

וכל אשר יקרא לו האדם נפש חיה הוא שמו

ס פ ר

בעל שם טוב על התורה

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בספר זה נקבצו דברי קדשו של הרב הקדוש והטהור והנורא הבעל שם טוב זי"ע, אשר הובאו בספרי קודש של תלמידו הרב הגאון החסיד מו"ה יעקב יוסף הכהן ז"ל — ה"ה ס' תולדות יעקב יוסף וס' בן פורת יוסף וס' צפנת פענח וס' כתונת פסים — וגם מס' דגל מחנה אפרים, ומס' ליקוטי אמרים וס' אור תורה ואור האמת שנדפסו ע"ש תלמידו הרב המגיד הגדול ממעורטש זי"ע, ומס' ליקוטים יקרים וס' צוואת הריב"ש, וגם מכל ספרי הצדיקים שיצאו לאור מאז ועד ימינו אלה, ונעתק הכל על סדר פרשיות התורה וחמש מגילות ומועדים בסדר טוב ויפה, כאשר עיניכם תחזינה מישרים.

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BAAL SHEM TOV
on the Torah

The holy teachings of Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, gathered from the sefarim of his disciples and of the tzaddikim of the generations that followed, arranged according to the order of the weekly parshiyos, the Five Megillos, and the festivals — newly translated and elucidated.



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Parashas Ki Seitzei

TEACHING 1

Taking the Yetzer Hara's Own Diligence as Spoil

כִּי תֵצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל אוֹיֵבְךָ וַנִּתְּנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּיָדְךָ וְשָׁבִיתָ שְׁבִיּוֹ

When you go out to war against your enemy, and Hashem your G-d gives him into your hand, and you take his captives (*Devarim 21:10*)

שָׁמַעְתִּי מִמּוֹרֵי זֶלֶה"ה בִּיאוֹר פֶּסוּק כִּי תֵצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל אוֹיֵבְךָ וַנִּתְּנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּיָדְךָ וְשָׁבִיתָ שְׁבִיּוֹ I heard from my teacher, of blessed memory, an explanation of the verse, “When you go out to war against your enemies... and you take his captives.” The verse says the victor takes what the enemy had taken. The Baal Shem Tov asks what a person carries off from the enemy in this war, and answers that he carries off the enemy’s own case.

כִּי עַל יְדֵי טַעֲנַת הַיֵּצֵר הָרָע עֲצָמוֹ, בָּזָה כּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת הַיֵּצֵר הָרָע, For through the argument of the yetzer hara itself, a person conquers the yetzer hara. The weapon is the yetzer hara’s own claim on him. Whatever the yetzer hara says in its own favor becomes the ground for refusing it.

שָׂאֵם הוּא זְרִיז בְּמִלְאָכָתוֹ לִפְתּוֹת אֶת הָאָדָם בְּעֵבְרָה, כְּדִי לַעֲשׂוֹת שְׁלִיחוֹת הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרֶה, For if it is quick and diligent in its work of enticing a person into sin, doing so in order to carry out the mission of Hashem, blessed is He, The yetzer hara is not an outlaw. It works hard at seduction because that is the assignment it received, and it performs the assignment faithfully.

כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בַּזוֹהַר (פ' תְּרוּמָה דְּקַס"ג ע"א) מְשַׁלִּי הַזּוֹנָה, as the *Zohar* writes (*parshas Terumah*,

¹ The compiler copied this parable above, in *parshas Bereishis*, teaching 141. See also *Kedushas Levi*, Likutim, s.v. “v’orach tzaddikim,” fol. 101a, and *Sefer HaZechus* of the Chiddushei HaRim at the end of *Gittin*. *Toldos Yaakov Yosef*, *parshas Pekudei*, fol. 78b, states the same teaching more fully: a person should learn from the yetzer hara, which stands ready at all times to entice him and thereby does its Maker’s will, as the *Zohar*’s parable of the harlot explains. If so, how can a person listen to the yetzer hara and sin? He should learn from the yetzer hara itself, which always does its Maker’s will. That passage cites the same explanation of “When you go out to war against your enemies” in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, and reads the mishnah “Who is wise? One who learns from every person” (*Avos* ch. 4) as including learning from the yetzer hara. See above, *parshas Bereishis*, teaching 159 and note 140 there, and *parshas Terumah*, note 5, on learning from every person. *Ben Poras Yosef*, fol. 108d, adds that one can draw a lesson for the service of Hashem from any event in the world, and tells of an incident in Bender in the year 5528: the Tatar king entered a fortress he had never been permitted to enter, and afterwards fined the city’s governor for having let him in. So too a person is commanded not to grant the yetzer hara entry, and is held to account for granting it, as the Sages read “a small city with few people in it, and a great king came against it” (*Kohel* 9:14) of the yetzer hara (*Nedarim* 32b). *Tzafnas Paneach*, fol. 69d, cites the Baal Shem Tov on “and you take his captives”: from the eagerness people showed for Haman’s will, one learns

fol. 163a) in the parable of the harlot, In that parable the king himself sends the seductress to test his son. She strains every effort to entice him, and precisely by doing so she carries out the king's will.

יְקַח הָאָדָם מוֹסָר לְעַצְמוֹ, שִׁיחָיָה הוּא זָרִיז בְּמַלְאכָתוֹ, שֶׁלֹּא לְשִׁמוּעַ לַיֵּצֶר הָרָע, from this a person should take a lesson for himself: that he too should be quick and diligent in his own work, not to listen to the yetzer hara, Here is the captive taken from the enemy. The yetzer hara's zeal is a demonstration that what counts is doing the work Hashem assigned you, without delay and without slackening. A person adopts that quality and applies it to his own assignment.

שֶׁהוּא רָצוֹן קוֹנוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ וְכוּ', וּדְפַח"ח: since this is the will of his Maker, blessed is His Name, and so on. And his words are beautiful. Refusing the yetzer hara is the person's assigned work exactly as tempting him is the yetzer hara's. Both serve the same Master, and the one who refuses is doing openly what the tempter is doing in disguise.

(Toldos Yaakov Yosef, parshas Bechukosai, fol. 126d)

THE MAIN IDEA

Watch how hard the pull to do wrong works on you, and learn from it. That drive is only doing the job Hashem gave it, and it never slacks. Do your own job, refusing it, with the same energy.

TEACHING 2

Eishes as the Initials of Adnai Sefasai Tiftach

וְרֵאִיתָ בַּשְּׂבִיָּה אִשָּׁת יָפֶת תּוֹאֵר וְגו'

And you see among the captives a woman beautiful in form... (*Devarim* 21:11)

אֵשֶׁת ר"ת אֲדֹנָי שֶׁפֶתִי תִפְתָּח (תהילים נ"א:י"ז) The word *eishes* is an acronym for "Hashem, open my lips" (*Tehillim* 51:17). The three letters of אשׁת, aleph, shin and tav, are the opening letters of the three words אֲדֹנָי שֶׁפֶתִי תִפְתָּח. That verse is the one a person says as he begins the Amidah, asking Hashem to open his mouth for prayer.

כְּמוֹ שֶׁשָּׁמַעְתִּי מִן אֲבִי וְזִלְזָה"ה עַל פֶּסוּק וְרֵאִיתָ בַּשְּׂבִיָּה אִשָּׁת יָפֶת תּוֹאֵר as I heard from my grandfather, of blessed memory, on the verse, "And you see among the captives a woman beautiful in form."² The grandson reporting this is the author of *Degel Machaneh Efraim*, and the grandfather is the Baal Shem Tov. The teaching as printed here gives only the acronym and its source, without spelling out what the Baal Shem Tov drew from it. The verse's own language, seeing something beautiful held captive and taking it home, invites the reading that the power of speech lies captive and a person redeems it in prayer, but the wording here is compressed and does not say so.

(*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, parshas Bechukosai)

THE MAIN IDEA

Your power of speech can sit captive inside you. When you ask Hashem to open your lips, you are bringing it home.

how to carry out Mordechai's will with desire and speed. The same sefer, fol. 90c, distinguishes those who simply do the opposite of what the yetzer hara urges from the higher class described as "wise, learning from every person," who learns even from the yetzer hara, eating the fruit and discarding the shell as Rabbi Meir did (*Chagigah* 15b); it brings a parable of a servant who rebels against his master at the master's own instruction, to test the provinces. That parable also appears above, in *parshas Bereishis*, teaching 141; see further *parshas Va'eschanan*, note 4.

² See also *Degel Machaneh Efraim*, parshas Vayeishev, on the words "and she lifted up," and parshas Shemos, on the words "Who gave a mouth to man," where the author explains something of the inner meaning of this matter at length.

TEACHING 3

The Beautiful Captive as the Opening Words of Tefillah

אִשֶּׁת יָפֶת תּוֹאֵר

A woman of beautiful form (*Devarim* 21:11)

אֲדֹנִי שְׁפָתַי תִּפְתָּח, **אִשֶּׁת יָפֶת ר"ת אֲדֹנִי שְׁפָתַי תִּפְתָּח**, The word **אִשֶּׁת** is formed from the initial letters of שְׁפָתַי תִּפְתָּח, “Hashem, open my lips,” The Torah calls the captive an **אִשֶּׁת יָפֶת תּוֹאֵר**, a woman of beautiful form. The Baal Shem Tov takes the first word letter by letter: alef, shin, tav open the three words of the verse a person whispers before the Amidah (*Tehillim* 51:17).

פִּי יְגִיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ and **יָפֶת ר"ת פִּי יְגִיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ** is formed from the initial letters of תְּהִלָּתְךָ, “my mouth will declare Your praise.” The second half of that same verse supplies the second word. The letters pei, yud, tav are the letters of יָפֶת, though the reading takes them in the order the verse gives them rather than the order they sit in the word. So the phrase that names the captive of war spells out, in its opening letters, the request a person makes before he begins to pray. The teaching stops here and leaves the reader to carry the point into *parshas Ki Seitzei*: what a person takes captive in his war is the power of speech, and he brings it home by turning it into praise.

(*Otzar HaChaim*, beginning of *parshas Ki Seitzei*)

THE MAIN IDEA

Your own mouth is the first captive you bring home from the war. Ask Hashem to open your lips, and the speech that was working against you turns into praise.

TEACHING 4

The Captive Woman of Beautiful Form as the Divine Presence in Exile

וְרָאִיתָ בַּשְּׂבִיָּה אִשֶּׁת יָפֶת תּוֹאֵר וְגו' וְלָקַחְתָּ לָּךְ לְאִשָּׁה

You see among the captives a woman of beautiful form... and you take her for yourself as a wife

(*Devarim* 21:11)

וְרָאִיתָ בַּשְּׂבִיָּה אִשֶּׁת יָפֶת תּוֹאֵר, וְהוּא גַם כֵּן הַבְּטָחָה, “You see among the captives a woman of beautiful form” (*Devarim* 21:11): this too is a promise. The Torah’s phrasing here is a plain future verb, “and you will see.” The Baal Shem Tov hears it as prediction rather than as the opening clause of a law. The word “too” points back to the previous verse, which he has likewise read as a promise: Hashem will deliver your enemy into your hand.

כְּשִׁיתֶנּוּ ה' בְּיָדָהּ אֶת הַיֵּצֵר הָרָע, אַזְ וְרָאִיתָ אִיךָ שֶׁהַשְּׂבִיָּה שֶׁהִיא אִשֶּׁת יָפֶת תּוֹאֵר הִיא בַּשְּׂבִיָּה כְּבִיכּוֹל³ When Hashem gives the *yetzer bara* into your hand, then “you will see” how the Divine Presence, who is the woman of beautiful form, is herself held captive, as it were. The enemy of the pasuk is the *yetzer bara*. Victory over it opens the eyes. Only then does a person recognize what is actually standing in the captives’ camp: not an object of desire but the Divine Presence, held in exile

³ The *Degel Machaneh Efraim* does not name the Baal Shem Tov here, but the teaching appears to come from him. In the *Likutim* to *parshas Mishpatim* the same author expounds the verse “If a man seduces” (*Shemos* 22:15): the man is the *yetzer bara*, the maiden is *machshavah*, and “he shall surely pay a dowry for her to be his wife” follows the line of “and you take her for yourself as a wife” in *parshas Ki Seitzei*, which he attributes there to his grandfather, of blessed memory. He gives no details of that explanation, but his wording matches the *derush* here, since it concerns the *nitzotz* held inside a thought. That is the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov he is pointing to.

among the *klipos*. The Hebrew adds “as it were,” marking that the exile is spoken of from our side, not His.

וְהִשְׁקֵתָּ בָּהּ לְפָדוֹתָהּ מִן הַשְּׂבִיָּה וְלִקְחָתָּ לָּךְ לְאִשָּׁה: “And you desire her” (*Devarim* 21:11), to redeem her from captivity, “and you take her for yourself as a wife.” The verse’s word for desire, *chashak*, now has a new object. What looks like attraction to the captive is really the pull toward redeeming the holiness held inside her. Taking her as a wife is the completed act: the Divine Presence brought out of the enemy’s camp and joined to the one who redeemed her.

(*Degel Machaneh Efraim, parshas Ki Seitzei*)

THE MAIN IDEA

Beat the pull to do wrong, and your eyes open. What looked like something to want turns out to be holiness held captive, waiting for you to bring it home.

TEACHING 5

Stripping the Soiled Garment from an Alien Thought

וְהִסִּירָה אֶת שְׂמַלְתָּ שְׂבִיָּהּ מֵעָלֶיהָ וְגו'

She shall remove the garment of her captivity from upon her... (*Devarim* 21:13)

כְּכֹר בְּאֶרְצִי בָשֵׁם אֲדוֹנִי אָבִי זְקִינִי זִלְלָהּ, ה, כִּי הַמַּחֲשָׁבוֹת זְרוֹת הַבָּאוֹת לָאָדָם [הוא], I have already explained in the name of my master, my grandfather, of blessed memory, that as for the alien thoughts that come to a person, [the reason] is The speaker is the Degel Machaneh Efraim, and “my grandfather” is the Baal Shem Tov. He is repeating a teaching he has given elsewhere.

כִּי מִתְאַוָּה הַנִּיצוּץ הַקָּדוֹשׁ שֶׁבְּתוֹרָה⁴ אוֹתִיּוֹת הַמַּחֲשָׁבָה זָרָה לְתִיקוֹן, לְהַעֲלוֹתוֹ לְשָׂרְשׁוֹ וּלְתַקְּנוֹ, that the holy spark inside the letters of the alien thought longs for rectification, to be raised to its root and repaired. The thought does not arrive by accident. Every thought is made of letters, and inside those letters sits a *nitzotz*. The spark is the one doing the wanting: it presses itself on a person because it wants him to lift it back to its source.

וְכָל הַמַּחֲשָׁבוֹת זְרוֹת, בְּעוֹלָמוֹת עֲלִיּוֹנִים, הָאוֹתִיּוֹת הֵם אוֹרוֹת צָחוֹת, אֲלֵא שֶׁיִּרְדּוּ לַמַּעַמְקִים, וְנָתַלְּבָשׁוּ, As for all alien thoughts, in the upper worlds the letters are lucid lights, except that they descended into the depths and clothed themselves in soiled garments. The same letters that now form an ugly thought are pure light higher up. Nothing in them changed in essence. They fell, and on the way down they picked up clothing. The offensiveness of the thought belongs to the garment, not to the letters.

כְּמוֹ שֶׁבִּירַר אֲאִ"ז זִלְלָהּ" ה' וְהִסִּירָה אֶת שְׂמַלְתָּ שְׂבִיָּהּ מֵעָלֶיהָ וכו', שֶׁלֹּא לִיקַח אוֹתָם בְּלִבּוֹשֵׁין, as my grandfather, of blessed memory, made clear from “She shall remove the garment of her captivity from upon her...”, meaning that one should not take them in their defiled garments. Here is the turn on the pasuk. The Torah forbids the soldier to bring the captive woman into his house dressed as she is. Read inwardly, the captive is the spark, and her captivity is its exile inside the *klipah*. A person must not take the thought in while it still wears that clothing.

⁴ The core of this idea, that every thought is made of letters, even an alien thought, appears above in *parshas Noach*, in the section Amud HaTefillah, teaching 106. That the whole desire of these thoughts is for a person to rectify them is set out at length there from teaching 116 onward. That the letters are lights that descended into the depths appears in *parshas Va'eschanan*, teaching 35. See also *parshas Noach*, Amud HaTefillah, teaching 108, where the alien thought is compared to a son pleading with his father, “Redeem me from captivity.”

Rather he should see to remove and separate the soiled garments from them, and then their light will shine like the dawn. The work is separation: pull the covering off the letters and leave the light. The word for removing follows the pasuk's own verb, "she shall remove." Once the garment is off, the light does the rest by itself.

(*Degel Machaneh Efraim, parshas Vayechi, on the verse Shimon and Levi*)

THE MAIN IDEA

An unwanted thought is not only filth. Inside its letters sits a spark of light that has fallen and picked up dirty clothing on the way down. Do not take the thought in as it comes; strip the covering off it, and what is left will shine.

TEACHING 6

Cross-Reference: The Firstborn of the Hated Wife as a Hint to the Jewish People

וְהָיָה הַבְּכוֹר לְשׂוֹאֵה

And the firstborn son belongs to the hated one (*Devarim 21:15*)

מָה שֵׁשׁ בְּכָתוּב זֶה רָמַז לְיִשְׂרָאֵל מְבוֹאֵר לְקַמֵּן בְּמַאֲמָרִים לר"ה וְיוֹם כִּפּוּר אוֹת ט': What this verse contains by way of a hint about the Jewish people is explained further on, in the discourses for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, letter 9. The compiler is not reporting a teaching here, only marking its location. He tells the reader two things: that the words "and the firstborn son belongs to the hated one" carry a *remez* about the Jewish people, and that the reading itself appears in the section of discourses for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, at teaching 9. He gives no part of the content, so anyone who wants the teaching has to turn there.

THE MAIN IDEA

The hint about the Jewish people in this verse appears in the discourses for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, teaching 9.

TEACHING 7

The Letters of Chet: Desire, the Hidden Good, and Sins Turned Into Merits

וְכִי יְהִיָּה בְּאִישׁ חֵטָא מְשַׁפֵּט מוֹת וְגו'

If a man has committed a sin punishable by death... (*Devarim 21:22*)

שָׁמַעְתִּי מִמּוֹרֵי פִירוּשׁ הַש"ס (יֻמָּא דפ"ו ע"ב) וְדוֹנוֹת וכו', I heard from my teacher an explanation of the passage in the Talmud (*Yoma 86b*), "willful sins [become for him like merits]," and so on. Reish Lakish there teaches that *teshuvah* is so great that a person's deliberate sins turn into merits. The teaching that follows explains how a sin can hold anything convertible into merit, and it does so from the word *chet*, sin, in the verse.

וְטַעַם שֶׁנִּקְרָא חֵטָא, כִּי כְבוֹדוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ מְלֵא כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּכִכּוֹל, גַּם מְקוֹם הַחֵטָא The reason it is called *chet*, sin, is that His glory, blessed is His Name, fills the whole world, as it were, including the place of the sin,⁵ Nothing stands outside His glory. The site of a transgression is therefore not

⁵ This point is explained above, in *parshas Bereishis*, teaching 40, and in note 34 there.

a place empty of Him, and this is the premise for everything that follows.

וְהַתְעֵנוּג שֶׁל הַחוּטָא נִמְשָׁךְ מִתְעֵנוּג הָעֲלִיּוֹן וכו', and the pleasure of the sinner is drawn down from the supernal pleasure, and so on. The enjoyment a person finds in the sin is not a pleasure of its own making. It descends from above, however far it has fallen by the time he tastes it.

וְהִנֵּה יֵשׁ מִדָּה הַנִּקְרָא חֲמֻדָּה, אֲשֶׁר מִמֶּנּוּ יִתְפַּרֵּךְ מִתְפַּשֵּׁט לְכָל הַבְּרִואִים אָדָם וּבְהֵמָה וְחַיִּים וְשָׂרָצִים, Now, there is a *middah* called *chemdah*, desire, which spreads out from Him, blessed is He, to all creatures, man and beast and animals and creeping things, and so on, as the senses testify to this. Desire is not a human defect. Every living thing craves, down to the creeping things, and the Baal Shem Tov takes that universality as evidence that desire has a single root above and extends from there into all of creation.

וּבְכָל אֶחָד מֵהַחֲמֻדָּה יֵשׁ הוּי"ה אֲדנִי, כִּי הַחֲמֻדָּה קֹדֶם שֶׁנִּפְעַל הוּא הוּי"ה, וְאַחֵר הַפְּעוּלָה נִבְרָא, In every instance of desire there are the Names Havayah and Adni, because the desire, before it is acted upon, is Havayah, and after the act Adni comes into being. Havayah is the Name of the vitality while it is still in its source and not yet manifest. Adni is the Name of Malchus, where that vitality becomes an actual presence within creation. Desire passes through both: it exists first as an unrealized stirring, then as a deed.

וְהִנֵּה יֵשׁ חֲמֻדָּה שֶׁהִיא ח' מִן הַחֲמֻדָּה שֶׁהִיא ח' אוֹתִיּוֹת שֶׁל שְׁנֵי שְׁמוֹת הַנ"ל, This gives the ches of *chet*, which is eight, the eight letters of the two Names mentioned. Havayah has four letters and Adni has four. Their total, eight, is the numerical value of the first letter of the word for sin. The letter that opens *chet* is a count of the Divine Names concealed inside the desire that produced it.

וְכִתּוּבוֹ יֵשׁ טוֹב גָּנוּז בְּתוֹכוֹ הֲרִי אוֹת ט' מִן חֲטָא, וְאוֹת א' מוֹכֵלֶּעַ בּוֹ הֲרִי חֲטָא: Within it there is good, hidden inside it, and that is the letter tes of *chet*; and the letter alef is absorbed within it,⁶ so you have *chet*. Tes opens the word *tov*, good, and stands for the good buried inside the sin. What the alef stands for the teaching does not say; it states only that the alef lies absorbed within, and the compiler sends the reader on to the teachings that follow.

וְהִנֵּה יֵשׁ י"ג מִדּוֹת שֶׁהַתּוֹרָה נִדְרָשֶׁת בָּהֶן וְאֶחָד מֵהֶם קָל וְחוֹמֶר וכו', Now, there are thirteen *middos* by which the Torah is expounded, and one of them is *kal vachomer*, and so on. The Hebrew word *middah* carries both senses here at once: a rule of exposition, and a divine attribute. The Baal Shem Tov moves from one sense to the other in the next line.

וְהִנֵּה עַל יְדֵי הַתְעוֹרְרוֹת זֶה הַחֲמֻדָּה מִשָּׁה, נִתְעוֹרֵר מִדָּה זֶה לְמַעְלָה בְּקָל וְחוֹמֶר וכו', Through the arousal of this desire below, that same *middah* is aroused above,⁷ by *kal vachomer*, and so on. The reasoning is compressed. If the desire is aroused this powerfully in its fallen state down here, then all the more so its root above. What a person stirs below reaches the *middah* from which it came.

רַק הַקְּלִיפָה שֶׁל הַחֲטָא הוּא מִסָּה מְבַדִּיל, וּמַפְסִיק מִלְּהַתְעוֹרֵר הַטוֹב לְמַעְלָה, Only, the *klipah* of the sin is a dividing screen, and it blocks the good above from being aroused, The husk wrapped around the good inside the sin acts as a barrier. As long as it remains, the arousal cannot pass upward.

כִּי אַחֵר שֶׁשָּׁב בְּתִשּׁוּבָה, וְנִסְתַּלַּק חֶלֶק הָרַע וְהַקְּלִיפָה, וְנִשְׁאַר רַק טוֹב הַגָּנוּז, except after he has repented, when the evil part and the *klipah* depart and only the hidden good remains, *Teshuvah* removes the husk. What is left is the good that was concealed there from the start, the tes inside the word.

וְאַזְ נִתְעוֹרֵר גַּם הַטוֹב שֶׁלְמַעְלָה, וְלִכְךָ וְדוֹנוֹת נַעֲשׂוּ כְזִכּוּת, and then the good above is aroused as

⁶ The compiler points the reader ahead to the teachings that follow here, from teaching 8 onward.

⁷ The compiler suggests that this *kal vachomer* is the one discussed above in *parshas Bereishis*, teaching 36 with note 31 there, and in *parshas Eikev*, teaching 35; see there.

well.⁸ This is why willful sins become like merits. With the screen gone, the good below reaches its root and rouses the good above. The sin now functions exactly as a merit does, and Reish Lakish's statement is explained.

וּבְלִבְדִּי שִׁיְהִיָּה הַזֶּדוּן לְתַאֲבוֹן וְלֹא לְהַכְעִיס, אֲזַי נַעֲשׂוּ זְכוּיֹת, וּדְפַח"ח: This holds only where the willful sin came from appetite and not from spite; then they become merits. And his words are beautiful. The whole mechanism rests on desire. Where a person sinned out of craving, the craving itself carries a Divine root that *teshuvah* can release. A sin committed to provoke has no such craving behind it, and the teaching excludes it.

(Kesones Passim, parshas Beha'aloscha, fol. 35b)

THE MAIN IDEA

The pull that drew you into a sin is itself a spark of something Divine. When you do teshuvah, the husk falls away and only that good remains, so the very craving that led you down now lifts you up. This works when the sin came from appetite, not from spite.

TEACHING 8

The Silent Alef in Cheit: The Master of the World Hidden Inside Sin

שָׁמַעְתִּי מֵאָא"ו זֶלֶה"ה, שֶׁלֶכָּה מוּבָלָע אַ פֶּתוּכֹי (בְּתוֹךְ תִּבְתַּח חֲטָא פְּדֻלְעִיל בְּאוֹת הַקּוֹדֶם) I heard from my grandfather, of blessed memory, that an alef is swallowed inside it (inside the word cheit, as explained above in the preceding section) for this reason: The speaker is the Degel Machaneh Efraim, and “my grandfather” is the Baal Shem Tov. The word חֲטָא, sin, is written with a final alef that the mouth never sounds. The compiler adds the parenthesis to point the reader back to the previous teaching, where the same word came up.

לְהוֹדִיעַ שֶׁשָּׁם גַּם בֵּין שׁוֹרָה אֱלוֹפּוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם בְּרוּךְ הוּא, מוּבָלָע וּמְכֻסָּה, to make known that there too rests the Master of the world, blessed is He, swallowed and covered over. Here is the turn. The letter alef is read as *aluf*, master, and *alufo shel olam* is a name for the Holy One. The unpronounced letter at the end of “sin” says that He is present in that place as well, but present the way a silent letter is present: written into the thing, and inaudible.

כִּי מִבְּלִעְדּוֹ לֹא יָרִים אִישׁ אֶת יָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת קָטוֹן וְגָדוֹל: For without Him no man could lift his hand to do anything, small or great. The reason the alef must be there. Every act draws its power from Him, and a sin is an act. So the vitality that carries out the sin is His vitality, concealed inside the deed. The wording echoes Pharaoh's words to Yosef, “without you no man will lift his hand or foot” (*Bereishis* 41:44), redirected from a viceroy to the Creator. The teaching is compressed and stops here; it says where G-d is to be found, and does not go on to say what a person should then do about it.

(Degel Machaneh Efraim, parshas Eikev, s.v. *V'yesb l'havin*)

THE MAIN IDEA

Even a sin runs on strength that comes from Hashem. He is there, silent as the unsounded alef, hidden inside the deed itself.

⁸ See above, parshas Bereishis, note 34, and teaching 167 in the body of the text there, and parshas Vaeschanan, note 11.

TEACHING 9

The Silent Alef in Cheit: Sin as Forgetting the Master of the World

שָׁמַעְתִּי מִן אֲזִלָּה"ה שְׁמֵלֶת חֵטָא, אוֹת אֲשֶׁבוּ אֵינוּ נִיכָר בְּהִכָּרָה, I heard from my grandfather, of blessed memory, that in the word חֵטָא [cheit, “sin”], the letter alef in it is not detectable in pronunciation. The word is spelled with three letters, chet, tes, alef, but only two of them sound. The closing alef is written and not heard. The Baal Shem Tov treats that as the word telling us what sin is. The speaker here is the Degel Machaneh Efraim, and his grandfather is the Baal Shem Tov.

וְהַטַּעַם לְפִי שֶׁהִרְשָׁע בְּשָׁעָה שְׂרוּצָה לְעֹבֵר עֲבָרָה שׁוֹכַח בְּאֵלּוּפוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, The reason is that at the moment the wicked person wants to commit a transgression, he forgets the Master of the world. Alef is the first letter of *Alufo shel olam*, the Master of the world. So the silent alef is a silenced awareness of G-d. Note the precision of the image: the alef is not missing from the word, only from the sound. The Master of the world has not gone anywhere, and the transgressor has not denied Him. In the instant of wanting the sin, he simply fails to register Him. Sin, on this reading, is a failure of hearing rather than a decision against G-d.

כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתַבְתִּי בְּמָקוֹם אֲחֵר: As I have written elsewhere. The Degel Machaneh Efraim points the reader to his own fuller treatment of this idea in another place, without naming it here.

(*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, in the *Likutim* to *parshas Devarim*, s.v. *ba'aravah*)

THE MAIN IDEA

Sin usually begins with forgetting, not with defiance. Hashem is still there; a person just stops hearing Him for a moment. Keeping that awareness audible is most of the work.

TEACHING 10

The Silent Alef in Cheit: The Master of the World Hidden Inside the Sin

שָׁמַעְתִּי מִן אֲזִלָּה"ה כִּי חֵטָא אֵלּוּפוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם מְסֻתָּמָר בּוֹ, וּדְפַח"ח, I heard from my grandfather, of blessed memory, that [in the word] *cheit*, sin, the Master of the world is hidden inside it. And his words are beautiful. The letter alef stands for *alufo shel olam*, the Master of the world. The Baal Shem Tov points to the alef sitting at the end of חֵטָא and reads it as the Master of the world concealed within the sin.

וְהַפִּירוֹשׁ, כִּי הֵא הוּא אֵינָה נִגְלִית וְאֵינָה נִיכָרָת בְּמִכְבָּטָא, וְהוּא בְּאַחֲרוֹנָה, The explanation is that the alef is not revealed and is not detectable in the pronunciation, and it comes at the end. This is the mechanism. Nothing about the sound of the word חֵטָא betrays an alef; the letter is written and silent. Hidden presence, exactly.

וְכֵן בְּתִיכַת טָמֵא ר"ל, גַּם כֵּן הֵא מוֹבָלָע בְּאַחֲרוֹנָה, The same holds for the word *tamei*, impure, Heaven spare us: there too the alef is swallowed at the end. A second word for the realm of defilement, spelled the same way. The pattern is not an accident of one word.

וְלִהְיֵינוּ זֶה, כִּי הָאָדָם הָעוֹבֵר עֲבָרָה ח"ו, אֵז הוּא הַסְתַּלְקוֹת הַדַּעַת מֵעֲלָיו, כְּמֵאמָרָם ז"ל (סוֹטָה ד"ג, To understand this: when a person commits a transgression, God forbid, his *daas* departs from him, as the Sages, of blessed memory, said (*Sotah* 3a), “A person does not commit a transgression...” The Gemara finishes: unless a spirit of folly has entered him. The Degel Machaneh Efraim reads that folly as a specific loss, the collapse of *daas*, the faculty that holds a truth present and felt.

At that moment he certainly thinks that Hashem has abandoned the earth and does not watch over it. This is the content of the folly. Not a denial of Hashem, but the assumption that this spot, this hour, falls outside His watch.

כי אם היה יודע ומאמין בזה, שנגד ה' כל מפעליו, שהוא משגיח עליו בכל עסקיו, בוודאי לא היה, For if he knew and believed that all his doings stand before Hashem, that He watches over him in all his affairs, he certainly would not transgress at all. The proof runs backwards from the act. Since he sinned, he must have been holding, at that instant, that no one was watching.

But in truth this is certainly a complete falsehood, for certainly His providence from Him, blessed is His Name, is present there too. "There" means the place of the sin itself. The Degel Machaneh Efraim does not soften this: providence does not withdraw from the scene of a transgression.

כי אם יצויר העדר השגחתו משם אף רגע אחד ח"ו⁹ מיד היה מת באותו רגע, ולא היה כח בו לעשות, For if one could picture the absence of His providence from there for even a single moment, God forbid, [the person] would die on the spot at that moment, and he would have no power to do anything. The argument turns on the fact that Hashem sustains every creature continuously. Withdraw that for an instant and the man is dead, and a dead man commits no sin. So the very strength with which he sins comes from the One he assumes has gone.

Rather, certainly the Holy One, blessed is He, is there as well, only in great concealment and hiddenness. Present, and not perceptible. That is the whole point being made.

This is what the concealment of the letter alef, which is the Master of the world, alludes to. The letter completes the word and gives it its form, yet the ear hears nothing of it. So with the Holy One in the place where a person sins.

(*Degel Machaneh Efraim, parshas Emor, s.v. Eileh haMitzvos*)

THE MAIN IDEA

Hashem is present even in the moment a person sins. The very strength to do it comes from Him. What sin does is not remove Him, only hide Him.

TEACHING 11

An Inadvertent Sin That Carries a Death Judgment: Keri and the Stripping of the Soul

וכי יהיה באיש חטא משפט מות וגו'

If a man commits a sin whose judgment is death... (*Devarim 21:22*)

ראיתי בכתבי הרב החסיד מו"ה יעקב יוסף הכהן בשם אדוני אבי זקני על פסוק וכי יהיה באיש חטא משפט מות והומת ותלית אותו על עץ לא תלין גבלתו על העץ כי קבור תקברנו ביום ההוא, I saw in the writings of the rabbi, the chassid, our teacher Rabbi Yaakov Yosef HaKohen, in the name of my master, my grandfather, on the verse: "If a man commits a sin whose judgment is death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on that day," The Degel Machaneh Efraim reports the

⁹ The same point appears above in *parshas Kedoshim*, note 7, and below in *parshas Vayelech*, note 3.
¹⁰ The reading of the alef as *aluf* shel *olam* is explained above in *parshas Bereishis*, teaching 22, along with the further places listed there in note 18.

teaching at second hand, from the writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, who had it from the Baal Shem Tov. He quotes the verse in full because every one of its clauses will be turned.

וְהִקְשָׁה הָא חֲטָא הוּא שׁוֹגֵג, וְאִיךָ הוּא מְשַׁפֵּט מוֹת שְׁיִיךָ לְמִזִּיד, and he asked: a *chet* is an inadvertent act, so how can it carry a judgment of death, which belongs to a deliberate transgression? This is the trigger. In the Torah's graded vocabulary *chet* is the lightest of the terms for sin and denotes something done without intent. A capital sentence belongs at the other end of the scale. The verse joins the two words in a single phrase.

וּבִיאר ז"ל¹¹ כִּי בְּחֲטָא שֶׁל הוֹצֵאתָ ז"ל, אִף עַל פִּי שֶׁהוּא שׁוֹגֵג, הוּא מְשַׁפֵּט מוֹת, and he explained, of blessed memory, that with the sin of wasteful emission of seed, even though it is inadvertent, it carries a judgment of death, One sin answers to both halves of the phrase. It happens without deliberate intent, and it is still lethal.

כִּי בְּפַעַם רִאשׁוֹן מְסַלֵּק הַסֵּטְרָא אַחֲרָא ר"ל לְמַמְנוּ הַנֶּפֶשׁ שָׁלוּ, וּפַעַם ב' הָרוּחַ, וּבְפַעַם ג' הַנִּשְׁמָה, for the first time, the *sitra achra* removes his *nefesh* from him, may the Merciful One spare us; the second time, the *ruach*; and the third time, the *neshamah*, The death is described as a staged removal of the three lower levels of soul, in ascending order. Each repetition takes another level. What is left after the third is a man with no living soul-level in place.

וְהוּא שְׁמַמְרֵי הַכְּתוּב וְכִי יִהְיֶה בְּאִישׁ חֲטָא, הֵינּוּ שׁוֹגֵג כְּזֶה שְׁיִיחָהּ מְשַׁפֵּט מוֹת אִף שֶׁהוּא שׁוֹגֵג, וְהֵינּוּ לֵאמֹר שְׁמַמְרֵי הַכְּתוּב וְכִי יִהְיֶה בְּאִישׁ חֲטָא, הֵינּוּ שׁוֹגֵג כְּזֶה שְׁיִיחָהּ מְשַׁפֵּט מוֹת אִף שֶׁהוּא שׁוֹגֵג, which draws him over to the *klipos*, so that he will not accept rebuke, and this brings about death, may the Merciful One spare us. The wording here is compressed. The Hebrew reads *lakelipos*, to the *klipos*, not *bakelipos*, so it describes where the man is carried rather than what is wrapped around him. The mark of that removal is practical: rebuke stops reaching him. That is what makes the condition fatal rather than merely damaged.

וְזֶהוּ שְׁמַמְרֵי הַכְּתוּב וְכִי יִהְיֶה בְּאִישׁ חֲטָא, הֵינּוּ שׁוֹגֵג כְּזֶה שְׁיִיחָהּ מְשַׁפֵּט מוֹת אִף שֶׁהוּא שׁוֹגֵג, וְהֵינּוּ לֵאמֹר שְׁמַמְרֵי הַכְּתוּב וְכִי יִהְיֶה בְּאִישׁ חֲטָא, הֵינּוּ שׁוֹגֵג כְּזֶה שְׁיִיחָהּ מְשַׁפֵּט מוֹת אִף שֶׁהוּא שׁוֹגֵג, This is what the verse says: "If a man commits a sin," that is, an inadvertent act of a kind that carries a judgment of death even though it is inadvertent, and that is the impurity of *keri*, may the Merciful One spare us. The Baal Shem Tov now reads the opening clause back as a definition. The Torah is not being loose with its terms; it is pointing to a specific case where the two terms hold together.

וְתִלִּית אוֹתוֹ עַל עֵץ, הֵינּוּ אִף אִם תִּתְּלֶה אוֹתוֹ עַל עֵץ חַיִּים, לֹא יִקְבַּל שׁוֹם וְתִלִּית אוֹתוֹ עַל עֵץ, הֵינּוּ אִף אִם תִּתְּלֶה אוֹתוֹ עַל עֵץ חַיִּים, לֹא יִקְבַּל שׁוֹם, "And you hang him on a tree," that is, even if you hang him on the Tree of Life, to speak words of rebuke to him, he will not accept any rebuke. The bare word *etz* invites the reading. Hanging a man on the tree becomes hanging him on the Tree of Life, on Torah itself, in the form of words of rebuke drawn from it. Given what the previous lines established, that measure fails: the *klipos* have already sealed him against it.

לֹכֵן לֹא תִלִּין נִבְלּוֹ עַל הָעֵץ כִּי אִם קְבוּר תִּקְבְּרֵנוּ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, Therefore "his corpse shall not

¹¹ *Otzar HaChaim, parshas Tetzzei*, fol. 130c, records the same question in the Baal Shem Tov's name with an answer that runs the other way. Since Adam's sin, good and evil are mixed together in everything, and at times even a complete *tzaddik* carries some spark of evil whose judgment is death, so that the evil should be consumed. Hashem has mercy, as it says, "Precious in Hashem's eyes is the death of His pious ones" (*Tehillim* 115), and instead arranges that the man fall into *keri*; the filth is cut away and the evil spark departs, as happened to many holy chassidim and complete *tzaddikim*. That is an inadvertent sin that comes to atone for a death judgment, and for a *tzaddik* it counts as an actual death. "You shall hang him" means hanging the episode on its cause, the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. "His corpse shall not remain overnight" then warns the *tzaddik* not to let that dead matter stay with him, "for you shall surely bury him": through the Shema at bedtime a person kills the destroyers and raises the souls to the yesod of Nukva, called the grave, the womb, the bundle of life, and his soul is repaired. And his words are beautiful. End of quote. See also *Otzar HaChaim, parshas Vayikra*, fol. 36a-b.

remain overnight on the tree,” but rather “you shall surely bury him on that day.” Since the tree accomplishes nothing, do not leave him hanging there. The verse’s own instruction supplies the alternative.

כְּשִׁיזְדָּמֵן שְׂיִהְיֶה בְּכִהְיֶנֶת יוֹם, הֵינּוּ טְהוֹר יוֹמָא (בְּרָכוֹת ד"ב ע"א) לְזַכֵּךְ אֶת נַפְשׁוֹ אִזְ תִּקְבְּרֶנּוּ, לְהַפְרִיד, When it happens that he is in the aspect of day, that is, “the day is pure” (*Berachos* 2a), able to refine his nefesh, then you shall bury him, to separate the dross from him. And his words are beautiful, etc. “On that day” is read as a condition rather than a deadline. The Gemara’s idiom, that once the sun sets the day itself is purified, gives “day” the sense of a purified state. When such a moment comes to him and his nefesh can be refined, that is the time to bury. What gets buried is not the man but the dead matter, the *pesoles*, which the burial separates from him.

And the explanation of the verse “If a man commits...” I myself heard from the mouth of my master, my grandfather, of blessed memory. The Degel Machaneh Efraim closes by adding his own direct testimony. He found the teaching in Rabbi Yaakov Yosef’s writings, but he had also heard this reading of the verse from the Baal Shem Tov himself.

(*Degel Machaneh Efraim, parshas Eikev, s.v. Od yirmoz vebaya eikev*)

THE MAIN IDEA

The real danger of sin is that it seals a person off, so that words of rebuke no longer reach him. Rebuke will not break through then. Wait for a clear moment when his soul can be refined, and use it to separate the dead weight from him.

TEACHING 12

An Inadvertent Sin as a Death Sentence, and the Bedtime Shema That Buries It

Our master, the holy Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, said: How can an inadvertent sin carry a sentence of death? The verse reads, “If a man has committed a sin carrying a sentence of death.” In the Torah’s vocabulary *chet* is the inadvertent transgression, as distinct from *avon* and *pesha*. So the wording is strange: an act done without intent should not be a capital matter at all. That oddity drives the whole teaching.

He said that it refers to the general sin, which is inadvertent and beyond a person’s control: a nocturnal emission. He calls it “the general sin” because it reaches everyone, and it is the one transgression that fits the verse’s word exactly: it happens without intent and without choice.

וְלַפְעָמִים יֵאָרֶע זֶה לְצַדִּיק גָּמוּר בְּיָלְדוּתוֹ כְּמִבּוֹאֵר בְּסֵפֶר הַמַּגִּיד מִשְׁרִים, וְכְמִבּוֹאֵר בְּסֵפֶר הַחֲזוֹנוֹת, Sometimes this happens even to a complete *tzaddik* in his youth, as is explained in the sefer *Maggid Meisharim*, and as explained in *Sefer HaChezyonos*. Both sefarim are personal records: *Maggid Meisharim* preserves what Rabbi Yosef Karo’s maggid told him, and *Sefer HaChezyonos* is Rabbi Chaim Vital’s own journal. The Baal Shem Tov cites them to establish that even great men are not exempt, which is precisely what makes the question urgent.

From where does such a thing come, and why should such a thing issue from before Hashem?

He said that this comes from the mixture of good and evil, the sin of Adam with the Tree of Knowledge. Nothing evil goes out

from Hashem as evil. What happens here traces back to the admixture that entered the world when Adam ate from the Tree.

ולפעמים מחמת איזה ניצוץ רע, יהיה נגזר על הצדיק מיתה ר"ל, Sometimes, because of some evil spark, death is decreed upon the *tzaddik*, Heaven forbid.

So ובהכרח גוזרין עליו שיאירע לו זה החטא ר"ל וינצל ממיתה, כי הרע חלף והלך לו ולקחו חלקם, of necessity they decree upon him that this sin should befall him, Heaven forbid, and he escapes death, for the evil has passed and gone off, and they have taken their portion. The occurrence functions as a substitution. The forces that had a claim on him collect their share in this way and leave, and the decree of death lapses.

For this sin is as hard for the *tzaddik* as death.

This is the meaning of "If a man has committed a sin" that is "a sentence of death," "and he is put to death," since it is as hard for him as death. Every clause now lands. *Chet* is the inadvertent act. *Mishpat maves* is the decree that hung over him. *V'humas*, "he is put to death," describes what the *tzaddik* himself feels, not what a court does to him.

And from where ומהיכן יהיה כזה, ותלית אותו על עץ, שעל ידי חטא עץ הדעת אירע לו כזה, does such a thing come? "And you shall hang him on a tree," for through the sin of the Tree of Knowledge such a thing befell him. The verse's "tree" is the Tree of Knowledge. The thing hangs on that tree because that is where it originates.

But in truth, "his corpse shall not remain overnight," not even for a single night's stay: the vile thing he did must not remain overnight in the sin of the Tree. He hears *nivlaso*, "his corpse," as *nevelah*, the vile thing itself. Whatever it was, it must not be left hanging there even one night.

"For you shall surely bury him," and he will raise up the good and put the evil to death. Burial here is not disposal but separation. The good held inside the matter goes up, and the evil dies.

"On that day," by means of the Krias Shema at bedtime. The verse's insistence on "that day" tells him when the burial happens: that very night, at the Shema said before sleep.

For then the illumination of Atika, which is called "That One," is revealed and drawn down, together with the well-known double-edged sword. In the *Zohar*, Atika, the concealed inner *partzuf* of Keser, carries the name *bahu*, "That One." So the words *bayom bahu* are not only a time but a hint: at that hour the light of Atika is drawn down. The "well-known double-edged sword" belongs to the verses recited at the bedtime Shema.

From the great light all the *klipos* die, as explained in *Pri Etz Chaim*. This supplies the "burial." The *klipos* that took hold do not have to be fought off one by one. The light itself kills them.

כי קללת אלהים תלוי, עיין לקוטי תורה יחזקאל על מה שאמרו רבותינו ז"ל (רבותי בראשית פכ"א, For a hanged man is a curse of G-d." See *Likutei Torah, Yechezkel*, on what our Rabbis, of blessed memory, said (*Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 21, par. 12), that Kayin hangs in slackness. A second reading of the closing phrase begins here, and it turns on the word *talui*, "hanging." The one who is "hanged" is not a body on a gallows but something left suspended, and the Arizal's comment on Kayin supplies the picture.

For what takes form

within the female is a strong drop, since the drop goes out from the male and is placed in the female,

and what was a loose drop of water takes shape and grows strong into a formed figure with a body and strong limbs. Received into its vessel, the drop is no longer slack. It acquires form.

But a drop that goes out from the male is called “a curse of G-d,” for many evils attach to it, since it stays suspended in the air.

שְׂיוּצָאת מִן הַזָּכָר, שְׁמַיִם, וְלֹא נִכְנָס בְּנוֹקְבָא, אֶרֶץ, אִם כֵּן הִיא תְלוּיָה בְּאֵוִיר וְאֵין לָהּ מְנוּחָה, עַד It goes out from the male, which is heaven, and does not enter the female, which is earth. It therefore hangs in the air and has no rest until it enters the female, because it is loose, in slackness. With no vessel to receive it, it has nowhere to settle. It hangs between the two, and what has no place has no rest.

וְזֶה סוֹד קִינן תְלוּי בְרַפְיוֹן, כְּמוֹ שְׂדִים שֶׁהֵם תְלוּיִים בֵּין שְׁמַיִם לְאֶרֶץ, עֵינֵינוּ שֶׁם בְּלִקּוּטֵי תוֹרָה הֵיטֵב, This is the secret of “Kayin hangs in slackness,” like demons, which are suspended between heaven and earth. Study the passage carefully there in *Likutei Torah*.

All this rests on the foundations laid by our master, Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, with a little added explanation so that his sweet words can be understood. The author of *Heichal HaBerachah* marks the boundary here: the teaching is the Baal Shem Tov’s, and the elaboration around it is his own.

(*Heichal HaBerachah*, parshas Ki Seitzei, fol. 130a, 131a)

THE MAIN IDEA

What feels like failure can be a mercy in disguise, absorbing a harsher decree. The point is not to leave it hanging. Bury it that same night with the Shema before sleep, and let the light lift out the good and finish off the rest.

TEACHING 13

Keri Without Thought as a Release from Death; Raising an Evil Thought to Its Source

הַבַּעַשׁ"ט זללה"ה אָמַר, שְׁלֹא יֵדָאג אָדָם עַל מַקְרָה בְּלִתי טְהוֹר, שְׂרָאָה קָרִי בְּשׁוּגָג בְּלִי שׁוּם מַחֲשָׁבָה The Baal Shem Tov, of blessed memory, said that a person should not be troubled over an impure occurrence, when he had a seminal emission unintentionally, with no foreign thought and no lustful thought behind it. The teaching draws a sharp line at the outset. Everything here depends on whether *machshavah* played any part.

For he was, Heaven forbid, liable to death, and through this, since the evil left him, he is released from death; and had this not happened, he would have died, Heaven forbid. The Baal Shem Tov reads the event as an exchange. The evil that stood against the man exits with the discharge, and the sentence lapses.

וְאָמַר רַמְזוֹ לָזֶה (בְּתַהֲלִים קט"ז:ט"ו) יָקָר בְּעֵינֵי ה' הַמּוֹתָה לְחֶסֶדִיו, יָקָר אוֹתִיּוֹת קָרִי, הוּא טוֹב And he gave a hint for this from (*Tehillim* 116:15) “Precious in the eyes of Hashem is the death of His devoted ones”: יָקָר has the letters of קָרִי, and it is good for His devoted ones. This is the mechanism. The three letters of יָקָר (“precious”) rearrange into קָרִי. The Baal Shem Tov

hears the verse saying that the *keri*, in Hashem's eyes, comes in place of "the death" for His devoted ones. The wording is compressed, and he leaves the reader to supply the substitution.

הַיֵּינוּ כְּשֶׁבָּאָה לּוֹ שְׁלֹא מִחֲמַת הָרֹדֶה, הוּא טוֹב, שֶׁבָּאֵם לָאוּ הִיא אֶפְשָׁר לְהִיּוֹת מֵת¹² ח"ו, That is, when it comes upon him not because of a lustful thought, it is good, for otherwise he might have died, Heaven forbid. The qualification returns. Only the unintended emission carries this meaning.

אִם כֵּן אֵין לְדַאֵג אֶלָּא אִם רָאָה עַל יְדֵי מַחֲשַׁבָּה ח"ו, So there is nothing to be troubled about unless it came about through thought, Heaven forbid. Worry has one legitimate object: what the man himself brought on through his own mind.

וּכְשֶׁבָּאָה לְאָדָם מִחֲשַׁבָּה רָעָה חֲלִילָה, יִרְאָה לְטַהֵר אוֹתָהּ¹³ בְּהַעֲלֹתָהּ לְהַתְקַשְּׁרוֹת הַבוֹרָא יִתְפַּרֵּץ שָׁמוּ, וְכו': And when an evil thought comes to a person, Heaven forbid, let him see to purify it by raising it up to attachment with the Creator, blessed is His Name, and so on. Even here the answer is not grief. The Baal Shem Tov turns the man toward his standard *avodah* with a stray thought: trace it upward and bind it to its source in the Creator.

(Likutei Amarim, fol. 28d; Or Torah, parshas Re'eh)

THE MAIN IDEA

What happens to you without your mind's consent is not yours to mourn. Save your concern for the thoughts you actually entertain, and even those you do not need to grieve over. Take the stray thought and lift it back to its Source.

TEACHING 14

Why the Yetzer Hara Strikes Hardest Right After Teshuvah

שְׁמַעְתִּי אוֹמְרִים מִפֶּה קָדוֹשׁ הָרַב בְּעַל שֵׁם טוֹב הַיּוֹתִיק הַחֲסִיד מו"ה יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמְעֻזְבוֹ, עַל הַגְּמָרָא (בְּרַכּוֹת ד"ט ע"א) I heard it said from the holy mouth of the rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov, the venerable and pious one, our teacher and master Rabbi Yisrael of Mezhibuzh, on the Gemara (*Berachos* 19a).

דָּאָם רְאִיתָ תַּלְמִיד חֶכֶם עוֹבֵר עֲבֵרָה בַּלַּיְלָה, אֵל תִּהְרַהֵר אַחֲרָיו בַּיּוֹם שֶׁמָּא עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה, If you saw a Torah scholar commit a sin at night, do not suspect him by day, for perhaps he has done teshuvah. The plain reading puts the sin first and the repentance after it. By morning the man is no longer the man of the night before, so you have nothing to hold against him.

וּמִקֻּשָּׁה שֶׁמָּא עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה ס"ד, אֶלָּא אֵימָא וְדַאי עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה, The Gemara objects: could it enter your mind to say only "perhaps he has done teshuvah"? Rather say: he certainly has done teshuvah. The Gemara refuses to leave the scholar's standing resting on a "perhaps" and upgrades the word to a certainty.

וּפִירֵשׁ עַל פִּי דְבָרֵי תוֹסֵפוֹת יוֹם טוֹב (אֲבוֹת פָּרָק ה') שֶׁהַקֻּשָּׁה עַל הָא דְאִמְרִינוּ עֲשֵׂרָה נְסִים נַעֲשׂוּ

¹² The sefer *Sur MeRa VaAseh Tov* writes that one should immerse in cold water after a *keri*, on the basis of "cold waters on a weary soul" (*Mishlei* 25:25), and connects the words מִיִּם קְרִים with מֵת, "dead." It cites the teaching in the name of the Baal Shem Tov that a *tzaddik* is released from death when he has a *keri*, from "Precious in the eyes of Hashem is the death of His devoted ones," since for a *tzaddik* the anguish over an impure occurrence weighs heavier than the anguish of death, and that anguish itself frees him from death, for great remorse fills his heart (see *Berachos* 7a). It notes there that *יקר* has the letters of קִרִּי, that the water answers to "a weary soul," and that water carries the sense of surrendering one's life, as in *nefilas apayim*, which the cold waters then sweeten.

¹³ On raising foreign thoughts and binding them to their source, see above, *parshas Noach*, in the section on prayer, from teaching 115 onward.

לְאָבוֹתֵינוּ בְּבֵית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, He explained this in line with the words of the *Tosafos Yom Tov* (*Avos*, chapter 5), who raised a difficulty on the teaching that ten miracles were done for our ancestors in the Beis HaMikdash,

וְאֶחָד מֵהֵם לֹא אֵירַע קָרִי לְכֹהֵן גָּדוֹל בְּיוֹם הַכִּיפּוּרִים, one of them being that no seminal emission happened to the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur.

דִּמְקָשָׁה לְמָה יֵאָרַע לוֹ קָרִי, אַחֵר שֶׁהָיוּ מְזַרְזִין אוֹתוֹ כָּל יְמֵי הַיּוֹם, וְהָיָה בְּטָהֳרָה כָּל הַיּוֹם הַהוּא, He asks: why would a seminal emission happen to him at all, given that they urged him on throughout the seven days and he stood in purity that entire day? If everything in the week's preparation pointed away from such a mishap, calling its absence a miracle makes no sense.

וְתִירֵץ כִּי יֵצֵר טוֹב וְיֵצֵר הָרַע מִתְקוּטָטִים זֶה עִם זֶה, וְלִזְזָה הָיָה קָרוֹב מְאֹד לְהִיּוֹת הַכֹּהֵן בְּעַל קָרִי עַד, He answered that the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara quarrel with one another, and for that reason it came very close to happening that the Kohen would have a seminal emission. End of quote. The seven days of purity are precisely what put him in danger. Every step he took toward holiness raised the pressure from the other side, so his staying clean really did need a miracle.

וְנִמְצָא לְפִי זֶה כְּשֶׁאָדָם עוֹשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה כְּרָאוּי וְנִכּוֹן, אֲזִי הוּא מְסוּכָן לְכָל יַחֲטִיאָנוּ הַיֵּצֵר הָרַע בְּחַטָּא, It emerges from this that when a person does teshuvah properly and fully, he is then in danger, lest the yetzer hara make him sin with the sin of a seminal emission, The Baal Shem Tov widens the case of the Kohen Gadol into a general rule about anyone who has just risen.

כִּי הַמְּנוּצָח מַחֲזִיק אֶת עֲצָמוֹ בְּכָל כּחוֹ, לְהַחֲטִיאוֹ לְהַמְנוּצָח, because the one who has been defeated braces himself with all his strength to make the victor sin. A wrestler who is losing makes his most violent effort at the end. The teshuvah defeated the yetzer hara, and the defeat itself is what unleashes the final assault.

וּפִירֵשׁ הָרַב הַנּו"ל ז"ל, אִם רָאִיתָ תַלְמִיד חֶכֶם שֶׁעָבַר עֲבֵרָה בַּלַּיְלָה, ר"ל שֶׁרָאָה קָרִי, The above-mentioned rabbi, of blessed memory, explained: "if you saw a Torah scholar commit a sin at night" means that he had a seminal emission. The Gemara specified night. The Baal Shem Tov reads that detail as naming the transgression, since this is the failure that belongs to the night.

אֶל תִּהְרַהֵר אַחֲרָיו בְּיוֹם, ר"ל שֶׁמָּא הוּא חַיִּיב בְּדָבָר שֶׁהִרְהַר בְּיוֹם, וּבָא לִידֵי קָרִי בַּלַּיְלָה, "Do not suspect him by day" means: do not think that he is at fault in the matter, that he entertained improper thoughts by day and so came to a seminal emission at night. The turn rests on one root. The Gemara's word for suspecting, *tehareher*, is the same word as *hirbur*, the improper thought that halachah treats as the cause of what happens at night. So the warning becomes specific: do not trace the night back to a lapse in his daytime thoughts.

רַק שֶׁמָּא עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה, וְלָכֵן הַיֵּצֵר הָרַע מַתְחִיזֵק אֶת עֲצָמוֹ בְּכָל כּחוֹ לְהַחֲטִיאוֹ וְדו"ק: Rather, "perhaps he has done teshuvah," and that is why the yetzer hara braced itself with all its strength to make him sin. Study this closely. The Gemara's phrase now carries the opposite weight. "Perhaps he has done teshuvah" no longer excuses the sin after the fact. It explains it. The scholar's day was not a lapse but a victory, and the night was the loser's answer. The wording is compressed here, and the teaching does not spell out how the Gemara's own upgrade to "certainly he has done teshuvah" fits the new reading, though it follows easily: the repentance is not a guess offered in his defense but the established cause of what happened to him.

(*Torei Zahav, parshas Ki Seitzei*)

THE MAIN IDEA

A hard fall right after a real step upward is not proof that the step was fake. The pull to do wrong fights hardest when it has just lost. Read the struggle as a sign of your victory, not your failure.

TEACHING 15

The Baal Shem Tov's Order for Consecrating an Addition to a Cemetery

לא תלין נבל(ת)ו על העץ כי קבור תקברנו ביום ההוא וגו'

His body shall not remain overnight on the tree, for you shall surely bury him on that day... (*Devarim* 21:23)

ראיה זאת העתקתי מכתבי קודש אדמו"ר הרב המגיד מקאזניץ זצ"ל זי"ע, והוא מועתק מהפעל **ראיה** זאת העתקתי מכתבי קודש אדמו"ר הרב המגיד מקאזניץ זצ"ל זי"ע, והוא מועתק מהפעל: See this: I copied it from the holy writings of our master and teacher, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, of blessed memory, may his merit shield us, and he copied it from the Baal Shem Tov, of blessed memory, may his merit shield us. These are his golden words: The chain of transmission runs from the Baal Shem Tov, through the Maggid of Kozhnitz, to the writer who copied it out.

From the Baal Shem Tov: if a community needs to add to the cemetery, may the Merciful One spare us,¹⁴

בכה יתנהגו, מקיפים תחלה המקום שרוצה להוסיף בשבע הקפות, עם עשרה אנשים לא פחות, this is how they should proceed. First they encircle the ground they wish to add with seven circuits, with ten men, no fewer. A minyan is required. The whole procedure consists of seven circuits around the new ground.

בכל הקפה יאמרו בארבעה קרנות מקום ההוספה בתהלים קפ"טל ק"ב ק"ג ק"ד, ובשעיה קפ"טל On every circuit they recite, at the four corners of the added ground, chapters 102, 103 and 104 of *Tehillim*, and chapter 42 of *Yeshayahu*, which begins, "Sing to Hashem a new song..." Four texts for four corners: three chapters of *Tehillim* and the passage from *Yeshayahu*.

ובכל הקפה יתחילו מצד קרן דרומית מזרחית, ותיכף בצד אותו קרן יאמרו בתהלים קפ"טל ק"ב, Every circuit begins at the southeast corner, and right there at that corner they recite chapter 102 of *Tehillim*.

ומאותו קרן יקיפו ויאמרו ויהי נועם דרך הקפה עד שיגיעו לקרן מזרחית צפונית, ובצד אותו קרן From that corner they walk the circuit, reciting *Vihi Noam* as they go, until they reach the northeast corner, and at that corner they recite chapter 103 of *Tehillim*. *Vihi Noam* accompanies the walking between corners; the chapters are said standing at the corners themselves.

ומאותו קרן יקיפו ויאמרו דרך הקפה ויהי נועם עד שיגיעו לקרן צפונית מערבית, ובצד אותו קרן

¹⁴ At the end of *Degel Machaneh Efraim* a brief version appears: in the name of Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, to encircle the place seven times, reciting *Tehillim* on each circuit, and to begin circling toward the right. That printing is garbled and abridged, since it never explains what the practice is for or what occasions it. The wording also shows that it did not come from the hand of the author of *Degel Machaneh Efraim*, since he does not introduce it with "my grandfather"; the intent, though, appears to be the teaching given here. See also *Sdei Chemed*, section *Aveilus* 83, which cites this practice in the name of *Kodesh Hilulim*, in the part called *Nofes Tzufim*; and *Maaseh Yechiel*, in the *Michla D'Asvasa* pamphlet, fol. 15a, copies it from *Sdei Chemed*. Neither is printed correctly, both being full of errors. The practice was also copied at the end of *Likutei Shoshanim*, printed under the name of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz. That *Likutei Shoshanim* is the very same collection first printed at the end of *Ner Yisrael*, later reissued under a different title.

יִאמְרוּ בְּתֵּהָלִים ק"ד, From that corner they walk on, reciting *Vibi Noam* as they go, until they reach the northwest corner, and at that corner they recite chapter 104 of *Tehillim*.

וּמֵאוֹתוֹ קָרְן יִקְיפוּ וְיֵאמְרוּ דְּרֵךְ הַקֶּפֶה וְיִהְיֶה נֹעֵם עַד שְׁיִגְיֵעוּ לְקָרְן מְעֻרְבִית דְּרוֹמִית, וּבִצַּד אוֹתוֹ קָרְן יִאמְרוּ בְּיַשְׁעִיהָ קְפִיטָל מ"ב שִׁירֵי לַה' שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ וְגו', From that corner they walk on, reciting *Vibi Noam* as they go, until they reach the southwest corner, and at that corner they recite chapter 42 of *Yeshayahu*, "Sing to Hashem a new song..." The route runs southeast, northeast, northwest, southwest, which is a circuit to the left as one faces inward from the southeast corner, closing back where it began.

At the completion of the first circuit they recite *Ana Bekoach*, with intent on the first Name, in the first verse. *Ana Bekoach* is built of seven verses of six words each, and the initial letters of each verse form one of the seven six-letter Names that together make up the forty-two-letter Name. The first circuit pairs with the first of them.

וְכַךְ יִתְנַהֲגוּ בְּכָל הַקֶּפֶה מְשַׁבֵּעַ הַקְּפוֹת, וְאַחֵר גָּמַר כָּל הַקֶּפֶה מְשַׁבֵּעַ הַקְּפוֹת יֵאמְרוּ אָנָּה בְּכַח, וּיְכוּוֹנוּ וְכַךְ יִתְנַהֲגוּ בְּכָל הַקֶּפֶה מְשַׁבֵּעַ הַקְּפוֹת, שֵׁם אֶחָד מִהַשְּׁבַע שְׁמוֹת, עַד שְׁיִגְמְרוּ הַשְּׁבַע שְׁמוֹת בְּשַׁבֵּעַ הַקְּפוֹת, They proceed the same way for each of the seven circuits. After completing each of the seven circuits they recite *Ana Bekoach* and direct their intent to one of the seven Names, until they have completed all seven Names over the seven circuits. Each circuit carries its own Name, so that by the end all seven Names have been drawn over the ground.

וּבְשִׁיתִּתְחִילוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת מְחִיצוֹת לַמָּקוֹם הַהוֹסָפָה, לֹא יִתְחִילוּ מִרוֹחַ צְפוֹנִית, וְגַם לֹא יִתְחִילוּ לְקַבֹּר בְּרוֹחַ וּבְשִׁיתִּתְחִילוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת מְחִיצוֹת לַמָּקוֹם הַהוֹסָפָה, לֹא יִתְחִילוּ מִרוֹחַ צְפוֹנִית, וְגַם לֹא יִתְחִילוּ מִכַּהֵן, When they begin to build the enclosing walls for the added ground, they should not begin on the north side. They should also not begin burying on the north side, and they should not begin with a *kohen*. Three cautions about beginnings: the fence, the first grave, and the first person buried there.

וְיִהְיֶה רְצוֹן שְׁיִבֹלַע הַמָּוֶת לְנֶצַח בְּמַהֲרָה בְּיָמֵינוּ אָמֵן סְלָה: May it be His will that death be swallowed up forever, speedily in our days, amen, selah. The closing prayer draws on the promise of *Yeshayahu* that death will be swallowed up forever.

(Printed at the end of *Ner Yisrael* on *Likutei Rosb Hashanah Gaon*)

THE MAIN IDEA

Even the ground set aside for burial gets surrounded with song and Hashem's Names before anyone uses it. The Baal Shem Tov's instructions end in a prayer that death itself be swallowed up forever.

TEACHING 16

Sending Away the Mother Bird: A Pointer to the Rosh Hashana Teachings

כִּי יִקְרָא קוֹן צִפּוֹר לְפָנֶיהָ וְגו', שֶׁלַח תִּשְׁלַח אֶת הָאֵם וְגו'

If a bird's nest happens to be before you... you shall surely send away the mother... (*Devarim* 22:6-7)

This is explained further on, in the teachings on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, letter zayin; see there. The compiler places the verse in its proper parsha but does not repeat the teaching. He sends the reader forward to the section of the sefer that gathers the Baal Shem Tov's teachings for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, where *shiluach haken* is taken up at the seventh entry. Nothing further is stated here, and the substance of the reading belongs to that later passage.

THE MAIN IDEA

The teaching on this verse appears in the section on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, letter zayin.

TEACHING 17

Your Camp: The Limbs of the Body as a Person's Own Camp

וְהָיָה מַחֲנֶיךָ קָדוֹשׁ

Your camp shall be holy (*Devarim 23:15*)

מִזֶּה שָׂוֶה קָאִי עַל כָּל אֲבָרֵי הַגּוּף This refers to all the limbs of the body,¹⁵ The trigger is the word מחניך, “your camp.” A camp is a body of men gathered under one command, and a person’s own limbs and powers form exactly such an assembly. So the demand that the camp be holy falls on each limb.

מְבוֹאֵר לְעִיל פ' בְּרֹאשִׁית בְּהִגָּה ט', כַּפ' לָהּ אוֹת מ"א, וּבַכַּפ' וַיִּשְׁלַח בְּסוּף הִגָּה ג' ע"ש: as explained above in *parshas Bereishis*, note 9, in *parshas Lech Lecha*, section 41, and in *parshas Vayishlach*, at the end of note 3. See there. The compiler adds nothing new here. He records the reading of the verse and refers the reader back to the three places where he has already developed it.

THE MAIN IDEA

Your body is a camp under your command. Keeping it holy means keeping every limb holy.

TEACHING 18

A Vow Made for Hashem's Sake: The Prohibition Read as a Promise

כִּי תִדּוֹר נָדַר לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תֹאָחֵר לְשַׁלְּמוֹ

When you make a vow to Hashem your G-d, do not delay to fulfill it (*Devarim 23:22*)

מְבוֹאֵר לְעִיל כַּפ' מְטוֹת אוֹת ב' שְׁוֵהוּ הַבְּטָחָה שְׂמִיכְבִּיחַ הַכְּתוּב שְׁלֹא תֹאָחֵר לְשַׁלְּמוֹ As explained above in *parshas Matos*, teaching 2, the verse is giving an assurance here: you will not delay to fulfill it. The compiler does not repeat the teaching, he points back to it. The reading turns on the two ways Hebrew uses *lo* with a future verb. Read as a command, “do not delay.” Read as a statement, “you will not delay.” The Baal Shem Tov takes the second reading, so the verse stops warning and starts promising.

כְּשִׁיחָיָה הַנָּדָר לְשֵׁם ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, ע"ש: This applies when the vow is for the sake of Hashem your G-d. See there. The condition comes from the words the verse itself supplies: “a vow to Hashem your G-d.” Only a vow made with that intent carries the guarantee. The words “to Hashem your G-d” stop functioning as the address of the vow and become the test of it. The teaching is compressed to a single line here, and the compiler sends the reader back to *parshas Matos* for the full argument.

¹⁵ The *Sefas Emes* (*parshas Ki Seitzei*, 5631, fol. 42b) works out the same reading. He cites the *Sifri* on “when you go out,” and reports in the name of his grandfather that the Sages expound “in the midst of your camp” as the limbs of a person; the *Yalkut* likewise reads it as “within each one.” On that basis he explains “you shall go out as a camp”: a person gathers all his desires and his whole soul and hands them over to the will of Hashem. Once he has assembled all his vitality in doing a mitzvah and turning from evil, “you shall be guarded” follows on its own, because foolish things can no longer unsettle a man who is ready to give up his soul, and nothing is dearer to him than his soul. The *Sefas Emes* adds that this counsel is also brought in the name of the Baal Shem Tov.

THE MAIN IDEA

When you make a vow purely for Hashem's sake, the verse is not warning you, it is promising you. That kind of vow carries the help you need to keep it.

TEACHING 19

Why We Break Earthenware at the Engagement and Glass at the Wedding

כִּי יִקַּח אִישׁ אִשָּׁה וּבָעָלָהּ וְגו'

When a man takes a wife and lives with her... (Devarim 24:1)

אֱמָרִים בְּשֵׁם הָרַב הַקָּדוֹשׁ וְהַטָּהוֹר הַבְּעַשׂ"ט נבג"מ זי"ע, הַטָּעַם לָמָּה בִּשְׁעַת שִׂידוּכִין שׁוֹבְרִין כְּלִי
,אֱמָרִים בְּשֵׁם הָרַב הַקָּדוֹשׁ וְהַטָּהוֹר הַבְּעַשׂ"ט נבג"מ זי"ע, הַטָּעַם לָמָּה בִּשְׁעַת שִׂידוּכִין שׁוֹבְרִין כְּלִי
 People say in the name of the holy and pure Rav, the Baal Shem Tov, may his soul rest in the hidden treasures, may his merit protect us, the reason why at the engagement people break an earthenware vessel, and at the wedding a glass one. The teaching begins from a fact of custom that most people never question. Two moments in the making of a marriage, two breakings, two different materials. The Baal Shem Tov treats the choice of material as deliberate.

כִּי אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְקַרֹּעַ הַתְּנָאִים בְּשֵׁם שְׂכָלִי חָרַס אַחֵר שֶׁנִּשְׁבַּר אֵין לוֹ תִּקְנָה,
 because it is impossible to tear up the *tenaim*, just as an earthenware vessel, once it has broken, has no repair. The *tenaim* are the written terms of the engagement. Once the two families have signed them, neither side can simply tear up the document and walk away. Earthenware carries that meaning in its very nature: shatter it, and the pieces cannot be reworked into a vessel again.

אַחֵר הַנִּישׁוּאִין יָכוֹל לְפֻטְרָהּ עַל יְדֵי גֵט, דּוֹגְמַת כְּלִי זְכוּכִית שְׂאֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁנִּשְׁבַּר יֵשׁ לוֹ תִּקְנָה:
 But after the marriage he can release her by means of a *get*, like a glass vessel, which even after it breaks has a repair. Marriage itself, paradoxically, is the looser bond of the two in this one respect. The Torah provides a way out: a *get*. So the wedding calls for glass, which the craftsman can melt down and form again. The Baal Shem Tov is not recommending divorce. He is reading the custom's own logic: the material broken at each stage matches whether that stage can be undone.

(Toldos Abaron, in the Likutim)

THE MAIN IDEA

Jewish custom speaks in objects. Clay at the engagement, glass under the chuppah: each material says something true about the bond being formed, and how it can or cannot be undone.

TEACHING 20

The False Matches That Fasten to the True One

בְּשֵׁם הַבְּעַשׂ"ט זי"ע, דְּכַשְׁמְכְרִיזִין בֵּת פְּלוּנִי לְפְלָנִי (סוֹטָה ד"ב ע"א)
 In the name of the Baal Shem Tov, may his merit protect us. When they proclaim, “the daughter of so-and-so is for so-and-so” (*Sotah* 2a), The Gemara teaches that before a child is formed a heavenly voice announces whom that child will marry. The Baal Shem Tov takes the proclamation itself as the starting point of what follows.

נִאֲסָפִים כְּמָה זְוִגִים שְׂקָרִים, וְנִאֲחָזִים וְנִסְבָּכִים בְּהֲדֵי הָאִי זְוִגָא שֶׁהִכְרוּז זָצָא עֲלֵיהֶם,
 a number of false matches gather, and they grip and entangle themselves with that match about which the

proclamation went out, The announcement does not go unnoticed. Once a particular pairing is named above, other pairings, ones with no truth to them, attach themselves to it. The two verbs are deliberate: they take hold, and then they knot themselves in.

וְחֵד בְּחֵד כִּי סְבִיחַ, אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְפָטְרָם כָּל כֶּה בְּנֶקֶל, and since one is entangled with the other, it is not possible to be rid of them so easily. A thing merely resting on top can be lifted off. Something knotted into the true match has to be untied, and that takes time and separate acts.

וְכֵן יֵשׁ שְׁנֵפְטָרִים מֵהֶם עַל יְדֵי שְׁנֵדְבָרִים זֶה בְּזֶה לְהִתְחַמֵּן, Rather, some of them are discharged when [a couple] speak with one another about marrying, Here the untying begins. A conversation about a possible marriage, even one that goes no further, is enough to release one of the attached matches.

וּמֵהֶם יֵשׁ שְׁנֵפְטָרִים עַל יְדֵי שְׁמִתוּוּעִדִּים לְהִתְחַמֵּן, and some of them are discharged when [a couple] come to an understanding about marrying, A step firmer than talk. The parties reach an agreement between themselves, and another false pairing comes loose.

וּמֵהֶם יֵשׁ שְׁנֵפְטָרִים עַל יְדֵי הַתְּקָשְׁרוֹת בְּתַקִּיעַת כֶּה, אוֹ רֹאשֵׁי פְּרָקִים אוֹ תְּנָאִים, and some of them are discharged through a binding by handshake, or by a summary of terms, or by formal engagement conditions, The stages keep tightening: a handclasp, then written headings of an agreement, then the *tenaim* themselves. The stronger the commitment a person enters into, the weightier the attachment it draws off.

עַד שְׁנֵפְטָרִים מְכוּלִּים, וְאִי יִמָּצֵא מִיֵּן אֶת מִינּוֹ וְיִוּוֹגוּ הָאֲמִיתִי, וְיִשָּׂאוּ זֶה לָזֶה, בְּדַת מֹשֶׁה וְיִשְׂרָאֵל, until he is rid of all of them. Then each finds its own kind, his true match, and they marry one another, in accordance with the law of Moshe and Israel. Only when nothing false is still holding on does the match that heaven announced come into the open. The whole sequence of shidduchim that led nowhere turns out to have been the clearing of the ground for this one.

(Dover Shalom, section 239)

THE MAIN IDEA

Every match that came to nothing was doing quiet work. Each conversation, agreement, or broken engagement pulls away something false that was clinging to your true match, and clears the way for it to come into the open.

TEACHING 21

Why One May Exaggerate in Matchmaking: A Portion Paid to the Samech Mem

שָׁמַעְתִּי טוֹב טַעַם בְּשֵׁם הַבַּעַל שֵׁם טוֹב לָמָּה מוֹתֵר לְשֹׁנוֹת בְּשִׁדּוּכִין, I heard a good explanation in the name of the Baal Shem Tov for why it is permitted to depart [from the truth] in match-making. The question is a practical one about a widespread custom: in shidduch negotiations both sides describe the match in generous terms, and no one protests.

וְהוּא לְכַאוֹרָה מְבוֹאָר בְּגִמְרָא (בְּתוֹבוֹת דִּס"ו ע"א) דְּאִיתָא שֶׁם בְּמִשְׁנָה וּבְגִמְרָא הָשׁוּם הוּא פּוֹסֵק פְּחוֹת, This seems to be explained in the Gemara (*Kesubos* 66a), where the Mishnah states that against the appraised goods [the groom] pledges one fifth less. The bride brings household goods into the marriage, and the groom commits himself in the *kesubah* to a matching sum. The Mishnah tells him to subtract a fifth from the figure at which the goods were appraised.

וּפִירְשׁ"י שְׁדֶּרְהָ הַנוֹעֲדִים לְמִזְמוּטֵי חֵתָן לְשׁוּמָם יוֹתֵר מִשְׁוִיִּים לְכְבוֹד הַכֶּהֱלָה, Rashi explains that those who gather for the wedding festivities customarily appraise them above their worth, for the honor of the bride. So the fifth is subtracted because the appraisal was inflated in the first place.

Here, apparently, is a case where the Sages take an inflated valuation for granted and simply adjust for it.

But in truth we find nowhere any permission to depart [from the truth] from the outset for the sake of honor. The compiler blocks the easy answer. Rashi describes what people do; he does not supply a license. Nothing in the sources allows a person to plan an untruth in order to honor someone.

Only for the sake of peace do we find that peace is so great that the Holy One, blessed is He, departed [from the exact truth] for its sake (Yevamos 65b). Peace is the one recognized ground, and the Gemara proves it from Hashem Himself, who reported Sarah's words to Avraham in altered form.

And that applies where a quarrel has already broken out between a man and his fellow, or between a husband and his wife. This closes off the second answer too. The peace license repairs a breach that exists. It does not cover a negotiation where nothing has yet gone wrong. So the question stands.

[The Baal Shem Tov] said that it is in order to give the Samech Mem his portion. Samech Mem is the accusing power, the side that opposes the union. The Baal Shem Tov moves the whole question off the ground of permitted speech and onto the ground of what a marriage costs. The untruth is not a concession to honor. It is a payment.

For pairing them is as hard as splitting the Red Sea, and so they had to bribe them. A match faces opposition from above, and the opposing side does not release it for nothing. The slight inflation in the terms is the bribe that buys its consent, much as the accuser receives a designated share elsewhere so that the holy business at hand can proceed. The Hebrew shifts from singular ("his portion") to plural ("bribe them"), taking in the accusing forces as a group.

(Nachal Eshkol, parshas Toldos)

THE MAIN IDEA

A match meets real opposition before it comes together, and the small exaggerations of matchmaking are the price paid to get past it. What looks like a loose custom is actually a bribe handed to the side that wants the union to fail.

TEACHING 22

This World as a Wedding: All the Toil for the One Word 'To Me'

I heard an explanation of the statement of the Talmud (Eruvin 54a), "This world is like a wedding celebration." Shmuel said to Rav Yehuda, "Grab and eat, grab and drink, for the world we are departing from is like a wedding." Read plainly, the line is about brevity: the feast ends quickly, so take what is in front of you. The explanation reported here takes the comparison in another direction.

Just as a wedding involves a great deal of exertion, and the purpose of all of it is the word "to me" that the groom says to the bride, and so on. Everything a wedding demands, the preparation, the expense, the crowd, the meal, exists for a few seconds under the chuppah. The groom says, "Behold, you are consecrated to me," and the whole event turns on that one word, *li*, "to me." Without it, none of the rest has accomplished anything.

וְהַנִּמְשָׁל מוֹכֵן כִּי תִיבֵת לִי הוּא שׁוֹרֵשׁ הַדְּבָקוֹת וְכוּ' יעו"ש: The application is clear, for the word “to me” is the root of *devekus*, and so on; see there. The Baal Shem Tov leaves the parallel for the reader to complete, and the compiler shortens it further with “and so on.” The point stands on its own. All the toil of a lifetime in this world is the preparation; the one thing it is for is that a person become Hashem’s own. That belonging is where *devekus* starts.

(Tzafnas Paneach, parshas Terumah, sec. 3, fol. 88b; Ben Poras Yosef, for Shabbos HaGadol 5527, fol. 109a)

THE MAIN IDEA

All the effort of a lifetime is the wedding preparation. The point of it is one word: becoming Hashem’s own. That belonging is where closeness to Him begins.

TEACHING 23

Charity and Tears as the Repair for a Blemish of the Holy Covenant

וְשִׁלְחָה יָדָהּ וְהִחְזִיקָה בְּמַבּוּשֵׁיוֹ וּגו'

And she reaches out her hand and seizes his private parts... (*Devarim* 25:11)

מָה שֵׁשׁ בְּכָתוּב זֶה רָמַז נִפְלָא לְתִיקוֹן פָּגַם בְּרִית קוֹדֵשׁ עַל יְדֵי נְתִינַת צְדָקָה וּבְכִיָּיה בְּדַמְעוֹת This verse contains a wondrous hint to the rectification of a blemish of the holy covenant, through¹⁶ giving charity and weeping with tears. The verse says nothing on its surface about sin or repentance. The compiler reports only the conclusion: the words hold a hint, and the hint concerns damage to the bris and how a person mends it. The note supplies the steps. The struggle in the verse becomes the struggle over a person’s holiness, the seizing becomes the attack on the covenant, and the penalty clauses become the two channels of repair, the hand that gives and the eye that weeps.

מְבוֹאֵר לְקַמֵּן בְּמִצְוֹתֵי ר"ה וּיו"כ אוֹת כ"ג ע"ש: The explanation appears below, in the discourses for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, section 23. See there. The compiler does not develop the reading here. He points the reader forward to where the same material is set out at length.

THE MAIN IDEA

A blemish of the holy covenant finds its repair in two simple acts: the hand that gives charity and the eye that weeps. The full explanation waits in the discourses for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

TEACHING 24

Blotting Out Amalek Begins With the Prince Above, Called Coarse of Spirit

תִּמְחָה אֶת זֵכֶר עַמְלֵק וּגו'

You shall blot out the memory of Amalek... (*Devarim* 25:19)

אִיתָא בְּכַתְבֵּי קוֹדֵשׁ שֶׁל מֶרְן ר"י בַּעַשׁ ט הַקְדוּשׁ זְכוּקִלְלָהּ ה"ה זי"ע וז"ל, It is found in the holy writings of our master, Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the holy one, of blessed memory, may his

¹⁶ Or *Pnei Moshe* on this verse gives the fuller form of the reading, in the name of a great man. The two men fighting are Michael and Samael. “The wife of one draws near” is Lilith, and “she seizes his private parts” means that she works to trip a person into wasting seed, God forbid. The repentance lies in the continuation of the same passage. “You shall cut off her hand,” which Rashi reads as a payment of money, points to giving charity with one’s hands, as the *Shelah* and *Reishis Chochmah* bring. “Your eye shall not pity” points to weeping constantly and not sparing the eye. See also *Toldos Yaakov Yosef*, parshas Ki Seitzei, fol. 198b, which sets the matter out clearly.

merit protect us, and these are his words: The compiler is copying a teaching that already stood in writing in the Baal Shem Tov's name, and he marks it off as a direct quotation.

עיקר מחיית עמלק הוא כי מתחלה צריכין למחות שר של מעלה שנקרא גס רוח. The essence of blotting out Amalek is this: first one must blot out the prince above, who is called “coarse of spirit,” The verse commands blotting out Amalek, and the Baal Shem Tov asks where the blotting out has to begin. Every nation has its *sar*, its prince in the upper worlds, and the nation on the ground stands only so long as its prince stands. Amalek's prince carries a name that is not a name at all but a *middah*: *gas ruach*, a spirit grown thick and swollen. Arrogance is what the war is actually against.

כמו שהובא בזוהר הקדוש בכמה דוכתי, וביוצר דקדושה דפ' זכור ע"ש, as the holy *Zohar* brings in several places, and as the yotzer for the Kedushah of *parshas Zachor* has it; see there. He points to two places where this name for Amalek's prince already appears: the *Zohar*, without specifying where, and the piyut recited on the Shabbos of *parshas Zachor*, the Shabbos on which the Jewish people read the command to remember Amalek.

ואחר כך נמחה עמלק דלמטה: and afterwards Amalek below is blotted out. The order is fixed and cannot run the other way. As long as the prince stands, the nation below has a root to draw on. Once the prince falls, Amalek below has nothing holding it up. The Baal Shem Tov does not spell out how a person goes about striking at the prince above; the wording is compressed. But since the prince's name is a trait of the soul, the front line is a person's own coarseness of spirit.

סליק פ'רשת תצא בס"ד Parshas Ki Seitzei is completed, with the help of Heaven. The compiler's closing formula for the parsha.

(*Kavod HaTorah, parshas Beshalach*)

THE MAIN IDEA

Amalek's real strength is arrogance. Work on the swollen pride inside you first, and the enemy outside loses its root.

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