readiness to sell the ticket for less than the full amount was a clear indication that there was obviously some amount of trust lacking, and this lack of total trust was responsible for his not winning.

Reb Yisroel Salanter expounds that by studying the laws of any specific area of observance, the person will enhance his observance of them. Therefore, by studying the Halachos and the words of Chazal, which deal with the concept of Bitachon, he will thereby increase his confidence and trust in Hashem.

The Sefer Hachinuch enlightens us with another very powerful means of enhancing our Bitachon.

The mitzvah of Gid Hanasheh, the prohibition of eating a specific part of the animal, is to remind us of the mortal battle between Yaakov Avinu and the Sar of Esav in which Yaakov was tapped in the thigh. In the course of their engagement, Yaakov was almost totally destroyed and through a miracle was saved. By refraining from eating the Gid Hanasheh, the Jew recalls that miracle.

It seems from the Chinuch that although the Jew has endured so much suffering and his history is full of so much bloodshed, focusing on the miraculous happening that took place thousands of years ago will give Klal Yisroel the faith and confidence that just as Yaakov was saved that one time, Hashem will continue to save us again and again for eternity.

When the Jew experiences even one miracle, and thereby recognizes the Almighty's absolute and total regulation of every event and every aspect of our existence, coupled with recognition of His love for us, it gives him the strength and confidence that just as He has saved us in the past, so will He continue forever.

In light of the concept of Bitachon, the question arises: if one is aware of Hashem's capability to solve all of his problems and that He

controls and regulates every occurrence so that nothing can transpire by chance, and He helps those who trust in Him even if they may be undeserving, is it not a lack of Bitachon for one to attempt to help himself?

The Chovos Halevavos says that the average person is supposed to do Hishtadlus, to make an effort to bring about the desired results, because he has no right to rely upon miracles.

Reb Yisroel Salanter explains that even though the Jew is supposed to do Hishtadlus, he must have complete trust in Hashem that He has the capability to solve the problem without any of the person's effort, and He has the love and dedication to do so. He also indicates that whether or not Hashem will help him in this situation does not depend at all upon his efforts but rather, upon whether he puts his trust and confidence in Hashem.

The purpose that the Hishtadlus serves is not to assist in bringing the solution to the problem, but only to fulfill the Halacha that one is not to rely upon miracles. However, it is totally divorced from one's Bitachon and serves no function in the attainment of his goals. Therefore, since the Hishtadlus is only a token effort performed because one is not permitted to rely on a miracle, it would seem that for one to attempt to do more than the amount necessary to fulfill this Halacha, (that is, as defined by Reb Yisroel, the amount that should make it possible by natural means without miracles) would constitute a lack of Bitachon on his part. It would seem logical, too, that one who feels a lack in the totality of his trust in the Almighty, should sooner work to strengthen that Bitachon rather than to pursue additional efforts beyond those needed to fulfill the injunction of, "Do not rely on miracles." The Chofetz Chaim illustrates this concept with a parable:

A story is told of a man who was on a train. The train was going at its average speed, but the man, being in a hurry, was not satisfied.

He jumped out of his seat, ran to the front car, and began pushing the wall of the train to try to make it go faster. We must realize that Hashem is the conductor who controls all events and our pushing will not make things come any faster than He wants them to come.

In Radin, at the Chofetz Chaim's Yeshiva, the custom was that the Yeshiva boys did not shave their beards.

There was a young man who was having a difficult time finding a wife and people told him that it was because his beard made him look unattractive. He went to the Chofetz Chaim and asked him if he should remove the beard. The Chofetz Chaim replied, "The Talmud says, 'The matching of a man with his proper mate is as difficult as the splitting of the Red Sea.' If it is so "difficult," so to speak, for Hashem to create a proper match, do you think that your shaving your beard will make it easier?"

It is important to note a concept found in the Nefesh Hachaim from Reb Chaim of Volozhin and in the Sefer Hachinuch:

When a Jew focuses upon the facts that nothing happens by accident and that everything is completely regulated by Hashem, this realization will protect him from any danger or harm.

Throughout the difficult course of our history, it has been this trust in his Creator that has preserved the Jew and given him the strength to persevere.

There can be no greater source of human strength than the knowledge that the Creator Himself, who controls and directs every occurrence, so deeply loves His people and is so committed to kindness and generosity to them. This knowledge, combined with the realization of the special relationship that He has with those who place their trust in Him, has always been and will continue to be the eternal strength of the Jewish people.

Coping with Stress in Business

Dear Friend,

It is only a few short hours after our conversation and frankly I am greatly pained by the grave implications of today's meeting. Even if I can assure you, beyond doubt, that this is but another step in the upward growth and expanded success of your business, I must still feel the pain hurting you now. We find by Avraham Avinu, that after his Bris, when Hashem had made it so hot that no one would come by to disturb his rest, Avraham was greatly pained by not having the opportunity to bestow kindness on someone. Hashem then sent the angels, one of whom was coming to tell him of the child he and Sarah would finally have after so many years, dressed as men, so Avraham would be able to bestow kindness upon them. Even though he was going to be told of the fulfillment of his life's desire, Hashem still considered the importance of removing the pain of not being able to bestow kindness.

The fact that I offer you positive and strong words of encouragement should not be interpreted as a lack of empathy, rather as a product of a deep conviction of the truth and efficacy of these thoughts.

The Talmud tells us that even though one who wishes to acquire wealth must do business, it really depends on Divine mercy; doing business is only a condition to be fulfilled. Understanding this idea alone is a major step in the right direction. We know Hashem is merciful and we know how to approach Him to request His mercy. This does not mean that He will always fulfill our request. Sometimes our desires are not in line with what His infinite wisdom sees as good for us. However, we know the address to turn to for help. The power of Tefillah is enhanced by the sense that we are totally

helpless without Him, and have nowhere else to turn – not even to our business acumen, connections, or the good graces of others.

To the degree that we muster the feelings of helplessness and dependence on Him, we increase the likelihood of receiving and witnessing His mercy and kindness. Tefillah, however, with all of its power and benefits, has its limitations. It is sometimes limited by the worthiness of the one who prays. He may not be worthy of the amount of mercy needed to help him. It is also often limited by the ultimate knowledge of the Creator as to what is really good for man. Therefore sometimes His mercy calls for the opposite of fulfilling man's request. In fact, we ask that He should "fulfill the wishes of our heart, for the good" rather than unconditionally.

This is the realization that man should have and this should be the basis of his Tefillah and his approach in facing the difficulties of life. "Everything that Hashem does is for the good," and "everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for man's fear of Heaven."

These concepts should serve to encourage our Tefillah and enhance our ability to cope with the difficulties of life. We can, to a great extent, influence the course of our business affairs, and we must take advantage of these opportunities.

There is, however, another concept that seems to go even beyond the power of our Tefillah. That is Bitachon – trust in Hashem. The Sefer Hachinuch indicates that there are two aspects to the mitzvah of Tefillah: one, to help man to achieve the desires of his heart, and secondly, to inspire in him a deepened Bitachon in his Creator. When man stands helplessly before his Creator in prayer and recognizes his own inability and Hashem's all-powerful control and he praises, beseeches and thanks Hashem all in one Tefillah experience, he finds himself moving upward from a state of need and hope, to one of anticipation, reliance and eventually absolute trust that Hashem will not let him down.

The question can be asked: How can we have absolute trust that Hashem will not disappoint us in light of the above concept that Tefillah is affected by what is good for us and what we deserves. The answer, seems to be, that Bitachon is not completely logical; sometimes man just has a feeling that Hashem will not let him down due to His knowing how much a given result means to the individual. This feeling can result from deep involvement in Tefillah, but it can then take man beyond the power of Tefillah alone.

We have a tradition passed down from generation to generation from the Gaon of Vilna and even going back further to Sinai, that to the same degree that one puts his trust in Hashem, his reliance will not be disappointed. This concept can be best understood and qualified by two stories from Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, whose Rebbe's Rebbe was the Gaon of Vilna.

One time, the Rashash, a great scholar of the 1800s questioned the statement of Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, the 19th century master of ethics, that even luxuries are granted through Bitachon. Rabbi Salanter said that he would prove it – from that moment he had Bitachon that he would receive a gold watch.

At that time, a ship was caught in a violent storm. The frightened captain vowed that should he survive and dock safely, he would give his gold watch to a rabbi in that port. A few days later, when the captain presented the watch to the shocked Rashash he exclaimed, “This does not belong to me. Give it to Reb Yisroel Salanter. It is his.”

On another occasion, a man in desperate need of 10,000 rubles came to Rabbi Salanter. He told the man he need only buy a lottery ticket and have complete Bitachon that he would win the 10,000 rubles. The man bought the ticket . . . and did not win.

When he complained to Reb Yisroel, he asked the man if he had complete Bitachon that he was going to win. The man said he did.

Reb Yisroel then asked the man to sell him this ticket for 5,000 rubles. When he said yes, Reb Yisroel told him that he obviously didn't have 100% Bitachon, because if he did, he never would have sold it for half.

On the one hand, with absolute Bitachon in the kindness and mercy of Hashem and his loving concern not to disappoint one who places complete trust in Him and awaits confidently His response, one can achieve the desires of his heart, even for luxuries. On the other hand, however, this trust must be absolute and complete in order to merit the desired results. Any willingness to settle for less indicates some lack in the completeness of this Bitachon.

A question could be asked. Even assuming that Bitachon is an emotional state based on the feeling that Hashem in His great power and infinite kindness won't let me down, how does it fit with the possibility that achieving my desired results may be more than I deserve or worse yet, may not be for my good?

We must say that Hashem will even reward one with more than he deserves and make it even work for his good, rather than disappoint the man who places his total trust and reliance on Him. Achieving this state is no simple accomplishment and it is very tempting to fool oneself into believing that he has this 100% Bitachon. We should, however, strive to achieve this state in order to merit our desires and to realize that to the degree that we have real Bitachon, He will respond to us with the fulfillment of the yearnings of our hearts. We can influence the outcome to the degree of our Bitachon.

The Vilna Gaon, offers us a piece of advice on how to achieve this state of mind and heart. When we focus on the kindness and mercy that Hashem has bestowed upon us in the past and recognize that we were not truly deserving of His gifts, rather we received them only due to His kindness and mercy, then we can begin to rely

on His kindness once again. If Hashem had only helped us in the past when we deserved it, then who knows if we still deserve it today? However, when we realize that all of His gifts of the past were pure kindness and mercy – and we know that His kindness is endless – we can be confident that He will help us again now.

We all know of the great miracles that Hashem has performed and continues to perform for those who put their complete trust in Him. Let's focus on them again and again and work on our hearts to feel more and more of His kindness. When we concentrate on this and our Tefillah, we can develop a total reliance on Him, with that ultimate feeling that He will never disappoint those who turn their desperate eyes in complete trust toward Him.

Please read and reread this letter and may we be privileged to see the fulfillment of our Tefillos and of that level of trust that we put in Hashem.

Sincerely,

Your Friend

P.S. I neglected to mention that reaching the above-mentioned level of Bitachon is obviously not an obligation for every Jew, but it is a level which can work wonders if one reaches it. However, there is an obligation, in difficult situations that seem very dangerous or serious, for one to be sure that for Hashem it is equally possible and easy for Him to solve the problem for the good, as it is not to work it out for the good. This realization is obligatory and helps to soothe our fears. As impossible as it seems to us, to Him it's simple.

Part II

Dear Friend,

As I begin my flight home, my mind wanders back a few years to another flight home, when I wrote to you as well.

Then everything looked so dismal, problems seemed almost insurmountable. I tried to strengthen your Bitachon and focus your optimism. I don't even remember the details, but your business has made amazing progress since then. Now here we are again, problem after problem compounded by more serious problems, wondering how many more problems and crises can be handled?

Well, I don't really know the answer, but I can't help but remember that so many times before we pondered the same question and made it through it all.

The Vilna Gaon writes that when a person is faced with a crisis he should review the past and realize that everything that Hashem has done for him in the past was only due to His kindness and mercy and therefore He will certainly continue to act the same way with him now. If what He did for him in the past was because he deserved such treatment, then maybe now he doesn't deserve to be helped. If however, it was not due to his deserving, rather due to Hashem's kindness and mercy, then he can rely on that again, because Hashem's kindness and mercy are constant and remain forever. We recognize that we are not truly worthy of Hashem's kindness, otherwise we wouldn't worry about anything.

This, the Gaon says, is the means to inspire Bitachon - confidence in Hashem's kindness that everything will work out fine.

This fits well with the Gaon's concept of Bitachon: that if one has complete trust that Hashem will help him, then it will surely happen.

Realizing all of His previous kindness and mercy helps us to feel confident again and thereby influence the resolution of our crisis based on the merit of our Bitachon in Him.

This formula for Bitachon would do well under normal conditions or circumstances similar to the previous crises. However, when the problems, trouble and crises get so out of proportion by comparison, it becomes more difficult to find that sense of confidence in their future resolution.

To help foster great Bitachon in Hashem's kindness and mercy in these extreme situations, it would help to consider the following: First of all, for Him small problems and seemingly insurmountable ones are all the same. Secondly, His kindness and mercy and His intimate involvement in every aspect of our lives are always active. The only problem is that we worry about being undeserving. Allow me to address this issue.

Since our purpose in this life is to rise to ever-greater levels of human perfection and closeness to Hashem, it follows that we must be exposed to serious tests. The tests are of two types: one which takes a person who may be less than fully deserving and through the test, uplifts him to a higher level to become deserving. The other, dealing with a person who is already very deserving, leading him to even higher levels.

When we see a situation that seems so unlikely to happen naturally, we can assume that it represents a serious test to bring us to higher levels and through the passing of this test to become truly deserving.

This being the case, the more unnatural the set of circumstances and crises, the more obvious it becomes that this is an opportunity to rise to new heights and to become deserving of success and blessing never previously achievable.

Even though there is a natural tendency to interpret the situation in the negative, the truth is that the result depends on one's score on the test. A positive outlook, with a strengthening of one's Bitachon, will bring him through the test and establish him on a level where he can really deserve the desired results.

I know it is easy to advise others, but I've been there once or twice.

Please recognize the message. It's so unreal, it can only be a special test, for special people, to uplift them higher and higher and make them even more deserving.

May you be privileged to soar higher and higher from these tests and feel that ultimate sense of true Bitachon in Hashem, and in the merit of the test results and the ensuing Bitachon, may you see the speedy resolution of all of your difficulties and be blessed with the Divine kindness and mercy that bring every measure of success in all of your endeavors.

Sincerely,

Your Friend

Nothing Besides Hashem

Dear Friend,

Before I begin, I want to thank you for an uplifting and unique experience. I returned home energized and inspired, as I hope you did. My family is very grateful to you and for that matter, your family, for the wonderful experience.

The following is a review of some of the thoughts we discussed that are pertinent to the basics of our daily existence. I suggest we review them regularly and I hope we can eventually make them available to others.

The basis of our existence is the realization of the concept “Ein Od Milvado.” There is nothing besides Him – Hashem is the ultimate Controller, Conductor, Facilitator and, of course, Creator and Owner of everything and every occurrence in existence – past, present and future.

I just received an email, which conveys this idea. Allow me to share it with you.

To: You

Date: Today

From: G-d – the Boss!

Subject: Yourself

Reference: Life!

This is G-d. Today I will be handling ALL of your problems for you. I do not need your help. So, have a nice day. I love you.

G-d

To internalize this concept, however, and to make it a constant awareness of our conscious minds and a deep-rooted, ever-present feeling in our hearts, requires much ongoing effort.

Truth be told, since everything is decided and decreed by Hashem on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, if we were to do absolutely nothing the entire year, this lesson of “there is nothing beside Him” might be very effectively learned. However, such behavior would be inappropriate on many different grounds.

First of all, man would not have all of the opportunities to do good and he would lack the tests of his will to stay away from evil if he did not have to put in all sorts of efforts to achieve his portion.

Secondly, man would undoubtedly pursue many more inappropriate paths and desires if he were not busy just trying to achieve the basics in his life (Perek Gimmel – Chovos Halevavos, Shaar Habitachon).

Besides, Hashem wants us to live in the natural world and not rely on miracles. It could be that when everything comes through obvious miracles, eventually we begin to take things for granted and might even begin forgetting the Source from where these miracles come. When, however, we have to put in all sorts of efforts and subsequently discover Hashem’s intervention, the ongoing suspense and struggle keep us more focused on Hashem as the ultimate Source of all blessing.

It may be that a person can reach such heights of closeness and trust in Hashem, that he can stay safe from this danger just by maintaining the focus on his Bitachon. However, for most of us, we need the Hishtadlus to keep us focused on Him.

By the way, this need to stay focused on Him is one reason why He often takes a long time to answer our prayers, and thereby forces us to keep beseeching and begging Him over and over. The

Medrash says that the reason the mothers of our people (Sarah, Rivka, Rochel, and even Leah) were childless for so long is that Hashem craves the prayers of the righteous. Obviously, He doesn't crave the prayers for His sake. He needs nothing. However, He craves their prayers for the uplifting quality and effect that it has on them.

If I were designing the world, I might have thought that instead of Sarah praying until she was 90 years old to have a child, I would grant her the child at, say, 60, and let her say Hallel and thank Hashem for the additional 30 years.

The problem is that our words are far more heartfelt when they are desperate requests rather than words of praise. We say the whole Hallel the first week, then half the next, and after a while we tend to take everything for granted. Not so when the need is still acute.

When He puts off answering our prayers, He forces us to keep sincerely focused on Him, and this brings us closer and closer to Him.

Hashem seems so committed to this concept of our living in the natural world rather than the miraculous, that it seems from Chazal that all that He grants us on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is only based on natural occurrences.

The Gemara in Shabbos 32a advises us not to rely on a miracle, because a miracle might not be forthcoming. Even though our lives and livelihood have been sealed on Yom Kippur, that decision is predicated on natural circumstances. However, Hashem never guaranteed the decisions of Yom Kippur if they have to come about through miracles. Therefore, Chazal tell us not to count on miracles, even for results that were decreed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The danger of forgetting that Hashem is the source of all blessing is so great, that according to the Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 430, Bircas Hamazon), the reason that Modim was instituted at the end of Shmoneh Esrei was to address this issue. It seems from the Chinuch that when we recite the various Brachos of Shmoneh Esrei, we become inspired that Hashem is the source of all blessing and begin to be reliant on Him and His kindness and graciousness. We find ourselves in danger of taking Him for granted and even as we rely totally on Him to grant our prayers, we are in danger of forgetting Him as the ultimate source of all blessing. We therefore recite Modim to remind ourselves and refocus on the idea that He, in fact, is the only source of all blessing.

An incident that took place over 25 years ago, also points out this concept. I once gave a Yeshiva bookkeeper a sign for her office, "*Yeshuas Hashem K'heref Ayin.*" The salvation from Hashem comes in a blink of an eye. She once asked me, "Why is it that He only blinks at the very last minute?" I answered that if He would blink a few days before the deadline or payroll, we might not realize that it is only from Him, and not because we are capable or competent. When, however, the salvation comes with a blink of the eye, at the last minute, we recognize clearly that it is only He that does it, and not ourselves or anything else.

Now that Hashem has designed the world so that we live with natural causes, not to rely on miracles, we must use Hishtadlus, our efforts, to achieve our goals. This, however, creates another problem. How can we protect ourselves from losing focus on the fact that despite all of our many strenuous and diligent efforts, it is really Hashem that is responsible for all of our accomplishments? It would seem that we need an ongoing approach and constant stimuli to refocus on that reality that only Hashem, and nothing and no one else, has any power over anything in our lives.

The following are some thoughts that can, when reviewed again and again and internalized in both our minds and our hearts, help achieve this desired effect.

We say in Hallel: “Please Hashem, save us; please Hashem, cause us to succeed.” The Seforno explains the phrase, “cause us to succeed,” as referring to being successful in doing the proper efforts. The question is, why doesn’t he rather interpret it to mean that our efforts should be crowned with success? The answer would seem to be that being crowned with success is included in the phrase “save us.” Efforts are not crowned with success, because they do nothing in the first place. Everything is completely and totally done by and from Hashem. We can only ask that we properly perform the Mitzvah of Hishtadlus (effort), but we must know that effort has no connection with the result. It is just a Mitzvah for us to perform, so as not to rely on miracles. It would be a good idea to recite this request at the end of Shmoneh Esrei daily (before stepping back) with this idea in mind.

The Ralbag says that Yaakov had to make every effort to get his son Yosef not to bury him in Egypt, even to the extent of making him swear to that effect. The reason he had to go so far, says the Ralbag, is so that his efforts should not be considered vain efforts (l’batalah). It seems that the results are not related to the efforts, as the Ralbag does not say that maybe the results won’t happen, only that the efforts may be wasted.

Once again, we see that our efforts are necessary, but unrelated to the results. All results come directly from Hashem.

The Talumd (Niddah 70b) indicates that one who wishes for riches must engage in business as a condition of appropriate effort. However, the riches themselves are a gift from Hashem, not coming directly as a result of one’s effort.

Another perspective of this concept can be seen in the Rambam at the beginning of the laws of Chanukah. The Rambam describes the pressure and pain suffered by the Jewish people “until the G-d of our fathers had mercy on them and saved them from the hands of their oppressors and delivered them.” He then continues that the Hashmonaim killed the enemy and saved the Jews from its hand.

Who really did the saving, Hashem, or the Hashmonaim? The Rambam seems to contradict himself.

The obvious answer is that from the moment of Hashem’s having mercy, they were really saved, the Hashmonaim just went through the motions and played out the script. However, for their efforts and dedication, they are also credited with the results, as if they actually were the ones who saved the Jews from their enemies.

The Mishna Berurah, at the beginning of Hilchos Megillah, brings a Rashi that explains why the Megillah is read at night and repeated by day. He says, “as a remembrance of the miracle, because they cried out in their times of trouble day and night.” It seems to indicate that remembering the miracle has to do with their crying out day and night. It would seem that the miracle is considered happening at the moments of their heartfelt prayers being heard, and the events of Purim are considered the playing out of the Divine decision, rather than the essence of the miracle.

We also find in the Mishna Berurah (Laws of Taanis Esther), that Taanis Esther reminds us that when a Jew fasts and does Teshuva with all of his heart, Hashem sees and listens to him in his time of need. We see that not only is everything up to Hashem and His mercy, but we all participate in the process by doing Teshuva. When we do so, then He is more ready to pay attention and have mercy on us. Even our Teshuva does not automatically remove an evil decree; we must then beseech Him for mercy as well.

Just a word about natural causes versus the miraculous: It seems from the Ralbag, when Yitzchak went to the Plishtim, he had to lie that Rivka was his sister, because he would have been relying on a miracle for them not to kill him and take her, had he said she was his wife. Yet it seems from this Ralbag that had Yitzchak not been afraid, he would not have had to lie. It seems that one's level of fear or confidence literally changes what is considered natural and what is considered miraculous. Had he not feared, then the Plishtim taking his wife or killing him would not have been the natural, and not lying would not have been considered relying on miracles.

Since all results are directly from Hashem, and the depths of our awareness of this principle and trust in his kindness are the greatest Zechus to bring about positive results, it would seem worthwhile to find additional opportunities to strengthen these realizations throughout our daily activities.

Two such opportunities can be found in Torah study and Tefillah. When we study Gemara, we are constantly searching for sources in the Written Torah for Halachos that were passed down from Sinai, through the Oral Tradition. Finding these Halachos, hinted at in the written word of Hashem, which was directly dictated to Moshe, connects us and our Halachic observance more directly and definitively to Hashem as the Source, thus strengthening our relationship with Him.

Our prayers are very powerful tools to strengthen our awareness of His total control, supervision, and direct involvement with every aspect of our existence. We constantly recite, "Baruch Atah Hashem." When we say "Hashem", we are calling Him by His first name, so to speak. We are referring to Him not in third person, but in second person familiarity. You are the Source of all blessing. His name defines His essence. Rashi (Parshas Va'arah, 6:3) tells us that in addition to Hashem referring to His status as Master of All and

Master of Mercy, He is also referred to as the One who is trustworthy to deliver on His word. When we focus on Hashem as Master of All – merciful and trustworthy to deliver on His word- what more do we need to be inspired to put our trust and reliance in Him?

When we say that He is the one who “opens the eyes of the blind” or “dresses the naked” or “unleashes the bound,” we realize that even though we are not blind, naked, and bound etc., if not for His graciousness, we would, in fact, be so.

We say in Nishmas, “Ad Heinah Azarunu Rachamecha...” The Vilna Gaon explains that when we realize the infinite kindness and mercy of Hashem that He bestows on us undeservedly, we come to rely on Him totally. Because, he continues, if what He has done for us in the past was because we deserved it, then maybe now I no longer deserve it. If however, it was pure underserved kindness and mercy, then Hashem, who never changes His essence, will always continue His kindness and mercy.

In Shmoneh Esrei we invoke the infinite merit of our ancestors. We also invoke the fact that in the name of Hashem, Kel, it refers to His overpowering, so to speak, His anger at our misdeeds in order to have abundant mercy on us. We also say that He is a king who helps, saves, and protects all according to the intensity, confidence, and trust that we feel in Him. It makes no difference, says the Vilna Gaon, whether we put in effort (helper), do nothing (savior), or put ourselves in positive danger (protector). If we trust in Him, He will respond accordingly.

In Ya’aleh V’yavoh, we invoke our special relationship with Him, as expressed in the Atah Bechartanu, to ask Him to respond to our prayers (Avudraham). (See an in-depth treatment of Shmoneh Esrei, as a source of Bitachon in “With All Your Heart – A Guide to More Heartfelt Prayer,” published by Proirity-1.)

The following is a list of assurances and promises from Chazal to remind us that everything is up to Him.

- » They tell us to give Maaser in order to be rich.
- » The Vilna Gaon and others say that this refers to 20% of one's profits, not just 10%.
- » They tell us that we may even test Hashem on this, because it is an absolute promise of performance.
- » It also seems from Chazal that even though this process may not be immediate, there is an immediate promise that if one gives Maaser, he will not lack anything.
- » They tell us that the appropriate format of giving Maaser is directed to those who study and teach Torah.
- » Chazal also assure us that Hashem grants special protection and assistance, kindness and mercy to those who put their absolute trust in Him. That goes to the extent of granting the desire of the person who is fully trusting that Hashem will not disappoint him in the fulfillment of his desire.
- » Reb Yisroel Salanter taught us that the absolute assurance of success in a given endeavor is only guaranteed to those whose Bitachon is 100% and unswerving. Yet it seems clear that to the degree that one places trust in Hashem, it is to that degree that he increases his assurance of success in that particular endeavor.
- » We are also taught that one who gives Tzedaka on condition of results is considered a Tzaddik Gamur (complete) because his intention is to give Tzedaka under all circumstances, and the condition is just something he would like in return.
- » We are assured that Tefillah always accomplishes and is never turned away completely. Tefillah, however, must emanate sincerely from the heart, not just the lips.

- » There are dangers in relying on humans as opposed to Hashem. The consequence being that Hashem turns us over into the hands of the one that we rely on. This is a matter of degrees. To the degree that we rely on someone else, He removes His personal Hashgacha from us and allows us to be taken care of by that person.
- » We are also taught the danger of relying on our own Tefillos, or even those of another adult, because this can lead to the Satan raising the following issue in accusation: “This person is confident in his Tefillah, let us review his actions and see if he is truly deserving or not.” Most of us could do without such additional scrutiny.
- » There is even danger in relying on Bitachon. There is a fine line between relying on my own Bitachon, (confident state) and relying on Hashem’s kindness and mercy, which is what Bitachon is really all about. However, we are assured that when one has Bitachon, he is guaranteed results, despite his personal standing as a righteous or even a wicked person.
- » Chazal tell us that wealth truly depends on Divine mercy and as such, prayer and our efforts are only conditions that we must fulfill in order to receive the Divine blessing.

The above points are based on Chazal, and are therefore absolutely reliable. I realize that this letter is tedious, but if we have gotten to this point in it, I suggest that we reread it again and again regularly to derive the Chizuk of “Ein Od Milvado” and Bitachon in Hashem.

With best wishes for continued success, and sincere appreciation.

Sincerely,
Your Friend

Faith Strengthened by Miracles

The faith and belief of the Jew has been challenged constantly for thousands of years. Yet, miraculously, it survives today and, to a great extent, flourishes. This phenomenon is one of the greatest miracles of all times. The survival of our faith in G-d through thousands of years of torment and torture, both personal and communal, is a most powerful inspiration to the Jew to retain his belief. Coupled with the miracle of the physical survival of our people, it serves as an overwhelming testimony to the eternal truths of our Torah.

The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 25) indicates that the Jew who gives up his life rather than forego his G-d is involved in an act of strengthening his faith in Him. It appears that the Jew can even be able to give his life in an act of Kiddush HaShem (sanctifying G-d's name), and yet not be at a level of complete belief. The act of giving up his life thus serves to strengthen him. It may very well be that our history of persecution and losing our lives because we are Jews has, in fact, strengthened and perpetuated our belief for generations.

What can we do today when we are not privileged with the opportunity to perform Kiddush HaShem? Reading about acts of Kiddush HaShem sometimes strengthens us; however, since we do not in fact perform these acts, the overall effect is often a weakening of faith, arousing questions about how such things could happen.

Today, the Jew must strengthen and deepen his Emunah (belief and faith) by focusing, as always, on the miracles of our past and the fact of our survival. Something more contemporary is also in order. The Ramban (end of Parshas Bo) tells us that the glowing miracles of our history allow us to tune into the hidden contemporary ones. The

focus on the everyday miracles can expand the Jew's Emunah beyond all imaginable dimensions.

We must note that Emunah is infinite in its degrees. The Ralbag (in Parshas Beshalach) tells us that although the Jewish people achieved an unbelievable level of Emunah at the Red Sea, they had to strengthen it by singing the Song of Praise. The Torah itself testifies to their level of belief, yet it still needed continued development.

How much more is this true today? Whether we have very great belief or little at all, we must work to strengthen it. Very often what appears to us as a lack of Emunah is in reality only an honest admission of the infinite levels left to achieve. So many of our so-called "doubters" are really just plagued by this phenomenon.

The Chinuch tells us (Mitzvah 3) that focusing on a singular miracle of our past has the power to effect the belief of the Jew under even the worst circumstances.

Rabbi Yaakov Emden, in the introduction to his Siddur, swears by his life that the miracles involved in the perpetuation of Torah throughout the ages are greater than those witnessed in Egypt and on the Red Sea. Focusing on such miracles will undoubtedly greatly enhance our Emunah.

We should note, however, that our Rabbis tell us (Brochos 5a) that Torah is one of three gifts given to us by G-d, but only through suffering. From the Ramban (Devorim 8-5) we see that the purpose of the suffering is to enhance our appreciation of Torah, coming only with such difficulty.

Recognizing and adjusting to a constant schedule of miracles has its drawbacks as well. We tend to take them for granted, develop a very smug attitude and often rely on miracles rather than putting forth the proper efforts.

Sometimes the only way to awaken us from this state is a firm “potch,” a situation in which the miracles don’t seem to be happening. To the contrary, everything seems to be going wrong. So much so, that once again, it testifies to Divine providence, or how else could so much just happen to go wrong.

This situation is compared by the Rabbis to a case of a lamb who has strayed from the flock. As evening time sets in he becomes afraid. Suddenly, he feels the crack of the shepherd’s stick on his back. This is the greatest comfort to him (See Tehillim 23 — “Your stick and your staff comfort me.” That’s how a stick comforts).

Sometimes our suffering has to bring us closer to G-d. The recognition that He is with us teaches us to be humble, not to take life for granted and to put forth the proper efforts.

We strive for a life without suffering, to fulfill the will of G-d with the proper peace of mind. Yet we must derive strength from the difficulties of life, as they bring us closer to Him. We must remember that Dovid Hamelech prayed to G-d and begged Him to hear his prayers, but promised that even after He does he will continue to look towards Him. The inspiration from our difficulties must give us strength to continue to yearn for Him and remain close to Him long after the pain has subsided.

Following are excerpts from the diary of the head of a Torah school functioning today with the age-old combination of problems and miracles:

It was at a recent convention of Torah U’mesorah that I was attempting to give some words of Chizuk to a young, dynamic Yeshiva principal who recently inherited the responsibility of fund-raising for his school. One could imagine his anxiety and concern.

I attempted to share with him my experiences of the past few years, which I summarized by the rule that inevitably – and always

at the last minute – the funds were absolutely needed arrived exactly when they were needed. I shared with him the daily routine of uncertainty, effort and then, so often, miraculous results. I told him of one particular incident that I had heard of many years ago which seemed to recur constantly in my own situation:

A large, well-known Yeshiva was in the midst of a severe financial crisis, not an unusual situation for a Yeshiva. The Rosh Hayeshiva decided that he had no choice but to try something new. He flew to Mexico, in the hope of establishing some new contacts and returning with substantial contributions. Unfortunately, he did not even cover his expenses. However, when he returned, he was greeted by his office staff with a large check that had just arrived from an inheritance left to the Yeshiva. It seems he just had to do his part, but the results came directly from somewhere else altogether.

I added to this another incident. I was deeply involved in study with a class when a student began to discuss an irrelevant matter. I politely advised him that I had no time to waste today as I needed \$10,000 in less than fifteen minutes, and had no idea how I would get it. At least we could learn and trust in the merit of Torah to help. If we were not going to learn, I would have leave and attempt to attend to my problem. Another student, remembering our many discussions about Bitachon, enjoined me, “Rebbi, You have to have Bitachon.” I smiled, admitted to my weakness and we continued our Shiur, only to be interrupted again in two minutes with a message from the office. A certain individual had just arrived with a check. It was for \$10,000.

Overhearing my conversation, another person who seemed to be involved in the same type of situation, began to relate his own story:

He had just given out a very substantial payroll, but his anticipated source to cover it did not produce. He was desperate. His

only option was to go directly to the bank and attempt to negotiate a loan to cover the payroll. He had never done such a thing, had no substantial co-signers and thought the idea a bit absurd himself. However, there was no alternative.

The president of the bank received him well and surprisingly, was considering his request. “When do you expect the funds?” he asked. “Oh, in two weeks,” he answered. This time period was admittedly a product of his assessment of the limit of the patience of the bank more than anything else. “Okay,” was the answer. Now the problem was, how would he get this large amount of money in two weeks? Did he really expect it? From whom? He had no idea.

A week had not gone by when a previously unknown benefactor stepped into the office with a check for \$20,000, which covered the loan completely. The bank was paid one week early and the school established a good credit rating.

It seems throughout the world today and throughout history, Torah institutions are plagued and blessed with such stories. One must understand that difficulties are G-d’s way of teaching His people. In sustaining a Torah institution, two major lessons are reviewed over and over again. One, of course, is that everything comes from G-d Himself, and is a result of our trust in Him rather than our own efforts. Time and again, we learn this lesson when our efforts don’t seem to bring results, but when we turn to Him in last-minute desperation, everything suddenly works out.

I recall a situation where a deadline for \$5,000 was just about an hour away, and I was sitting in the office almost broken, after having tried every means imaginable. “I can only await a miracle,” I thought to myself. “Do I have another choice?”

Suddenly, I received a call from halfway around the world. A terrible accident had taken place. The end result worked out only by

a series of unbelievable miracles. The caller asked me, “How are you doing?” My answer: “I am sitting now and waiting for a miracle.” He responded that as a Zechus, for a remedy for the victim of the accident, he had procured \$5,000 for our Yeshiva and I can pick it up immediately from a local contact. Needless to say, the deadline was met in time.

Someone once asked, “Why, if G-d is going to come through anyway, does he invariably do it at the very last minute? The answer is simple. If the money, for example, were to always come a few days before the deadline, we would believe that the reason we meet our payments is because of our good financial situation. When it always happens at the last minute, we realize profoundly that it’s all an act of G-d.

Another important lesson to be learned from the difficulties is described in the words of Dovid HaMelech, “Trust not in princes.” He enjoins us about the danger of mistakenly putting our trust in man. Very often, we border on violation of this principle when we have confidence that a certain individual will be willing and able to help us.

The Brisker Rav said that each month when he gave out the stipends for the fellows of his Kollel, he never had the faintest idea from where he would get funds the coming month. If he ever thought that a certain person would be the one, it never worked out. It seems that the Almighty was constantly protecting this great Sage and Tzaddik from bordering on a violation of “trusting in princes.”

Another strange situation comes to mind. The Yeshiva needed a loan of \$10,000 for exactly one month with a guaranteed return. For some reason, the usual people were unable to oblige. I visited one individual who lends such money and would have wanted to, but another Yeshiva had just been there and borrowed the funds.

Another individual known to lend such money had a very strange, but true, story. For the first time in his business career, by some miscalculation, he was overdrawn a phenomenal amount at the bank and could not possibly help at this time.

I was confident that one of these two would certainly help and had no idea what to do now. By the morning, the Yeshiva needed the money. I guess I had “trusted in princes” a bit too much.

Sitting and waiting in the second individual’s office, I happened to read a familiar story about Reb Aryeh Levin, the famed Tzaddik of Jerusalem (See page 101). This story became my source of strength at that moment. There must be another plan, unbeknownst to me.

That evening, I received a call from a friend and upon telling him the whole story, he suggested the name of a person for me to see. I called, and although I rarely had success even receiving an appointment with this individual, a meeting was scheduled for 8:30 the next morning.

Much to my surprise, this man too, who always lends, and has major funds available, shows me his checkbook, in which it was recorded that many recent loans had already been made, many times greater than my request. He told me that he didn’t have the funds. I couldn’t believe it. Knowing my deadline was that morning, I related to him my story and the story of Reb Aryeh. He looked at me, wrote the check, and said he would worry I about covering it later.

The stories of meeting deficits and deadlines go on and on. What arrives each day in the mail so reflects the day’s needs that it seems that someone prearranges the mail according to the need of the moment. Well, Someone does!

Every individual involved with a Torah institution realizes that the scope of the miracles is much broader than the institution alone.

The individuals involved live with constant miracles (as do all Jews, but for some reason they are more obvious in these situations).

Following are a few excerpts from the personal diary of the head of such an institution:

Traditionally, the head of a Yeshiva only receives his salary after everyone else has been paid. He must have other resources and his daily miracle schedule parallels that of the Yeshiva. Refunds, loans, gifts, etc., arrive in the mail according to the needs of the day. These daily occurrences are almost too numerous to remember, let alone to relate.

Two incidents stand out, however. It was Purim time and many, many guests were invited for the festive Purim meal. The financial situation was very tight and, contrary to tradition and much to the chagrin of the hostess, meat, it seemed, would not be on the menu.

A few days before Purim, a former student arrived with two cases of wine and a huge package of meat — a Purim gift. The wine was the gift of a certain family who ordered it through a butcher shop. The meat was the gift of the butcher. Since he was sending the wine anyway, he wanted to encourage business with his shop and so, sent a sample of his meat. I realized that there must be some mistake about the wine, since I hardly knew the people who sent it. After calling them, we realized that it was meant for another person with the same name. They refused, however, to take back more than one case. The meat, of course, was really meant for us. The Purim Seudah was a great success.

Another incident took place during the summer. One of my children was going on a trip with camp and needed a small amount of extra money. Unfortunately, the funds were not available. The only suggestion I had was for the children to say Tehillim and pray for the money. In the midst of the Tehillim, the one who needed the

money questioned: “What is going to happen? We need the money tomorrow morning. How can we get it by then?” The other one answered, “Maybe Hashem will make someone think to give it to us.”

The next day, the child returns from the trip glowing. A friend who had borrowed money four months previously, suddenly remembered that day to bring the money to return the loan. It was exactly the needed sum. Their prayers were answered.

Focusing on the hidden miracles in his own life can be an endless source of strength and faith for every Jew. This focus is the secret of the unswerving faith of generations past and has the power to keep our faith alive forever.

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Special Edition – Bitachon

The only way to reach true happiness is by having bitachon, faith and trust, in Hashem. The Chovos HaLevavos explains the reason for this.

We may think that the happiest person in the world would be someone with a profession so lucrative, or a skill so in demand, that he can make as much money as he needs, whenever he desires. The Chovos HaLevavos (in his introduction to Sha'ar HaBitachon) shows us seven reasons why even this person would be lacking in security and happiness, and only one who trusts in Hashem can be truly content:

» One who trusts in Hashem knows that He provides for us anywhere and in any situation. (For example, even in the barren wilderness, Hashem had ravens bring food to Eliyahu HaNavi who was hiding from King Achav). On the other hand, one who relies on his own skills will be stymied when he lacks the proper equipment or supplies to ply his trade.

» If we feel that our professions bring us our sustenance, we may be forced to take jobs that are hazardous, or to work unduly long hours. One who has Bitachon knows that everything that happens to him is for the best, and that his livelihood will come easily and safely. King Dovid was stranded in the dry, desolate desert as he compared himself to a lamb whose faith in his shepherd is unshakable (Tehilim 23). Just as the lamb knows that the compassionate shepherd will lead him to a green pasture and a cool,

quiet brook. Dovid knew that Hashem, in His mercy, would provide for him, even in a forbidding desert.

» Any professional is afraid of the competition. If his trade secrets are revealed and his monopoly broken, he may not be able to make a living. One who trusts in Hashem does not fear anyone, as Dovid said, “I trust in Hashem, I will not fear - what can man do to me?” (Tehilim 56:12)

» Someone devoted to his business is constantly assailed with problems and decisions that keep him tossing and turning at night: “If I keep a bigger inventory it can be stolen, it may spoil or I might not be able to sell it. If I keep a smaller inventory we might not have enough stock on hand when demand for our products rises.” With Bitachon in Hashem, we know that Hashem will give us what we need, when we need it, wherever we may be.

» Even if a person is successful at amassing a vast amount of wealth, it cannot protect him from sicknesses and situations that deny him the chance to enjoy his prosperity. One with Bitachon is protected from any calamity; anything painful that happens to him is only an atonement for a sin, or to give him more reward in the World-to-Come.

» Even a massive fortune may be worthless if food is not available (in times of famine or war, for example). If we trust in Hashem we will never lack anything, just as a fetus in the mother’s womb or a chick in its egg is constantly provided with all its needs.

» Someone who devotes his entire life to amassing a fortune will not reap dividends after his death, while someone who spends his days growing spiritually and striving for greater heights in Bitachon is guaranteed a high rate of return for his investment both in this world and in the World-to-Come.

Reflections of Our Youth

A Decade At-Risk Inspires Hope for the Future

As a teenager in Priority-1's alternative high school, Torah Academy, Yossi's drug involvement was sure to lead to serious legal troubles in the future... Four years later he's learning in Yeshivas Brisk in Yerushalayim. He's gone from at-risk to Brisk!

Yaakov's situation was so bad that even an alternative high school was too much for him – he dropped out mid-year. Just a few months later, he was stirred, like many of us, by the catastrophic events of 9/11. Now he has found his way back to Yeshiva and is enjoying tremendous success in his learning.

After just six months in the Torah Academy, Avi is already on his way to a complete return. When asked what sparked this quick change in his behavior he answered simply, "You believed in me."

The good news is that after a decade of some of the most serious attrition from the Yeshiva world, many young people have finally returned to the distinguished ranks of *Bnei* and *Bnos Torah*. The bad news is that the Yeshiva drop-out/at-risk phenomenon continues to spiral out of control. Yet, the experiences of the last decade have taught us many lessons about dealing with these issues and reversing the sad direction of these precious young lives.

The Pressure Cooker

Two of the most devastating culprits chasing our kids away are feelings of intense pressure and a lack of validation. Unfortunately,

many of our children, even those who lead normal, productive lives, feel an overwhelming demand to conform and perform on par with everyone's expectations. This causes undue stress and anxiety which often lead children down the road of rebellion. If we ease the pressure at home and at school and allow our youth to develop at their own pace and feel good about their unique accomplishments, this will empower them to live healthy, productive lives.

A footnote about pressure: much of the pressure and invalidation that these young people feel stems from the constant criticism of parents, rebbeim and teachers.

Rashi says in Parshas Devarim that Yaakov did not want to reprimand his illustrious, righteous son Reuven for fear that Reuven might turn away from him and connect with his wicked uncle, Eisav. Need more be said about the potentially devastating effects of criticism?

To stem the tide of young adults turning away from Torah and constructive living, we must also let them feel validation from their families, friends and the frum community. This, of course, can often be a long and complex process. First, the very family and community that turned them off must turn back to them with acceptance. Once the feelings of guilt and worthlessness begin to subside they can begin to feel that we love them for who they are rather than who we want them to be. Once we begin to believe in them they can start to believe in themselves. Indeed, most young people who drift from Yiddishkeit and constructive living seem to be plagued by a lack of happiness with their religious environment.

In our holy language, Lashon Hakodesh, the root of a word defines the essence of its concept. An advanced form of internal happiness is referred to as "Osher." The root of this word is the concept of "validation" (LeAsher). When a person feels personally validated, he or she feels happy. Happiness is about validation. If our homes,

schools and communities validate our children, they will be happy with them and with themselves. If they are happy, they will not want to drift away from their environment. We must learn how to maximize the opportunities for our children to find validation.

One Size Fits None

When dealing with young people in trouble it is important to be able to look at each person as an individual and not to deny that there may be a problem. Unfortunately, denial very often exacerbates the problem. Well-meaning parents are often so caught up in the social stigma of raising an at-risk teen (i.e., community acceptance, shidduch prospects, etc.) that they ignore the problem until it spirals out of control. Parents must be prepared to acknowledge the problems if they arise and deal with them head-on by consulting professional help when needed. They will find that by bringing professional assistance into the picture they can relieve themselves of much of the pain and heartache associated with raising troubled teens.

Professional Help the Torah Way

Substance abuse and addiction, anti-social behavior and promiscuity are very real issues in the Jewish community. The true extent of these problems would shock even the most seasoned parent or teacher. To be able to reach young people that are involved in any of these behaviors, we must first address the addiction and bring it under control. This must be done by a professional.

When choosing a therapist, it is absolutely crucial that parents find one who practices *al pi derech haTorah*. *Boruch Hashem*, we have

in our midst many highly qualified therapists that are themselves *Bnei Torah* of the highest caliber and are available to help any family in need. Parents must understand that effective rehabilitation requires spirituality to be an ingredient in the recovery process and therefore, they must be sure that this spirituality is Torah-based.

Drugs and Alcohol are not the Problem

Many people mistakenly believe that drugs or alcohol are the main factors that cause young people to stray. In truth, drugsaddiction– or any other inappropriate behavior – are merely a person’s way to fill an aching void within. Many of our youth feel a severe spiritual hollowness inside and, with nowhere else to turn for fulfillment, they turn to these easy “problem-solvers.” The root of the problem is the emptiness; their solution is to get high.

To effectively deal with addiction problems we must first fill that void with real *ruchnius*. We must show them that they have the ability, no matter how far away they may feel, to have a deep and meaningful relationship with Hashem. They are capable of experiencing and truly feeling His *Hashgocha Pratis* in their own lives and relating to Him in a very real way. They have to see and hear and *truly feel* the utter *geshmak* that comes from an exhilarating moment of Torah learning or heartfelt Tefillah. Most of all, they must learn that true happiness – *lasting happiness* – can only be found in a life committed to these ideals.

To accomplish this, parents have to teach by example and show their children that these same ideals are central to their own lives. Only then can they expect to impart these feelings to their children.

Everyone Needs a Family

No matter what they say and no matter how they act, even the most estranged children yearn to be welcomed members of their family again. It is imperative that parents and siblings understand this and learn to embrace them wholeheartedly and accept him or her for who they are now. Of course, this must be balanced with a firm set of rules and consequences, which is why family counseling is very often helpful, if not necessary. As we noted earlier, it is crucial to find a counselor who has genuine Torah *Hashkafos* and sensitivity to the needs of the religious family.

Everyone Needs a Yeshiva

Yes! No matter what they say and no matter how they act, most young men or women that have gone astray truly want to be a part of the Yeshiva world. They feel that they never meant to abandon the society that raised them. On the contrary, it was their community and friends that rejected them. They will not be able to make real progress until they feel the friendship and acceptance return.

Indeed, we have found that one of the most important elements of our alternative high school is its mentoring program, which pairs up students with dynamic bochrin and yungeleit from our Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh and Kollel Ner Yehoshua on a regular basis. These mentors have been specially trained to understand the mindset of troubled teens, relate to them with the utmost sincerity and shower them with acceptance. As soon as they can demonstrate to our students that the Yeshiva world is not judgmental or intimidating, the barriers fall down and very often the results are amazing!

Training is the Key

The success of our mentoring program has taught us another important lesson: a little training can go a long way. I believe that a training program is the single solution that can, *B'ezras Hashem*, prevent the vast majority of our children's difficulties from becoming at-risk situations.

We all sincerely want the best for our children or students. Unfortunately, many of us lack the basic training and experience that is needed for success. It is amazing and frightening to think that all professionals, no matter what their field may be, are required (sometimes by law) to undergo training, certification and often, ongoing enrichment to maintain their jobs. Yet Klal Yisroel's two most important professionals – parents and teachers – are not required to undergo any significant training whatsoever.

If we as a community would join together to support – *and attend* – training workshops for parents and teachers we would certainly see major progress in the battle to prevent this critical issue from threatening all of us.

Concluding a meeting with the leadership of Priority-1, the *posek hador*, Maran Harav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv stated emphatically that the need for training is “*pashut u'barur* and a matter of *pikuach nefesh*.”

“*Viyotze Meiovdus Licheirus*” ... From Slavery to Freedom

Evocative words, yet in my youth I often wondered if we really understand them. As contemporary American Jews, living, as we do, with all the comforts of modern day society, can we really grasp the concept of *Ovdus* - Slavery? We certainly don't have that ubiquitous Egyptian taskmaster, cruelly lashing out with his whip as we toil under the Middle-Eastern midday sun. Generally, we are not starving, exposed to the elements or acting as unpaid laborers.

Without feeling the depth of the idea of slavery, is it then possible for us to truly comprehend the concept of *Cheirus* - Freedom? Free from what? Sure, we're free in this country obsessed with freedom, but do we ever stop, sit down and contemplate the gratitude we feel for our freedom? I don't believe that it is something we can fully appreciate without first experiencing what it feels like to be enslaved.

As a nation, we have been persecuted throughout the generations, perhaps more so than any other people on earth. Even with our intrinsic system for transmitting from one generation to the next, it still takes a rare individual who can actually feel the pain of his forefathers. How easy it is to forget the massacre of our people only 60 years ago, when we live in such relative comfort and opulence. Human nature dictates that we focus on the good that we have, rather than on the pain of others before us.

As I grew older, I thought that perhaps it was meant for us to take metaphorically, as in freedom from the slavery to our evil

inclination. By struggling against our more base desires, we achieve a measure of freedom. That way, we, too, can partake in the slavery and freedom of our ancestors.

Although a satisfying explanation, I still felt that it lacked the physicality, the actual pervasive agony, associated with slavery.

Perhaps I searched for an answer a little too hard, because then slavery found me.

Slavery came to me in disguise, wearing many masks. Slavery came to me with a fun-loving facade, and the promise of freedom. Slavery came in the form of little bottles and bags. Slavery crept up on me slowly, convincing me that it was anything but. Slavery moved in, and freedom moved out.

What is slavery? Slavery is not being in control of one's destiny; letting an outside influence, be it person or pill, dictate what we do. Slavery is being beholden to something just more powerful than we are. It is waking up in the morning, and not being able to get out of bed without the aid of poison. Slavery is despair, hopelessness.

It was a long, painful and arduous journey. When the realization that I was a slave, a prisoner, set in, I did what all prisoners do. I tried to escape. Unfortunately, this prison comes with bars of a different sort. They follow you. Having tried nearly everything, I was at the brink of emotional, mental, spiritual and physical despair.

Out of desperation, I searched for freedom in the one place where I was sure it wasn't – the one place where I knew deep down it had to be. I searched where I started. I searched for freedom using my Tefillin and my prayers. I found freedom at home, the same place where I had left it all those years before. In many ways, that was the most painful part of the entire process. Admitting one's entire life has been a lie is no easy task. Many die rather than face the perceived humiliation; the acknowledgement of the destruction

they've wrought...but out of pain comes healing.

As a Rebbe of mine is fond of repeating, "the darkest part of the night is before the dawn."

But when the dawn finally breaks...when *Ovdus* becomes *Cheirus*...nothing ever feels so sweet.

Freedom has a meaning for me now. It was a lesson learned at a high cost, but what else in life has value? This year, sitting at the Seder table, I don't think I'll have a problem with Rabbi Elazar's commandment, "A person is obligated to view himself as if he, too, left Egypt."

When we experience slavery, we appreciate freedom.

May we all merit to experience freedom from our own personal slavery, and as a people, may we merit to experience the ultimate freedom in our time, and return from exile.

Thoughts from the Fringe

I was nine years old when I started drinking. I drank because I felt I would sleep better. My first time becoming really drunk was in the tenth grade. My lack of self-confidence and desire to fit in were in full gear. I wondered what the meaning of life was. I grew up in a frum family where the mentality was: "I am not good enough unless I am the best. Even then, I'll find a way to underscore my achievements." This attitude was the fuel to my fire. My life had no meaning, and I was empty. I desired acceptance. I wanted to be wanted. I was spiritually bankrupt. I had no connection to Whoever it was I was Davening to. I was just talking the talk. I found drugs in the twelfth grade, and I was off. Drugs were the new love of my life; they didn't care if I did well on tests or woke up for Davening, and they never contradicted themselves. Drugs gave me solace when I was sad, and they were with me when I was happy. They blocked out the scowls and dirty looks and the "When are you going to do something with yourself?" conversation. Using drugs and alcohol stopped all of that. My mother cried at night begging Hashem to just return her son home safely. She would jump to the ringing phone at two in the morning with the hope that it wasn't the police, that it was just me telling her not to wait up for me, because I'd be home late. I tried my best to always be drunk or high and thereby not have to deal with reality.

There are many more nice Jewish boys who end up down that path. Some don't make it back to Yiddishkeit, and some, *Chas V'shalom*, end up dead. These are occurrences that are happening in our neighborhoods. Lives and souls need to be saved with love, tolerance and Hashem. We all need to be loved, and we all need to love ourselves. We are all loveable. When I first started to get well I

was told: “We will love you until you love yourself.” I was literally on a suicide mission. I hated myself. I needed to be loved. I needed to be told I was loved. It worked wonders for me. A simple “hey, how are you?” or a hug was all I really wanted. It’s hard to love someone who you may feel isn’t “doing the right thing.” That’s where tolerance comes into play. Everyone is different. When I first got clean, people would approach me and let me know that smoking cigarettes is unhealthy. I would respond by saying, “You should have seen what I used to smoke.” Tolerance should come with perspective. How can we judge someone who is using drugs? Do you know what he has been through? That doesn’t mean you have to tolerate him doing so, just try to be a little understanding.

We need to let our youth know that when they are Davening, a loving and caring G-d is listening to them. It’s not rhetoric, it’s how we improve our relationship with Him. I know that from where I was to where I am today, I couldn’t have done it without Hashem. It’s hard to understand sometimes why a nice Yeshiva boy would do such things.

We just want to be heard. We just need a shoulder to cry on. We need people to care. People need to show an interest and find out why these things are going on. Usually, the best way is to just ask. Instead of pointing to the kid wearing the jeans in Shul on Shabbos and saying to your friend, “Wow, look what happened to poor David’s kid. He was such a good kid.” Just walk over and say Good Shabbos. Find out what he’s up to. Ask questions. Show an interest. He already feels like enough of an outcast.

There is much meaning to be found and a lot of life to live.

The Journey Back

It has been said that the driving force behind all human action is the desire to not be “apart,” not to feel separateness. We all want to feel we belong. Unfortunately, I grew up not feeling “a part” of anything, I never felt that genuine feeling of belonging.

I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home with many wonderful values. There was a strong emphasis on helping others; being an all around giving person; and being devoted to my family. Although I was raised with very strong morals, there were many demands placed on image and fitting into the community standards. This was difficult for me because I did not fit society's standards. Many others have also faced this problem because they, like me, had separate ideas about how they wanted to lead their lives. We, as individuals, have different needs and can not possibly be expected to fit into the same mold we are taught to strive for. Trying to fit a square into a triangle is just frustrating and disappointing. This is how I felt throughout my life.

The question I've been asking myself for years is why? Why wasn't I able to be myself; or better yet accept myself? Why was the thought of being different so threatening and terrifying? Does the choice to disagree or see things differently mean you're wrong? Fear! I hate being afraid, and growing up, fear seemed to be behind everyone's inability to really be honest, to really change. I had to break free from this prison of guilt and frustration. Simply put, I felt terrible about myself. I therefore chose to find ways to feel better or to numb my consciousness.

Starting from a very young age I found myself looking for ways to fit in, or if that didn't work, I looked for ways of escaping and ways to make myself feel better. When it came to fitting in, I would

go out of my way to get people to like me, hoping I would fit in and therefore feel better about myself. For example, I would share more than I should, buy things for my friends, and act overly nice to others who didn't treat me the same. Looking back, I realize that these actions did not help my self-esteem but instead, made things worse because they were not done for the right reasons. When it came to escaping reality, I would seek different forms of instant gratification. I would over eat to comfort myself; sleep to avoid anything that was going on; buy things with the hope that I might feel better having acquired something else; go down to the bar in my house and get drunk as a child; and use different types of drugs to escape my pains. I would also act out in many other inappropriate ways. These catered to the side of me that required attention by a member of the opposite gender. I found myself wanting to kill myself. As a result of this, I was slowly destroying my body, mind and soul. At this point I was totally dependent on these actions and they controlled my life. I was sucked in and they consumed me. This was all in an attempt to make me feel better and to fit in.

As time went on I began to understand what some of the reasons for these behaviors were. I suffered from different psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, and Bi Polar disorder. Without the knowledge of these issues growing up and all the time that passed going untreated, it was difficult to find a stable point in my life. To this day I struggle with how I feel about myself and the world around me.

At different points in my life I found myself resenting the community I lived in, the education or lack thereof I received, and, unfortunately, my parents as well. I always wondered what could have made things better. I realize that nothing could have made my problems just go away, but what could have assisted me along the way so that things would not have gotten so out of control?

It is my belief that we need to educate ourselves and, most importantly, our children, that it is O.K. if something is wrong, and we must deal with it instead of trying to sweep it under the rug. Giving special attention to those that struggle is essential. By learning the signs and symptoms, issues can be addressed before they get out of hand. It is also vital that people are given the opportunity to use their potential to the fullest even if it doesn't go with the flow. By being more tolerant of those who don't fit the mold we can remain close instead of being as distant as possible. We are all individuals and have various needs. As a community we need to allow people to be themselves even if they are different, even if it doesn't sound or look good. By accepting each other for who we are, we can be a closer and more productive community, and therefore we will be preparing ourselves for the future.

Reflections of the Past

An Open Letter from the Chofetz Chaim - Rabbi Yisrael Mayer HaCohen

Written Before the First World War

Although I do not generally place myself in a (public) leadership position but having witnessed the raging flames which engulf our holy heritage, while many sit on the side with their hands clasped and cry “What will happen to our people?”, I have seen it necessary to tell them that shouts and cries alone will not extinguish the fires which burn. At times such as these the weak must take courage and everyone must strengthen himself to do his share in putting out the raging flames. We cannot, at such a critical time, concern ourselves with those who divide us and declare it unbecoming to assume a position beneath our dignity. Only a fool concerns himself with his prestige in such a situation, where the flames already lick at the very pillars which support us.

Let me explain. At first the evil inclination enticed us to change our Jewish customs, such as our mode of dress. Afterwards he progressed to get us to transgress the laws of the Torah such as the proscription of shaving with a razor. Now he has been strengthened even further and has begun to attempt to convince us to transgress the laws of the Sabbath, which carry with them the grave penalty of stoning; and the laws of forbidden sexual relations, for which one must rather sacrifice his life than be forced into committing. Even those who themselves do not desecrate the Sabbath are enticed by the evil inclination to remove their children from schools which study Torah and enroll them in totally secular schools. Not only does

the Sabbath become meaningless to them, but without a doubt, as adults, all of the Torah, as well, will mean nothing to them. We have already seen how small a percentage of them will remain true to their religion as adults.

Those who still remain true to the Torah see this raging inferno which the evil inclination has kindled and broken in spirit, they cry out “Woe, woe, what will become of us and our children? While we live our children are too embarrassed to turn fully away from us, and they need our financial support. But one day our children will be left alone, and then they will do as their hearts desire, trampling even the most stringent of our laws.” What will it help, however, to cry and shout? Will this extinguish the fire? Each individual whose heart aches with pain at the desecration of G-d's name and is concerned with the future of the Jewish people must do all that is within his power to save the honor of G-d. This is our reason for existence, as the Torah writes “All who call my name and for my honor I have Created him...”

For a time like this the Torah says “it is a time to do for G-d.” Note the words “to do.” Every man, both great and small, must *do* what he can for the honor of G-d to save what he can from the Supreme King's treasure - that is - his religion and his people. First and foremost is for each person to spread the light of Torah to whatever extent he can, for it is through the neglect of learning Torah that these great problems have arisen and the Torah is trampled on. We can see this in the passage of the Sifri on the verse “and you shall turn away and worship strange gods.” The Sifri comments, “once a person turns from the Torah (completely) he goes and clings to idolatry.” Unfortunately, as a result of our many sins, we witness this today. Conversely, however, if we shall succeed in turning our people slightly back to Torah, their heads will necessarily be pulled to their Father in Heaven. The words of the

prophet have already explained why we were exiled. “And G-d said - because they have forsaken my Torah.” Our sages of blessed memory have explained that G-d is saying, “If only they (the Jewish people) forsook me but my Torah they kept, because the light within it would bring them back to the good path.” We can see this today with our own eyes. Even those of our youth who have strayed completely from our faith, through the efforts of dedicated men who have arranged for them to study Torah, they have changed completely and once again the light of Torah shines within them.

This therefore must be our first priority. Every Jew must concern himself with all of his ability to establish in his city study groups to learn Talmud, Mishna, Ain Yaakov, etc. . . .and to organize special youth groups for our youth. He must seek out experts to help him if he cannot do it himself.

The entire foundation of our faith rests on this.

Thank G-d we have seen that if one dedicates himself to this, G-d helps him, and the merit of this work cannot be exaggerated. In reference to this kind of work, it is said, “A wise man acquires souls.” If, however, we are neglectful of this work, we may be held accountable for those souls who were lost because they had neither help nor support. How can we not take pity on the souls of our brethren who are our own flesh and blood, the descendants of Abraham, and try to save them from this great danger.

Besides the tried and true approach of spreading the study of Torah, we are all obliged to remonstrate and try to enjoin our brethren from committing sin. It is the mitzvah of “rebuke” to gently explain to all the gravity of their sin and the jeopardy it places him and his family in - for the penalty of excision includes within it an edict of becoming childless. Also, one must publicize the stringency of sin and to bitterly decry the desecration of G-d's name which ensues when the principles of Torah are nullified and from the loss

of souls who have accumulated within themselves the sin of excision if they do not repent. The Torah has instructed us to return the lost animal of our neighbor. If the Torah is concerned about returning his animal which strays from its path, how much more so then are we obligated by the Torah to have mercy on a Jewish soul which has strayed from the proper path and return him to the true way. And in truth, even the total sinners of our time are, for the most part, not sinning to rebel against G-d, Heaven forbid, but are rather misguided individuals who have been misled by others.

They are indeed like lost sheep who do not know how to return to their master's house. It is a great mitzvah to have mercy upon them and to teach them the proper way. As the verse in the Torah says, "And you shall make known to them the path that they may go in it." To what may this be compared? To one who sees his friend drowning in a river, or in other danger. It is a mitzvah to save him, and it is forbidden to stand idly by. Obviously, the same holds true if one sees his friend seriously ill and as a result of his disorientation, attempts to take his own life. Certainly we are obligated to do all in our power to prevent him. So too, when we see men who, as a result of their (spiritual) disorientation and their consuming involvement in the vanities of this world, have forgotten the Torah and the great responsibility of keeping the mitzvos, we are obliged to prevent them from transgressing laws which will cut their souls from eternal life, for although the Holy One, Blessed be He shows great patience, eventually the debt must be paid.

Those men of Torah whom G-d has graced with wisdom and understanding, and who have the ability to help repair the breach in our people, must not remain silent. The sheep are straying and before long will be completely lost - and they will be held accountable. This is particularly true of the leaders of the flock in all places who are referred to as the "eyes" of the people. If they turn

away from teaching the way of G-d, then their people are as a blind man walking on a path. Invariably he will come to danger by falling in a hole. So too, our people will inescapably come to a great danger through their sins without the proper guidance.

I know that everyone thinks, “What can I do about those who repudiate their religion; they are heretics and sinners and they certainly won't listen to me.” This, however, is not a satisfactory response. We do not intend to resuscitate those who have already died in spirit and retain not a drop of trust in Torah. We must strengthen those weak-hearted who remain amongst us so that they too do not succumb to the seductions of the others.

You must also know that when we accepted the Torah we did not do so only for ourselves. We accepted it to strengthen its observance amongst the rest of our people as well. We all become guarantors for one another. If one does not prevent another from sinning when he could have - then he will be punished as well. This is what is meant by the concept of *aravus*- of becoming guarantors for one another. We reaffirm this acceptance every day when we accept the yoke of the mitzvahs in the second paragraph of Shema Yisroel, and then in the blessing of Emes Veyatziv we indicate that this acceptance goes for ourselves, our children and for all of Israel. It is therefore apparent that if one could prevent his friend from a particular sin and does not do so he too becomes responsible for that sin. And so have our sages of blessed memory said: “Whomsoever has the power to prevent the sins of his household and does not do so is held accountable for the sins of his household, (to prevent the sins) of his city and does not do so - is held accountable for the sins of his city, (to prevent the sins) of the entire world and does not do so - he is held accountable for the sins of the entire world.” Behold we see that our faith grows weaker every day and if we will not see to strengthen it, who knows what may occur, heaven forbid. Even if

only one prohibition of the Torah is dispensed with, over time it is very bad; all the more so if it is a prohibition which is punishable through excision or execution. Woe to us, Heaven forbid, if G-d visits the punishment on us all. It can even be that one who studiously avoided any sin all of his life will, in the World-to-Come, be held liable for prohibitions such as eating unkosher food and forbidden sexual relations and Sabbath desecration. For example, if these sins were flaunted in his city by various people, when he comes before the Heavenly Tribunal, he will ask how can he be considered guilty of sins which he never committed? They will answer him, "you should at least have tried to reprove those who committed them and explain greatly to each person the gravity of his sin. Perhaps they would have refrained." The Rabbis teach us that if one performed an act deserving of greater punishment (excision) unwittingly but had intent for a negative prohibition (without excision) he is only considered an unwitting offender. The reason is that had he known that as a result of his act his soul would be cut off from the living spirit of his people he would probably have refrained. Furthermore, the Rabbis teach that in the final judgment when sinners are challenged for their sins, the fear is so great that even the body and soul, which had previously loved one another, attempt to exonerate themselves and blame the other. The soul claims, "From the day I separated from the body I have not sinned at all," and the body says the opposite. What does the Holy One do? He joins them together and punishes them. I am certain that at the time the sinners themselves will point an accusing finger at the community and those who retained the fear of G-d and they will say, "If they would have taught us the severity of the sin we would never have done it." I remember one incident from my youth in a city where a respected man was arrested and the police while leading him away allowed him to rest a moment in the street. He then called to the Rabbi of the city and said to him, "I know that my sins have caused me all this,

but I have a complaint against you. You know me, and you should have rebuked me for my conduct. If this can happen in this world, certainly in the World-to-Come where the fear is far greater, the sinners will rail against us so as to lighten their own judgment. I believe this is what we say in the prayer Avinu Malkeinu - “Our Father, Our King, with Your great mercy, wipe away all of our notes of spiritual liability.” This seems superfluous. Have we not already in that same prayer asked for our sins to be wiped away? Rather, first we asked for the sins we committed ourselves to be wiped away. Afterwards we ask for the sins which others committed but which we are liable for as a result of our being guarantors.

In truth, a person must be most fearful of judgment. At times even while yet in this world man can be held accountable for the sins of others. Our sages in Tractate Sabbath (folio 55) commented that the Holy One commanded the angel to impress the letter Tav on the saints - as an allusion to the word Tichya (revival of the dead). Afterwards though it is written He commanded him to begin punishment on those who are closer to Him, for the attribute of Judgment arose before Him and asked, “What is the difference between these and these?” The Holy One answered, “These are complete saints - these are complete sinners.” Whereupon the attribute of Judgment retorted, “They should have protested!” G-d answered, “It is revealed before me - their protests would not have been accepted.” But the attribute of Judgment answered, “If it is revealed before You, was it revealed before them?” And so the attribute of Judgment immediately went out to declare them all guilty.

The Medrash relates that the attribute of Judgment asked, “Which of them was killed by me? Which of them had his head split by me?” From this we can see the extent of the obligation even to suffer embarrassment in order to prevent a Jew from sinning. One

who desires honor and a position of respect through Torah should be especially prepared to lower himself for its sake. We cannot excuse ourselves by saying it is better not to say something which will be ignored, since it is highly unusual that a Rav should speak in a topic of Torah and not be heeded by at least some of his audience.

At this time, it is of great necessity that those who fear G-d gather in each and every city at regular intervals and together with their spiritual leaders determine what they can do to hold back the breach in our faith. If they gather together to care for the physical needs of the city, certainly we must do so for our issue which concerns our very lives, the lives of our children and the honor of the Supreme Ruler of the Universe. First and foremost, every large city must develop a community group to concern themselves with the observance of Sabbath so that stores will close before nightfall on Friday evenings and with other Sabbath observances as well as developing plans to maintain Jewish standards of family purity.

I know full well that it is not within our power to totally remove these obstacles from the path of our people. Nevertheless, we are not excused from saving whatever we may save. When hundreds are drowning in a river we cannot excuse ourselves from the rescue just because we cannot save them all. Without a doubt, if we shall do our part, we can save many holy souls from desecrating the Sabbath, which is equal to serving idols. Likewise, we can save many from transgressing the laws of family purity, which Jewish law requires that one give up his life rather than transgress.

To rescue even one soul all of this effort would be worthwhile, and the desecration of G-d's name can also be minimized when it is seen that at least there is protest made when the laws are transgressed.

The essential fact is that the laws of the Sabbath and sexual morality are of the most stringent within the entire Torah, and we

must take constant heed to prevent their transgression from becoming habit which then causes them to be looked on as permissible.

Therefore, to those who love G-d, I say the only correct course and counsel to follow is what I wrote at the very beginning of this article. Kindle the light of Torah in the souls of the people of G-d, both children and adults. The blackness of the dark can only be eliminated through the spreading of light, and the deeper and thicker the darkness the greater the light that is needed.

One of the foundations of our faith is the education of our youth. Just as we must pay attention to the adults and teens and kindle the lights of Torah within them, it is even more important to concern ourselves with young Jewish children. We must see that they are taught and educated in the way of Torah and Mitzvos through the appointment of able instructors. They must teach them Chumash with Rashi, and even more important, we must strengthen ourselves through the establishment of classes in Talmud, which is the most important tie which binds the Jewish people to their heritage.

Our experience has shown us that it is only through the strength of the oral Law - the Talmud - that our people have been able to stand steadfast in their studies and their faith to this day. It would be most appropriate if the elders of the city would periodically test the students of the city in order to strengthen their resolve in their studies. He who has the merit to found a Yeshiva in his city serves as a beam of light to his city and to all neighboring communities.

The overriding principle is that there is much to be done in “the vineyard of the L-d.” Happy is he who sets his head to this and in whom there is thus fulfilled the words of the prophet, “And those that serve the people shall shine as stars forever more.”

Written with a spirit broken by his shattered people, the

youngest of the priests, and a servant to those who serve G-d and by one who anguishes over the pain of his people and earnestly awaits the final salvation.

(Rabbi) Yisrael Mayer HaCohen, Author of the works "Chofetz Chaim" and "Mishnah Berurah"

Rav Hirsch's Mah Nishtanah Message

(Based on Haggadah Shel Pesach Nachlas Hasar)

Hashem requires us as Jewish parents to always infuse our young children with the Torah and its spirit. We are to bring them to Hashem at a tender age and imbue them with a Jewish soul that will be aflame with Jewish life and be a part of our Jewish destiny. This night – the night on which we celebrate our birthday in history and the commencement of our role as Jews – has been specially designated by Hashem for the dedication of our young children. The survival of our people and the continuation and development of the relationship which began at Yetzias Mitzraim depend on the sanctification of our children. And now when you share the Matzah with them, thereby taking part in the mission of Jewish dedication, let your words flow from your heart. Let your heart sincerely appreciate your noble role as a Jewish parent. We must teach them the lesson of this Matzah, the spirit of this holiday of Pesach and the significance of the great event so that our children will understand the mission of the Jewish people....

“V’Kan HaBen Shoel – and now the son asks...”

IF WE WANT TO KNOW what is the difference between man and animal, we would not be so incorrect to say that it is man's ability to ask. Without doubt, the very first thought that enters a child's mind when he is exposed to the world that surrounds him is “What is this?” The human spirit seeks to understand what is happening around it. Even before his lips can utter the words his

heart is wondering, “What is this?” If we could only read the expression in his eyes we would understand the questions in his mind. The whole nature of a child is to question, and it is precisely for this reason that he is able to learn so many skills in his early years.

So when his mind develops and his lips are capable of verbalizing the curiosity of his soul, and he asks and asks, seemingly without end – answer him! His thirst for knowledge is a sign of a healthy soul. The same way that parents are so careful to feed their child’s hunger every day, they must take the time to quench his thirst for knowledge and feed his soul. Why don’t parents take the time to answer their child’s questioning mind? Why don’t they learn about the experiences that their child will encounter so they can guide him properly?

Don’t think that answering his questions is the responsibility of his teachers when he enters school. Visit any school where a child’s soul develops to maturity. There you will be able to easily distinguish the “fortunate” children who received answers at home to their childish questions, who did not ask the question, “What is this?” in vain. These are the children that have parents – and specifically mothers – who conversed with them when they were young, cultivating their desire to understand and offering proper guidance. These are the fortunate ones! While other women wasted time at theaters and social events, these mothers found satisfaction and contentment in the company of their children and used this precious time to teach and guide the next generation. It is not the school that is responsible for their success when they develop into mature adults of fine character, but their mothers who lovingly provided them this essential early education.

You will also see children whose parents did not have the time, the desire, or sufficient knowledge to spend time with their children.

These children also had questions but they stopped asking when they received no answers. They became indifferent to objects and events. Instead, they occupied themselves with other activities, never striving to know and understand. These children will require several years of schooling just to be trained how to ask and learn. Still, they will never be able to regain what they lost due to their parents' neglect.

So don't let your child's questioning disturb you even if it may be incessant, and don't answer him in anger; answer him honestly. Yes, honestly! Don't try to avoid his question by confusing him with nonsense or fairy tales. And if he is unable to comprehend the answer, or you don't know the answer, or if the answer is simply unknown – tell him! Teach his young mind that there are limits to human comprehension. Let him learn that he will not understand – this, too, is a valuable lesson. Just do not nourish his soul with nonsense, and do not allow other people to fill his hunger with nonsense; let your child stay near you. Jewish father and mother, take the time to create a healthy atmosphere for your child's thirsting soul.

For the Sake of Our Children

Excerpt from Chovos Hatalmidim

We should be heartsick, however, and our hair should stand on end when we see the way the younger generation has turned to heresy and has lost all spiritual discipline. They possess neither faith, nor fear of G-d, nor knowledge of Torah. They have actually come to despise G-d and His servants, the people of Israel. The administrators and deans of the yeshivos, who are totally immersed in the life of the yeshivah and its students and encounter only the elite of our youth, are unaware of the gravity of this problem. They console themselves, saying: “Yes, it may be true that many of our young people have freed themselves of any commitment to Torah, but still, Israel has not been abandoned. There are still young men, sons of our people, outstanding in their Judaic scholarship, whose heart is steadfast with the Lord.”

Poke your heads outside of the four cubits of your yeshivah! You will see the great mass of people who have broken from the observances of our faith, may G-d have mercy on them and us. You will see houses of study where the destruction of Jerusalem has been reenacted. Once they were filled with Torah scholars, now they have become empty, and instead, groups and organizations whose goals include the dissemination of heresy and the rejection of Torah have been filled with members. In former good days, even the laborers and merchants who were not necessarily scholars were at least faithful Jews. Now their youth have denied Torah, have wandered and fallen into a great depth of spiritual darkness. Should we be satisfied with merely the handful of students who attend our yeshivos? Is this the entirety of the people of Israel?

And are we really so sure of our yeshivah students? Have we done everything we should do concerning their education? Yes, we can be confident that the students who have reached the upper level of classes, and especially those who have already begun to instruct others and render halachic judgments, and have filled themselves with Torah and acts of devotion, will remain within the holy palace of Judaism and of divine service. But will all our students reach the upper level of classes? Many of our students in the lower grades will be unable to continue their studies much longer. They will leave the yeshivah to become merchants or laborers, either of their own free will, or by force of circumstances. As the *Midrasb* says: “A thousand enter to study, and only one emerges to instruct (from among the whole group).” Do we have any assurance that, a short time after having left the yeshivah, these students will not divest themselves of the commandments and, G-d forbid, cease to observe the Shabbos? Why should we not strategize on how to influence them while they are still in our schools? All the children that eventually throw off the yoke of Torah are in our hands during their childhood and grow up in our schools. Why should we abandon them without binding them and their souls to G-d and to His Torah in their childhood in a way that will last until their old age?

We tend to look at the straying of our youth as if they alone were to blame and we were completely innocent. G-d, however, declared the following about his relationship to Avraham: “I have made Myself known to him in order that he command his children and his household after him to guard the path of G-d (Bereishis 18:19).” Every generation in Israel is a link in the chain of our heritage, a chain whose beginning stretches back to Avraham and whose end will reach our righteous Messiah (may he come soon). Every generation receives its faith, its Torah, and its sense of awe before G-d from the generation that preceded it. They take what they have received, serve the Lord with it, and pass it on to the next

generation. “In order that he command his children” is the mainstay of our existence. And if this chain has been broken in our generation, and we are not succeeding in our attempt to pass the Torah on to the next generation, can we truthfully put all the blame on them? Are they not from the seed of Avraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Are they not also holy souls? Why deceive ourselves with the faulty excuse that we want to pass on the tradition, that it is their fault for refusing to receive it? For however much they are at fault and however true it is that they refuse to listen, try and imagine what would have become of these same “criminals” in earlier generations.

No matter how much they are to blame, no matter how flawed their souls are with defects that did not afflict previous generations, would they still have refused to accept their place in the chain? Would not most, if not all of them have been *tzaddikm*, or, at the very least, simple, faithful Jews? This is because their parents, and the whole generation that would have preceded them, would have taken such great care in educating the next generation, as they did in fulfilling all of G-d’s word - much more care than we take now. They would have burned like fiery torches and would not have looked on calmly and coldly as the younger generation was spiritually drowning and as G-d’s people were falling headlong into heretical ideologies. They would have risen and dedicated their whole soul and might to saving them and educating them, using various stratagems and pretexts.

Are we really devoid of responsibility, we, the older generation, their educators, upon whom the responsibility for passing on the awareness of G-d’s holiness, the knowledge of His Torah, and dedication to His service rests? Can we truly say, with an untroubled soul, “Our hands have not spilled this blood,” the lifeblood of the Jewish souls that are descending to spiritual darkness? What will we answer the One who dwells on high, how will we justify ourselves

before He whose abode is in the heavens? He will come to count His spiritual army on earth, and among them the young generation, the sheep of His flock, whom He left for safekeeping in our hands, relying on our sense of responsibility. He will roar from on high, and shout from the place of Holiness: “Where are My children, whom I love tenderly, the children of Avraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Where are my children?”

And if we truly want to return to G-d and to straighten out what we have made crooked, we must acknowledge our own share of guilt. For even if they are flawed in a way that previous generations’ of young people were not, this does not justify our neglecting them, our failure to investigate and discover the source of their soul-sickness while they are still young, while it is still possible to know how and with what they can be healed. Can the father or guardian of a child claim to be innocent of blame when his child has lost a limb, if the infection that led to this maiming started off as a small cut that could have been easily healed, and it spread out only through neglect?

For all that the young people are to blame, for all their corruption, we cannot simply justify ourselves by sighing bitterly. We must feel pain and heartache because of our neglectfulness as well. Only then will we be able to search for a way to take action, to repair, to heal our nation’s brokenness. And we must pray to G-d to show us His path, and to remove the heart of stone from our children so that together we can merit to serve Him in truth and with a full heart. Then we can be “Israel, in whom You are glorified,” and we can say “Look at this child whom I have placed before You.”

With strong principles and with hard facts — not with guesses and presumptions — we must explain, first of all, what the difference is between the generations. Why, in previous generations, did just about any kind of education seem effective? Almost every

student of every teacher and every child of every father were servants of G-d, while now this is not the case.

The simplest and most important reason is that today's youth consider themselves grown-up before their time. This is not simply a wild guess, the whole world, actually, is lamenting about the same phenomenon. Our purpose is not to explain the reason or cause for this attitude among young people, but the fact is that it does exist. An atmosphere of foolishness has surrounded the young people of our time, in which they have come to think of themselves as grown-up and independent — in their opinions and in their desires — though their mind is still upside down and their desires unripe and bitter. Our sages have told us all along (*Sotah 49*) that in the time preceding the coming of the Messiah, arrogance would be rampant. To think of oneself as trustworthy, secure, and authoritative in one's own opinions is surely arrogant. This trait has caught fire to such an extent that one is sometimes astonished to encounter this independent spirit and false strength bursting forth in very small children who already consider themselves grown men and women.



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