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Table of Contents:

- Rav Yehuda Nachshoni on Ben Sorer U'Moreh
- Rav Avraham Schorr on The Sound of Emunah
- Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk A Century Since His Passing
- Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz Sichos Mussar on אשר קרך בדרך
- Rav Yizchok Kossowsky on the נצחון של שלום
- Rav Asher Weiss on Sheva Brachos
- Rav YY Jacobson on Can You Forgive Your Child?

From cshulman@gmail.com

Adapted from

הגות בפרשיות התורה by Rav Yehuda Nachshoni (1915-1982)

Ben Sorer U'Moreh: Punished for What He Will Become

The Torah's law of the סורר ומורה בן introduces a striking dimension into the Torah's system of punishment. Ordinarily, a person is judged for what he has done. Here, however, the severity of the punishment cannot be understood merely by looking at the acts the young man has already committed. His present conduct is significant because of what it reveals about the direction in which he is heading.

The Ramban connects the parsha to the mitzvos of honoring and fearing one's parents, איש אמו ואביו תיראו and כבד את אבך ואת אמך. Certainly, the parents have a central role in the proceedings. The Torah gives them the authority to bring their son before Beis Din, and if they are unwilling to do so, the punishment cannot be carried out. They may also forgive him. This demonstrates that the law is directly connected to his relationship with his parents and to their responsibility for his chinuch.

Yet simple disobedience to parents cannot explain the punishment. The Torah does not punish every rebellious child as a בן סורר ומורה. The halacha confines the law to an extraordinarily narrow pattern of gluttonous eating and drinking, and Chazal surround it with so many conditions that the case becomes exceedingly rare. The parsha therefore combines several themes: the authority of parents, the responsibility of chinuch, the corrosive effect of uncontrolled appetite, and ultimately the danger that the individual may pose to society.

Did a Ben Sorer U'Moreh Ever Exist?

The extraordinary nature of the law led Chazal themselves to debate whether it was ever actually carried out. The Gemara in Sanhedrin 71a records the view that בן סורר ומורה לא היה ולא עתיד להיות, *a ben sorer u'moreh never existed and never will exist*, and that the parsha was given only as דרוש וקבל שכל, *study it and receive reward*.

According to R' Yehudah, the conditions themselves make the case virtually impossible. Among them, the mother must resemble the father in קול ומראה וקומה, voice, appearance and stature. R' Shimon approaches the issue differently. Could it truly be imagined, he asks, that because a young man ate a prescribed quantity of meat and drank wine, his father and mother would bring him before Beis Din to be stoned? He therefore concludes that the parsha is to be studied rather than implemented.

Yet R' Yonasan declares, אני ראיתיו וישבתי על קברו, *I saw him and sat upon his grave*. The Mishnah likewise treats the law as a genuine halachic institution and explains its underlying principle: גידון על שם סופו, the young man is judged in light of his eventual end.

The Maharsha gives an important interpretation of R' Shimon. R' Shimon does not mean that the Torah itself could not impose such a law. The Torah, which knows where this pattern of conduct leads, can indeed declare that the young man deserves death. Rather, ordinary parents could hardly bring themselves to take their son to Beis Din because of his present behavior. They do not see the future with the Torah's clarity and would naturally have compassion upon him. דרוש וקבל שכל therefore has a practical educational meaning. Parents are to study what the Torah teaches about the possible consequences of an unchecked pattern of behavior and use that understanding to guide their children while there is still time.

Rabbeinu Bachya finds another lesson in the same expression. The parsha demonstrates the supreme place that אהבת השם must occupy even in a parent's heart. There is hardly a more powerful human love than that of a parent for a child, yet love of Hashem must ultimately stand above even that love. In this respect the parsha has something in common with the Akeidah. Avraham was not ultimately permitted to sacrifice Yitzchak, but the Akeidah revealed the limitless extent of his devotion to Hashem. The בן סורר ומורה similarly teaches an ideal even in circumstances that may never actually arise.

The Kli Yakar shifts דרוש וקבל שכל from the parents to the children themselves. The Torah wants young people to hear the parsha and understand where a life surrendered to appetite and self-indulgence can lead. The reward comes from learning its warning before the warning ever needs to become reality. This fits

the Torah's conclusion, *וכל ישראל ישמעו ויראו*, *all of Israel shall hear and fear*.

The Present Act and the Future Criminal

Several mefarshim describe the *בן סורר ומורה* in language broader than the technical halachic definition. The Sifrei speaks of one who is *דברי תורה ומורה על דברי הנביאים*, rebellious against the words of the Torah and defiant toward the words of the Nevi'im. Ibn Ezra sees him as rebellious both against Hashem and against his parents, and describes his pursuit of food and drink as the search for a life devoted to this world. Abarbanel similarly depicts a young man whose rebellion will not remain private but will eventually corrupt others.

Halachically, however, the Torah does not punish general rebellion. It identifies a very specific pattern of eating, drinking and theft which Chazal understand as the beginning of a predictable deterioration. He consumes what he has taken from his father in the company of disreputable companions and begins habituating himself to a life of uncontrolled indulgence. When his father's resources are exhausted and he can no longer maintain that lifestyle, he will seek money elsewhere. Chazal express the principle starkly: he will eventually *מלסטם את הבריות*, rob people in order to satisfy the appetites he has trained himself to regard as necessities.

This is the meaning of *שם סופו*. The Torah does not view the present act in isolation. It sees a developing human personality.

Even so, the severity of the punishment remains difficult. A robber or even a murderer is not ordinarily punished by *sekilah*. Why should this boy receive one of the Torah's most severe punishments before he has committed those later crimes? Various Rishonim explain the punishment in different ways. Some associate it with the severity of insulting or rebelling against his parents; others suggest that the ultimate course of such a life will lead to the gravest transgressions. The Ksav V'Hakabbalah (1785-1865) focuses on the words *ובערת הרע מקרבך*, *you shall eradicate the evil from your midst*. When an evil tendency is allowed to take root, it spreads. The Torah therefore depicts the need to confront it at its first identifiable stage rather than after it has fully developed.

When Appetite Takes Control

The Sefer HaChinuch places particular emphasis on the *זליה לא תאכלו על הדם* itself. He associates the prohibition with *דם* and explains that excessive eating and drinking are not merely unattractive habits. They can become the source of much wider spiritual deterioration.

The Torah itself warns *וישמן ישרון ויבעט*, *Yeshurun grew fat and rebelled*. When physical appetite is constantly indulged, the demands of the body increasingly dominate the person. The Chinuch describes body and soul as pulling in opposite directions. The more a person trains himself to satisfy every physical desire, the weaker the authority of the *nefesh* can become.

For this reason the Torah places the lesson specifically at the threshold of adulthood. The halachic period during which a boy can become a *בן סורר ומורה* is extraordinarily short, only about three months from the beginning of his halachic adulthood. It is precisely at this formative stage that the Torah gives its most dramatic warning against creating a life organized around

consumption and pleasure. Food itself is indispensable, and the Torah therefore cannot command a person to withdraw from it. Instead, it teaches him at the beginning of adulthood that necessity must not become indulgence and that indulgence must not become mastery.

This approaches the Ramban's broader principle of *קדושים תהיו*. A person can technically remain within many individual rules of the Torah while allowing physical appetite to become the organizing principle of his life. The Torah demands more. *קדושים תהיו* requires discipline even within that which is permitted.

Yet the Ramban adds another element. The *בן סורר ומורה* is not punished solely because of his own spiritual decline. His punishment also serves as a warning to others. The words *וכל ישראל ישמעו ויראו* appear in several exceptional Torah laws in which the public effect of the punishment is itself significant. The Ramban compares this to such cases as the *זקן ממרא*, whose defiance threatens the unity of Torah authority; *עדים זוממים*, whose punishment protects the integrity of justice; and the *מסית*, whose words endanger the religious loyalty of others. In each case, the Torah looks not only at the individual act but also at the danger it creates for the larger community.

The *בן סורר ומורה* is therefore, in a certain sense, the *פרט* viewed in relation to the *כלל*. His conduct matters not only because of what it is doing to him but because of what unchecked corruption ultimately does to society.

Why So Many Limitations?

Precisely because the principle is so severe, the halacha confines it within extraordinary limits. The *דין* applies only to a *בן* and not a *בת*. It operates only during a brief period of adolescence. Both father and mother must participate; if either refuses, there is no *בן סורר ומורה*. They can forgive him. Various physical conditions of the parents can prevent the law from applying. The eating must involve prescribed quantities of meat and wine, under prescribed circumstances. He must obtain them in the required manner and consume them outside his father's domain in the company described by Chazal.

The accumulation of limitations makes an actual case exceedingly rare. Yet the rarity is itself revealing. The Torah did not create a broad license to punish troublesome adolescents. Quite the opposite. It constructed an almost impossibly narrow law in order to express an exceptionally powerful educational principle. Rav Yehudah Leib Chasman (1869-1936) develops this in *Or Yehel* through the concept *זה ערבים זה לזה*. Communal responsibility does not mean only that innocent Jews may sometimes be affected by the wrongdoing of others. It also means that the Torah evaluates wrongdoing partly by its effect upon the community. The individual cannot regard his moral life as entirely private. His conduct helps determine the moral character of the society around him. Thus *וכל ישראל ישמעו ויראו* is not incidental to the *parsha*. It is one of its central themes.

The Exception of Yerushalayim

The law is limited not only by age and circumstance, but, according to a source cited by the Meshech Chochmah, also by place: *בן סורר ומורה* does not apply in Yerushalayim. He explains that Yerushalayim was a place where large quantities of sacred food were naturally consumed, *korbanos* such as *shelamim* and the produce of *maaser sheini*. Eating generously in such

surroundings does not carry the same meaning as the indulgence of the *בן סורר ומורה*. Food eaten as part of a mitzvah does not train a person toward lawless appetite.

This leads to a broader idea with which the discussion concludes. Physical enjoyment is not intrinsically the enemy of kedushah. It depends upon the context in which it is experienced. A *סעודת מצוה* can itself sanctify the body. The fruits of Eretz Yisrael, nourished by the kedushah of the land, can likewise become instruments through which physical existence is elevated rather than degraded. The Bach famously explains the words *ונאכל מפריה ונשבע מטובה* as an expression of this idea: through the produce of Eretz Yisrael, a Jew can absorb something of the kedushah that permeates the land.

The parsha of *בן סורר ומורה* is therefore not simply a warning about an exceptionally rebellious child. It is a profound statement about chinuch and human development. A habit that appears small today may shape an entire personality tomorrow. Appetite can remain a servant or become a master. Parents bear responsibility not merely to react to wrongdoing, but to recognize the direction in which a child is moving. And the individual must understand that his private moral choices ultimately affect the *כלל*.

The Torah judges the *בן סורר ומורה על שם סופו* because the beginning of a road already contains the possibility of its destination. But the extraordinary restrictions surrounding the law convey the other half of the message: the Torah's primary concern is not punishment. It is to recognize the road early enough that the destination can still be changed.

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The Sound of Emunah

By Rav Avraham Schorr

The Steipler Gaon (Sefer Chayei Olam) (1899-1985) writes that parents should tell their children stories about tzaddikim. Such stories awaken emunah and give a child a picture of what spiritual greatness can look like. Of course, one needs wisdom in choosing the stories. They should not be so distant or extraordinary that the child cannot relate to them. They should teach something practical about life and inspire the child to aspire toward growth. There is one story, however, that every Jewish child should know. I have asked many classes about it, and almost no child has ever heard it. In the early 1950s, a child was born who, according to those who witnessed it, could recite vast portions of Torah before the angel caused him to forget (Niddah 30b). He could recite from Shas, Rambam, Shulchan Aruch, and other seforim, despite being far too young to have learned them in the ordinary way.

Why is this story so important? Because it brings to life the teaching of Chazal that before a child is born, a malach teaches the neshama the entire Torah (ibid.). The child does not enter this world empty. The neshama comes from another realm, already connected to Torah and Hashem. The angel then causes the child to forget so that he can spend his life rediscovering what his neshama already knows.

For many of us, such a story is difficult to accept because it does not fit within the ordinary laws of this world. But that is precisely why it is so powerful. It reminds us that this world is not the only world. A neshama existed before it entered the body, and it carries

memories and capacities that cannot be explained through physical experience alone.

In one sefer, a letter is printed from a great Rosh Yeshivah in Detroit to Rav Chatzkel Levenstein zt"l (1895-1974), the Mashgiach of Ponevezh. He had heard about this child and wanted to know whether the report was true.

From far away, the story sounded almost impossible, so he wrote to Rav Chatzkel in Bnei Brak and asked him to investigate. Rav Chatzkel wrote back that his daughter and son-in-law lived near the family and had personally told him about the child. When he first heard the report, he put on his coat and began walking toward the house to see the child for himself. Then he stopped. He thought, "My daughter and son-in-law are trustworthy Jews. They told me what they witnessed. Why must I see it with my own eyes? If I cannot believe until I personally see, I am weakening the very emunah this story is meant to strengthen." He therefore turned around and returned home without seeing the child.

That is an extraordinary lesson for our generation. We live in an age of photographs, videos, recordings and constant documentation. Whenever something remarkable occurs, people immediately ask, "Is there a video?" We assume that seeing creates belief. Yet seeing is not always emunah. Sometimes the demand to see everything is itself the opposite of emunah. The Ohr HaChaim (see Shemos 10:2) explains that hearing is connected to faith, while seeing can remove the need for faith. When I see something directly, I no longer believe it; I know it through my senses. Emunah begins where physical sight ends. The Meshech Chochmah develops this idea through the mitzvah of honoring parents. The Gemara (Yevamos 6a) refers to various actions associated with kibbud av va'em as a hechsher mitzvah, a preparation to a mitzvah. The Meshech Chochmah reads into this that the very mitzvah of kibbud av va'em is unto itself a hechsher mitzvah to all other mitzvos of the Torah. Why would honoring parents be the foundation of the entire Torah?

The answer is that our emunah in the Torah rests upon our mesorah. Why do I believe that Hashem revealed Himself at Har Sinai? Because my father told me what his father told him, and his father received it from the generation before him. The chain continues all the way back to those who stood at Sinai.

If one destroys the authority of parents and the concept of transmission, one eventually undermines the entire foundation of Torah. Without mesorah, there is no one to hear, and at that point, a person believes only what he can personally see or prove. We do not need anyone to explain that disrespect toward parents is one of the great illnesses of our generation. Society often teaches young people that they are not obligated to listen to their parents and that their own feelings and opinions automatically outweigh the wisdom of previous generations. Of course, complicated situations require wisdom and guidance. But once the general concept of kibbud av va'em is weakened, the power of mesorah is weakened with it.

One avodah during Elul is the restoration of emunah. We reclaim the ability to believe in Hashem and receive the mesorah of Torah from past generations without demanding that everything first be proven to our own satisfaction. We stop living as people who

question every tradition and doubt every message simply because we did not witness it ourselves.

Reb Zusha of Anipoli (1718-1800) notes that the letters of the word teshuvah represent different foundations of returning to Hashem. The first, he notes, is “Tamim tihyeh im Hashem Elokecha—You shall be wholehearted with Hashem your G-d” (Devarim 18:3). Teshuvah begins with temimus, a simple and wholehearted faith. It is the willingness to follow Hashem without constantly questioning whether we know better. Temimus has become an undervalued quality. If a shidduch resume described someone first and foremost as a tamim, many people might not be impressed. They prefer someone sharp, sophisticated, worldly, independent, and fully aware of everything happening around them.

Simplicity is sometimes treated as weakness. But the Torah sees it differently. To be a tamim does not mean to be foolish. It means to be whole and sincere in one’s relationship with Hashem. It means not living with constant suspicion and cynicism.

The world sometimes mocks Jews for having gone “like sheep.” That expression is often used critically, as though following with faith were a sign of weakness. Yet Klal Yisrael is repeatedly compared to Hashem’s flock. We are proud to follow the Shepherd because we trust Him. We do not wander without direction. We follow the Ribbono Shel Olam with temimus. This is the deeper meaning of “Lo anachnu amo—We are His people” (Tehillim 100:3). We become His nation when we are willing to hear His voice and trust the mesorah He has given us. The transformation from lo with an aleph, “we are not His,” to lo with a vav, “we are His,” takes place through genuine emunah. This is also how we prepare for the Shofar of Rosh Hashanah. The beracha is “Lishmoa kol Shofar,” to hear the sound of the Shofar. The mitzvah is specifically in the hearing because hearing represents emunah.

We cannot see what the Shofar accomplishes in Shamayim. We cannot photograph the gates it opens or the accusations it silences. We hear its cry, and we believe.

May we arrive at Rosh Hashanah with ears that truly know how to hear and may the sound of the Shofar awaken our emunah, restore our temimus, and remind us that we are the flock of Hashem.

And through that faithful hearing, may we live fully and proudly as His people.

From Chaim Shulman

Rav Meir Simcha HaKohein of Dvinsk: A Century Since His Passing

With biographical info adapted from an article 50 years ago by Rav Yaakov Feitman shlita.

Parshas Ki Seitzei begins with the words כִּי תֵצֵא לְמַלְחָמָה עַל אוֹיְבֶיךָ which coincides with the beginning of Elul as the זל ארי noted represents our inner battle with the Yetzer Hara. The life of *Rav Meir Simcha HaKohein of Dvinsk (1843-1926)*, whose 100th Yahrzeit was 4 Elul this past Monday, was about stepping beyond the safe boundaries of home, confronting danger, navigating moral complexity, and remaining faithful to Hashem even in the chaos of the battlefield. The following bio adapted from Rav Yaakov Feitman article about Rav Meir

Simcha in the Sept. 1976 Jewish Observer (which was then his 50th Yahrzeit).

Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843-1926)

Selections Collected from Rav Yaakov Feitman's Article

Selections are collected below from Rav Feitman's article, The Or Same'ach Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohein ZTL, Jewish Observer Sept. 1976

Rav Meir Simcha's Youth

Rav Meir Simcha's childhood already hinted at the greatness to come. By age seven he had mastered Tanach; by nine, one-sixth of Shas; by ten, he had surpassed every teacher in his town of Baltrimantz. His speech naturally echoed the cadences of Chazal. Even in private notes he never intended to publish, he wrote in the idiom of the Gemara, such as his youthful gloss defending the K'tzos HaChoshen: A kohein comes to the aid of a kohein. [CS - Rav Meir Simcha had created most of his great chidushim by age 16, according to Rav Yitzchok Perman in the name of Rav Shmuel Leib Svei.]

He then spent twenty-seven uninterrupted years learning Torah before accepting a rabbinic position. This immersion shaped a mind that could see both the eternal truths of Torah and the unfolding dangers of contemporary society. His chilling prediction, They will think Berlin is Jerusalem, appears in Meshech Chochma decades before the Holocaust, a warning that assimilationist dreams would one day turn to ashes.

His Torah works reflect this synthesis. The Or Same'ach is terse, brilliant, and foundational; the Meshech Chochma is sweeping, philosophical, historical, and prophetic. His commentary on Chumash moves effortlessly from halacha to mussar, from Kabbalah to ethics, from ancient history to contemporary warning. Yet Rav Meir Simcha's greatness was not only in what he wrote, it was in how he lived.

His Seminal Works

Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk is known in particular for two seminal works. [The *Ohr Somayach* is an acclaimed commentary on the Rambam, which is widely studied and celebrated for its brilliant insights. The work is considered great because it (i) offers profound insights into Jewish law, (ii) deeply analyzes the Rambam's specific rulings, and (iii) seeks to refine the application of law to modern scenarios. Rav Meir Simcha had a fiercely independent intellect that wasn't restricted by major institutions, which allowed him to develop a very unique scholarly approach. He established the groundwork for this book early in his life, and it was published in stages starting in 1902. Today, it remains an essential text for anyone seriously studying the Rambam.] His other major work is the *Meshech Chochma*. Upon even the most preliminary study of the Meshech Chochma, one's first and continuing impression must be one of wonder at Reb Meir Simcha's absolute mastery of so many disciplines, styles and approaches, each brought into play precisely where it is needed and where it does the most to elucidate that particular passage. Together, these texts cemented his legacy as one of the greatest Torah scholars of the early 20th century.

Tshuva on the Spot

One story from his early rabbinic years illustrates the depth of his Torah mastery. A wealthy businessman once arrived in Dvinsk with a complicated halachic question involving

partnerships, ribbis, and overlapping contracts. He apologized for disturbing the Rav and said, I know this will take you hours. I will return later. Rav Meir Simcha asked him to wait one minute, walked to his desk, and wrote a full responsum on the spot. When the astonished man asked how he had answered so quickly, Rav Meir Simcha replied simply: I have been thinking about this question for twenty years. His mind carried entire sugyos fully developed, waiting for the moment someone would ask.

Dvinsk: A City of Two Giants

When Rav Meir Simcha became the Rav of the Misnagdic community of Dvinsk, he shared the city with another towering figure: the Rogatchover Gaon, Rav Yosef Rosen, who served as Rav of the Chassidic community. Their relationship was legendary, filled with sharp wit, deep respect, and mutual awe. Rav Meir Simcha once joked that each was only half a rabbi, explaining that when two visiting rabbis waited to see him, he told his rebbetzin, No, there is only one rabbi. Like me, each of them is only half a rabbi; thus only one is waiting. The Rogatchover, for his part, would send people seeking blessings to Rav Meir Simcha with the simple instruction: Go to the Kohein. And Rav Meir Simcha would send complex, research-heavy questions to the Rogatchover, saying, Step in to the Rogatchover and he will answer you on the spot. Dvinsk became a dual center of Torah for the entire world. Letters poured in from every continent. Gedolim visited to witness the phenomenon of two giants living side by side.

The Rav Who Would Not Leave His Post

When World War I broke out, Dvinsk became a war zone. The Russian commander ordered the expulsion of Jews from the front. Famine, disease, and bombardment ravaged the city. Even the Rogatchover fled. But Rav Meir Simcha refused. He declared: As long as there are nine other Jews in the city, I will be the tenth for a minyan. His presence steadied the terrified population. His calm was their anchor. His refusal to abandon them was their hope. When people begged him to flee, he answered with serene faith: Every bullet has an address. None will reach where Heaven has not decreed. This was leadership in its purest form, not bravado, but responsibility.

The Firing-Squad Miracle

One of the most dramatic episodes of his life occurred during this period. Suspicious soldiers, some say Russians, others say Czech units under Russian command, seized Rav Meir Simcha, accusing him of aiding German forces simply because he refused to leave the city. They dragged him to a courtyard where executions were carried out. Eyewitnesses later described that Rav Meir Simcha stood calmly, murmuring Tehillim, without fear. As the firing squad prepared their rifles, a local non-Jewish laborer, a simple tanner, ran forward shouting: Do not shoot this holy man! If you kill him, the whole city will suffer! The soldiers hesitated. The commander demanded to know who the man was. The tanner answered: He is not like other Jews. He is a righteous man for all people. The commander ordered the soldiers to lower their rifles. Rav Meir Simcha was released immediately. This story circulated widely in Dvinsk, and even secular Jews repeated it with awe.

The River that Receded

Another story, told by both Jews and Gentiles, describes a moment that seemed miraculous. The Dvina River overflowed its banks, threatening to destroy both Jewish and non-Jewish neighborhoods. Panic spread. Townspeople begged Rav Meir Simcha to intervene. He walked to the riverbank, looked at the raging water, whispered a short tefillah, and turned away. Within minutes, the water level began dropping. Non-Jews said openly: The rabbi stopped the river. Whether miraculous or coincidental, the event became part of Dvinsk's collective memory. It reflected the reverence Gentiles had for him, a reverence earned not through power, but through integrity, justice, and holiness.

Justice for All: The Gypsy Case

His relationship with non-Jews began with a simple case. A Jew and a gypsy were business partners. When they had a dispute, the gypsy insisted: We will go to the Jewish rabbi. He is the only one who judges fairly. Rav Meir Simcha ruled in favor of the gypsy after investigating the facts. The gypsy spread the story throughout the region: The Jewish rabbi judges truth, not people. This was the turning point. After that: Gentiles brought him their disputes. Local peasants called him the holy judge. Even priests respected him. This reputation is what later saved him from soldiers.

Another story of his judicial brilliance shows how deeply he understood human nature. Two butchers once came before him in a dispute. As they argued, Rav Meir Simcha suddenly stood up and said to one of them, No doubt you are brazen enough to present your false claims because you know my capacity here is merely that of arbitrator. But if I were to administer to you a Biblical oath, you would not persist in your lies. The butcher immediately broke down and admitted the truth. His words carried the weight of Torah itself.

Miracles of Insight: The Train Disaster

Another story illustrates his uncanny intuition. A man rushed to say goodbye before catching a train. Rav Meir Simcha kept him talking, asking question after question, seemingly unaware of the man's urgency. The man missed the train. Later that day, the train derailed. Many died. The man returned to Rav Meir Simcha in tears, saying: You saved my life. Rav Meir Simcha simply answered: Hashem does His will. I only delayed you. This humility, refusing credit even when others saw a miracle, was the essence of his greatness.

His Final Days: Leaving the World Through Torah

In the summer of 1926, Rav Meir Simcha became critically ill. Gedolim across Europe prayed for him. Rav Elchonon Wasserman (1874-1941) visited him in Riga. On his deathbed, Rav Meir Simcha asked to recite Mishnayos Taharos, by heart. He whispered the words with difficulty, then said: Oy... I cannot learn Torah properly. These were his final words. Rav Elchonon later said: We saw what it means when a tzaddik's soul leaves the world through Torah. The Chofetz Chaim mourned: Who will guide us now?

And the Rogatchover Gaon ordered that Rav Meir Simcha's shtender be buried with him, an ancient honor reserved only for one whose lectern could testify in Heaven to a lifetime of total dedication to Torah.

A Century Later

One hundred years after his passing, Rav Meir Simcha's voice still echoes through batei midrash around the world. His Or Same'ach remains a foundational sefer for anyone learning Rambam. His Meshech Chochma continues to illuminate Chumash with brilliance, depth, and prophetic clarity. But perhaps his greatest legacy is not found in his writings, but in his life: His courage in remaining with his community during war. His integrity in judging Jew and non-Jew alike. His humility in the face of miracles. His calm faith under threat of death. His ability to inspire awe in both Jews and Gentiles. His unwavering devotion to Torah until his final breath. Rav Meir Simcha did not merely teach Torah. He embodied Torah.

Remembering Those Who Came Before Us

In an Asifa in Lakewood this past Sunday night to commemorate the 100th Yahrtzeit of Rav Meir Simcha, Rav Uren Reich, noted, based on the Meshech Chochmah, the Gemara's statement that the korban of Rosh Chodesh is, kaviyachol, a kapparah for Hashem having diminished the moon: Klal Yisroel's task in the world is to combat avodah zarah, and the diminishing of the moon left the sun to loom large in the sky, magnifying the allure of sun worship and making that task harder. On Rosh Chodesh, therefore, Klal Yisroel is granted a measure of leniency – which is why Rosh Hashanah falls on Rosh Chodesh, so that Klal Yisroel enters judgment with that leniency in hand, though it would be unbecoming for us to invoke it, which is why Rosh Chodesh goes unmentioned in the Rosh Hashanah davening. He ended with the Meshech Chochmah's words in Parshas Ki Savo, that we must thank Hashem for those who came before us and taught us Torah upon which we build, and, he said, for the Meshech Chochmah itself.

Adopted and translated by CS from

Sichos Mussar by Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz

(1902-1979)

Maamar 96, Parshas Ki Seitzei

אשר קרך בדרך

The Torah commands us to remember Amalek: *וזכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים אשר קרך בדרך*, *remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you left Egypt, how he encountered you on the way*. We are further commanded *אשר קרך בדרך*, *erase the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens, do not forget*.

The struggle with Amalek occupies a unique place in Torah. The pasuk declares *וזכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים אשר קרך בדרך* and Chazal explain that neither Hashem's Name nor His throne will be complete until Amalek is erased. The evil and deficiency within creation are embodied in the spiritual contamination of *אשר קרך בדרך*. As long as Amalek remains, *אין השם שלם ואין הכסא שלם*.

What is *אשר קרך בדרך*? Chazal explain *אשר קרך בדרך*, Amalek cooled the spiritual heat and enthusiasm of Klal Yisrael. This coldness is not merely one failing among many. It is a root of human smallness and spiritual decline. Through *התעוררות* and *שימת לב*, by allowing what he sees and knows to penetrate his heart, a person can continually rise. When that inner awakening is cooled, growth stops. This was the unique contamination of Amalek.

The origin of Amalek itself reveals this quality. The Torah tells us *והמנע היתה פילגש לאליפז בן עשו ותלד לאליפז את עמלק*. Chazal relate that Timna was descended from royalty and wished to attach herself to the family of Avraham. Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov did not accept her, and she eventually became a concubine to Elifaz, preferring to be a servant among this nation rather than a noblewoman elsewhere. From her came Amalek. Yet Chazal conclude with the striking criticism *מאי טעמא לא איבעי להו לרחקה*, they should not have distanced her so completely.

Certainly the Avos had reason not to accept Timna. Avraham Avinu devoted his life to bringing people beneath the wings of the Shechinah, and if the Avos determined that she should not be accepted, their judgment rested on what they perceived through *רוח הקודש*. Nevertheless, Chazal say *לא איבעי להו לרחקה*. Even if she could not be accepted, there was no need for such *ריחוק*. From that excessive distance came Amalek, whose essence is itself *ריחוק*, coldness and indifference.

That trait reached its fullest expression when Amalek attacked after Yetzias Mitzrayim. The Torah describes the terror that seized the nations after the makkos and Krias Yam Suf: *שמעו עמים ירגזון חיל אחז יישיב פלשת אז נבהלו אלופי אדום אילי מואב יאחזמו רעד נמגו כל יישיב כנען*. The entire world trembled before what Hashem had done for Klal Yisrael, yet Amalek remained unmoved. He saw what everyone else saw and heard what everyone else heard, but nothing penetrated him.

We find the same phenomenon during makas barad. After six makkos, Moshe warned the Egyptians to bring their servants and livestock indoors. The Torah tells us that *ה' הירא את דבר ה'* brought them to safety, while others left everything in the field. How could anyone disregard Moshe's warning after all he had already witnessed.

The Torah answers *ואשר לא שם לבו אל דבר ה' ויעזב את עבדיו ואת מקנהו בשדה*. It does not say that he did not know or believe. It says *לא שם לבו*. He did not take it to heart. A person can know something and even witness it with his own eyes, yet remain unaffected because the knowledge never penetrates his heart. Through a failure of *שימת לב*, he can act against what he knows to be true.

This was Amalek. He knew that the nations were terrified by what Hashem had done, yet he attacked. Chazal compare the nations to people standing before a boiling bath into which no one dared enter. Amalek jumped in. He knew he would be burned, but his indifference overcame what he knew, and by entering he cooled the bath for everyone else. This is *אשר קרך*. Amalek's own coldness diminished the awe created by Yetzias Mitzrayim.

This is why the battle remains *וזכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים אשר קרך בדרך*. As long as the contamination of indifference and spiritual coldness remains, *אין השם שלם ואין הכסא שלם*.

But the root of Amalek is not confined to the historical nation of Amalek. This middah can exist within every person.

The Gemara discusses the requirement of *ידיעה בתחילה* for someone who entered the Beis Hamikdash while tamei. Rashi explains the concept of *ידיעה בית רבו* as follows: *למד בבית רבו*. *שהשרץ מטמא וידע שזה שרץ ונגע בו אבל לא שם על לבו שנטמא*. The person learned that a sheretz conveys tumah. He knows that the object before him is a sheretz. He knows that he touched it. Yet he

does not take the final step and recognize that he himself is now tamei.

This is extraordinary. He knows every individual fact. A sheretz is tamei. This is a sheretz. I touched it. Yet somehow, he remains convinced that he is as he was before. The facts have not changed him because he has not been *שם לב*. Here too there is something of Amalek, knowledge that remains cold and distant from the person who possesses it.

לב אי שימת לב is therefore the root of human pettiness and spiritual deficiency. Conversely, *שימת לב* and *התבוננות* are the foundations through which a person can rise immeasurably. The difference between remaining small and becoming great may not lie in how much a person knows, but in whether he stops to recognize what his knowledge means for him.

The Gemara in Megillah relates that Rabbah sent Mar bar Mar, through Abaye, a basket of dates together with a cup of toasted wheat flour. Abaye remarked that when Mar would see the gift he would say *נחית לא מצוריה* *דיקולא מלכא ליהוי דיקולא מצוריה* לא נחית. Even when a villager becomes king, the basket he was accustomed to carrying does not come down from his neck. Rashi explains that although Rabbah had now become the leading figure in Pumbedisa, he was still sending commonplace foods as though nothing had changed. A person does not naturally notice the changes that have taken place within his own life. He continues behaving according to yesterday's habits because he does not recognize that he is no longer where he was yesterday. *דיקולא מצוריה לא נחית*. The old basket remains hanging from his neck. He may have become a king, yet inwardly he remains the same villager.

But this is precisely where the unique greatness of man lies. Every other creature remains fundamentally in the state in which it was created. Even the malachim do not possess the human capacity for *עליה* in the same sense. A person, however, can change his condition at any moment. He can rise from the lowest level to the highest. The path to that transformation is *לב*, *התבוננות* and *שימת לב*, to stop, to pay attention, and to recognize where he truly stands. This is what Chazal teach concerning Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya. After a lifetime deeply immersed in aveirah, one moment of awakening transformed him completely. When Rebbi heard what had occurred he cried and declared *אחת בשעה עולמו בשה* *יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת*, *there is one who acquires his world in a single hour*. A person need only awaken himself, leave the routine and habits that have imprisoned him, and throw the *דיקולא* from his shoulders. Once he truly sees himself, the smallness that seemed to define him can fall away. Halachah itself demonstrates how far a single movement of the heart can reach. The Gemara in Kiddushin teaches that if a man betroths a woman *על מנת שאני צדיק*, *on condition that I am a tzaddik*, even if he had been a complete rasha we must consider the possibility that the kiddushin took effect *שמהרהר תשובה* *שמא הרהר תשובה* *בדעתו*, perhaps at that moment he contemplated teshuvah.

The Lechem Mishneh asks why, then, when kiddushin takes place before witnesses who are disqualified because of their aveiros, we do not always fear that perhaps those witnesses silently did teshuvah at that moment. He cites the Maharam of Padua, who explains that the case of *על מנת שאני צדיק* is different because the man has outwardly demonstrated some awakening. He has declared his desire to be a tzaddik. Once we see even that small

movement, we must consider the possibility that within his heart an actual thought of teshuvah occurred.

A single genuine awakening may be enough to transform a *רשע גמור* into a tzaddik.

This is the meaning of the Torah's description of teshuvah: *כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלאה היא ממך ולא רחוקה היא לא בשמים היא ולא מעבר לים היא כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו*. The Ramban explains that these pesukim refer to the mitzvah of teshuvah. Teshuvah is exceedingly close to a person. Teshuvah does not require a Navi to descend from Heaven and show us the way. *ולא מעבר לים היא*, a person does not need to travel across the sea in search of someone who can transform him. What is required is awakening, *שימת לב*, an escape from the smallness and mechanical routine of everyday existence. That itself is the reversal of Amalek.

The Torah tells us *ובני קרח לא מתו*. The sons of Korach had descended together with their father toward the depths, yet Chazal tell us that at the critical moment *בלבם תשובה* *הרהרו תשובה*. A place was preserved for them and they were saved. One instant of thought, one awakening of the heart, could lift men who had already fallen toward *שואל* and bring them back upward. This is not a minor feature of man. This is his extraordinary greatness.

The same principle explains why Chazal describe the Satan as becoming confused by the repeated sounds of the shofar. Tosafos cite the explanation that when the Satan hears the first shofar he is disturbed, and when he hears it again he fears that perhaps this is the *שופר גדול* heralding the final geulah and the end of his power. The Satan has heard the shofar year after year for generations, yet he remains afraid. Why. Because he understands something that we too easily forget. Even the smallest authentic awakening within a Jew can destroy his entire hold over that person. A single *תקיעה* can awaken a heart, and once the heart awakens, everything can change.

Koheles describes *עיר קטנה ואנשים בה מעט ובא אליה מלך גדול וסבב אתה* *ובנה עליה מצודים גדלים ומצא בה איש מסכן וכלט הוא את העיר בהכמתו*. Chazal understand the *עיר קטנה* as man himself, whose powers appear small, while the *מלך גדול* is the yetzer hara surrounding him with seemingly overwhelming fortifications. How can one poor wise man rescue a city surrounded by such a mighty king. The answer is that the wise man reveals the truth. The king is not truly so mighty and the fortifications are not as impregnable as they appear. Much of their strength is illusion. One awakening can scatter them. One *תקיעה* can cause the entire structure to collapse.

This is the secret of *מאד* *הדבר* *כי קרוב אליך הדבר*. The chacham knows how close change really is.

If so, why does teshuvah seem so difficult. Because without *שימת לב* it truly is difficult. A person becomes so absorbed in his own habits and routines that he cannot see any avenue of escape. The yetzer hara appears before him as a *מלך גדול*, and he surrenders before the battle has even begun.

But once a person awakens, once he pays attention to who he is and what he can become, he discovers that the path was never impossibly distant. *בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו*. Through even one genuine moment of *התעוררות* and *שימת לב*, he can overcome what appeared unconquerable.

That is the profound contrast between Amalek and the greatness of man. Amalek is אשר קרך, the force that cools, distances and makes everything seem irrelevant. Man's task is precisely the opposite, to awaken, to take things to heart, to recognize what he knows, and thereby to change.

This is גדלות האדם.

Adapted and translated by Chaim Shulman from

שבת ומועד by Rav Yizchok Kossowsky

(1877-1951) Rav/ABD of Iyve, Volkovisk & Johanusburg and confidante and brother-in-law of Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski

נצחון של שלום

כי תצא למלחמה על איביך ונתנו ה' אלקיך בידך *when you go out to war against your enemies and Hashem your God delivers them into your hand* (Ki Seitzei 21:10)

At the very end of the Mishnah, Rabi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches, עתיד הקב"ה להנחיל לכל צדיק וצדיק שלש מאות ועשרה עולמות שנאמר *in the future Hakadosh Baruch Hu will grant every tzaddik three hundred and ten worlds, as it says, to bequeath substance to those who love Me and I will fill their treasuries* (Uktzin 3:12; Mishlei 8:21). Immediately afterward, Rabi Shimon ben Chalafta concludes the entire Mishnah, לא מצא הקב"ה כלי מחזיק ברכה לישראל אלא השלום שנאמר ה' עז לעמו יתן ה' יברך *Hakadosh Baruch Hu found no vessel capable of containing blessing for Israel other than peace, as it says, Hashem will give strength to His people, Hashem will bless His people with peace* (Uktzin 3:12; Tehillim 29:11)

Why are these two teachings placed together? What is the connection between the 310 worlds awaiting every tzaddik and the blessing of peace?

There is another difficulty. The Mishnah teaches, והכל לפי רוב *everything is according to the abundance of one's deeds* (Avos 3:15), and elsewhere warns, שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצות, *you do not know the reward of the mitzvos* (Avos 2:1). How then can every tzaddik apparently receive the identical reward of 310 worlds?

The answer is that the 310 worlds are not the reward itself, but the place in which the reward is enjoyed. The reward itself is not limited to a fixed measure. ואצרתיהם אמלא, *I will fill their treasuries*, each according to what he has earned

Why the Reward of a Mitzvah Endures

There is a fundamental difference between the reward of mitzvos and the punishment of aveiros. A mitzvah creates an enduring spiritual consequence, while the punishment of an ordinary aveirah does not necessarily possess the same permanence. The reason lies in the two elements joined within man, body and neshama. The neshama is pure and eternal, while the body is material and transient. The source of a mitzvah is מצד הנשמה, from the side of the neshama, and its reward therefore shares in the neshama's permanence. Aveirah ordinarily begins מצד החומר, in the physical side of man, through bodily desire and the power of the yetzer hara

The Rambam gives striking expression to this idea in explaining why a properly coerced get is nevertheless considered voluntary. A Jew's true will is להעבירות מן העבירות, *to perform all the mitzvos and distance himself from aveiros*. When he refuses, יצרו הוא שתקפו, *his yetzer has overpowered him* (Rambam,

Hilchos Gerushin 2:20). The aveirah does not necessarily express the deepest will of the person. The yetzer may overpower him and pull him in a direction his neshama does not desire

But this raises an obvious problem. The neshama cannot perform a physical mitzvah without the body, and the body cannot commit an aveirah without the neshama. Chazal make precisely this point in the parable of the lame man and the blind man. The body claims that without the neshama it is powerless, while the neshama claims that without the body it cannot act. Hakadosh Baruch Hu therefore reunites them and judges them together (Sanhedrin 91a-b). If body and soul participate together in every human act, how can mitzvah be attributed particularly to the neshama and aveirah particularly to the body?

The halachah of שנים שעשו, two people jointly performing one act, may provide a model. Rabi Yehudah distinguishes between זה יכול וזה יכול, where either participant could have performed the melachah alone and they are exempt, and זה אינו יכול וזה אינו יכול, where neither could have performed it without the other and both are liable (Shabbos 92b-93a). In the latter case neither has physically performed the entire melachah, yet because neither can succeed without the other, each relies upon and joins in the other's participation, and the completed act is attributed to both. So too with body and neshama. Both participate in every deed, but they do not necessarily stand in the same relationship to it. In a mitzvah, the neshama is the directing force. It desires the mitzvah and uses the body to bring that desire into action. The body participates, but the act is essentially מעשה הנשמה. Since the neshama is eternal, its reward is enduring. In an ordinary aveirah the direction is reversed. The impulse comes מצד הגוף, from the physical side of man, which draws the neshama after it. The aveirah is therefore attributed primarily to the transient side of man

When Sin Reaches the Neshama

This explanation creates another difficulty. Chazal speak of resha'im who יורדין לגיהנם ונידונין בה לדורי דורות, *descend to Gehinnom and are judged there for generations upon generations* (Rosh Hashanah 17a). If aveirah comes primarily from the transient body, how can its punishment become enduring? The answer is that there is a point at which sin ceases merely to be the body overpowering the neshama and begins to affect the neshama itself

Chazal teach, צדיקים יצר טוב שופטן רשעים יצר הרע שופטן בינונים זה וזה, *tzaddikim are ruled by the yetzer tov, resha'im by the yetzer hara, while beinonim are ruled by both*. Rava then says, לא איברי *the world was created only for complete resha'im or complete tzaddikim* (Berachos 61b). Ordinarily a person lives with two competing forces. His neshama pulls upward while the yetzer pulls downward. When he sins, the lower force may have prevailed, but the neshama has not necessarily made the sin its own

A רשע גמור is different. Repeated sin can penetrate so deeply that evil is no longer merely something that overpowers him. It becomes what he wants. The aveirah then comes not only מצד הגוף but also מצד הנפש. Because the neshama is eternal, evil that has entered the neshama can produce an enduring consequence. The opposite process creates the צדיק גמור. He has not merely won individual battles against the yetzer. He has continued the struggle

until the lower forces themselves are brought beneath the authority of the good

This gives new meaning to *ואהבת את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך*, *you shall love Hashem your God with all your heart* (Devarim 6:5), which Chazal interpret, *בכל לבבך בשני יצריך ביצר טוב וביצר הרע*, *with both your inclinations, with the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara* (Mishnah Berachos 9:5; Berachos 54a)

The *ב* of *יצריך* can suggest more than serving Hashem with both inclinations. It can also mean recognizing the good that comes *through* both. Just as *ב* can mean by means of or in exchange for, as in *שדות בכסף יקנו*, *fields will be acquired for money* (Yirmiyahu 32:44), so too *בכל לבבך* can teach a person eventually to recognize even the purpose served by the yetzer hara. Without resistance there could be no struggle, and without struggle there could be no victory and no reward

Chazal therefore teach, *חייב אדם לברך על הרעה כשם שמברך על הטובה*, *a person must bless Hashem for adversity just as he blesses Him for good* (Mishnah Berachos 9:5), and the Gemara explains that adversity too must ultimately be accepted *בשמחה* (Berachos 60b).

There is hardly a greater *רע* within man than the yetzer hara, which Chazal themselves call *רע* (Sukkah 52a), yet even it can become the means through which man attains eternal life *From Two Hearts to One*

The Torah's language may contain another hint to this struggle. When it speaks of serving Hashem with both inclinations, it says *בכל לבבך*, using *לבב* with two letters *ב*. This can represent the human condition in which two forces contend within one heart. The struggle is lifelong. Chazal compare the yetzer hara to a fly that continually returns to the openings of the heart (Berachos 61a), and therefore warn, *וואל תאמן בעצמך עד יום מותך*, *do not trust yourself until the day of your death* (Avos 2:4)

David HaMelech prayed, *לב טהור ברא לי אלקים ורוח נכון חדש בקרבי*, *create for me a pure heart, God, and renew within me a steadfast spirit* (Tehillim 51:12). He sought not merely another victory but a *רוח נכון*, a spirit that would remain firm. He could ultimately say, *ולבי חלל בקרבי*, *my heart is hollow within me* (Tehillim 109:22), which Chazal understand as referring to his conquest of the yetzer hara (Berachos 61b)

This is the peace of *צדיק גמור*. The lower faculties have not disappeared, but the civil war within him has ended. They no longer constitute an independent force rebelling against the neshama

There is, however, another way for the inner struggle to end. The Torah describes the sinner who hears the warning of the covenant and says, *והתברך בלבבו לאמר שלום יהיה לי כי בשררות לבי אך*, *he will bless himself in his heart saying peace will be mine though I follow the stubbornness of my heart* (Devarim 29:18)

The change in language is significant. He begins with *בלבבו*, the divided heart in which two forces still contend, but concludes *בשררות לבי אך*, following the stubbornness of a single heart. He too has ended the conflict, but only by silencing the yetzer tov and surrendering to the yetzer hara

That is not genuine peace. Chazal say *רשעים מלאים חרטות*, *resha'im are filled with regrets* (Nedarim 9b), and the Navi declares, *אין שלום אמר ה' לרשעים*, *there is no peace says Hashem for the wicked* (Yeshayahu 48:22)

The absence of struggle is not itself peace. Everything depends upon which force has prevailed

Why the Mishnah Ends With Peace

We can now understand the final two teachings of Uktzin. Rabi Yehoshua ben Levi promises 310 worlds *וצדיק וצדיק*, *to every tzaddik*. Even the tzaddik who has not yet reached the level of *צדיק גמור* receives eternal reward for the mitzvos that come *מצד*. The language *ואצרתיהם אמלא* itself suggests permanence. *להנחיל* speaks of inheritance, a lasting possession, while *יש* denotes something of enduring substance. There is therefore eternal reward even while the battle continues. But reward is not the highest aspiration. After describing the reward awaiting every tzaddik, the Mishnah concludes, *לא מצא הקב"ה כלי מחזיק ברכה לישראל אלא השלום*

After all six sedarim of Mishnah have taught us mitzvah and aveirah, permitted and forbidden, obligation and exemption, the entire battlefield of human life has been laid before us. Torah teaches us how to fight, but the ultimate goal is not endless warfare

The Mishnah therefore ends with peace

There is a false peace in which a person stops fighting because the yetzer hara has won, *שלום יהיה לי כי בשררות לבי אך*. And there is a true peace in which the good has prevailed so completely that the struggle itself has been transformed

This is the *שלום* of Torah

ה' עז לעמו יתן, *Hashem will give strength to His people, Hashem will bless His people with peace* (Tehillim 29:11) *The Victory of Peace*

The same pasuk reveals an even broader meaning

Chazal relate that when the Torah was given at Sinai, its voice traveled from one end of the world to the other. The kings of the nations trembled and gathered around Bilam, fearing that Hashem was again bringing destruction upon the world. Bilam reassured them that no flood was coming. Hashem was giving His people His treasured Torah, as the pasuk says, *ה' עז לעמו יתן*, *Hashem will give strength to His people*. When the nations heard this, they answered, *ה' יברך את עמו בשלום*, *Hashem will bless His people with peace* (Zevachim 116a)

Why did they respond specifically with a blessing of peace?

They understood that Torah gives Klal Yisrael a unique *עז*, a strength that allows the nation to endure. At first they feared that Israel's victory must mean their defeat, as though this new power would overwhelm the rest of the world

Bilam taught them otherwise. The strength Hashem was giving Israel was Torah. Its victory would not depend upon the destruction of another nation. Klal Yisrael could triumph simply by remaining Klal Yisrael, attached to Torah and enduring through every generation

The nations could therefore answer, *ה' יברך את עמו בשלום*. This is a *שלום* of peace, a victory of peace. Ordinary victory leaves someone defeated. The victory of Torah does not require a defeated people at all

The same is true within man. *כי תצא למלחמה על איביך*, life requires battle with the yetzer. But the goal is not to remain forever on the battlefield. The highest victory comes when Torah brings the entire person under one direction, until the struggle itself gives way to peace

The 310 worlds are the eternal reward earned through the struggle. The final words of the Mishnah point beyond the struggle to its ultimate goal

ה' עז לעמו יתן ה' יברך את עמו בשלום

The greatest victory is the victory that ends in peace

From cshulman@gmail.com

Adapted and translated from מנחת אשר

By Rav Asher Weiss

24:5 כי תצא – כי יקח איש אשה

Sheva Brachos

The familiar Sheva Berachos recited beneath the chuppah and during the seven days of celebration are among the most ancient expressions of Jewish marriage. Yet their precise halachic character is surprisingly complex. Are they birchos hamitzvos or birchos hashevach? Why do they require ten people? Is the chassan himself included in the minyan? Must the berachos be recited over wine, and if so, who must drink from the cup? These questions reveal that Sheva Berachos are not merely blessings recited at a wedding; they express the Torah's understanding of marriage as an event in which the couple, the community and Klal Yisrael as a whole all participate.

The Sources of Birkas Chassanim. The central sugya is in Kesubos (7b). Rav Nachman quotes Huna bar Nosson: מנין לברכת חתנים בעשרה שנאמר ויקח, עשרה אנשים מזקני העיר ויאמר שבו פה, from where do we know that birkas chassanim requires ten? From Boaz, who gathered ten elders of the city and told them to sit (Rus 4:2). Rabbi Abahu derives the same law from במקלות ברכו אלקים השם ממקור ישראל, in assemblies bless Hashem, from the source of Israel (Tehillim 68:27). Since קהל denotes ten, the berachos of marriage are recited before a minyan.

Chazal trace the idea still further back, to the first marriage in history. Regarding Adam and Chavah the Torah says ויברך אותם אלקים *Hashem blessed them* (Bereishis 1:28). Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer describes Hashem Himself as blessing Adam and Chavah beneath their chuppah while the malachim served as shushvinin, attendants to the wedding. Similar ideas appear in Bereishis Rabbah and the Zohar. The blessing of a new Jewish home is therefore rooted in the very creation of man and woman.

Birkas HaMitzvah or Birkas HaShevach? The Rishonim disagree regarding the nature of these berachos. The Rambam rules that birkas chassanim should be recited before nissuin, and the Tur likewise writes that they are recited beforehand. The Beis Yosef understood this to indicate that they possess the character of birchos hamitzvos and are therefore recited לעשיית, before performance of the mitzvah. The Ramban and Ran, however, state explicitly that these are birchos hashevach rather than birchos hamitzvos and therefore need not precede the nissuin.

One must be cautious about identifying the category of a bracha merely from its wording. We sometimes find a birkas hashevach using the language אשר קדשנו במצותיו, and conversely there may be a bracha associated with a mitzvah that does not follow the usual formula. The nusach alone therefore cannot resolve the question.

Indeed, the Ran understands that even according to the Rambam, the fundamental character of birkas chassanim is birkas hashevach. His proof is that the Rambam permits the berachos to be recited even after the marriage if they were not recited beforehand. A classic birkas hamitzvah ordinarily cannot simply be recited days after the mitzvah has already been completed.

Our custom, as codified by the Rema, is to recite Sheva Berachos after kiddushin while still beneath the chuppah. The Darchei Moshe explains that since the primary chuppah is yichud, the berachos recited beneath the chuppah still precede the completion of nissuin and can therefore satisfy עובר לעשיית. The Makneh offers an additional consideration: before the kiddushin the man is not yet a chassan, and it would be difficult to recite birkas chassanim for one who has not yet entered even the first stage of

marriage. Moreover, if birkas nissuin were recited before kiddushin, the birkas eirusin and kiddushin themselves would interrupt between the berachos and the nissuin.

Even if one accepts that the timing of the berachos reflects some aspect of birkas hamitzvah, their essential nature must still be praise and thanksgiving. The same blessings continue to be recited throughout the שבעת ימי המשתה, long after the initial act of nissuin. They celebrate not merely the performance of a legal act but the creation and joy of a new Jewish marriage.

Why Are Ten Required? The Mishnah teaches that birkas chassanim requires ten, and the Gemara offers the two sources already noted: Boaz's ten elders and במקלות ברכו אלקים. The Acharonim disagree whether the presence of ten is indispensable even bedieved. The Noda B'Yehuda understands that ten may be a requirement lechatchilah but not necessarily me'akev, whereas the Aruch HaShulchan (1829-1908) writes that the implication of the poskim is that it is an essential requirement. The Gemara further rules that the chassan himself counts toward the ten. The Hafla'ah suggested an ingenious distinction based upon the two sources. If the requirement is learned from Boaz, perhaps the chassan should not count, because Boaz himself gathered ten other men. If it is derived from במקלות ברכו אלקים, all that is required is a congregation of ten Jews, in which case there is no reason to exclude the chassan. The Sheiltos of Rav Achai Gaon, however, cites the proof from Boaz and nevertheless rules that the chassan joins the ten. Its discussion reveals a deeper understanding of the requirement. The question is whether we need ten people דקא מהדן ליה, ten others whose task is to bring joy to the chassan, in which case he cannot count as one of them, or whether כיון שהוא נמי שייך בשמחה מצטרף, since he himself participates in the mitzvah of simchah, he joins the minyan.

This formulation shows that the requirement of ten is intertwined with the simchah of marriage. The berachos are not simply public blessings that happen to require a minyan. They belong to the communal celebration of the new marriage, as reflected especially in שמה תשמה and אשר ברא. The chassan is not merely the passive object of the blessing. He himself is obligated to rejoice with his kallah and is therefore part of the ציבור through which that simchah finds expression.

Standing for Sheva Berachos. The Knesses HaGedolah records the custom of Constantinople that everyone stands during birkas chassanim משום כבוד חתן וכלה דחתן דומה למלך, out of honor for the chassan and kallah, since a chassan is compared to a king. A practice of standing during the berachos is also found in the Zohar.

Maharikash gives a very different explanation. The closing bracha includes ישמע בהרי יהודה ובחוצות ירושלים קול ששון וקול שמחה, the promise that voices of joy will again be heard in the cities of Yehudah and Yerushalayim. This is not merely a blessing for the particular couple; it is a bracha for all of Klal Yisrael. A public blessing of this kind, he argues, should be recited while standing, just as we find standing associated with birkas kohanim and the berachos on Har Gerizim and Har Eival.

According to this explanation, standing is not merely a minhag of kavod for the couple but a requirement arising from the communal nature of the beracha itself. Maharikash limits this reasoning to the birkas nissuin beneath the chuppah and not necessarily to Sheva Berachos throughout the following days. Rav Chaim Palagi extends the practice more broadly, even discussing it in connection with birkas eirusin.

The Makneh adds a striking point: if a chassan possesses the status דומה למלך, perhaps he cannot simply waive that honor. Whether or not one accepts this chiddush, the sources reflect the unique dignity with which Chazal surrounded the establishment of a Jewish home.

Are There Six Berachos or Seven? Maseches Soferim teaches that birkas chassanim is recited over a cup of wine. But this raises a basic question: is the cup an essential part of Sheva Berachos, or is it simply a kos shel bracha accompanying six marriage blessings?

The Rambam's language is precise. He first writes that birkas chassanim consists of six berachos. He then adds ומביא כוס של יין ומברך, and if wine is available, one brings a cup, recites Borei Pri HaGafen and then recites the six blessings over it, resulting in seven berachos. The implication is clear: the actual birchos chassanim are six. Wine is desirable but not indispensable.

This reading also fits the text of the Gemara in Kesubos, which asks מאי מברך and lists six blessings, later referring to שית נינהו, there are six birchos chassanim.

The Rosh, however, cites Rabbeinu Nissim that the cup is indispensable, and the Tur follows this view. Their text may have treated Borei Pri HaGafen itself as one of the seven berachos. The Sheiltos indeed has a version in which the Gemara begins הגפן פרי הברכה, first recite Borei Pri HaGafen and then שהכל ברא and the remaining berachos.

A remarkable account in Sefer HaPardes attributed to Rashi reflects this position. At a wedding at which eirusin and nissuin were performed together, a separate cup was brought for birkas nissuin. The person reciting the berachos neglected to repeat Borei Pri HaGafen because he had already recited it on the cup of eirusin. He was required to return and recite it, because ברכת אירוסין לחוד וברכת נישואין לחוד, the two sets of berachos are separate, and בנישואין הוא דתקינו רבנן שבע ברכות וכלא בורא פרי, Chazal instituted seven berachos for nissuin and without Borei Pri HaGafen there are only six.

The Tashbetz takes the opposite position. He notes that the Gemara nowhere mentions a cup of wine for eirusin or nissuin as it explicitly does for Kiddush and Havdalah, and when the Gemara enumerates birkas nissuin it says six, not seven. According to him Borei Pri HaGafen is plainly not one of the birchos chassanim.

The Shulchan Aruch follows the Rambam: והן שש, there are six marriage blessings, and if wine is present one brings a cup and first recites Borei Pri HaGafen (Even HaEzer 62:1). The kos therefore does not appear to be me'akev.

If the Cup Is Not Essential, Who May Recite Borei Pri HaGafen? This produces a major difficulty in our accepted practice. If Borei Pri HaGafen is simply a birkas hanehenin rather than part of the mitzvah of Sheva Berachos, the ordinary rule is that there is no arvus for such a bracha. One Jew cannot ordinarily recite a bracha over food or drink for another person unless the one reciting it is himself eating or drinking.

Yet our custom is that the person who recites Borei Pri HaGafen does not usually drink. The wine is given to the chassan and kallah. The Pnei Yehoshua already expressed surprise at this minhag.

There are reports that Rav Chaim Brisker would discreetly place a drop of the wine upon his hand and taste it after reciting the bracha, and that Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld followed a similar practice, apparently out of concern that otherwise the bracha might be levatalah. The reliability and universality of this report are disputed, and Rav Moshe Feinstein in fact writes that it is preferable for the person reciting the bracha not to drink, in accordance with the established minhag.

The minhag itself is ancient. The Maharil records כשגמר הברכה נתן לחתן, after completing the bracha the wine was given first to the chassan and then to the kallah. The same practice is recorded in the minhagim of Worms and by Maharam Mintz. We therefore require an explanation that accords with the Rambam and Shulchan Aruch, according to whom Borei Pri HaGafen is not itself one of the birchos nissuin.

The Tashbetz provides an extraordinary principle. Although Borei Pri HaGafen is a birkas hanehenin and ordinarily should be recited by one who drinks, כאשר הברכה עצמה נעשית בשביל המועטים כגון חתן וכלה כשר הדבר, when the entire bracha is being recited specifically for the few individuals at the center of the mitzvah, such as the chassan and

kallah, it is proper that they drink the cup of their blessing. He adds that כאשר הברכה בשביל המצוה שנעשית בגופו מספיק להטעימו, when the bracha accompanies a mitzvah whose entire event is being performed for that person, his drinking is sufficient.

This is a remarkable chiddush. The chassan and kallah are not ordinary listeners attempting to be yotzei someone else's birkas hanehenin. The entire kos and its bracha belong to their wedding. The mesader recites the bracha as part of the blessing of their marriage, and they therefore may be the ones who drink. This provides a compelling basis for the ancient Ashkenazic minhag even according to the Rambam's view that the wine is not one of the essential six blessings. The Maharsham likewise strongly defends the accepted practice.

Why Does One Person Recite Both הגפן and שהכל ברא? A final custom deserves attention. We commonly divide Sheva Berachos among several honored guests, each reciting one bracha. Yet we do not ordinarily separate Borei Pri HaGafen from לכבודו. The person given the first bracha recites both.

One explanation is that our practice of allowing the chassan and kallah alone to drink demonstrates that Borei Pri HaGafen has acquired the character of a birkas hamitzvah in this context. Since אין אומרים שירה אלא, song and praise are associated with wine, the cup itself becomes part of the mitzvah of birkas chassanim. Borei Pri HaGafen is therefore joined with one of the actual marriage blessings rather than treated as an independent birkas hanehenin.

According to the Tashbetz, however, there is no need to redefine Borei Pri HaGafen in this way. It can remain a genuine birkas hanehenin, while the special nature of the wedding permits the bracha to be recited for the chassan and kallah who drink. On that understanding there would seemingly be no strict halachic reason that Borei Pri HaGafen could never be assigned to a different person from לכבודו.

Still, ישראל אם אינם נביאים בני נביאים הם. Established Jewish practice often reflects a sensitivity that is deeper than any single technical explanation. The cup of wine is not an incidental refreshment placed beside Sheva Berachos. It carries the joy, song and blessing of the occasion. Whether one understands Borei Pri HaGafen as one of the seven blessings themselves or as the bracha upon the kos accompanying the six, the minhag has joined the wine to the opening of birkas chassanim. Sheva Berachos thus unite several dimensions of marriage. They are birchos hashevach expressing gratitude to Hashem for creation, man and woman, joy and Yerushalayim. They require a ציבור because a Jewish marriage belongs not only to two individuals but to the community that surrounds them. Their very nusach moves from בריאת האדם to שוש תשיש, from the creation of the first human being to the future joy of Yerushalayim. And the kos of wine gives tangible expression to the simchah with which all these berachos are recited.

The berachos beneath the chuppah therefore do much more than bless a newly married couple. They place the private joy of one chassan and kallah within the long history of Klal Yisrael, beginning with ויברך אותם עוד ישמע בערי יהודה ובחוצות, in Gan Eden and looking forward to ירושלים קול ששון וקול שמחה קול חתן וקול כלה.

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Rabbi YY Jacobson

Can You Forgive Your Child?

Confronting the Pain of Dealing with Children Who Derail Your Life

A grade school teacher was asking students what their parents did for a living. "Tim, you be first," she said. She asked what his mother did all day. Tim stood up and proudly said she's a doctor. Amie shyly stood up, scuffed her feet, and said her father is an electrician. Billy proudly stood up and announced his daddy steals from people and drinks a lot.

The aghast teacher promptly changed the subject to geography. Later that day she went to Billy's house and rang the bell. Billy's father answered

the door. The teacher explained what his son had said and asked if there might be some logical explanation.

Billy's father said he's actually a lawyer, but he couldn't explain that to a seven-year-old.

The Torah law concerning a wayward son seems absurd and horrific. The text describes a stubborn and rebellious son who doesn't obey his parents. The parents must take hold of him and bring him to the town elders. They declare that he is a profligate and a drunkard. Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. This purges the evil from among them. How are we to understand this Torah passage? Are we to believe parents would actually have their teen killed? Can you imagine a Jewish mother sending her son to the death chamber? She might say, "Here, Ben, take these cookies, and don't forget your cardigan, because it gets cold in the death chamber."

Besides, isn't a death sentence for eating meat and drinking wine excessive? Did a 13-year-old kid's offenses really merit capital punishment?

The Mishnah and Talmud offer an answer, which Rashi quotes. The boy isn't punished for his current sins. The Torah testifies that his outrageous behavior means he will inevitably grow up to be a robber and murderer. It's better to kill him now before he destroys his own soul and murders others. Let him die an innocent man.

Yet this seems absurd. All of Judaism rests on the idea that a sinner can repent. The most evil Jewish king, Menashe, was accepted as a penitent. So how can a troubled 13-year-old boy be destined to become a monster? True, the Talmud says this story never happened and never will happen. The law is theoretical, not practical. But what lesson is the Torah trying to impart?

Rabbi Shmuel Bornstein gives a beautiful answer. He raises another question. The Talmud says a wayward son is forgiven and not punished if his parents forgive him. This rule applies only to a male, as a daughter can never become a wayward child.

But we don't kill the boy because of what he did to his parents. We kill him because the Torah testifies that he is destined to become a killer. So how does his parents' forgiveness help?

The answer contains a critical lesson for dealing with challenging children. Every child is inherently holy and good. They carry the genes of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Each has a Jewish soul eternally connected to the Divine.

To reveal that connection, parents must keep the bond with their children strong. When we sever our relationship with our children, we deprive them of experiencing themselves as part of a golden chain. When a son feels his parents' forgiveness, it keeps him connected to his roots. There is now strong hope that he will transform himself.

If parents don't forgive their child, they ensure that he continues in his destructive path. When they accept and love him, they allow him to discover his own spiritual power.

The Torah teaches us never to disconnect from a child. Sometimes we feel compelled to sever the bond because a relationship is simply too painful. But this alienation is the primary reason a child will never come back.

You need to learn to forgive your children and see their hidden light. Yes, there have been serious misdeeds. Your child is broken. But he needs stamina to repair himself, and he needs to believe in his soul's goodness. We can help him achieve that if we (i) love him, (ii) forgive him, and (iii) show him that he's a fragment of G-d. Keeping him connected allows him to see himself in the context of a 4,000-year chain.

Rabbi Simon Jacobson shared a relevant story from one of his weekly classes. He was discussing how every person is sent to Earth with a unique mission. Even someone born with a handicap has other strengths that allow them to realize their calling.

After the class, a striking young man with motor complications approached him. He had a rare disease that affected his nervous system,

mental capacity, and growth. His wealthy parents had given him away as a newborn after hearing a severe diagnosis. They placed him in a quality institution but never visited.

He grew up as a privileged orphan. He had all his physical needs met, but he lacked unconditional love from nurturing parents.

This exquisite human being radiated a rare warmth. He told Rabbi Jacobson that he lacked certain abilities, but he didn't know what his compensating strengths were. He asked for help discovering his special qualities.

Rabbi Jacobson was deeply moved, and they began communicating regularly. The young man occasionally addressed his feelings of rejection. He had tracked down his parents but was terrified of contacting them.

After months of hesitation, Rabbi Jacobson called the father. He introduced himself as a friend of the son. The father's response was brisk and cold.

Rabbi Jacobson said that the son was extraordinary and would make him proud. The father simply hung up.

A few days later, Rabbi Jacobson tried again. The secretary blocked the call, so he left an urgent message. The next day, the father took the call. Rabbi Jacobson pleaded that it would be life-transforming for the parents to meet their son.

The father said they didn't want to go there. Rabbi Jacobson persisted, and the father promised to get back to him.

He didn't.

Rabbi Jacobson called again, and the father eventually relented. They scheduled a fateful meeting, and the parents insisted that Rabbi Jacobson be present.

They met in the parents' lavish living room. The atmosphere was cordial and detached, like strangers discussing the weather. Rabbi Jacobson finally broke the silence. He told the parents that their son was beautiful and showed the soul's capacity to shine. He said getting to know each other would be life-changing.

Before Rabbi Jacobson stood up to leave, the young man turned to his parents. He spoke slowly because of his speech impediment. He had never called them by these names before.

He said, "Mumma, Puppa, I am not perfect. You, too, are not perfect. I have forgiven you. Can you forgive me?"

Everyone burst into tears, and Rabbi Jacobson left them alone.

The handicapped child asked his parents if they could forgive him for not being perfect.

Can you forgive your child for not being perfect?

Can you forgive your loved one for not being perfect?

Can you forgive yourself for being imperfect?