

# Derech Ha-rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

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## First Shabbat Meal

"See I present before you today a blessing and a curse (Deuteronomy 11:26)."

One single action can divert the entire world to merit, or Heaven Forbid, the opposite direction.

The Torah portion begins with Hashem instructing the twelve tribes, through Moshe, to publicly announce a list of blessings and curses for several accomplishing Mitzvot and transgressing sins, respectively. The tribes were split into two groups, each one positioned on one of two facing mountains, Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval. They were given to recite, loud and clear, to the entire nation the set of blessings and curses.

Upon further grammatical inspection of the first verse, there seems to be a blatant grammatical error. The first word, "Re'eh" (see, perceive), is in the singular, while the word "Lifneichem" (before you), is a plural form of the verb. To explain this seeming inconsistency, we refer to a teaching in Kiddushin 40a. There, it teaches that one should always perceive themselves as if they are half meritorious and half guilty, and every action they perform will tip the scale of judgment to one side or the other. Praiseworthy are they if they perform a Mitzva, as they have tipped the scale to the Good side, and blameworthy are they if they've done the opposite. Maimonides (Laws of Teshuva 3:4) goes a step further: 'One's Evil Inclination tries to persuade a person that they and consequently their actions are insignificant. What will a simple good deed or sin do to change who they are or the world at all? At critical moments the Evil Inclination attempts to persuade one that no one will pay attention if they transgress that Mitzva; they are insignificant in the context of the whole and therefore their actions too are insignificant.

The Torah teaches us the very opposite. Every action a person does has great significance and importance, not only for themselves but for the entire Jewish nation. At every moment, one must perceive themselves as the decider of fate of the entire Jewish nation. One good deed has a positive influence on the entire world and, Heaven Forbid, the opposite as well.

It is this essential lesson that the Torah is teaching us in its particular choice of words in the first verse. Moshe divides the tribes onto the two facing mountains, Gerizim and Eival, and instructs each group to pronounce the blessings and curses that Hashem has listed. Moshe tells the tribes "Behold, perceive (as

individuals), that Hashem has given to you (plural form, as a group) blessings and curses." Moshe addresses himself to each individual and makes them aware that they have responsibility for the entire nation. Each one is an individual entity, but their actions influence the entire nation to either direction, condemnation or merit.



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## Soul Of the Rif

First of all, take account of yourself. Look at yourself; see what you do and how you do it. Look at your essence, your conduct and only then you can assess others. Only then can you calculate who is good and who is not, who has performed and who has not. See what you are, rather than constantly viewing yourself as the best. First look at yourself and then at others.

Please G-d, the Almighty will help us enter into Elul with a great improvement of our character traits and we will then be able to pass through Elul with holiness and purity. "Prepare yourself to approach your G-d, O Israel (Amos 4:12)." Let us prepare ourselves for Elul, [as we say in the Selichot] son of man, why are you asleep? Arise, call out in supplication. We need to start awakening ourselves, so that we reach the 25th of Elul, the day of the great gathering with humility, as fitting vessels for the Day of Judgment. We need to prepare ourselves for the 25th of Elul, that is the day on which Hashem began to create the world, "the heavens and the earth





## 2nd Shabbat Meal

"The blessing, that you will listen to the Mitzvot of Hashem your G-d, which I am commanding you today (Deuteronomy 11:27)."

The great power of a person hearing

In the weekly portion, the Almighty tells the Jewish people as follows: "See I place before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing that you will listen... (Deuteronomy 11:26-27)." If we listen and go on the good path, there will be blessing and goodness; if, G-d forbid, we do the opposite, then there will be curse. The question must be asked, why does the Torah say "that you will listen" rather than "that you will do"? The bottom line is the action, the listening happens at the start not at the end, a person listens and then takes action. If so, why did the Torah say "that you will listen" and not "that you will do," why is the emphasis on the listening of these words?

Perhaps, we can answer by suggesting a powerful concept, people denigrate the power of listening. Sometimes, listening can have a great and incomparable impact.

The Mishna (Avot 2:8) says: "Praised is the one who gave birth to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya." The great praise of Rabbi Yehoshua is that his mother is praiseworthy, the reason for this is because the story is told of how his mother was the one who caused him to become wise, for she would pass by all of the study halls in her town.

She would say to those studying in them, "Pray for this fetus in my womb, pray that he should become a great Torah scholar." The Talmud Yerushalmi (Yevamot 1:6) tells of how his mother would bring him in his crib to the synagogues in order that his ears would become attached to the words of Torah, even though he would not understand. The key point was that he heard words of Torah and they impacted him to a powerful degree. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya grew up to be one of the greatest sages of the Mishna, because from his infancy, his soul was already absorbing words of Torah and only ingesting spiritual matters.

When a person listens to that which is fitting, their soul becomes elevated and strengthened with good. In contrast, when they hear something not good, their soul becomes sustained by evil things, evil takes root there and evil forces are then found in it.

The story is told about one of the great Tzadikim of our nation, the Bnei Yissaschar. When his grandson was still small, the Bnei Yissaschar would take him and teach him Kabala, mystical secrets of the Torah, great and holy matters. People who saw him teaching Kabala to his grandson said to him, "Rabbi, you are holy and a Tzaddik, but this child is small, why do you teach him Kabala while he is not yet able even to read and write?! He should first learn the basics of Torah, Chumash, Mishna and Talmud, after that, he can learn Kabala?"

The Bnei Yissaschar said to them, "The Mishna (Avot 4:20) says: If one learns Torah as a child, to what is he comparable? To ink written on fresh paper. And one who learns [only] when he is elderly, to what is he comparable? To ink written on smudged paper. Perhaps, my grandson does not currently understand what I am explaining to him in matters of Kabbala, but he hears it, it enters and is already found in him in a stronger manner. In future years, when he learns this, it will be easier for him, because he has already heard it once."

This is a tremendous concept, Hashem gave us blessing and curse "which you will hear" - everything is found at the start, the root and potential of all is found in the first hearing which a person does.



## Q & A with the Rif



### Question:

Dear Rav, I wanted to ask the following question. I am a woman who became observant during my life but was not observant from birth. I cover my head and try to observe everything that I should. I live my life with faith that the Messiah could be revealed at any moment, but I have great pain from my sons. One is a soldier and the second is a seventeen year old. They spend the whole day engaged in mundane activities, on phones, movies and games, and I am afraid that, G-d forbid, they will not be redeemed with us, and something bad will happen to them.

### Answer:

You are a Tzadket and it is fitting for you to know the following: Our grandfather, Rav Aharon Pinto, was a great man, and he would enter the kitchen every Friday and mix up the food within the various pots. Our grandmother, who was a Tzadket, would ask him, "Why do you come into the kitchen? You are a tzaddik and a holy man, why are you mixing up the pots? He said to her, "I pray for my children. When I mix up the foods that they will eat, this has an effect, so that when they eat the food, fear and love of G-d will enter them."

In a similar vein, when the Chafetz Chaim was older, he would take the Tehillim of his mother, he would weep and say, "If my mother had not wept with these Tehillim, I would not be the Chafetz Chaim."

The blessings of a mother break through the Gates of Heaven. Indeed the tears of a mother who cries and prays for her children are immensely powerful.

"A voice on high is heard, a cry of bitter weeping, Rachel weeps for her children" (Yirmiya 31:14). If a mother cries for her children to return in teshuva (repentance), eventually they will do so. The prayers of a mother are made of iron, they guard and protect, they have the most power. Continue to pray for your children, in the end they will go in the ways of Hashem.





## 3rd Shabbat meal

In the month of Elul, a person can complete and repair all the incomplete Mitzvot that he has performed throughout the year.

It is necessary to know of the great value of the month of Elul, for when a person knows and recognizes the value of something, they accord it importance. When a person does not know the depth and essence of something, they will not value it, and thereby lose the potential. For this reason, the Gemara (Shabbat 10b) quotes Rav, who says that a person who gives a gift to their friend must inform him. If a person gives a present to a friend, they must make the friend aware of its value, for example that it is expensive and worth great value, or that it has charms and great abilities. In summary, the friend must be told what the present can achieve. If a person does not know the value of something that they hold, they cannot maximize its potential.

Over many years, we have become accustomed to think of Elul as the month in which we blow the shofar. During this time, we recite Selichot, prayers for forgiveness. After Elul, Rosh Hashana comes and we ask for forgiveness from each other. This is followed by Yom Kippur, a day during which everyone is afraid; after this, people return to the routine of their regular lives, but this is a mistake of unmatched severity, sourced in a plot of the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination).

Elul is a special month which has tremendous power; it is not merely another month like the others of the year. Our holy teachers explain that the forty days from the first of Elul until Yom Kippur are equal to the forty se'ah measures of water which a Mikva must contain in order to be valid. Every instant and every hour of these days is like part of the waters of a Mikva. It is known that a Mikva which lacks even a little water below the required amount is invalid. So too, if one wastes even a single hour during Elul, this can entail squandering the opportunity and invalidating the Mikva that is Elul.

This is a unique month of forgiveness, every moment of the month is part of the purification of a person. When Bnei Yisrael sinned with the golden calf, this was a difficult time, G-d wanted to wipe them out entirely and take another nation in their place. Moshe stood and prayed, he wept and sought forgiveness from Hashem. He ascended to Heaven on the first of Elul to seek forgiveness for the people and to appease Hashem. While he was there, on Earth, Bnei Yisrael brokenheartedly requested forgiveness and atonement for their sin with the golden calf, and they blew the shofar.

On the fortieth day, which is Yom Kippur, Hashem said to Moshe: "I have forgiven according to your words (Bamidbar 14:20)." From then onwards, this time of the month of Elul has been a time of teshuva and atonement in which every person works on improving themselves, purifying everything evil they may have done throughout the year.

At this time, a person can change everything; the very essence of this time is change. Every moment of the month of Elul is a time to repair and change what we have done throughout the year. There are also Mitzvot and good deeds which we have done but not wholeheartedly, so they cannot ascend before Hashem. A person who goes and buys an incomplete gift for the king cannot give it in its incomplete form to the king, as this would be a great disgrace. If a person gives the king a broken watch, this is a terrible offense and the king will be greatly insulted. If a person gives the king a painting, it cannot have broken glass.

This is the time to fix our gifts that we have given. If we have contributed prayers or study of Torah which has been incomplete, the time to fix and complete everything is the month of Elul. It is known that the Talmud (Pesachim 34a) teaches that there was a small channel [called a Lul] between the ramp and the altar on the Western side. They would throw the invalidated Bird offerings in this gap. There was a small hole by the altar into which all the offerings which had become invalidated were placed.

Our holy teachers tell us that Heaven is modeled like Earth. Just as there was a small hollow slot in which they would place the invalid and damaged offerings, there is a great altar in Heaven on which the angel Micha'el stands and offers all the complete offerings.

The offerings of Am Yisrael, every Mitzva and every good deed which a person does is offered to G-d by Micha'el the angel. If a person did an incomplete action of Mitzva, it remains in this slot in Heaven, with all the incomplete actions.

In the month of Elul, when a person performs teshuva and removes all the obstructive things within their heart and adheres to Hashem, He removes all of their incomplete Mitzvot from this slot, such as the Torah they learnt without love and fear of Hashem. He adds the letter Alef, which symbolizes "Alufo shel Olam" (the Chief of the World), namely the Almighty, and thus transforms the word 'Lul' into the word 'Elul.'

The teshuva and improvement we make in the month of Elul entails adding the letter Alef, and creating the reality of being one with G-d. In Shir Hashirim (3:6), the verse says "I am to my Beloved [G-d] and my Beloved is to me;" the first letters of the words of this verse form the word "Elul." In this month, through the subjugation of the heart, we repair and complete everything we have done throughout the entire year, including all our incomplete prayers and good deeds, so that they are raised up and offered by Micha'el before the Almighty as a pleasing offering in their complete form. Every person must work on improving themselves, subjugating themselves, and then all the Mitzvot will be refined and be pleasing to the Divine.

## מחפשים ישועות בחיים? בואו וזכו את הרבים!



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## Treasure charms from the Rif



One should know a fundamental principle, that if one recites the 27th chapter of Psalms ("By David, Hashem is my light and my salvation") in the month of Elul - the month of mercy and supplications - then even a negative decree from Heaven can be annulled. The Arizal's Prayer Book states:

"Anyone who recites the 27th Chapter of Psalms, in both morning and evening, throughout the month of Elul until after Simchat Torah, can be assured of joyous and sweet years ahead. Moreover, any negative decree against him from Heaven can be annulled and the prosecution be quenched; instead, he will be pardoned and cleansed of his sins."





### Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar.

There is a great story told about Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the 'Divrei Yoel' from Satmar.

Rabbi Yoel instructed his followers to build a site outside of New York which would serve as a Talmud Torah (Torah school) for the children. Additionally, he designated the site as a place to house a camp for young boys during the summer months, in which they would learn Torah, and indeed this is what happened. The children began to study in the new site, and this continued for some years.

After a few years, a non-Jewish man who lived near the site, approached a Rabbi who taught in the Talmud Torah. He remarked that when the children first arrived from New York, he was appalled by their behavior; they were rude and inconsiderate in a way he had never experienced before. Yet he noticed that as each month passed, the children became calmer, more relaxed, more holy, more humble and ultimately more refined. He was astounded by the dramatic transformation of the children.

The Rabbi was touched by the non-Jewish man's words and promptly relayed them to Rabbi Yoel. Rabbi Yoel listened to the story and smiled knowingly. He explained that the Yetzer Hara of America is a drive towards arrogance, insolence and cravings. Indeed, this was the Yetzer Hara that the children were subject to while in New York. However, upon entering the new site, distant from the big city, their persona, and indeed the persona of the entire place, had been sweetened by the beauty of Torah. They had been infused with Yirat Shamayim (fear of G-d), and had successfully inculcated the site with the holiness of Eretz Yisrael.

Rabbi Yoel further related that this is the idea related in Gemara (Brachot 8a). The Gemara recounts that upon Rabbi Yochanan hearing that elderly people resided in Babylonia, he was confused. He asked as follows: The Torah states "In order to prolong your days and the days of your children upon the Land that Hashem has sworn to your forefathers (Deuteronomy 11:21)," which suggests that longevity only exists in Eretz Yisrael, so how could elderly people be found anywhere else!?

Rabbi Yochanan then answered his own question, explaining that those elders had merited long lives on account of having frequented the synagogues in the early mornings and late evenings. Their unwavering dedication to prayer and Torah study had infused Babylonia with the holiness traditionally only found in Eretz Yisrael, and thus they had been granted the blessing of longevity, traditionally unique to Eretz Yisrael.

With this Gemara and the story of Rabbi Yoel in mind, one can be certain that a life without Torah and holiness can disintegrate, and become devoid of goodness. However, if one lives a life of Torah, holiness and Yirat Shamayim, then anything is possible. If one envelopes oneself in such an environment, the Yetzer Hara will be gradually subdued, and the person will come to sanctify his surroundings - illuminating those around him.

### A further story regarding Rav Yoel

Once, shortly before the Pesach break, one of the Roshei Yeshiva (Heads of the Talmudic Institution) from Satmar approached Rav Yoel. He told Rav Yoel about a certain student from the yeshiva whose behavior was not befitting that of a yeshiva student. He was simply wasting his time and that of his teachers in the yeshiva. For this reason, the Rosh Yeshiva explained that he felt it proper to expel him from the yeshiva.

Rav Yoel listened to the Rosh Yeshiva and responded that seeing as it was approaching the Pesach break, he should refrain from expelling

the student. Rather, he should make use of the vacation period to approach the student personally, and ask him to clean the yeshiva of chametz for the upcoming festival. The Rosh Yeshiva obliged and informed the student that Rav Yoel had personally requested that he clean the yeshiva of chametz. Once the student heard that the holy Rav Yoel had made this personal request, he immediately cleaned the entire yeshiva of chametz.

Pesach came and passed and the new yeshiva semester resumed and the student had noticeably improved. Rather than causing trouble, he gradually became integrated into the yeshiva, and eventually became a pillar of the yeshiva - serving as an inspiration for the other students. Fast-forward some years to today and that same student is one of the outstanding Roshei Yeshiva in America. That same student, who was on the cusp of being thrown out of yeshiva, is one of the premier Poskim (Halachic authorities) in America today, and all because he was asked to clean the yeshiva for Pesach!

This story enlightens us about the sensitivity one ought to have towards a child. Although a child disrupting others may be a cause for concern in regard to other children; a child who is not disruptive, but is merely not turned on, is simply suffering from an internal blockage which is holding him back. A child like this ought to be embraced and given a role to play within his school or yeshiva, in order to make him feel valued and loved. A child must be treated with sensitivity, one harsh comment can break him, yet a small dose of love and sensitivity can imbue him with the confidence to be empowered to truly fulfill his potential.

### A final story involving Rav Yoel

One day, Rav Yoel was riding in a taxi in Manhattan. Inappropriate music was playing in the taxi and Rabbi Yoel asked his attendant to kindly ask the driver to turn it off. The driver refused, explaining that it was his taxi, he enjoyed the music and therefore would continue listening to it. Rav Yoel therefore suffered in silence for the remainder of the journey. When he eventually reached his destination, he speedily changed from the brand new clothes he had been wearing, into a spare set of clothes. He then handed the new clothes to his attendant and instructed him to burn them. The attendant looked at Rav Yoel aghast, unable to fathom burning the beautiful new clothes. Unflinchingly, Rav Yoel explained to him that these clothes, despite their beauty, had been the clothes in which he had heard the foul music, and therefore had to be burnt. He feared that they may continue to harbor a negative influence on him, continuing to remind him of the music each time he would wear them. This is the acute sensitivity of a Tzadik.

