

THE FOUNDATION OF PIETY

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Devarim

The Foundation of Piety

The sole purpose of Sefer Devarim, writes R' Yechezkel Sarne z"l (1890-1969; rosh yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva in Yerushalayim), is to drive home the very same lesson that opens the first chapter of Mesilat Yesharim, by R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato (Ramchal; 18th century). That lesson is: "The foundation of piety and the root of perfect [Divine] service is for a person's duty in this world to become clear to him and free of doubt." Ramchal explains further that man was created in order that he may enjoy the ultimate pleasure, i.e., the pleasure that comes from being close to G-d. All material pleasures were created either to distract man from his task or to be used as tools to further man's spiritual development.

R' Sarne continues: Contrary to his usual style, Ramchal does not cite any verses or Talmudic statements to support the assertion quoted above. Why? Because the Torah is so full of proofs that it is not necessary to single them out. In particular, he writes, this is the message of Sefer Devarim. Throughout the final Book of the Torah, we are reminded to seek G-d out, not to forget Him, etc. We also read (Devarim 29:3), "But Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day." The reference to "a heart to know" is reminiscent of the verse (Devarim 4:39), "You shall know this day and take to your heart that Hashem, He is the G-d--in heaven above and on the earth below--there is none other." Taking these two verses together, writes R' Sarne, confirms Ramchal's assertion that true understanding of one's duty--to remain aware of G-d and to cling to Him--does not come easily; rather, one must toil, perhaps even his whole lifetime, until he really reaches the level where he even remembers on a consistent basis why he was placed in this world. (Iyunim Al Mesilat Yesharim)

"May Hashem, the Elokim of your forefathers, add to you a thousand times yourselves, and bless you ka'asher deebair / as He has spoken regarding you." (1:11)

R' Yosef Nechemiah Kornitzer z"l (1880-1933; rabbi of Krakow, Poland) writes: Moshe Rabbeinu blessed Bnei Yisrael that Hashem should multiply them a thousand times over, as if to say: G-d willing, all will go well with you, the Jewish People. But, Moshe added: Remember that Hashem is blessing you even "ka'asher debair," which may be translated, "at a time when Hashem speaks harshly about you," i.e., a time of judgment. Even a decree that seems harsh is ultimately for our good. (Chiddushei Rabbeinu Yosef Nechemiah Al Ha'Torah)

"So I took the heads of your tribes, distinguished men, who were wise and well known, and I appointed them as heads over you, leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens, and officers for your tribes." (1:15)

R' Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman z"l (the Vilna Gaon; 1720-1797) writes: Our verse refers to four different categories of leaders of the Jewish People: "leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens." Other verses refer to the leaders by different names: roshim / heads, shoftim / judges, shotrim / law enforcement officers, and zekeinim / teachers of Torah. The "leaders of thousands" were the "heads," who served a general leadership function. The "leaders of hundreds" were the judges. The "leaders of fifties" were the teachers. Finally, the "leaders of tens" were the officers who enforced the judges' rulings.

The Gaon continues: Why were there twice as many Torah teachers--one per 50 people--as judges--one per 100? Because there are twice as many hours available for Torah study as there are for judgment, since courts may sit only during the day, while Torah must be taught day and night. (Aderet Eliyahu)

"Except for Kalev ben Yefuneh-he shall see it, and to him I shall give the Land on which he walked, and to his children, because he followed Hashem wholeheartedly." (1:36)

Why isn't Yehoshua, who also did not participate in the evil report of the Spies, mentioned as well? R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (1879-1941; the Reisher Rav; killed in the Holocaust) explains:

Kalev is promised in our verse not only that he will receive a share in the Land, but also that he will pass it on to his sons. But Yehoshua had no sons, only daughters. If a person has no sons, his daughters inherit his land. However, at the time of the incident of the Spies, that halachah had not yet been taught. Indeed, it couldn't have been taught just then (through a promise to Yehoshua) because the daughters of Tzelofchad deserved to be the agents through whom that law was taught (see Bava Batra 119a). (Ha'drash Ve'ha'iyun)

Letters from Our Sages

This is an excerpt from a much longer letter written by R' Menashe Klein z"l (1924-2011) to R' Yosef Shalom Elyashiv z"l (1910-2012) in response to the latter's pask / ruling regarding a Torah crown that was lost during the Holocaust and discovered decades later in the hands of another Jew. The central issues in R' Elyashiv's psak were: Under what circumstances does military conquest effect a halachic change in the ownership of conquered property and are Holocaust victims presumed to have given-up hope of recovering their property? In this letter, R' Klein addresses those issues based on his own experiences in the Holocaust.

Thursday of Parashat "Behold Hashem stood above him" [Vayetze], 5761 [2001], Brooklyn, N.Y., may Hashem protect it.

To his honor, my friend, rabbi of rabbis, gaon of ge'onim, halachic authority of the generation, mountain to which all turn, prince of Elokim in the midst of the holy city of Yerushalayim, may it be rebuilt . . .

[After summarizing R' Elyashiv's ruling, R' Klein writes:] First, I want to make clear that the war of the Nazis, may their name be blotted out, to conquer the entire world generally, and to annihilate, murder and destroy the Jewish Nation in particular, was different from any other war. When a state fights a war against another state, the war is against the state and not a war to annihilate the nation or individuals. Therefore, even if the soldiers plunder property, they often leave the owners alive. In that situation, one can entertain the idea that the owners do not give-up hope of recovering their property because, if they succeed in expelling the invaders, they may recover their property. Moreover, even if the invaders win, they can be expected to establish law and order in the land they conquer.

However, in this war, the Nazis came with overwhelming force to conquer the entire world, and to annihilate, murder and destroy the Jewish Nation in particular, under the banner of the evil chancellor, may his name be blotted out, and to plunder their property. There was even a special department in Germany responsible for this. This was their corrupt way, may their name be blotted out: Immediately after the Nazis entered a conquered city, they quickly assembled the Jews, from young to old, children, new mothers, and even the ill from the hospitals, and placed them in ghettos. The ghettos were a way station on the way to the extermination camps, may Hashem save us. Immediately after the Jews left their homes with whatever they could carry in their hands, the Nazis sent messengers to take all the property of the Jewish People, as the witness [who testified before R' Elyashiv] had himself done at their orders.

[R' Klein then summarizes his personal experience in his hometown of Ungvar, Czechoslovakia,

which was similar to the above description. He continues:] It is plain that as soon as the Jews left their homes and their property without anyone to guard it, that they despaired [of recovering the property] for they knew what was going to happen to them. Regarding this, I cite the verse [Esther 3:13], "Letters were sent by courier to all the King's provinces, to destroy, to murder, and to exterminate all Jews, young and old, children and women, in a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions." Then [in Esther's time], we merited that the decree was overturned, but we, for our sins, did not merit to have the decree [in Europe] overturned. Certainly, after a person actually went to the ghetto, and from the ghetto to the extermination camp, who did not despair entirely [of recovering his property]?! They not only gave up hope of recovering their property, they gave up hope of being counted among the living. The end proved them right, for "only one from a city and two from a family" [Yirmiyah 3:14] returned. Even those who survived did not think about their property, and most never tried to return to their homes, for they knew they would find nothing remaining--neither people nor property. . .

I needed to state this as an introduction [so that] there can be no argument that there was absolute despair [of recovering property]. . . But, if one buried his property in a hole that he dug in the ground before the Nazis took him, and after the war he returned there to search, then we should say that he did not despair . . . (Pirumei Nissa p.232)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the Hamaayan page.

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