

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

by Shlomo Katz

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Today's Learning

Mikvaot 9:1-2

Kitzur 198:15-199:3

Pesachim 20

Yerushalmi Eruvin 53

One of the mitzvot in this week's parashah is the mitzvah of returning a lost object. The Torah instructs us: "You shall not see the ox of your brother or his sheep or goat cast off and hide yourself from them; you shall surely return them to your brother . . . you may not [literally: 'You will be unable'] to hide yourself." (Devarim 21:22-23)

R' Avraham Shaag z"l (1801-1876) asks why these verses repeat themselves. What is added by the last phrase, "You may not hide yourself"?

He explains: Even a person who was born with negative character traits can acquire good traits in their place. This is done by behaving in a way which is contrary to one's natural tendencies. For example, if one is disposed to hate another person, one can conquer those feelings by going out of one's way to do kindness for that person.

Chazal learn from the phrase, "You shall surely return them to your brother," that you must return a lost object even if its owner has already lost it, and you have already returned it, one- hundred times. If you perform this act of kindness repeatedly, says R' Shaag, "You will be unable to hide yourself"; it will become natural to do a kindness for the person that you once hated.

R' Shaag adds: Particularly in this month of Elul, when the shofar is blown throughout the land to awaken us to return to Hashem, we must remove the hatred of others from our hearts, stop lording over others, eradicate lashon hara, and cease other infractions that we commit against our fellow men. Maybe, just maybe, by the time Yom Kippur has passed, the good behavior that we adopt during Elul will have become second nature. (Derashot Ha'Rosh Vol. I, No. 25)

"You shall surely send away the mother [bird] and take the young [literally: 'the children'] for yourself, so that it will be good for you and prolong your days." (22:7)

R' Moshe Shick z"l ("Maharam Shick") writes: This verse can be understood in light of the explanation given by the Chatam Sofer to the verse (Devarim 28:11), "Hashem will increase your bounty for the good [literally: 'Hashem will leave you over for the good'], in the fruit of your womb . . ." The Chatam Sofer, in turn, explained that verse in light of Rambam's statement to his son: "Fortunate is the person who completes his days quickly," i.e., who completes his appointed mission on this earth quickly.

The Chatam Sofer asks: How could Rambam say this, considering that the Torah promises long life to those who perform mitzvot? (Why would the Torah promise something which is not desirable?) He answers that long life is worthwhile if, after one completes the mission for which Hashem placed him on this earth, he then uses his time to help or teach others. This is the meaning of the quoted verse, "Hashem will leave you over for good in the fruit of your womb," i.e., Hashem will leave you on this earth longer as long as you are doing good for the fruit of your womb, a reference to one's children and students.

Maharam Shick adds: Chazal say that one who observes the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird will merit to have children of his own. This is alluded to in the verse, "You shall surely send away the mother bird and take the children for yourself." After you have children [or someone to whom to teach Torah], then, the verse continues, it will be good for you if Hashem prolongs your days. (Maharam Shick Al Ha'Torah)

"Beware of the tzara'at infliction . . . Remember what Hashem, your G-d, did to Miriam on the way, when you were leaving Egypt." (24:8-9)

"Remember what Amalek did to you, on the way when you were leaving Egypt . . . you shall not forget." (25:17-19)

It is written in the name of the Arizal that in reciting the prayer Ahavah Rabbah (or Ahavat Olam in Nusach Sefard) before Shma, when one reaches the words "le'shimcha hagadol" / "to Your great Name," one should recall in his mind the mitzvah to eradicate Amalek. The connection of these words to Amalek is that Hashem's Name is said to be incomplete as long as Amalek exists (see below).

Similarly, when one reaches the words, "lehodot lecha" / "to thank You," one should recall in his mind how Miriam was punished for her lashon hara. This is an appropriate place to remember Miriam's punishment in order to be reminded that the mouth was created for praising Hashem, not for speaking lashon hara. (quoted in Siddur Yeshuot Yisrael)

R' Chaim Yosef David Azulai z"l (the "Chida") writes: In my humble opinion, one does not fulfill the mitzvah of "remembering" in the above manner. The gemara (Megillah 18a) states expressly: "I might think that 'Remember' can be fulfilled by thought alone; therefore, the Torah says, 'You shall not forget' [which implies thought]. How then does one fulfill 'Remember'? By speech."

Rather, the proper way to fulfill the mitzvah of remembering Amalek and Miriam's punishment [and eight other subjects which we are similarly commanded to remember, i.e., the Exodus; Shabbat; the giving of the Torah; that all power is given by Hashem; how we angered Hashem in the desert; the mahn; Bilam; and Yerushalayim] is by reciting aloud the verses which mention these subjects, as printed in many siddurim after Shacharit. (quoted in Siddur Ha'Chida, p.185)

R' Zvi Elimelech of Dinov z"l writes: The Arizal was not suggesting that one fulfills the mitzvah of "remembering" merely by thinking about Amalek. In fact, there is no obligation to fulfill that mitzvah every day, only once a year. However, there is a separate mitzvah of "not forgetting," which is a daily obligation, and that is the mitzvah that the Arizal was referring to. (Bnei Yissaschar, Chodesh Adar I:8)

What does it mean to say that Hashem's Name is incomplete as long as Amalek exists? R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l explained that "Amalek" does refer not only to the ancient nation by that name but to any nation which adheres to the philosophy of Amalek and attacks Jews for no reason other than the fact that they are Jews. In our own times, R' Soloveitchik said, Nazi Germany was a manifestation of Amalek.

It is a desecration of G-d's Name when Amalek flourishes at the expense of the Jewish people. As long as G-d's Name can be desecrated in this manner, it is not complete. (From a taped lecture: Mitzvat Minui Melech)

An Astonishing Midrash

Who ordered Miriam sequestered [when she contracted tzara'at]? It could not have been Aharon, for he was her relative. It could not have been Moshe, for he was not a kohen. Therefore, it must have been Hashem.

Why does the midrash say that Moshe could not have ordered Miriam sequestered because he was not a kohen? Wasn't he also Miriam's relative (just as Aharon was)? Also, wasn't Moshe a kohen? The gemara does state that Moshe served, together with Aharon, as a kohen in the mishkan.

The halachic work Bet Shmuel rules that if a person enters Gan Eden alive, his "widow" may remarry. Only a woman who is married to a "man" may not marry another man, whereas a woman who is married to a malach/angel may marry "another" man.

The Torah refers to Moshe as a "malach" (Bemidbar 20:16). As a malach, Moshe had no relatives (as we see from the fact that a malach's wife can remarry). Of course, as a malach, Moshe could not be a kohen, since only a human can be a kohen. This is the point of the midrash - if you argue that Moshe was not Miriam's relative because he was a malach, then he also was not a kohen. (Conversely, if he was a kohen, he was also Miriam's relative.) (Binat Nevonim)

R' Meir of Narbonne z"l
("Ha'meili")

born approx. 4950/1190 - died 8 Marcheshvan 5024/1263

R' Meir was a disciple of his father, R' Shimon; of his uncle, R' Meshullam of Bezier; and of R' Natan ben Meir of Trinquetaille. R' Meir was a contemporary of Ramban, and corresponded with him. (R' Meir, known as "Ha'meili," should not be confused with a slightly later sage from Provence known as "Ha'meiri." The latter's name was R' Menachem.)

R' Meir wrote Sefer Ha'meorot on several tractates, and he also wrote a book of sermons and a Torah commentary, both of which have been lost. Another work by R' Meir, Milchemet Mitzvah ("An Obligatory War") appears to have been a defense against attacks on Judaism. Existing excerpts from this treatise indicate that it contained a letter from R' Meir to the French King (probably Louis IX) discussing the king's unfairness in promulgating anti-Jewish legislation. In the letter, R' Meir upbraids the king for his ingratitude, pointing out the many occasions when the taxes paid by Jewish subjects had saved their royal masters and that a Jewish soldier had risked his own life to save the life of the king's ancestor Charlemagne during the latter's siege of Narbonne. R' Meir further reminded the king that he is only human and will have to answer for his deeds before the Heavenly Tribunal.

Another part of the work Milchemet Mitzvah records a debate held between R' Meir and a representative of the Catholic church. It is recorded that this clergyman was so impressed with R' Meir that, when that clergyman was subsequently made a cardinal, he used his position to better the Jews' lot. (Source: The ArtScroll Rishonim, p. 172)

Sponsored by Irving and Arline Katz on the yahrzeit of father Moshe Aharon ben Menashe Reiss a"h and by the Wertenteil Family.

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