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PENINIM ON THE TORAH

PARSHA BOOKLET

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PARASHAT MISHPATIM

But if the bondsman shall say, "I love my master, my wife, and my children - I shall not go free"...and his master shall bore through his ear with the awl, and he shall serve him forever. (21:5,6)

Chazal comment us that the "ear" which heard at Har Sinai, "For to Me shall Bnei Yisrael be avadim, slaves, and not avadim l'avadim, slaves to slaves. Yet this man went and acquired a master for himself." It is one thing to become a slave in order to repay one's debt. It is totally another thing when one seeks to make servitude a life-long endeavor. Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, suggests that this halachah provides us with a powerful lesson. Chazal tell us that one who purchases an eved Ivri, Hebrew bondsman, actually acquires a "master" for himself.

Let us attempt to present this idea and put it into perspective. The master visits the shopping mall and sees an exquisite suit - on sale, no less. He is about to make the purchase when he remembers that if he buys a suit for himself, he must do the same for his eved. The servant must be equal with his master. He has no choice but to buy two suits.

The master continues his shopping expedition. Everywhere he stops to buy, he buys double. It is more like, "Buy two; get one!" Another scenario that presents an ironic outcome is the Yamim Tovim. Chanukah is approaching, and the master has a beautiful, ornate, silver menorah. It is an expensive heirloom that he inherited from his father. Regrettably, this year he is not going to light this menorah, because if the master has only one menorah, or if he has one expensive menorah and one of lesser value, the eved gets the expensive one! This incongruity applies equally on Purim if the master has only one Megillah. He can always hope that his servant will be nice enough to share it with him!

This reverse state of affairs continues on Shabbos if the master only has one special set of clothes. He will be wearing his weekday clothes while his eved will be clothed in his expensive suit and cotton shirt. They return from shul walking through the street - the eved in his fancy Shabbos clothes and the master in his weekday garb. Imagine, the people that mistakenly wish Gut Shabbos to the servant and completely ignore the master. It may seem ironic, but that is the meaning of acquiring a "master" for oneself. The master is selfless in his generosity and benevolence. All this is to provide the Hebrew bondsman with an environment that maintains his dignity - even if it is at the expense of the master. He was aware of the repercussions when he made the decision to purchase an eved Ivri.

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There is more. The master cannot have the eved perform any labor that might be below his dignity. The eved must be treated as royalty. When we take into consideration that the type of individual that was sold as a servant had been a thief who could not repay the money he stole, we understand that we are not dealing here with a member of the higher echelons of society.

Clearly, one who purchases an eved is a tzaddik of the highest order, a benevolent, generous man who feels the pain of his fellow Jew who is down and out. He wants to help, even if it is at the cost of personal convenience and degradation. All that matters is the opportunity to be of assistance to a fellow Jew.

Having digested all of this, is it any wonder that the eved wants to continue his servitude after the initial six year period? Who would not want to "work" for such a virtuous master? The man must have the middos, character traits, of a saint to make such a sacrifice.

Rav Sholom explains that after all is said and done, if the master asks his servant to do something "respectable," such as mail a letter or deliver a package, the servant most certainly has to oblige. This is servitude. The servant must listen to his master. He cannot refuse. This is the blemish created by servitude. A Jew can have no master other than Hashem. This is a Jew's shibud, obligation, to Hashem. We are His servants and only His servants. Thus, any responsibility or obligation to a human being that detracts from our total and unequivocal commitment to Hashem is, by its very nature, a negation of our servitude to the Almighty. Therefore, the "ear" that heard at Sinai that a Jew must be totally committed to Hashem-- yet proceeded to sell himself to another human being--should be bored with an awl.

Rav Sholom takes this thesis further. Until now we have addressed a situation in which a Jew sold himself to a saintly master who provides for all of his needs and accords him the greatest respect. What about someone who sells himself to a master of less credible virtue? Surely, one who sold himself to a gentile would be demeaning himself and placing a serious strain on his relationship with Hashem. After all, if one who is sold to a tzaddik must have his ear drilled because it indicates a breach in his commitment to Hashem, certainly one who sells himself to a gentile is crossing the line of devotion. Furthermore, the gentile is not likely to treat him nearly as well as the Jewish master would treat him.

Wait! We are not yet finished. What if a Jew were to sell himself not to a Jew - not to a gentile - but to an animal? Could there be a worse form of denigrating the Tzelem Elokim, G-dly Image, in which he was created? Is there a lower form of disgrace than servitude to an animal? One might question the feasibility of such a transaction taking place. It does occur, however, more often than we are willing to admit.

There is such a beast as the animal within us; the base character; the physical desires; the moral deficiencies from which we have a very hard time severing our relationship. Is this any less a form of slavery than to an animal? Yet, we do it all the time! We are so busy feeding our physical and base desires that we have become slaves to the animal from within. If the eved Ivri who has sold himself to a virtuous master is assailed for wanting to remain in servitude, because it detracts from his commitment to Hashem - how should we, who have sold ourselves to a beheimah, the animal within, justify our actions?

If a fire goes forth and finds thorns. (22:5)

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If one makes a fire, even if it was created in his own field for discretionary purposes, he is still obligated to tend to it. Therefore, he is responsible to pay whatever damages result from his uncontrolled fire. Fires have the potential to cause great devastation. While it is not as common in contemporary times, in previous centuries in Europe, when houses were made out of wood and were built in close proximity to one another, an uncontrolled fire could destroy an entire community. Even today, we have only to peruse the headlines of a few months ago to read about the havoc which fire caused in California. The following incident may not be totally relevant to the parshah; nonetheless, I feel the lesson one may derive from it is critical.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, cites the sefer, Yesod V'Shoresh Ha'Avodah, Shaar Ha'gadol, perek 5, which mentions a tzaddik by the name of Rav Moshe Eiveyer, who would perform specific customs in honor of Hashem. He proceeds to describe the areas in which this righteous man distinguished himself. Rav Zilberstein writes that for some time he had searched for data concerning Rav Moshe's life and endeavor. He finally found a story in the Bais Avraham from Horav Avraham zl, m'Slonim which records the following episode.

Prior to his passing, Rav Moshe assembled members of his community in his home and attempted to inspire them concerning the significance of Birkas Ha'Mazon, Bentching after meals: "I assure you that whoever recited Birkas Ha'Mazon from a written text, his house will not sustain the damages of fire." This was stated during a time in history when every blaze carried the potential for destroying an entire community. Everyone in the community heeded Rav Moshe's advice. Well, almost everyone. There was one person who simply refused to read the Bentching from a written text. It was not convenient. The Jewish community was spared the effects of a conflagration as a result of their adherence to Bentching from a written text.

One night, the wife of the individual who refused to comply with Rav Moshe's request woke up to a noxious odor. It smelled like fire! She looked out of the window and saw a non-Jewish house down the block that was ablaze. She woke her husband and they both stared in shock and disbelief. Their home was in the line of the fire. What were they going to do? Suddenly, the wife looked at her husband and said, "Quickly, run to the cemetery and pray at the grave of Rav Moshe. Ask his mechillah, forgiveness, for your disregard of his warning and ask him to intercede on our behalf."

The man might have been obstinate, but he was not a total fool. He ran to the cemetery and prostrated himself in front of the tzaddik's grave, begging forgiveness for his insolence. He promised that he would never again separate himself from the community and would always recite Bentching from a written text.

It did not take long for the miracle to occur. The man returned home to notice that all of the homes belonging to gentiles were gone, while his home was standing, unscathed, because the fire had just been put out - at his door step.

The lesson is there for all of us to heed.

So it will be that if he cries out to Me, I will listen, for I am compassionate. (22:26)

When the oppressed cry out to Hashem, they have a captive audience - Hashem listens and responds. The response may not always be what we want to hear, but our entreaty is never ignored. The word that the Torah uses to describe Hashem's compassion, chanun, is a derivative of chinam, free,

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implying that Hashem's compassion is often the result of His altruism, rather than a reward for something we deserve. It is Hashem's boundless love for His People that catalyzes His compassion - not necessarily our own worthiness. If so, why do we find tragedy occurring in some of the finest homes? Unquestionably, Hashem's ways are a secret to which the human mind is not privy, but how are we to understand the meaning of His unwarranted compassion in the context of catastrophe?

As we said, Hashem's ways are beyond the grasp of human ken. In place of some rationale, I cite a letter of condolence which Horav Yosef Sholom Elyashiv, Shlita, sent to the bereaved family of a young Jewish scholar who was taken suddenly from them.

"Regarding the question that I was asked: Why? For what reason did Hashem do this? I cannot answer such a question. Hashem's ways are hidden from us, but the "Rock - perfect in His work" (Devarim 32:4). We believe that Hashem's ways are just - even though, due to our limitations, we do not understand them. Nonetheless, I would like to quote the Zohar HaKadosh on Parashas Vayishlach: David HaMelech was born without years. In other words, no specific time was allotted for his life. When Adam HaRishon saw this, he granted him seventy years of his life. We derive from here that a person can live in this world and be unaware that every day of his life is a special gift that Hashem, in His overwhelming kindness, has given him. Therefore, one must thank Hashem for whatever life has been granted to him, for that life (however short or adverse) might be something special that was granted to him above and beyond that to which he was entitled. One who was fortunate enough to have spent his time on this earth serving Hashem, warranting the crown of Torah, earning the crown of a good name and meriting to leave after him a generation of committed, righteous offspring, is truly a blessed individual." While these words may not decrease the pain, they give us a positive insight and help us to maintain perspective under the most trying moments. Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, cites an incident that took place concerning Horav Shmuel Birnbaum, zl, the venerable Rosh Yeshivah of Mir, America. The Rosh Yeshivah sustained two heartrending losses with the passing of two of his sons at a young age, under tragic circumstances. It was during the shivah, mourning period, for the second catastrophe that the Rosh Yeshivah sat there in deep pain, unable to accept comfort. One of his closest students moved over to his rebbe and asked, "Rebbe, if Avraham Avinu would have carried out Hashem's command during the Akeidas Yitzchak, and Yitzchak would have been slaughtered, would Avraham have to sit shivah?"

The Rosh Yeshivah thought for a moment and said, "It seems that if this was the will of the Almighty, then it would countermand shivah. How can one sit shivah and mourn for an occurrence that Hashem Himself in His Glory commanded Avraham Avinu to carry out?"

"If that is the case," the student continued, "can the Rosh Yeshivah question the tragedy that took place with his son? Is there any doubt that this is the unequivocal will of Hashem? This is what we believe, that everything is in accordance with Hashem's will. It is not as apparent as it was at the Akeidah, so, therefore, we must sit shivah, but we must permit ourselves to be consoled."

The Rosh Yeshivah looked at his student and said, "Nichamtani. You have comforted me."

Do not respond over a dispute to tilt after the many. (23:2)

According to the simple interpretation of this pasuk, it is exhorting us to convict a defendant of capital punishment only if there is a majority of two judges that render a guilty verdict. A court that tries capital cases is comprised of twenty-three judges. A verdict of acquittal can be passed with a

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majority of one. Hence, when twelve judges find for acquittal and eleven for guilty, the defendant is found innocent. In order to issue a guilty verdict, it has to be at least thirteen to ten. Rashi adds a homiletic interpretation based on the fact that the word riv, dispute, is written chaseir, missing a yud, which makes it sound like rav, master, or rabbi. This prompts Rashi to say, "Do not respond against a master," meaning that they may not dispute the ruling of the outstanding member of the court. Therefore, in cases of capital punishment, they begin polling the judges from the side, so that the lesser judges may state their opinion first.

Rashi is teaching us the importance of listening to the manhig, leader, of a community. Regrettably, this is not in vogue in contemporary times, when we often do what we want or what conforms to our perception of right and wrong. Torah leadership is hardly an issue to some. Perhaps the following episode will explain what seems to be the standard today. In a small community in Eastern Europe, the boorish members assembled and decided to rebel against the leadership of the town's rabbi. Sadly, this was not unusual. It was just that these individuals lacked the "finesse" and "diplomacy" that some of today's self-righteous, duplicitous denizens of the Jewish community manifest. These people had no shame, and they told it from their own perspectives. They saw no reason for the rav to have the last word regarding kashrus, education, mikveh and other religious activities. After all, they were the majority, and the Torah enjoins us to follow the majority.

The rabbi was as clever as he was a scholar. He listened to their claims and replied, "Let me share a story with you. Once, all two hundred and forty-eight organs of the body got together and came to the head with a challenge. They felt that they were all nothing more than his servants. He made the decisions for the body, and they had to follow along obsequiously. He never consulted with them. Does the Torah not teach us that the majority rules? Why did he not listen to the Torah?"

"The head was not stymied by their allegation. He replied, 'The Torah is addressing a case in which the Sanhedrin, the great body of Jewish Law, is comprised of seventy-one heads, each one a Torah scholar of great erudition and sterling character. When one is confronted with so many heads, it is necessary to question each one and obtain his opinion. Thus, if there is no consensus, we follow the majority. Among all of you, however, there is not a single head. You are all tails, each one vying to present his opinion. The axiom of "majority rules" does not apply in such a circumstance!'"

Three times during the year shall your men folk appear before the Lord, Hashem. (23:17)

The idea of Aliyah l'Regel, pilgrimage to Yerushalayim for the Three Festivals, is repeated three times in the Torah: in Parashas Mishpatim; in Parashas Ki Sissa (Shemos 34:24); and in Parashas Re'eh (Devarim 16:16). Horav Yosef Sholom Elyashiv, Shlita, posits that these three sets of three emphasize the three primary principles of faith upon which our religion is founded. They are: the existence of Hashem; Torah from Heaven; Divine Providence. We believe in the Supreme Being/Hashem Who gave us the Torah at Har Sinai and Who guides and directs every aspect of the world and our lives.

The Pesach Festival attests to the existence of Hashem. Indeed, Hashem begins the Ten Commandments by introducing Himself as the One Who took us out of Egypt, as opposed to the One Who created the world. Hence, it is something one must believe. It is not something that we saw, but the exodus from Egypt was experienced by the entire Jewish People. The experience was transmitted through the generations from parent to child so that it has become inculcated into our psyche.

On Shavuot, Hashem gave us the Torah amid miracles and wonder, on a fiery mountain that

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was resounding with thunder and lightning. On this day every year, man can reflect upon the meaning of the festival and what it represents. The Torah is eternal and has the same validity to us today as it had some thousands of years ago when it was given to us on Har Sinai.

The Festival of Succos provides us with a unique window into Hashgachah Pratis, Divine Providence. The succah, which all observant Jews either build or sit in, might have for its base a variety of components. In other words, one person will have a simple four wall succah made of wood or fiberglass, while his neighbor might have an addition to his house that is converted into a succah. One area in which all succos coincide is the roof: the schach, covering, must be kosher and uniform, its covering meeting the criteria for all Jews across the board. This teaches us that there is one covering for all Jews. We are all individually and collectively under Hashem's protection and guidance. This is the lesson of Succos.

Three Festivals - three times - three lessons.

And these are the ordinances that you shall place before them. (21:1)

Parashas Mishpatim addresses civil and tort law. Interestingly, it follows closely after the Aseres HaDibros, Ten Commandments. Surely, there must be a message in this juxtaposition. Simply, Hashem is telling us that religion applies to all areas of life. Parashas Mishpatim and the Ten Commandments were both delivered at Har Sinai, prior to the forty-day period during which Moshe Rabbeinu received the entire Torah. Clearly, we see that the laws involving one's relationship with his fellow man are no different than the Ten Commandments. Thus, during the same session in which Hashem taught Moshe the most fundamental mitzvos, such as the unity of G-d, he also taught him the laws of damages incurred by one's cow. How are we to understand this?

Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, derives from here that one who feels he is above the mishpatim, ordinances, that regulate civil and tort law, is indicating that he has a similar attitude concerning his belief in Hashem. The two beliefs accompany one another. One who believes in Hashem believes that his annual livelihood is decided on Rosh Hashanah. If he resorts to cheating and other forms of irreputable behavior in business, he demonstrates that he does not believe that Hashem provides for him. One who internalizes the idea that Hashem provides whatever he needs does not have to resort to behavior that is unbecoming a Jew. To distinguish between mitzvos is to deny their Source.

If you buy a Jewish bondsman. If he has nothing, he shall be sold for his theft. (22:2)

Chazal teach us that the eved Ivri, Jewish bondsman, was a thief who was sold to pay back his debt. We must endeavor to understand why the Torah chose to begin this parsha specifically with the laws of eved Ivri. Horav Yaakov Neiman, zl, gives the following analogy to explain this. A man is blessed with two sons. One son is very successful, an absolute pleasure in school. He just soaks up everything that he is taught. Discipline is never an issue with him. As time progresses, he grows into an exceptional talmid chacham, Torah scholar. Eventually, he assumes a position as a rosh yeshivah, disseminating Torah to the masses. It goes without saying that he has been a tremendous source of nachas, satisfaction, to his parents. Their other son was quite different. School was an experience that

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did not agree with him. He could not get along with his rebbeim, and they could not get along with him. Torah study just did not turn him on. In an effort to satisfy his growing boredom, he gravitated to places that were not conducive to his spiritual or moral growth. His social base coincided with his negative lifestyle, attracting friends from the dregs of society. He had every opportunity for spiritual growth, but he ignored it, until he ended up on the other side of the law.

Now, asks Rav Neiman, about whom does the loving father constantly worry: his son who is a rosh yeshivah, disseminating Torah to hundreds of students; or the son that is either on the street or spending time in jail? Obviously, the first son, from whom he derives much nachas, is not on his mind. It is his second son that preoccupies most of his waking hours with worry. What will he do next? Where will he end up tonight? Is he safe or is he hurt? These questions are the father's daily companion.

Hashem also worries about this son. The son who steals and does not have the money to pay back his debt is the son that "occupies" Hashem's time. Therefore, when the Torah begins the parsha that addresses the relationships between man and his fellowman, Hashem wants us to know what and who His priorities are. He notifies us that the son who steals and is a problem, who is always in trouble, he is Hashem's concern. How can he be brought back to a positive lifestyle, to a life of Torah? If this is Hashem's concern, it certainly should also be ours. This is the message that the Torah is conveying with its placement of eved Ivri at the forefront of the parsha.

A similar idea is to be gleaned from the Torah's drawing a distinction between the payment for one who steals an ox or sheep, either selling or slaughtering the animal. He must pay five times the value of the ox or four times the value of the sheep. The difference between the two species is attributed by Chazal to the embarrassment that the thief sustains when he must carry the sheep on his shoulders in order to make his escape. This embarrassment is considered by the Torah as sufficient reason for reducing the payment for a stolen sheep. Once again, we see Hashem's love and concern for His errant son. Hashem does not punish like an unfeeling judge whose need for objectivity can, at times, cloud the punishment he must decree against the thief. He is not allowed to take extenuating or mitigating circumstances into account. He must address the law in black and white. In contrast, Hashem has room for grey. He punishes as a loving Father, taking into consideration all of the aspects of His son's behavior.

The parshah concerning the eved Ivri is a parsha of chinuch, education. The Torah is teaching us how to respond to a person who resorts to stealing as a means of a livelihood. He is sold into servitude to a kind and benevolent master who must do everything possible to make the servant feel comfortable and at home. He must treat him with the utmost respect and do nothing that will in any way impinge on his dignity. When he leaves, the master must give him gifts as they part ways. All of this is to send a message to the thief: We care about you. We have not given up hope on you. We look forward to welcoming you back into a life of Torah and mitzvos. When the thief sees that there is still hope for him, that the door to his return has not been shut, he has a positive attitude towards returning and adopting a new lifestyle of commitment to Torah and mitzvos.

Interestingly, this approach should work in all areas of chinuch, with all types of students. One should not wait until a student falls prey to a negative lifestyle before he acts toward him in a positive and caring manner. The best and most effective therapy is pre-emptive.

And the master shall bore through his ear with an awl, and he shall serve him forever. (21:6)

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A person is sold as an eved Ivri, Hebrew servant, serves his six years, and now refuses to leave. He wants to continue his servitude, claiming that he likes his master and the situation that he is in. Can he stay? The Torah frowns on such an appeal, but permits it under certain circumstances in which the eved goes through an induction process. His ear is bored with an awl and he is then allowed to continue as a servant until the Yovel, Jubilee year, after which he goes free. Chazal view the ritual of boring his ear as a form of punishment. "The ear that heard at Har Sinai, 'Bnei Yisrael are My servants - and not servants to servants (other people). This man acquired a new master for himself. Let his ear be bored.'" Clearly, Chazal do not paint a laudatory picture of the eved who desires to continue his servitude. What is really wrong with his request? Life in the "outside" world is fraught with challenges. Why not opt for a secure job, three meals a day and a home with a family? Is that so bad?

This is a recurrent theme throughout rabbinic literature: the ability to choose between two opposing opportunities or ideas. Hashem has granted us the ability to choose: between right and wrong; between life and death; between positive and negative. There is always a competition between these two poles, each opting to win our approval. Hashem says, "Life and death I have given (before) you, blessing and curse, and you should choose life" (Devarim 30:19).

We are endowed with seichel, common sense. We are provided with an education. Hashem wants us to make use of our G-d-given talents and abilities to employ our education and make the correct choice. At least, we should not shy away from our responsibility to confront the situation head on and make a viable choice.

Life is filled with challenges, fraught with dilemmas. We must decide who to marry, which field of endeavor to enter, how to educate our children, and to which school we send them. The list goes on and, as it continues, we become bogged down with decision-making to the point that it takes its toll on our health and welfare. How often do we muse, "I wish someone else would make the decision for me!"? After all is said and done, however, we all know that the "buck stops here." We must decide, and we must live with our decision. That is life. For some, this is the excitement of life. For others, this is what they fear. They would rather bury their heads in the ground than face the challenge of making a decision.

What we do not understand, explains Horav Chananya Malkah, Shlita, is that making a decision is not a challenge, but a responsibility. Shirking responsibility is the defining character trait of a weak person. An eved is someone who has stolen money in order to support himself. He has no way of paying back what he has stolen, so the court sells him as a servant to a benevolent master who will pay off his debt and support him for six years. He should then leave. This particular servant, however, has fallen in love with the easy lifestyle of servitude. He receives his three meals without having to fend for himself in the public workplace. His family is provided for. His children's education is addressed. Basically, he does not have any worries: no competition; no decisions; no aggravation. For what more can a person ask? Why should he not love his master? He now has the opportunity to escape from the reality of life with its constant struggles and decisions. What does he have to lose?

He loses himself, his individuality. A servant is content to have someone else take care of making his decisions for him, limiting his choices. He would rather defer his individuality to another person than confront making a decision and living with the consequences of deciding between different options. It is too much competition for his mind to handle. This attitude runs counter to everything the Torah teaches us. One must take responsibility, "step up to the plate," and personally make a decision. Someone else cannot live my life - I must live my life. When an eved says, "I love my master. I want to

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continue on as a slave," he is shirking his responsibility as a Jew. In fact, he denigrates himself as a human being.

Those who find fulfillment in life are those who change what should and can be changed - or, at least, they make a reasonable attempt to do so. They accept what cannot be changed, and they continue from there. They do not run away and hide. Each individual's life is a large block of stone. He, himself, is the sculptor. His ideas, ideals and talents are his tools. With his will, he can create anything. With a lack of will, he is left with a block of stone.

People do have choices in life and action. It is these choices that define greatness, heroism and freedom. Through choice, one preserves his independence, suppresses his irritability with life, overcomes apathy and elevates his spirituality. People who have survived the concentration camps remember the men and women who walked through the barracks comforting others, even giving away their last piece of bread. As a noted psychologist once wrote, "These people may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from man, but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance.

The eved shirks this freedom and hides from this responsibility. This is the root of his sin. Hashem granted him abilities, and he eschewed them. It is one thing to do this temporarily for six years, but to settle for such a lifestyle for life - is sinful. Chazal teach us that there is no free man like the individual who studies Torah. One who devotes himself to Torah transforms himself into an intelligent, thinking individual. He thinks, hence, he understands. Learning clarifies the individual's relationship to all areas of life and avails him the opportunity to make a realistic, cogent decision. It gives one a hashkofas ha'chaim, perspective on life, based on a heritage from the past that has been tempered in self-sacrifice.

The word intelligence is a derivation of two Latin words: "inter" and "legere." "Inter" means between, and "legere" means to choose. Intelligence is the capacity to choose between two alternative courses of action and to make moral decisions. This ability is called bechirah chafshis, a basic tenet of our religion. True freedom is the ability to dominate over our own feelings and to prevail over impulses and thoughts. The Torah gives us this ability. The eved runs from life's opportunities, because he would rather serve than prevail. He refuses to accept the responsibility that comes with making a choice.

To the elders he said, "Wait for us here... Behold! Aharon and Chur are with you; whoever has a grievance should approach them." (24:14)

As Moshe Rabbeinu was about to leave for his ascension upon Har Sinai, he instructed the elders to remain behind and take charge of the leadership of the people. He added that primary responsibility of managing the nation would be in the hands of Aharon and Chur. Regrettably, at the most critical time in the nation's history, they did not follow these instructions. They did not consult with their elders. The Torah in Vayikra 9:1 writes: "It was on the eighth day, Moshe summoned Aharon and his sons, and the elders of Yisrael." The Torah continues with the two offerings that were to be brought: Aharon brought a young-bull for a Sin offering, accompanied by a ram for an Elevation offering; the people were to bring a he-goat for a Sin offering, accompanied by a sheep for an Elevation offering. Toras Kohanim explains that Aharon's young bull atoned for the sin of the Golden Calf, while the people's he-goat atoned for the sin of the mechiras Yosef, sale of Yosef, by his brothers, when they slaughtered a he -goat and dipped Yosef's multi-colored cloak in its blood. These two sins stand at the

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forefront and are archetypical of sin in general. The mechiras Yosef is the source for all sins which are bein adam l'chaveiro, between man and his fellow man. The sin of the Golden Calf serves as the source for all sins that fall under the category of bein adam l'Makom, between man and G-d.

Horav Yosef Zundel Salant, zl, asserts that these sins had a common failing which brought about their ignoble consequence: they did not consult with their elders, their gedolim, spiritual leadership. When the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf, they ignored Aharon and Chur, whom Moshe had designated as his surrogates during his absence. They should have approached these leaders to seek their counsel. They did not and, therefore, they sinned. Likewise, before Yaakov's sons decided to act against Yosef, they should have sought advice from the zakan ha'dor, elder of the generation, Yaakov Avinu. They did not, hence, they sinned. Now, when they are bringing korbanos, sacrifices, to atone for their misdeeds, it is critical that the zekeinim, elders, be there as atonement. Their presence sends a message: no longer will we act without direction from our spiritual leadership.

Horav Matisyahu Solomon, Shlita, points out that we recite in the tefillas Shemoneh Esrai: Al hatzadikim, "On the righteous, on the devout, on the elders of Your People, the family of Israel." We are praying for our spiritual leadership without whom we cannot lead our lives in accordance with the letter and spirit of the law. This tefillah is to be recited with the same level of kavanah, concentration and devotion, as the other berachos of Shemoneh Esrai, because we realize that our elders are indispensable to our spiritual welfare.

Our nation is different from other nations in that we cannot survive without the institution of zekeinim, elders. Other nations can exist without being led by sages or elders. We are unique in the fact that our zekeinim are a necessity, not merely a luxury. Rabbi Akiva compares Klal Yisrael to a bird. Just as a bird cannot fly without wings, so, too, are we helpless without our elders. Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, explains that a bird without wings has even less capabilities than any other creature/animal that had never possessed wings in the first place. Without wings, the bird is a helpless, pitiful creature. We are similar to that bird. Without our leadership, we are helpless and pitiful. Our zekeinim are the sine quo non of our survival. To usurp the power of the elders is tantamount to striking a fatal blow at the life force of the Jewish nation.

Rav Matisyahu relates that he heard a more penetrating perspective from Rav Chaim. A generation that has lost its spiritual leadership is referred to as a dor yasom, an orphaned generation. Rav Chaim explained that an orphan seems to have someone to address his needs. There is either a surrogate, a guardian or an orphanage. There is someone who cares about him and who will continue to take care of him. A yasom, however, is a person whose needs are not really known to us. Even the individual that cares for him has no clue as to what the orphan's needs actually are. Only a father and mother know what their child needs. Only parents fight with mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, to see to it that their child's needs are provided for. They know, and they provide. When a child becomes orphaned, he loses the people who understand his needs. A generation who has lost its elders has lost the individuals who had been acutely aware of its needs. The elders are Klal Yisrael's guardians, who understand their character and the true nature of their needs. A simple person provides; a gadol knows what to provide.

If you buy a Jewish bondsman, he shall work for six years. (21:2)

The Torah's treatment of the Jew who falls on hard times and resorts to stealing as a means of support is in total contrast with secular law. The secular world views a thief as having a habitual,

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chronic failing: once a thief, always a thief. The punishment that is imposed upon a thief is a prison term where he spends his days and nights with individuals of all walks of life, perpetrators of all forms of crime. By the time he "graduates" from prison, he has been exposed to every type of human deficiency. He entered as a thief, and he leaves as an authority on every form of abomination.

The Torah takes an approach that is radically different. Understanding that a lack of self-esteem might be a precursor to this person's downfall, the Torah seeks to imbue him with a positive state of mind and, thereby, raise his self-esteem. He stole; he cannot repay his debt. Bais Din will find a way for him to reimburse his victim, while simultaneously placing him in an environment that would be therapeutic for the issues that confront him.

While some of us might take issue with the thief's ignoble background, the Torah insists that once the thief is sold as a Jewish bondsman, everything changes. Indeed, Chazal say that one who purchases an eved, servant, actually purchases a master. First of all, the actual sale must be performed with utmost dignity. The thief is not sold publicly. It must be a private sale, one that will uphold his respectability. A man who steals has lost hope. We must see to it that his aspirations and confidence return. Everything about being an eved is focused toward this goal. The master may not demand that he undertake any form of hard labor. He must speak to him with respect and treat him as an honored member of the family. Horav Yechezkel Sarne, zl, asserts that the relationship that the master must retain with the eved supercedes even that which every Jew must establish with his fellow Jew. We have a mitzvah of V'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho, "Love your neighbor as (you love) yourself." In the event that this is impossible, as in a situation when there is only one cup of water for both of them to survive, then we say, chayeicha kodmin, "your life precedes his." In other words, there is no stipulation of kamocho, "as yourself," if your own life is in danger. Concerning the eved, however, this law does not apply. The eved is always first.

In the master's home, the eved learns how to act towards others. He learns respect for others, and develops self-respect for himself. One who respects his fellow Jew could neither hurt nor steal from him. The six years that the eved spends in his master's home is an educational process which disciplines and enlightens him. It is a process that indoctrinates him with the character development that he is sorely missing and fosters within him a sense of self-esteem. When the eved realizes his true self-worth, he will never again resort to denigrating himself with an act of theft.

The Torah begins Parashas Mishpatim, the parsha which addresses civil law, with the laws pertaining to the eved Ivri, by design. It teaches us that regardless of how low a person has sunk, it is our mutual responsibility to assist in his rehabilitation, so that he can once again return to Hashem and serve him productively. Furthermore, the Torah intimates to us the inestimable value of each and every Jew. We may never give up hope - on anyone.

If has nothing, he shall be sold for his theft... If the theft shall be found in his possession... he shall pay double. (22:2,3)

In the Talmud Bava Kamma 79b, Chazal distinguish between a ganav, thief, and a gazlan, robber. The thief must pay a fine of keifal, double the principle. If he does not have the ability to repay his "debt," he is sold into slavery to cover what he owes. The robber, on the other hand, pays only the principle - if he is able. If he is unable to pay, he does not. Indeed, the halachah should have been the opposite, since the gazlan, robber, grabs with force, while the thief sneaks in at a time when people will

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be unaware of his presence. Chazal explain that there is another element to the ganav's nefarious deed that demands an extreme form of atonement: his attitude towards Hashem. The robber is evil, but he does not conceal this from anyone. He acts openly and blatantly, stealing and plundering to his heart's content. The ganav, on the other hand, is ashamed of what people might say. Therefore, he sneaks into the home under the protective veil of night. He does not want people to know that he is a thief, but what about Hashem? Does he give greater recognition to what people might think than to what Hashem knows? Apparently, he does. One who attributes greater eminence to man than he does to Hashem deserves a greater punishment.

In an alternative exegesis, Horav Tuviah Lisitzin, zl, suggests that the ganav has acted surreptitiously, surveying the house, developing a relationship with the owner, so that he could determine the most opportune time to break into the house. He has become the owner's friend, so that he can steal from him, or he takes advantage of a current friendship to further his miscreant goal. This is low. It takes a real scoundrel to use people in such a manner. He has manipulated a friend, so that he can steal from him. The person deserves a punishment commensurate with his contemptibility.

This idea surfaces again in connection with the din, law, of to'ain taanas ganav, a watchman who claims and swears that the object he was asked to guard was stolen. If witnesses testified that he has lied, and the object has been discovered in his possession, the shomer, watchman, pays keifal, double. If the watchman were to claim, however, that the object was lost, and it was discovered later that he lied, he does not pay. Why? In both cases, the watchman has lied and sworn falsely. What difference does it make what it is that he has lied about?

In the Talmud Bava Metzia 94b, Chazal say that an aveidah, a lost article, is analogous to a peshiah, an act of negligence, while geneivah, theft, has a greater resemblance to an oneis, an accident. Therefore, a watchman who claims that the article he was guarding has been stolen from him is attempting to present himself as being wholesome and upright. An "accident" occurred, and the article was stolen. Nebech, it is unfortunate, but he cannot be blamed. The one who claims that the object has been lost is willing to present himself as having been negligent concerning its care. In both cases, the shomer is a liar, but in one of them, the case of geneivah, he seeks to conceal his true character. He is, therefore, punished accordingly.

We now have a new understanding of the sinner who covers up his true nature. He demonstrates that he has greater respect for what people think than for what Hashem knows. That is like adding insult to injury by compounding his sins.

If you encounter an ox of your enemy or his donkey wandering. You shall return it to him repeatedly. (23:4)

The Torah in Sefer Devarim 22:1 writes a similar enjoinder, but uses a different word to describe the circumstance in which the animal is now found. There it says, "You shall not see the ox of your brother, or his sheep, or his goat, cast off... You shall surely return them to your brother." The use of the word nidachim, "cast off," as opposed to toeh, wandering, which is the Torah's word of choice in Parashas Mishpatim, prompts the Ramban to distinguish between the situations that each pasuk addresses. Toeh, wandering or straying, is a term implying that the animal has just deviated slightly from the correct path and can subsequently be returned without much problem. Nidachim, however, implies that the animal has run far away. It has distanced itself from its home and its master. In

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addition, in Sefer Devarim, the Torah adds a sheep and goat to the list of lost animals. Both of these animals will find it difficult to return on their own to their masters' homes.

The Chofetz Chaim, zl, views these pesukim as an imperative for each and every one of us to demonstrate concern for the spiritual well-being of our brethren. If the Torah emphasizes its concern for a Jew's valuables, for his ox, donkey, or sheep, certainly it behooves us to, at least, do the same and more for its owner, our Jewish brother or sister, who has strayed or even who has distanced himself far from the Jewish mainstream. Moreover, Chazal teach us (Bava Metzia 31A) that we derive from the words, *hasheiv teshiveim lo*, "you shall return it to him repeatedly," that one is enjoined to return the animal even one hundred times. Consequently, by implication, we are obligated to return a lost Jewish soul as often as necessary. Caring for a lost Jewish soul is not a one-time deal; it is a mission that one must undertake regardless of the daunting nature of this task.

The Chofetz Chaim adds that those in our generation who have become alienated from the Torah are not real sinners. They have not acted with animus towards the Torah. They simply neither know, nor have they ever experienced, the beauty and serenity of a Torah way of life. They are no different than lost sheep who have strayed far away and have no way of returning home - on their own. Those that have the talent and ability to reach out to the estranged Jew must do so, and those who lack either the talent or self-confidence to act personally should at least support those who do.

When we reflect upon American Jewry, we realize that the Torah renaissance to which we are privy today is -- for the most part -- the work of a handful of dedicated laymen and Roshei Yeshivah who toiled *b'mesiras nefesh*, with self-sacrifice, to plant the seeds of Torah in this country. Horav Yehudah Heschel Levenberg, zl, came to New Haven, Connecticut, in 1922, and founded the first advanced yeshivah in America. He came at the behest of the Alter, zl, m'Slabodka, Horav Nossan Tzvi Finkel, zl. His devotion to his students and his dedication and zeal to build Torah in the American spiritual wasteland were guided by a unique compass. It was a tradition from the great tzaddik, Horav Shimshon, zl, m'Ostropolia, who said that to introduce Torah to a new country, one must be ready to sacrifice everything, even his life. He succeeded in producing a number of the gedolei Torah who guided the past, and whose lives continue to inspire the present generation of bnei Torah. In order to feed his students, Rav Levenberg would go from door to door, if necessary. In fact, at one point, he was even reduced to collecting tomatoes from Jewish farmers in the area, so that he could feed his students.

On his deathbed, he related the following to his close student, Horav Sender Linchner, zl: "Do you know the meaning of *mesiras nefesh*? You probably think of *mesiras nefesh* as being burned at the stake to sanctify Hashem's Name. No. That is *mesiras haguf*, sacrifice of the body. I could have remained in Slabodka and spent my life going through *Shas* (the entire Talmud) many times. Instead, I came to America and spent my days collecting tomatoes from Jewish farmers around New Haven, so that my talmidim would have something to eat. That is *mesiras nefesh*."

I could go on with stories about those who labored in the field of Torah, so that we, their beneficiaries, could be availed the multiplicity of Torah institutions that exist today. Every community had its own unique rav or rosh yeshivah, who, together with committed laymen, built Torah in their respective communities. I would be remiss, however, not to mention the individual who probably was the architect of Torah in America, Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl.

Rav Shraga Feivel was an individual who lived with a sense of responsibility for his fellow Jew. In fact, no subject so dominated his teaching or private conversation as the need for every Jew to concern himself with the fate of his fellow Jew. Among the most important phrases in his repertoire was, "What are you doing for Klal Yisrael?" He would go so far as to posit that a person who partakes

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of Hashem's bounty- who breathes His air, who eats His food, and who benefits from His knowledge - yet does not feel compelled to share his money, food or knowledge with others serves no purpose in Creation. He would interpret Chazal's maxim in Pirke Avos 2:18, Al tehi rasha bifnei atzmecha, "Do not judge yourself to be a wicked person," with a homiletical bend. Anyone who limits his efforts to himself alone - who is bifnei atzmecha, for himself - is derelict of his obligation as a Jew.

Rav Shraga Feivel went one step further in his devotion. He felt that reaching out meant to attend to a person's material needs, as well as to his spiritual deficiencies. There is no dearth of stories about Rav Shraga Feivel's sensitivity to the material needs of his students. He understood that a hungry boy could not learn, and that clothes for Yom Tov were a staple. The list goes on. A young refugee from a very distinguished European family arrived penniless at the yeshivah. Rav Shraga Feivel saw to it that this young man would "find" a dollar in his jacket every week. Furthermore, knowing that this delicate young man found it difficult to partake from the meals served in the kitchen, Rav Shraga Feivel thought of a ruse to supply him with an adequate meal every day. He told the young man that a distinguished Torah scholar had arrived from Russia. Since it was not befitting a man of his stature to eat his meals in the dining room, it would be best that he eat at a restaurant. Would the young man be willing to accompany the scholar to the restaurant, so that he not be compelled to eat alone? The ploy worked, and the young man had one daily meal at the restaurant.

Rav Shraga Feivel made it a point to know each student's financial situation. One of today's leading philanthropists remembers how, as a young student in Torah Vodaath, he suffered real want. His father had passed away, leaving his family with very little. Rav Shraga Feivel was acutely aware of his circumstances: "Before he would talk to me about an afternoon chavrusa, study partner, he would inquire if I had eaten a filling lunch. He always asked me about my mother, and how she was faring at home."

Tuition was never an issue that would bar anyone from attending the yeshivah, as long as Rav Shraga Feivel was at its helm. One day as he was walking through the hall, he heard a woman sobbing in the financial office. When he investigated, he discovered that this woman, who had three sons in the yeshivah, was literally begging for a tuition reduction. Observing this, Rav Shraga Feivel signaled to one of the officers to follow him out of the room, "Come, let us go see for ourselves how she is living." They went to her apartment and discovered a place where the very walls cried out from the poverty within. Rav Shraga Feivel took out a few dollars from his pocket and left it on the table.

Understandably, he reduced her tuition, explaining to the board that they were dealing with pikuach nefesh, issues that border on life and death. In the future, he instructed them to view all tuition issues in this manner. Torah is the lifeblood of our People. There is no reason to spill Jewish blood in order to have access to it.

Men such as Rav Shraga Feivel, and others like him who built Torah in this country, viewed their work as a mission, themselves as agents of the Almighty and their sense of responsibility for Klal Yisrael their raison d'etre.

If you see the donkey of someone you hate crouching under its burden, would you refrain from helping him? You shall help repeatedly with him. (23:5)

Rashi defines the word azov as ezrah, to help. One helps the donkey, regardless of the fact that the owner of the donkey is one who persists in committing sins, despite repeated warnings not to do so.

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He is someone whom it is permissible to hate, since he flaunts his degradation of the Torah. Yet, we are enjoined to offer and assist him. Targum Onkeles defines the word azov as abandon/refrain or desist. In this context, we are being told to abandon our animus towards this individual, desist from our resentment of his actions, overlook who he is and what he does in order to help him. Horav Zev Weinberger, Shlita suggests a corollary between these two definitions. One might think that while it is permissible to have a negative sentiment towards this individual, assisting him in his time of need is an action that takes place despite one's negative feelings. It is almost as if the "helper" wants to say, "I do not care for you. Yet, I am willing to help you." This is nekamah, pure revenge, a negative commandment in the Torah.

Targum Onkeles posits that one should synthesize both definitions of azov. First, abandon the hatred you have in your heart towards this individual. Find a favorable place in your heart for him. Then, help him. By first eschewing any feelings of contempt within his heart, the assistance he offers will be much more appropriate and meaningful.

You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. (22:21)

The Torah focuses its prohibition against taking advantage of the weak and helpless specifically with reference to the widow, orphan and convert, because they are the most susceptible to such treatment. But, clearly this admonition applies to anyone who is weak. Now, let us ask ourselves a question: do we know who is really weak, and who puts on a show that he is strong and filled with self-confidence? Do we have a clue as to "who" stands before us? How often do we attempt to excuse our behavior towards another Jew by saying, "I did not know that he had a problem. I did not know that there are issues at home." Everybody who stands before us is a potential orphan or widow. This means that the loneliness and helplessness that is so much a part of the lives of the widow and orphan might very well also be their companion. They, too, suffer but do not necessarily show it. There is only one option: we must view everybody who stands before us as having a potential problem and deal with them accordingly.

We have no idea how the way we act might affect another person in need. Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita, cites the following episode from the Mechilta. Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Shimon, two of the greatest Tannaim, were being led to their execution. Rabbi Shimon turned to Rabbi Yishmael and said, "My heart troubles me, for I know not for what sin I am being killed." Rabbi Yishmael replied, "Did it ever occur that a person came to you to have a judgment rendered concerning a halachic question and you asked him to wait until you finished your drink, or tie your shoe? The Torah says that you are not to cause another person anguish - regardless of the intensity of the pain." When Rabbi Shimon heard this, he said, "You have comforted me."

What Chazal are telling us is that we never know how what we might consider a simple delay, could be a major infringement on someone else's emotions. We must think before we act - and then think again, because it is so easy to hurt someone whose emotions are already frayed.

You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. (22:21)

People think that capital punishment is meted out only to one who sins with any of the three

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cardinal sins of murder, adultery, or idol worship. Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, cites a compelling incident from the Sefer Chasidim that teaches us otherwise. Indeed, if the person in question were alive today, we would probably speak of him in exalted terms and crown him with distinction. Nonetheless, he suffered a terrible and tragic punishment for his lack of empathy for a widow. The Sefer Chasidim relates a story about a man who tragically buried a number of his sons and those who survived did not have children to carry on their father's name. This individual was not a sinner; in fact, he was a Rosh Yeshivah who had over the years inspired many talmidim, students. Yet, prior to his death, the man confirmed that he had one sin that catalyzed all of these tragic occurrences. It seems that he had a younger sister who had been widowed and wanted to remarry. She was ashamed to articulate her feelings to her brother, who could have arranged a suitable match for her. The brother, who was presently speaking, said, "I could have helped her, but did not, because I wanted her property to revert to me."

One sin - a sin of omission - because he wanted to benefit from her possessions, was the cause of all this man's anguish. Certainly, one could find a rationale for justifying his non-action. She never asked for a husband! Should he be blamed for taking advantage of an awkward situation? Indeed, this was a man of distinction, a Torah scholar of reknown, who, quite possibly, wanted to use the money he would gain to sustain the students of his yeshivah. For this sin, his sons should die and he should never see grandchildren?

Apparently, Hashem views this incident from a different perspective. The Chida explains that this man was punished because his inaction caused this widow great pain. She could have had children but because of him, she was left childless. He caused a widow to suffer and that is something which Hashem does not overlook. How careful should we be in our inter-relationship with others - especially those who are helpless.

Distance yourself from a false word. (23:7)

There is no other transgression in the Torah whereby the Torah itself demands that we distance ourselves from it. Hashem is the essence of truth and He absolutely abhors falsehood. The Bais Halevi was well-known for his incredible integrity. Every word that left his mouth was the height of veracity. When he was rav in the city of Slutzk prior to accepting the rabbanus in Brisk, the beginnings of the Haskalah, Enlightenment, were taking root in the community. One day, a group of communal leaders came to him lamenting the fact that apostasy was beginning to seize the community. Heresy was rearing its ugly head and its tentacles were reaching into all areas of Jewish spectrum.

Rav Yoshe Ber looked at them with serious eyes and said, "What do you expect? Truth always wins out."

"What is the rav saying?" they asked incredulously. "How can the rav give credibility to kefirah, heresy?"

The rav looked them straight in the eyes and said, "I never said that they were correct. No! They are absolutely wrong in their beliefs, but they are sincere and truly believe in what they expound. Their heresy is founded in truth. They are true apostates! Therefore, they are successful. Regrettably, many of those among us are not really true yirei Shomayim, G-d-fearing. They are only acting outwardly as devout and pious Jews, but internally they do not really believe."

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While most of us would never blatantly tell an untruth, at times we stretch the truth because we do not want to hurt someone. For instance, someone approaches us for a loan, which we suspect he is incapable of paying back. What do I do; tell him the truth? That will make him feel bad. Lend him the money; I will lose it. So, the natural response is to lie and say, "I do not have any extra money right now." The Sefer Chasidim categorically forbids such behavior, claiming that a lie is a lie and the heter, dispensation, of darkei shalom, maintaining peaceful co-existence with a non-Jew does not apply even here, before the fact. It is only after an incident has occurred and nothing can be rectified, that Chazal have allowed one to be meshaneh b'diburo, change his words a bit, in order not to make a gentile upset and thereby instigate strife.

Now we come to the one place that most people have a difficult time maintaining their integrity: Shidduchim, information with regard to a potential matrimonial match. No one wants to utter a word of lashon hora, slanderous speech, and to say the truth might awaken some skeletons that have been buried deep in the proverbial closet. Some will say nothing, which, in effect, conveys a negative connotation. Others will openly prevaricate, an action which will only cause grief later on. The truth is probably the best route one should take, since this way the individual has the opportunity to explain whatever extenuating circumstances prevailed in causing whatever problem may exist within the family, or the prospective mate.

In the event one cannot tell the truth, either because it is too slanderous, or he fears repercussions, he should say nothing, by avoiding the issue or getting onto another subject. The option of lying should not exist. Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl, was wont to say, "One should not articulate with his mouth something that his heart cannot attest to its veracity. Horav Pinchas Koritzer, zl, said it differently, "When the sin of speaking an untruth will be as serious as the three cardinal sins of murder, adultery and idol-worship, Moshiach will come."

You shall worship Hashem, your G-d, and He shall bless your bread and your water, and I shall remove illness from your midst. 23:25)

Hashem is a personal G-d, Who can be reached directly, without having to go through intermediaries. In prayer, we speak directly to Hashem, a worship which results in our receipt of His blessings. The effect of Tefillah is even more compelling when prayed b'tzibbur, in a public forum of ten or more men. The Ma'or Va'shemesh derives the significance of Tefillah b'tzibbur from the above pasuk. He notes that the pasuk begins in the plural, va'avaditem, "and you shall worship", and ends with a blessing to the individual in the singular, lachmecha, meimecha, mikirbecha, "your bread, your water, your midst." Why the change? He explains that if one prays in a communal forum, the effect will be so powerful that the individual will be blessed with parnassah, a livelihood that is easy to come by, and good health. Alternatively, "your bread and your water" are a reference to spiritual achievements which will be gained only by he who prays to Hashem b'tzibbur.

The Ma'or Va'shemesh adds that one who prays b'tzibbur will have access to spiritual opportunities that are beyond the purview of the average person. Indeed, he interprets this into the meaning of the pasuk in Mishlei 14:28, B'rov am hadras melech, "A multitude of people is a kings glory." The word hadras, which is translated as glory/beauty can also be translated as being derived from hadar, as in hadarna bi, "I changed my mind," remorse, or a reversal of one's earlier decision or opinion. We thus praise Hashem, that He reverses His decision, so to speak, in favor of those who pray to Him, b'rov am, in a large communal forum.

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The early commentators distinguish between Tefillah b'kavanah, prayer amid concentration and devotion, and Tefillah without kavanah. They compare the Tefillah without kavanah to a *guf b'li neshamah*, a body without a soul, which obviously has no sustaining life force. Likewise, without concentration, the prayer has no life to it. Individual prayer can easily fall into the category of Tefillah without kavanah, because one who prays alone is usually in a hurry, swallowing his words and certainly giving very little thought to them. The feeling of exaltation that one has upon praying with a large group, the enthusiasm, the excitement and fervor is overwhelming and inspiring. The words take on new meaning as one concentrates on their inner meaning, bringing one closer to Hashem.

The Ramban in his commentary to Shir HaShirim writes that one who prays b'tzibbur will have his prayer accepted by Hashem, even if he did not concentrate on every word. So great is the power of the tzibbur.

The significance of Tefillah b'tzibbur was recognized by the gedolei Yisrael throughout the millennia. Many stories are told of their overriding *mesiras nefesh*, devotion to the point of self-sacrifice, to be able to pray with a minyan. Rabbi Paysach Krohn in *Reflections of the Maggid* cites the Talmud in Berachos 47b that teaches us: "A person should always rise early (to go) to the synagogue, so that he should merit to be counted among the first ten." Chazal explain that the first ten to arrive receive a reward equivalent to all those who came afterwards. The Maharasha explains, that the Shechinah, Divine Presence, graces a place where people pray only after there is a minyan in attendance. Therefore, it is only the first ten who receive credit for "bringing" the Shechinah to their place of prayer. Those who come later certainly receive reward for praying in a place where the Shechinah's Presence is manifest, but it is the first ten who get the credit for availing them the opportunity. Chazal are telling us that the initial reward for those first ten is equal to what everyone else receives for praying in the presence of the Shechinah.

Rabbi Krohn tells an intriguing story that should inspire us. There was a young man who owned a furniture store in a small community. One morning he noticed smoke rising up between the slats of his parquet floor. He quickly ran to the basement to see what was wrong, and soon had his worst fears realized. A fierce fire was raging in the basement. He was unsuccessful in his attempt to extinguish the fire with a portable extinguisher. By the time he ran upstairs, the fire had already spread to the first floor. The furniture was all aflame. He ran to the phone to call the fire department and then returned to his store, to watch helplessly as it burned to the ground.

The fire department finally arrived, but, alas, all they could do was water down the adjacent store to make sure the fire did not spread. His business was gutted. It would be months before he could even dream of opening up again.

A few days after the fire, this young man came to shul and remarked to a friend, "You know, a few days prior to the fire, a fellow came over to me and commented about my late arrival to Minyan. 'You come to shul everyday,' he said, 'but why do you always come so late? You are never there at the beginning of davening.'"

I replied to him, "What difference does it make when I come? The main thing is that in the end I am there!" "Now I realize that the fire department also came - in the end - when my store had already been turned to rubble. It was too late. Hashem showed me that coming in the end is not good enough. It is no different than the fire department. It was too late."

While this may address those who are not there at the beginning of davening, there is another group that is equally disdainful - those who leave early. There are *Kaddeishim* which are recited at the end of davening for a reason. Apparently, they must be important since it is a point when the *yasom*,

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orphan, or one who is reciting Kaddish for the deceased, says Kaddish. There are those of us who feel that this portion of davening is not pertinent to us. We leave at will, or we justify our absence with some form of contrived need. Regrettably, those who must stay for that part of davening are those who say Kaddish. Let us not act in a manner that Heaven has reason for criticizing our behavior. The alternative to leaving at will is being compelled to staying for reasons beyond our control.

Everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will obey. (24:7)

Chazal teach us that when Hashem heard Klal Yisrael proclaim, "We will do and we will obey," He exclaimed, "Who revealed this secret to My children, the secret that the ministering angels use for themselves?" This is a reference to the fact that only angels have the same order of priorities; they obey Hashem's word without waiting for any explanation. Klal Yisrael's willingness to accept Hashem's command at face value, to be willing to act before they comprehended the command, elevated their status before the Almighty. What is the actual meaning of Naase v'nishmah, we will do and we will obey? Were they prepared to follow blindly and act without any clue as to what they were doing and why they were doing it?

The commentators, each in his own inimitable manner, explain this. Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, explains that Klal Yisrael were saying, "We will do - and we will understand after we carry out the mitzvah what is the rationale behind the command. Indeed, we realize that unless one performs the mitzvah, he is missing a sensitivity to it. We can attempt to explain the beauty of Shabbos to someone, but until he experiences it, he will not truly comprehend its unique character. This applies to all mitzvos. One must live it in order to feel an appreciation and understanding of it.

And his master shall bore through his ear the awl. (21:6)

Chazal explain that the ear is bored because it was the ear that heard that "Bnei Yisrael are My servants"(Vayikra 25:55). Yet, this eved, servant, felt so degraded that he chose to be a servant to a servant. He had the opportunity to leave servitude, to be a free man, but he chose to remain subservient to a human master. This man had no self-esteem. His ear was bored so that he would have a constant reminder of what he had done to himself. Why are we to wait six years to bore his ear? The beginning of his degradation was when he first became a servant. Why was he not bored then?

In his response to this question, Horav Yechezkel Levinstein, zl, delves into the human psyche. He distinguishes between two individuals who are on the ladder of spiritual ascendancy, both on the same rung: one is ascending, while the other is descending - rapidly. One individual is basically doing well, but, as of late, he has manifested a tendency toward slacking off a bit. He has exhibited a slight decline in his spiritual affiliation, and he is gravitating gradually toward the blandishments of his yetzer hora, evil-inclination. This man is in trouble. He stands on the precipice about to fall into the nadir of depravity. Although to all appearances he presents himself as being spiritually healthy, his slight decline can rapidly transform into an uncontrollable downward spiral.

The other individual has already fallen to the bottom of the pit. He has destroyed his spiritual status quo, but a yearning, a tiny spark within his consciousness, has begun to ignite. Deep in the recesses of his soul, an awakening is beginning. If this person continues with his quest, his success is ensured.

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There was an accepted maxim in the famed Bais HaTalmud of Kelm: a person who previously had not davened, prayed, with kavanah, proper concentration and devotion, but has now begun to recite some prayers with kavanah, is far better than he who has always davened with great kavanah which has recently begun to dwindle. Although one exhibits enormous kavanah, while the other manifests very little kavanah, the first is an oleh - he is ascending - while the latter is a yoreid - he is descending.

When a person is plummeting to the depths of depravity it is not an appropriate time to speak to him. He is in the throes of descent and, as he is plunging downward, he is not inclined to listen. The one who is ascending, however, is open to suggestion. While he may still be at the bottom of the ladder, he is facing upward. For him, there is hope.

At the point of his original sale, the servant is on a downward spiral. He has just stolen and been caught, but has no money to pay back his theft. He is willing to be sold into servitude. To bore his ear, to give him mussar, an ethical discourse, about what he is doing to his life will be to no avail - at this point. In contrast, the eved who has completed six years of labor, who has been a servant to another human being and has enjoyed it to the point that he wants to return to this life of subservience, has reached the bottom. He can only go up. Now is the appropriate time to speak to him, to bore his ear and convey the Torah's lesson to him. For him, there is hope for success.

*If you buy a Jewish bondsman, he shall work for six years; and in the seventh, he shall go free.
(21:2)*

The Ramban explains why the Torah's civil laws begin with the laws of eved Ivri, the Hebrew bondsman. The freedom that the Torah demands for these servants after six years is a direct corollary to Klal Yisrael's liberation from Egypt. Indeed, this is the reason that in the Haftorah for Parashas Mishpatim, Yirmiyahu HaNavi emphasizes freedom of the eved Ivri after six years, warning that a lack of adherence to this law will catalyze Klal Yisrael's national exile. Furthermore, the Yerushalmi in Meseches Rosh Hashanah says that the laws of eved Ivri were presented as the Jews left Egypt and reiterated at Har Sinai. We ask: Was there no other time to command Klal Yisrael concerning the laws of the Jewish servant? Was the Egyptian exodus the only venue for these laws? Could they not have waited until they reached Har Sinai? Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, provides a practical answer to this question. It was at a time when they themselves had just been liberated from bondage, when they had finally experienced the joy of freedom, that they would gladly accept a mitzvah that limits how long a Jew could be subjected to servitude.

Otzros HaTorah cites an incredible story that gives pragmatic application to the concept that one gains deeper insight into a matter after he has personally experienced a corresponding situation. When his enemies were seeking Nero Caesar of Rome, he escaped from the capitol and hid in the home of one of his trusted servants. Word got out that Nero was in the area, and an extensive search was instituted to find the monarch. Nero had nowhere to go, but to remain in the servant's home. When the rebels came and searched the house, Nero hid beneath a bed, pushing himself as far back as possible. The rebels entered the house and took it apart. They came to the bed, and instead of looking beneath it, they ran a sword back and forth. Apparently, they did not go far enough, because the sword missed Nero by a fraction of an inch. He held his breath and - if the concept of prayer can apply to such a despot - he prayed. After awhile, the rebels gave up their search and left.

The war was finally over, and Nero's forces had triumphed. Now came the opportunity to repay

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those who had been faithful him. He called to the palace the servant who had risked his and his family's lives for the king and asked what he wanted as a reward. He could have anything he desired. The servant responded that he wanted just one thing. He wanted to know what went through the king's mind as he lay beneath the bed while the rebels were searching for him. How did he feel at that time? Of all the things that the servant could have requested, he chose something that made no sense. At least we understand why he was a servant.

Upon hearing his request, the king immediately instructed his guards to shackle the servant and throw him into the dungeon. The nerve of the man! His insolence was outlandish. To throw away such an unprecedented opportunity was chutzpah at its nadir. Therefore, in three days, Nero himself would perform his execution. The day of the execution arrived, and the prisoner was prepared for his final moments on earth. Nero climbed up the stairs of the gallows. He took the noose and placed it around the neck of his soon-to-be departed servant, pulling the rope slowly. The very last moment, as the servant was choking, Nero cut the rope, sparing him. At that moment, Nero whispered to the man, "Now you know how I felt under the bed!"

Nero explained his actions to the servant in the following manner: "I promised you anything that you wanted. Your request was one that simply could not be conveyed orally. I could not explain to you my true emotions. The only way that you could actually understand how I felt was to experience a similar situation first hand. I gave you the opportunity to experience what it felt like to be so close to death."

In order for Klal Yisrael to sense the inherent joy that a servant feels when he is liberated, so that they would accept the laws of eved Ivri correctly, it was essential that they hear the laws at a time when they were experiencing the joy of liberation.

You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. (22:21)

Only a very despicable person takes advantage of a widow or orphan. Regrettably, however, it happens. It is lamentable that those in power take advantage of those who are not. Those who are themselves insecure, frequently prey upon the weak and disadvantaged. They must exert their power over someone, so they choose to pick on the inherently vulnerable disadvantaged. Hashem will not tolerate the victimization of widows and orphans. He is the Father of orphans and the Judge of widows. They are not alone because they can turn to Hashem, Who will listen to their pleas.

Loneliness is a state which we all fear. It is not the loneliness of solitude that we fear. It is possible to be surrounded by a crowd and yet feel all alone. The number of people with whom we come in contact has nothing to do with our level of loneliness. The warmth of our hearts towards the people around us determines our level of loneliness. One can be in the midst of a crowd or in the comparative quiet of his home; it is a sense of self-worth - a feeling that others care about him and that he has friends who share common goals and aspirations - that drives away the feelings of loneliness. While at times it is good to be alone, it is never good to be lonely. A secular writer once defined city life as "millions of people being lonely together."

One who trusts in Hashem understands that he is never alone. Hashem is always with him. Moreover, a Jew has a past to which he can connect. He belongs to a tradition that is enduring and stable. The tragedy of so many of our alienated brethren is that they have severed their ties to the past. By uprooting themselves from our tradition, they have destroyed the bond of "belonging" to the Jewish

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family.

Hashem tells the widow and orphan that they are not alone. He is with them. This is the message for anyone who has experienced loneliness: Hashem is with you. There is no loneliness so great, so absolute, so utterly devastating than the loneliness of he who does not know to call upon Hashem in his time of need. He who cannot pray to Hashem with the inner confidence that he knows that he is being heard, that his entreaty is being acknowledged, is truly lonely. The ultimate answer to loneliness is faith in Hashem. The companionship of Hashem is the balm for all loneliness.

Lying in a hospital bed can catalyze this relationship. Hashem's Shechinah rests at the head of a sick person's bed. Finding oneself suddenly in a hospital bed can be a frightening experience. One day, we are movers and shakers, occupied with so many people and involved in many endeavors. Suddenly, it is all in the past. We are no longer occupied. We are passive respondents. We do not move; we are moved. We have become dependent upon the doctors, nurses, and our families. It is at this time of loneliness that we lay back and realize that we are not really alone. We are as alone as we want to be. The Shechinah is there to comfort and reassure us throughout our ordeal.

He shall pay five cattle in place of the ox, and four sheep in place of the sheep. (21:37)

One who steals livestock and either sells or slaughters it must pay five times the value of the ox and four times the value of the sheep. Chazal tell us that the Torah reduced the fine for a sheep, as a result of the embarrassment which the thief suffered when he carried the sheep on his shoulders. They add that if the humiliation of a common thief evokes Hashem's pity, how much more so should we be concerned with the feelings of innocent people. The Torah takes the feelings of a person very seriously. While no one would purposely hurt another person, all too often our thoughtlessness inadvertently causes unnecessary pain to another person. At times, our insatiable ego provokes us to act in a manner which, albeit unconscious, can have a detrimental effect on those around us. The following vignettes demonstrate how far some of our gedolim, Torah luminaries, went not to infringe upon another person's sensitivities.

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, the legendary Maggid of Yerushalayim, was a dynamic speaker. His words could penetrate the most obstinate heart and move the most intractable person. He related that he was once asked to substitute for a mashgiach in one of the yeshivos. The mashgiach had to go fundraising for an extended period of time. The students of the yeshivah asked Rav Sholom to give them shmuessen, ethical discourses, which was one of the functions of the mashgiach. Rav Sholom was in a quandary. He was asked to act as a mashgiach in the sense that he would speak with and motivate the bachurim, young men, of the yeshivah. Shmuessen was a function that belonged solely to the mashgiach. If Rav Sholom's discourses would be impressive, then word would get back to the mashgiach, and it might make him feel bad. On the other hand, did he have the right to impede the students' spiritual development if he had the ability and the charisma to reach out to them? He decided to ask Horav Yechezkel Levinstein, zl, mashgiach of Yeshivas Ponevez, for his opinion regarding the matter. Rav Chatzkel responded, "We have an accepted axiom that if the opportunity to build the Bais HaMikdash avails itself, but, simultaneously, this might cause someone to feel bad, it is better not to build!" Rav Sholom did not give the shmuessen.

In support of this, we see that Moshe Rabbeinu delayed going to Pharaoh for seven days, because he feared that his older brother, Aharon Hakohen, would be hurt. Imagine, Moshe knew that

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Klal Yisrael's liberation hinged on him, yet he refrained from going because he did not want to hurt his brother. This is one more reason why he was worthy of the mantle of leadership.

It is not uncommon for principals and teachers to showcase a specific student. After all, a teacher looks good when he can showcase the fruits of his labor. The school administration takes great pride in their students who excel academically. Regrettably, this is a standard by which the common person measures success. They rarely notice the student who is diligent, but does not receive an A on his test; or the student who epitomizes ethical behavior and exemplary demeanor, but does not possess the greatest mind. This is human nature, and it probably will not change. Horav Solumon Mutzafi, zl, was as brilliant as he was pious. His virtue and saintliness were legendary. At the young age of six years old, he was the undisputed academic scholar of his school in Baghdad. One day the principal told him that the Chief Rabbi of Baghdad and a group of philanthropists from America were coming to visit the school. The principal had decided that young Solumon would be tested publicly to demonstrate to the visitors his brilliance and breadth of knowledge. This would certainly benefit the school.

Solumon refused to be part of the show. He felt it was wrong to benefit from his Torah knowledge. In addition, it would hurt his fellow classmates. The principal insisted; the young boy refused. When Solumon saw that it was a losing battle, he hid. For two hours he concealed himself in order not to hurt the other boys' feelings. Even as a young child, this great tzaddik showed signs of greatness.

You shall not revile G-d. (22:27)

Chazal derive that the word Elokim is a reference both to G-d and to judges. While it is, indeed, forbidden to curse anyone, judges are often the brunt of people's curses, since they are compelled to render judgment which is not always popular - especially in the eyes of the individual who is on the losing end of a litigation.

Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, zl, served for a short time as Av Beis Din, head of the court, of Horav Yehoshua Leib Diskin, zl. Once during his incumbency, he was confronted with a bitterly disputed divorce case. He eventually ruled in favor of the husband, an act that incited the members of the wife's family. They felt that the ruling was unjust and were prepared to take the law - and the judge - into their own hands. They barged into Rav Yosef Chaim's house and began shouting and berating him as if he were the lowest scoundrel. They were so vicious and violent that the rebbetzin began to cry uncontrollably. In light of the fact that it was only a week before Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the days of judgment, their cruel words and curses left a powerful impact on her sensitive heart.

Throughout the tirade, Rav Yosef Chaim remained silent, seated peacefully at his table, never raising his head from the Talmud which he was studying. As the shouting began to get out of control, however, Rav Yosef Chaim arose, looked them straight in the eye, and made the following pronouncement: "Listen now to what I have to say." As soon as he spoke, a sudden silence enveloped the room.

"If you are correct in your claims against me, and my beis din and I erred in halachah, you have already succeeded in registering your complaint with Hashem. May He have mercy on us, for a judge is only human and can rule only in accordance with the facts presented before his eyes.

If, however, we are correct and you are wrong, if our rendering of the law is justified," Rav Yosef Chaim paused for a moment, as the protestors moved back bracing themselves for what was sure

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to be a scathing rebuke "Then I want you to know that I forgive you with a complete heart for your disgraceful behavior and for the terrible pain you have caused me and the members of my family - and I wholeheartedly wish that you are inscribed in the book of life for a good year!"

One can only imagine the shock and embarrassment that overcame the dissident group. The Rav's humility was overwhelming. They left the house in disgrace, as the neighbors began to congregate to determine the source of the commotion. A few days later, on Erev Yom Kippur, as Rav Yosef Chaim was returning from pouring his heart out in prayer at the Kosel HaMaraavi, the leader of the group of dissenters confronted Rav Yosef Chaim and begged forgiveness for his insolence. Rav Yosef Chaim reaffirmed that he had already forgiven him wholeheartedly. It was unnecessary to reiterate this. The man was visibly relieved to hear the Rav's reply. Rav Yosef Chaim then asked him a question which seemed to be a change of subject: "Tell me, have you purchased an Esrog yet?"

"What a question! Rebbe, I will have you know that I spent a small fortune securing what I feel is a most beautiful specimen, but, it was worth every penny!"

Rav Yosef Chaim continued, "Let us make a calculation. The Torah demands that a person spend up to -- and no more than -- one-fifth of his money to fulfill a positive commandment, such as the mitzvah of Lulav and Esrog. Yet, in order to avoid committing a negative commandment, one should be prepared to give up everything that he owns.

Now there is a negative command that says, 'You shall not curse a judge.' To what is the Torah referring with these words? It certainly is not addressing the party in whose favor the judge has ruled. He would be more likely to bless the judge than to curse him. It makes sense to say that the Torah is referring to the one who lost the case; he should not curse the judge. Let us go one step further. If he realized that the judge had ruled correctly and that he was wrong, he also has no reason to curse the judge. We must, therefore, conclude that the Torah is addressing the individual who is certain that the judge erred and miscarried justice against him. He is the one who is admonished not to curse the judge.

Now, I ask you, in comparing this negative commandment to the Torah's positive commandments, which must be taken more seriously?"

The individual took the hint and understood the point to which Rav Yosef Chaim was alluding. He was prepared to spend a small fortune to purchase an Esrog, but would do nothing to refrain from slandering and abusing the rav who had rendered judgment against him. Regrettably, this form of righteous hypocrisy still prevails.

Distance yourself from a false word. (23:7)

It is impossible for any human being to stand up to challenge the truth. Truth is an absolute which no one can circumvent. Ultimately, a person never suffers when he tells the truth. Indeed, one who lies only delays the inevitable. A person cannot elude the truth. His lies come back to haunt him. Regrettably, this is the way of the world. Lie whenever it suits you; bend the truth, if that is what it takes. Tanna Due Eliyahu cites the pasuk in Mishlei 19:3, "A man's foolishness corrupts his way." A person should be careful to act righteously and speak the truth. When he does, an angel is assigned to assist him to continue along this path. If, however, he is inclined towards evil and lying and deceit, he is assigned an angel who will mislead him. Thus, a person is led upon the path that he has chosen for himself.

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There are so many examples which demonstrate the ill effect of lying and the reward of speaking the truth. The following story is one of the most compelling examples which illustrate that one never compromises himself by being truthful. Horav David Luria, zl, the Radal was well-versed in secular subjects, as well as kol haTorah kulah, the entire Torah. He was proficient in several languages, including French. Once, a group of his antagonists slandered him before the government, claiming that he was a rebel who aided anti-Czarist forces. He was summarily arrested, brought to St. Petersburg and imprisoned. A few days later, he was summoned to appear before a group of government officials to confirm the charges against him. When the interrogation began, the officials spoke among themselves in French, thinking that this rabbi surely had no idea what they were saying. Hearing them converse, Rav David moved away. Observing this, the Chief Minister turned to him and said in a menacing tone, "Why did you not remain in the designated spot? How dare you move away!" "Your honor," answered Rav David in French. "I am sorry, but I noticed that the officials were speaking among themselves in French, thinking that I did not understand them. However, as you see, I am quite fluent in French. I could not listen to their conversation while deceiving them. It just would not be proper. I, therefore, moved away." The officials were quite taken aback with Rav David's integrity. As a result, he found favor in their eyes, and he was exonerated of all the charges leveled against him.

Horav Yechezkel Levenstein, zl, was another great tzaddik who represented integrity at its zenith. In his old age, he exerted himself to refrain from weeping when learning mussar, ethics, or, making a cheshbon ha'nefesh, personal introspection and accounting. While at times tears are beneficial, he nonetheless felt that he should restrain his emotions. He explained, "An old man tends to cry. If a heartfelt cry is influenced by external factors, it has been transformed from a noble expression to a lie with strong emotional backing."

This was the reason that Rav Yechezkel refused to deliver a eulogy at the funeral of Horav Yitzchak Aizak Sherr, zl. Tragically, one of Rav Yechezkel's grandchildren had recently passed away, and he knew that the tears he would shed would likely be influenced by his own personal grief.

The attribute of emes, truth, is an absolute upon which there is no room for compromise. With truth, it is either all or nothing. One either is truthful or he lies. Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, notes that for this reason when a person claims, "It is true. I tell you it is true!" we suspect him of prevaricating. When he says, "It is true!" for a second time, it weakens the credibility of the first time. Otherwise, why would he need to emphasize the fact?

Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl, the legendary architect of Torah in America was also known for his meticulous adherence to the truth. On one Simchas Torah, the students of Mesivta Torah Vodaath were dancing with great enthusiasm with the Torah. They spontaneously broke into a moving rendition of Bilevavi Mishkan Ivneh, "In my heart I will build a Sanctuary," one of Rav Shraga Feivel's favorite nigunim, songs. Suddenly, Rav Shraga Feivel stopped the dancing. The singing immediately came to a halt.

Rav Shraga Feivel later explained the reason for his actions. "I suddenly felt ill, as if I was about to faint, or G-d forbid, have a heart attack. Everything started spinning. I thought to myself, the last thing I want people to think is that he reached such an exalted state of ecstasy when he sang Bilevavi that his body could no longer contain his soul, and he passed away. I immediately decided to put an end to the dancing."

Sefer Chassidim teaches us regarding the awesome power of he who speaks only the truth. "When a person speaks truthfully and will not contemplate falsehood, then everything he thinks or declares shall be fulfilled, even if he does not mean it." The Chida writes about Horav Yosef Shmuel,

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the author of the Mesoras HaShas; "His words are listened to in the Heavens like those of the Rishonim."

The Chafetz Chaim would often send people who were in need of a tzaddik's blessing to Horav Yosef Zundel Hutner, zl, of Aisheshok. When questioned in regard to this practice, the Chafetz Chaim explained that Rav Yosef Zundel was an individual who guarded his tongue from any form of forbidden speech. He was a person who was especially careful not to utter any form of falsehood. Such a person had a sanctified mouth. Blessings that emanate from such a source of purity will be fulfilled by Hashem.

In his preface to Sefer Machtzis HaShekel, the Chasam Sofer writes that the author, Horav Shmuel HaLevi Keller, zl, was so scrupulous to speak only the truth that he was prepared to die rather than utter a falsehood: Once a corpse was found that had been stabbed to death. The murder weapon was found lying next to the body. There was no question regarding the knife's owner - it was Rav Shmuel. The terror that gripped the community was unimaginable. The entire community was thrown into despair. Quickly, the leaders of the community went to Rav Shmuel's house. After notifying him of the grim details, they implored him to tell the magistrate a lie, to assert that the knife was not his.

On the day of the trial, the judges called on him and asked if the knife belonged to him. He replied the following: "The truth will ultimately prevail. The knife is mine, but I did not perpetrate this evil deed."

Is it any wonder that his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch is so widely accepted?

And Moshe took half of the blood and placed it in the basins and half of the blood he dashed against the Mizbayach. And he took the Book of the Covenant...and they said, "All that G-d has spoken we will do and we will obey." And Moshe took the blood and sprinkled it on the people. (24:6,7,8)

Horav Mordechai Rogov, zl, derives a compelling lesson from the sprinkling of the blood of the korbanos, sacrifices, at the time of the receiving of the Torah. We are being taught to defend and uphold the Torah even at such times when doing so requires that we invest our own blood and our very lives for Torah's sake.

Every drop of Jewish blood that has been spilled l'shem Shomayim, for the sake of Heaven, to defend the Torah, does not go to waste. This blood has been preserved as the lives of the living are strengthened and inspired by the lives of the martyrs. We cherish, admire and value their dedication and commitment to Torah and mitzvos. Their ultimate devotion - actually relinquishing their lives for Torah ideals -- concretizes our faith in Hashem as it incorporates their mesiras nefesh, supreme devotion, into our national agenda. Their willingness to defend the Torah strengthens our own resolve to sustain the Torah.

Rav Rogov notes that the impact of these selfless deeds goes beyond our own people. Its far-reaching effect inspires even the gentile world which witnesses such dedication. While it is true that other nations also manifest a form of self-sacrifice, these people, regrettably, are willing to die while they kill others. This is not self-sacrifice. This is moral hypocrisy and blatant murder.

Chazal tell us that the executioner who was assigned to carry out the death sentence against Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon by burning him to death at the stake was himself overcome by what he saw. Rabbi Chanina's submission and devotion melted the executioner's wicked heart to the point that he himself repented. He gave up his life in order to decrease Rabbi Chanina's suffering by hastening his death.

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This phenomenon has repeated itself throughout the millennia. Those who have witnessed our People marching to their death with their heads held high, with pride and devotion in our beliefs, with resolution and fortitude in the face of impending death, have come to admire the Torah and its teachings. Many of them have sustained this inspiration and dedicated their own lives to observe the Torah's laws. Some have even entered under the protective wings of the Shechinah.

Moshe Rabbeinu took half of the blood and placed it into basins. He took the other half and sprinkled it on the Altar. The blood from the bowl was then sprinkled upon the people. The significance of these actions served to energize the spiritual psyche of the people, so that they would serve Hashem enthusiastically -- with vibrancy and vigor. The other half was directed at the Mizbayach, the symbol of Jewish sacrifice. This teaches us that Torah's mission includes a profound commitment of a readiness for sacrifice when the need arises.

And his master shall bore through his ear with the awl, and he shall serve him forever. (21:6)

The Torah abhors the eved Ivri, Jewish slave, who spurns his freedom. The ceremony that extends his servitude is performed on his ear, at a door. The door symbolizes freedom, for the Jews in Egypt were instructed to smear the blood of the Korban Pesach against their door posts. The ear earns its significance from the fact that at Mt. Sinai the ear was the instrument that heard the commandment not to steal, a prohibition which can result in an individual being sold as a slave, if he does not have the funds to repay the victim. Later, he is punished when he has rejected the opportunity to go free. Upon studying the words of Chazal, we are immediately struck with the question: Why the ear? True, the ear did not listen, but the hands and the feet actually carried out the act of theft. Why should the ear bear the onus of guilt?

The Chidushei Ha'Rim, cited by the Sefas Emes, explains that for he who neither cares nor takes responsibility for the things he hears, it is far better that he should not have heard in the first place. Hearing the admonition and acting against it intensifies the action. Veritably, this is taught to us by Chazal in Pirkei Avos 1:17 when they say, "Lo ha'medrash ikar, ela ha'maaseh." "It is not the learning, but the doing that is the main thing." Learning is viewed as a means, a vehicle for knowing what and how to carry out the command. The important thing is truly the deed. This is a powerful statement. Indeed, often times, our communities appear to be drowning in a sea of words. When faced with a problem, we first convene meetings - conferences, conventions, commissions - everything to increase rhetoric and avoid acting to solve the problem. We bemoan and bewail the situation. We diagnose the problem and talk and talk about solutions - but, regrettably, it remains nothing more than talk. These gatherings are truly important and necessary, but they should not become substitutes for action.

We are a nation of action. Indeed, our Sages were defined by their activities and adherence to what they expounded. According to the Midrash Shmuel, the reason the names of the Tanaaim are mentioned in the Mishnah corresponding to their maxims is that they personally personified and exemplified everything that they taught. They comprised a walking Mishnah!

The Jewish slave heard at Har Sinai. He chose to ignore what he heard; instead, he acted against Hashem. The fact that he heard and ignored what he heard makes his actions that much worse. Hence, his ear is bored with an awl to teach him the origin of his rebellion and to indicate the area upon which

he should focus his teshuvah, repentance, process.

But for one who had not lain in ambush and G-d caused it to come to his hand... (21:13)

Coincidence is a word which does not belong in the Torah's lexicon. Nothing just happens. There is a reason for every occurrence. Referring to the unintentional murderer, the Torah says, "G-d caused it to come to his hand." In other words, what seemed to have "happened" was really "caused" by Hashem. Chazal say that the unintentional act of murder which he committed was precipitated by a previous unintentional act of murder that remained unpunished. His current victim must also have been guilty of a capital offense that went similarly unpunished. This occurrence was compensation for both of them. Hashem was merely bringing His book of outstanding accounts "up to date." The question which presents itself to us all - and which is articulated by the Gra M'Vilna - is: Why did the first act of unintentional murder happen? We understand why Hashem caused this second shogeg, unintentional act. What about the first?

Horav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, z.l., explains that there are actually two forms of shogeg. He first cites Chazal in the Talmud Makkos 9b, who explain why the Torah commands us to set aside three Arei Miklat, Cities of Refuge, in Eretz Yisrael, as well as three others in Ever haYarden. Why should the number of cities designated for Eretz Yisrael, which was home to nine-and-a-half shevatim, tribes, be the same as across the Jordan River in which there lived only two-and-a-half tribes? What evidence suggested that crossing the Jordan should engender such an increase in the ratio of tribe to City of Refuge? Chazal respond that there were many murderers in Gilaad. This response generates much discussion among the Rishonim, early commentators. Just because there are many intentional murderers in Gilaad, is that a reason to necessitate a greater number of Arai Miklat for the unintentional murderers? Responding to this query, Maharal presents to us the mindset of he who kills unintentionally. He explains that one who kills inadvertently should have been more careful. His lack of caution catalyzes the tragedy. In Gilaad, there was a multitude of murderers. In a city where life is cheap and murder is, regrettably, a way of life, vigilance is clearly lacking. Is there any wonder that the need for Cities of Refuge arises? Thus, the idea that the Maharal posits is that shogeg is the result of indifference and unwariness. When one does not care, "accidents" will invariably happen - only these "accidents" are not really accidents. They are unintentional acts of violence that might have been averted had the individual been more alert, had he manifested a greater regard for human life. One who shudders at the thought of another human being's death, who trembles at the idea of inflicting harm on his fellow, acts accordingly.

Chazal taught this idea to us in the Talmud Yoma 23A, when they relate a tragic incident that occurred in the Bais HaMikdash. It once happened that two Kohanim were running side by side to mount the Kevesh, ramp, leading up to the Mizbayach, Altar. When one of them came within daled amos, four cubits, of the Altar, the other took a knife and thrust it into his heart. The father of the young Kohen, who was mortally wounded, came and saw his son still in convulsions, in the last throes of death, and he said, "May he be an atonement for you. My son is still convulsing, so the knife has not become tamei, ritually contaminated, by coming in contact with a dead body." Chazal remarked that this father was more concerned with the spiritual cleanliness of the holy vessels, i.e. the knife which killed his son, than even the shedding of his own son's blood. This teaches us that murder, the taking of human life, was of very little significance to him.

It is incredible to consider that murder is clearly a terrible thing, but not when it is compared

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with the kedusha, holiness, of the Bais HaMikdash. Of what little value and meaning can a human life be, if the purity of a vessel in the Temple takes precedence? This is carrying religious observance a bit too far. It is the line of thinking of one to whom human life has little significance. Is it any wonder that in a generation such as that, the incidence of unintentional murder would escalate? When people do not value human life, the inadvertent taking of human life occurs more frequently, because people do not seem to care. In such a society, even the finest, the purest and most pious ones can, chas v'shalom, Heaven forbid, become victims of the premeditated murderer syndrome.

In support of this idea, I recently heard how Horav Aizik Scher, z.l., once cried bitterly when he read a newspaper article relating that a man had been killed. When someone sitting with him looked up startled, Rav Aizik responded, "How can people read in their morning newspaper about how a man was killed - and continue with their breakfast as if nothing had happened? This man probably left a wife and children. Is that not a tragedy? Have we become so callous that human life is meaningless?" If Rav Aizik made this statement some seventy years ago, what should we say now?

Returning to our original question, Horav Goldvicht explains that there are two forms of "unintentional." There is the "asher lo tzadah," "one who did not lay in ambush," and there is also one who, "Elokim inah l'yado," "G-d caused it come to his hand." The first circumstance, in which the unintentional murder is referred to as one "who did not lay in ambush," is represented by the classic case wherein one goes to the forest to chop wood and the blade slips and kills someone. If such a person had valued human life more, he would have checked and rechecked the blade to make absolutely certain that it was solidly in place. True, he did not lay in ambush, but there is still an element of negligence on his part.

The second circumstance which the Torah refers to as being "caused by G-d," is a situation in which one who once killed b'shogeg, but was not in any way punished, must go through a similar episode during which his unpremeditated act of murder "occurred" in a more public forum. Hashem caused this to "come to his hand," as a result of the earlier episode which remained unresolved. Nothing "just happens;" there are no coincidences in life. It just depends on how long it takes for us to wake up and take notice.

You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan...if you are to cause him pain...I shall surely hear his outcry...My wrath shall blaze and I shall kill you. (22:21, 22, 23)

I have always been bothered by the need to record a mitzvah whose observance would seem to be common sense. Regrettably, if we look around contemporary society, we observe that people are not so rational anymore. The elite and social climbers who perceive themselves as powerful have no qualms about pursuing their goals, even if it means trampling on another human being. The fact that the human being might be a widow or an orphan does not seem to trouble them. They are in the way, and nothing can stand in the way of progress. This is especially true when money is involved. People always seem to find a heter, halachic dispensation, when it is needed to satisfy their insatiable greed for accumulating material wealth. If the situation happens to take undue advantage of a helpless widow or orphan, it is just too bad.

There are also those "righteous" individuals who would never permit the blood or tears of a widow or orphan on their own hands, but who have no problem delegating their iniquity to someone else. Interestingly, this is probably the only time they ever delegate authority to anyone. The Ibn Ezra

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makes a noteworthy observation that addresses these paragons of "virtue." He notes that the Torah presents the first pasuk, which admonishes us against causing the widow or orphan to suffer, in the plural, "Lo'saanun," while the second pasuk states, "If you dare cause him pain," in the singular. This teaches us, says the Ibn Ezra, that if the community permits even one person to inflict pain on the helpless or downtrodden, Hashem will punish them all. Those who turn their heads away when a broken person is harmed, when a widow is taken advantage of, when an orphan is caused undue pain - will themselves have to answer to the Almighty. Hiding behind the cloak of anonymity and piety, these individuals allow others to do their contemptible work. They think they fool the world and, in truth, they succeed in pulling the wool over many an eye. The All-Knowing and All-Seeing Almighty, however, is aware of their devious nature and will exact retribution.

There are people who go out of their way to reach out to the downtrodden. Their work quite often goes unnoticed - even by the beneficiary. It might take years, as it did in the following story. The effect, however, lasts a lifetime. The story is about an eleven-year-old boy whom we will call Jerry, whose father suddenly passed away at a very young age. Jerry was left alone in the world - alone with his young, widowed mother, who had to go out to earn a living to support the two of them. She worked long hours, and Jerry was alone for much of the evening. He missed his father terribly, but he had to cover up his loneliness, lest his mother notice and be overcome with grief.

Jerry was observant in a traditional sense. There was no Jewish Day School in his town, so he would go to the afternoon Talmud Torah after public school. His day would begin at 5:30 a.m. when he arose to go to the early Minyan to recite Kaddish for his father. It was not much different than it is now. Most of the men in shul were the older men who were present early every day. The sight of an eleven year old boy reciting Kaddish tore at everyone's heart. Understandably, all of the men doted on young Jerry. They were all very protective of the little orphan.

After a few weeks of attending Minyan something occurred. Mr. Goldman, the shamas, sexton, of the synagogue, began to appear at Jerry's front door each morning, just as Jerry prepared to begin his trek to the synagogue. Mr. Goldman was not a young man. Originally he had gotten a ride to the synagogue each day. Now, all of sudden, he was just "passing by" the house - each morning just as Jerry began his walk. He explained, "Your home is on the way to the synagogue. I have to go this way to the synagogue. I have to go this way anyway, and I figured it would be nice for me to have some company. This way I would not have to walk alone."

Mr. Goldman was incredible. Through the freezing cold of winter, through the blazing heat and stifling humidity of summer, they walked together. The pelting rain and blinding snow did not halt their daily walk. During their walks, Mr. Goldman would share a story from the Midrash, a thought from Chazal, a halachah from the Shulchan Aruch, a mussar, ethical, thought. He held Jerry's hand as they crossed the street. He slowly moved in to fill the void left by Jerry's father's death. Indeed, as Jerry recollects today, it was those daily walks and comradeship that convinced him to pursue his religious studies in a yeshivah gedolah.

Years went by, and the walks were replaced by phone calls and letters. Jerry shared his successes with his surrogate father. When Jerry graduated yeshivah high school, Mr. Goldman was there to share in the nachas. Years later, when Jerry received semichah, ordination, Mr. Goldman shared in this most wonderful moment. Indeed, Jerry felt that his semichah was a gift, a special gift to a special man, who from out of the blue had become his primary motivator and source of encouragement.

Jerry met his bashert, Divinely ordained match, and Mr. Goldman attended the wedding. He sought no accolades, just the pure nachas of observing the joy in the life of the young man whom he

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had befriended. A few years later, Jerry, together with his wife and little six-month-old son came to visit his mother. They called Mr. Goldman and asked if he could come to the home that he would "pass by" so often, years ago. Mr. Goldman responded that he would like to, but, alas, he could no longer walk more than a few steps. Jerry said he would gladly come by to pick him up. Realizing that he had never known where Mr. Goldman lived, Jerry asked him for directions.

The trip was long and complicated. It was a full twenty-minute drive. As Jerry drove, tears ran down his face as he realized the distance Mr. Goldman had walked daily just to "pass by" his house. He had walked over an hour just so that a young orphaned boy should not feel the pain of loneliness. He had made Jerry feel that he was the beneficiary of having a young boy keep him company, when, in truth, the opposite was true. He understood the young boy's loneliness and he sought a way to alleviate it.

They met - the young boy turned man, his family and the old man who was now in his nineties. Everyone cried. What a beautiful and poignant scene it was; the next generation supporting the past generation, the generation that had nurtured and sustained it. It was an inspiring moment for Jerry and his wife. He finally was able to repay the man who had given him so much. What did he want? He merely wanted what all parents want - nachas and the best for their children. Jerry took Mr. Goldman home. As he said goodbye, they embraced and cried. They both knew that this would probably be the last time they would see one another. A short time later, Mr. Goldman went to his eternal rest, satisfied with a life lived well, a life that had inspired and kindled the spark in another life. Like a candle, he lit the flame in Jerry's neshamah, soul. By his simple gesture of being there, of holding Jerry's hand, of walking with him to shul and letting him know that he was not alone, he engendered confidence and faith in a young boy, giving him the reason and hope to go on. It is so easy and takes so little to help those in need. What are we waiting for?

When you will buy a Hebrew servant. (21:2)

Parashas Mishpatim deals primarily with civil and tort law. It begins with the laws regarding the eved Ivri, Hebrew slave. The Sefer HaChinuch explains that as a preamble to the laws of social justice, the Torah details the laws concerning the eved Ivri. We are to derive from here that, in order to achieve the necessary level of sanctity, the citizens of our emerging nation must exemplify compassion and act with kindness towards our fellowman. This begins with the slave whom we are to treat with extreme kindness, according him the respect a descendant of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov deserves. Indeed, Chazal teach us that he who purchases a Hebrew slave is actually purchasing a master; so stringent are the laws regarding the self-respect and welfare of a Hebrew slave.

Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl, asserts that the master must be sensitive to the eved's feelings. At no time should he feel degraded or any less important than his master. If the master has just one pillow, he must give it to the slave, while he sleeps without a pillow. Otherwise, the slave might feel that he is of a lesser stature than his master. In contrast, the master will feel only a lack of physical comfort as a result of not having his pillow. His self-esteem, however, will not be affected. We are to be "nosei b'ol im chaveiro," carry the yoke with our friend, sharing in his physical and emotional pain. There is one area in which the Torah seems to distinguish the slave and master. The Torah permits the master to give a shifcha Canaanis, gentile slave, to a nimkar b'geneivaso, slave who is sold because he has stolen. This is enigmatic. Until now, we have gone out of our way to circumvent any negative impact on the slave's

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self-esteem. Yet, we permit him to marry a gentile slave for the purpose of producing children who will also be slaves. Is there a more degrading message than this?

Horav Mordechai Miller, zl, quoted by Horav Matisyahu Solomon, Shlita, explains this based upon the Ralbag's reasoning for giving a gentile slave to the eved Ivri: He says that it will bother him greatly to know that the children which are products of his marriage will not be considered his. He is separated from them when he is liberated.

Horav Miller explains that there are two aspects to an act of theft: First, the material loss which the thief incurs for the owner/victim; second, the emotional pain sustained upon losing something to which one has become attached. The thief sometimes validates his act of stealing with the notion that he is poor and the owner is rich (i.e. "He deserves" to have the stolen article). If the thief were sensitive to the owner's feelings, if he were to feel the pain and anguish that the owner experiences with his loss, then he would not steal. The Torah, therefore, gives him something - a wife and children - and then takes them away. Let the thief experience a taste of the bitterness which had been catalyzed by his cowardly act of theft.

The laws of eved Ivri are a lesson in chinuch, education, to train and refine the Jewish mind and heart, to sensitize them towards one's fellow man. This underscores the Torah's underlying motif - nosei b'ol im chaveiru. As Hillel told the ger, convert, loving one's fellowman is the primary essence of the Torah; the rest is explanation - to study (Torah). If one is not sensitive to another's needs, he will not comprehend the profundity of nishmas ha Torah, the soul of the Torah.

To bear the yoke with his fellow is one of the forty-eight levels of achievement that one must attain in order to "acquire" Torah, to make it an integral part of himself. To bear the yoke together means one sees and feels everything his fellow does. He shares his burden, senses his pain and suffering, because he has made his friend's plight his own. This profound form of kinship is endemic to the Torah world. Veritably, it is one of the basic reasons why the world of Torah has endured for so long.

You shall not persecute any widow or orphan. (22:21)

One tear. Who can estimate the value of a tear shed by a lonely man, weeping over his sorry lot in life? Who can imagine the power and influence of a tear shed by a poor widow, bemoaning her fate, grieving over her loss, which is magnified every time she senses that vacuum in her life, the loneliness and feeling of helplessness that have now become her partner? Indeed, we cannot begin to calculate the value, the power and the influence which tears of the broken-hearted generate. Every tear pierces through the heavens and is gathered before the Heavenly Throne where Hashem holds it near to Him, cherishing every drop.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates a poignant story that illustrates the value of a tear: It was time to elect a Chief Rabbi for Yerushalayim. The people were encouraged to vote for Horav Chaim Yaakov Levine, a very suitable candidate for the position. When Horav Levine heard this he made it a point to see who else had been nominated for the position. He noticed that Horav Betzalel Zolty, zl, was also a candidate for the position. He immediately said that under no circumstances would he run for the position. Even after a number of great rabbonim attempted to dissuade him, he remained adamant - he would not compete with Horav Zolty for the position of Chief Rabbi. After awhile, he explained the reason for his refusal to his close friends.

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Apparently, his father, the venerable Horav Aryeh Levine, zl, once related that he was walking through the alleyways of Yerushalayim at night when he came upon a woman who was mending socks by the light of a small torch. Perhaps today we cannot relate to this profession, but seventy years ago, when one's socks had a hole in them, they were repaired. Usually, it was some poor woman who darned these socks for the meager pay it generated. "Why are you doing this?" asked Rav Aryeh of the woman, "and especially with so little light." "I am a poor widow. With the few coins I make, I am able to pay the rebbe that learns Torah with my orphaned son." The woman kept on sewing, as her tears trickled down on the socks that she was repairing.

"Do you know who this widow was?" Rav Chaim Yaakov asked. "She was Rav Betzalel Zolty's mother! Is it possible to estimate the value and effect of her tears? Rav Zolty should become the Rav of Yerushalayim. His spiritual growth was catalyzed on a field irrigated by the tears of a widow!"

You shall not revile G-d, and you shall not curse a leader among your people. (22:27)

Words are cheap, and emotions, at times, run high. We might accidentally say something that we regret later on. What we do not understand is that words have an effect and they might cause irreparable damage to another person, as the following story illustrates. A certain rav in Yerushalayim, a Slonimer chasid, did not have children for twenty-four years after his marriage. Ultimately, in a miraculous incident he and his wife were blessed with a child. He related that as a young man he was a student at Yeshivas Slonim in Yerushalayim. The woman that came nightly to clean the floor would come with her children, who, because of their young age, could not be left at home alone. The children, of course, did not comprehend the importance of the Torah study that was going on in the bais ha'medrash. Thus, the noise level of these children often disturbed those who were learning.

It happened that one night the noise level became intolerable for this young man, and he remarked to the woman that it would be a good idea for her to discipline her children. The woman who was beset with enough headaches remarked, "Would that you not merit to have the taste of tzaar gidul banim, pain of raising children." At the time, the young man felt that the woman was, in effect, blessing him to have an easy time raising his own children. Undoubtedly, this was her true intention. These words, however, were issued during a moment of anger and the effect was tragic.

Years went by. The young man forgot the incident. He met his bashert, intended mate, and entered into matrimony. They had a blissful marriage - except for one serious concern - they had not yet been blessed with children. They traveled all over the world in search of the doctor, the drug - the miracle that would grant them progeny. It was to no avail. They were rapidly approaching middle age, and no child.

For some reason, the man remembered the incident that had occurred many years earlier concerning the cleaning woman, her children, his derogatory rebuke and her response. Suddenly, he realized that what he had understood as a blessing was actually a curse. Immediately, he went in search of this woman. With luck, he was able to locate her. He quickly went to visit her, to beg her forgiveness for his impatience and for the impudent remark he had made many years earlier. She was happy to forgive him and even added that those wild children were today great Torah scholars serving in positions of distinction throughout Eretz Yisrael.

Nine months later - twenty-four years into their marriage, they were blessed with a child. Yerushalayim clamored; everyone was overwhelmed with excitement. They all took heed of the lesson:

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the impact of every single word, its far -reaching effect and consequence. No one meant any harm, but words were said, and the consequences had taken effect.

Distance yourself from a false word. (23:7)

Integrity is much more than a virtue, a good character trait, it defines a human being. Indeed, there is no other negative command/transgression in the Torah where there is a special warning to distance oneself. Falsehood swallows up a person as he becomes sucked into its grasp. We try to justify our lack of integrity: saying it is not really a falsehood; it is for the purpose of a mitzvah; nothing really bad will come out of it. While all this may be true, the end result is that the person has lied. A white lie today becomes a major falsehood tomorrow. Horav Zisha, zl, m'Annipoli once rendered this pasuk homiletically. "From a word of falseness, one becomes distanced from Hashem." When one stretches the truth he is not only transgressing the principles that govern man's relationship with his fellowman, but he is also transgressing the principles that define man's relationship with the Almighty. The effect of a lie is all-encompassing. Not only does it lead to other sins, it also has a double effect on our children.

First, they see and hear our bending of the truth. Children tend to outdo their parents. What is a white lie that a parent might erroneously justify, will, years later, become the foundation for a child's total lack of integrity. Parents that maintain a sterling character will hopefully see it manifest in their children's behavior. Second, Horav Yehudah Zev Segal, zl, often cited the following from Horav Mendel, zl, m'Rimanov, who wondered why we notice sweet and innocent children straying from the Torah when they become older: he attributed this phenomenon to timtum ha'lev, numbness of the heart. When parents feed their children food that has been purchased with money earned illicitly they are, in effect, giving them maachalos asuros, forbidden foods. These forbidden foods take their toll on a child's neshamah, soul, diminishing his chein, pleasant, sweet demeanor.

The words we write or speak, the nuances manifest in our emotional expressions, our business dealings with people are all opportunities for demonstrating our integrity and moral stature: whether it is calling in sick when we are not, or putting on a show of emotion during davening when it is not really there, or taking money under false pretenses: these are all examples in which our integrity is challenged.

We live in a society where, to quote a popular American author, "Lying has become an integral part of American culture, a trait of the American character. We lie, and we do not even think about it. We lie for no reason...and the people we lie to are those closest to us." Our Torah's dictate, of course, aggressively deploras such practice. Truth is not just an important Jewish quality. It is called "chosomo shel Hakadosh Baruch Hu," seal of Hashem. It is the emblem by which Hashem is known. One who lies is as if he has worshipped idols. For, without truth, there is no foundation of belief and there can be no true belief in Hashem. It has been said that one who speaks the truth need not have a good memory, since a person does not have to remember what he said. A liar, however, must remember everything he has said so that he can continually cover up his lies.

The Avos, Patriarchs, each possessed a character trait that he personified. While they all were exemplary in their middos tovos, positive character traits, they each had one area which set him apart from the rest. Avraham Avinu personified the quality of chesed, kindness; Yitzchak symbolized the pillar of avodah, worship; Yaakov represented the middah of emes, truth. Undoubtedly, each of the Patriarchs were thoroughly proficient in the other characteristics. His individual benchmark, however, was in one particular trait. Perhaps this is why Eisav's guardian angel, the symbol of the enemy of the Jewish People, chose Yaakov as his adversary - and not Avraham or Yitzchak. Each one of the other

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two characteristics does not present a long-term threat. They could be minimized, even perverted, to meet Eisav's needs. In contrast, Yaakov's middah indicated a serious threat to the survival of Klal Yisrael's enemies. Avraham's kindness was distorted by Lot, when he was prepared to give up his daughter's virtue and allow her to be violated by the people of Sodom. Too much kindness can undermine the character trait and transform it into an abomination. Yitzchak's middah of worship has been twisted by Eisav's descendants and transformed into their medium for pagan ritual. The only way that the qualities of kindness and worship can be reinforced and tempered, so that they are applied in their proper balance, is through the quality of truth. The overwhelming power of emes pierces through the ambiguities that cloud the essence and true meaning of these values. The angel waited for Yaakov, the representative of emes. Yaakov manifested the greatest threat to the philosophical perspective of the enemies of the Jewish People. The quality of truth, symbolized by Yaakov, would forge the nation to prevail over Eisav. The angel had to prevent this from occurring, because he knew that with the power of emes, Klal Yisrael would triumph over its enemies. As the descendants of Yaakov Avinu, whose name was changed to Yisrael to symbolize his triumph over the forces of falsehood, we must maintain our heritage of truth and impart this legacy to our children, so that we are worthy of the title Bnei Yisrael, the children of Yisrael.

"And his master shall bore through his ear with an awl." (21:6)

The *Torah* is critical of the *eved Ivri*, Jewish slave, who chooses to stay on after the usual six years of servitude. When one is granted freedom he should take advantage of the opportunity. A Jew submits to only one master - Hashem. According to the *Torah*, when an *eved Ivri* chooses to extend his period of slavery, his master bores his ear with an awl - near a doorpost. In the *Talmud Kiddushin 22b*, *Chazal* explain why a doorpost and an ear symbolize the servant's disdain for freedom. The doorway represents freedom, since it was the doorposts upon which the Jews smeared the blood of the *Korban Pesach* prior to their release from Egyptian slavery. The "ear" heard at *Har Sinai*, "*Do not steal.*" Yet, this person stole and, since he had no money to pay back his debt, he was reduced to slavery. Now that he is rejecting the opportunity to go free, his master pierces his ear.

This idea applies specifically to a Jew who is *nimkar b'gneivaso*, sold to pay his debt. Another type of *eved Ivri*, a *mocher atzmo*, is one who sells himself. What did his "ear" do wrong that it must be pierced? *Chazal* explain that this ear should have "listened" when Hashem said, "*For to Me will Bnei Yisrael be slaves.*" This means that one remains subservient only to Hashem, not to a human being. We may question *Chazal's* need to cite two reasons for the "ear" ceremony. Is not the prohibition of taking another master in addition to Hashem sufficient to explain the ritual for both forms of *eved Ivri*? Why do *Chazal* mention another reason for the servitude of the thief?

Horav Eliyahu Meir Bloch, zl, infers a profound lesson from this *Midrash*. When an individual seeks to correct a moral/spiritual failing within his personality, he must go to the source of the problem. Where did it all begin? What was the initial flaw which caused his downfall? If the reason for his desire to remain a slave originates from an insecurity, if he feels a need to be dependent upon someone else, then he must address that issue. If he is overwhelmed by his inability to cope with his desire to steal, if he simply cannot control his passion to take another person's money, then he must address that problem. We cannot simply gloss over pathological deficiencies because it is more convenient to overlook them. If the source of one's sin is not acknowledged, the "teshuvah," repentance, will be

ineffective.

Horav Bloch applies this idea to interpret the phrase that we say in the *Viddui*, confession, "But we and our fathers have sinned." Why is it necessary to cite the sins of our ancestors when we are enumerating our sins? Do we mitigate our transgressions by including those of our fathers? The purpose, claims *Horav Bloch*, is to indicate the source of our sins: Where and when did it originate? By getting to the foundation, we avail ourselves of the opportunity to purge the evil we have "inherited." While it may not be complimentary to our ancestors, our *teshuvah* remains incomplete if the root of our error is not destroyed.

"You shall not persecute any widow or orphan. If indeed you do persecute him and if indeed he cries out to Me, I will verily hear his cry." (22:21)

The *Torah* presents to us a sin and its punishment. The sin is apparent: Persecuting the downtrodden, those who have no one else to care for them. The punishment, however, is a bit ambiguous. What really is the punishment for persecuting a widow, orphan or anyone who cannot take care of themselves? The underlying message of this *pasuk* seems to be that - regardless of the amount of time that elapses -- the individual is guaranteed punishment. Hashem clearly states that He will listen and He will repay. That warning should serve as more than a sufficient deterrent for most people. There are individuals who foolishly think that if there is no concrete punishment mentioned in the *Torah*, then they will attempt to get away with that which is unmentioned. To these shortsighted sinners, Hashem responds, "Do not worry. I will not ignore the cry of the oppressed. Those who persecute them will surely receive their punishment."

We go through life wondering how some people can get away with murder. We see cruelty, oppression, persecution and suffering inflicted upon people, and the perpetrators do not seem to get punished. *Chazal* teach us in *Pirkei Avos 3:16*, "The collectors make their rounds constantly every day, and collect payment from the person whether he realizes it or not." This is a reference to punishment. Hashem is the "collector" Who goes around collecting what is owed by people. At times a person is astute enough to realize that his suffering is a form of punishment. There are those, regrettably, who suffer but do not attribute their suffering to Divine retribution. A person's suffering, for the most part, is dictated by his deeds, even though he may have forgotten what he has done. While this may seem to be a generalization, the intention is only to arouse within a person the idea that everything occurs to him for a reason. Also, no one leaves this world with a "balance" of retribution. Years may go by, even generations, but the person who has hurt others will ultimately pay for his evil.

It is told that when the *Chafetz Chaim* was a young man, a widow in his city could not pay her rent. Her landlord attempted to evict her in the dead of winter, but to no avail. So, what did this "paragon" of human decency do? He removed the roof over her head, leaving her exposed to the harsh cold and elements. The townspeople were indignant and up in arms. Even this did not move the landlord. He remained intractable despite public censure, forcing the poor widow out into the cold. The *Chafetz Chaim* said nothing, but set the incident aside in his memory, waiting to see what punishment the landlord would receive. After all, the *Torah* says that Hashem will listen to the pleas of the widow. In no way could such an inhuman act take place without severe retribution from Hashem. It took ten years, a period of time during which most people, especially the perpetrator, forgot about the cruel incident, but Hashem did not forget. The landlord was walking outside and was bitten by a mad dog. Before long, he died after intense suffering. Interestingly, most people would never have correlated the

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two incidents. That is an unfortunate trait of human nature.

The *Chafetz Chaim's* son, *Horav Leib, zl*, recounts a frightening incident that occurred in Radin, where his father was *Rav*. It once happened that a butcher, whose son was drafted into the army, kidnapped a yeshivah student whom he placed in his son's stead. The *Chafetz Chaim*, was greatly disturbed by this dastardly act and remarked, "such a dreadful act cannot go unpunished by Hashem."

Thirty years later, when many people had long forgotten the butcher's cruelty, the butcher's son became ill with cholera. He suffered intensely and, before long, he died. The *chevrah kaddishah* refused to prepare his body for burial, due to the contagious nature of his disease. The elderly father was consequently compelled to bury his son with his own two hands.

These two incidents demonstrate the meaning of, "*I will verily hear his cry.*" Hashem listens and He punishes. We have to open our eyes and analyze the course of events that take place, at times even years later, to see the punishment incurred by those who prey on the weak and downtrodden. We find individuals who externally display well-meaning intentions while they destroy the lives of those who interfere with their agenda. They justify their actions, sometimes even receiving legitimacy and recognition by those who seek their favor. They should be aware that they will not escape the punishment they incur for the wrong they have committed. Regardless of their unfounded support, they will ultimately pay for the hurt they have caused.

"Everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will listen." (24:7)

Klal Yisrael responded to Hashem with a remarkable display of faith. They were prepared to "do," to act in accordance with Hashem's command, without seeking to understand the reason for the command. They trusted in the Almighty with total surrender. There is one simple question, however, that we should address. Why did they respond with the plural, "*We will do, and we will listen.*" Should not each one of them have said, "I will do and I will listen?" Why did *Klal Yisrael* use the plural form?

The *Chidushei Ha'Rim* responds to this question with an analogy. Let us picture a large group of prisoners who are forced to sit outside on a very hot day with the sun beating down on them. To make matters worse, they are not permitted to have any water. We can imagine their parched lips and dried mouths, as they thirst for that drop of sustenance, that bit of water that will nourish and refresh them. Suddenly, a man approaches with a large container of water and asks, "My friends, do you want some water to drink?" There is no doubt that the immediate response would be, "We do, we do!" No one would answer I do, since the thirst is so obvious that everyone knows that the others are also dying of thirst. Consequently, when one responds, he has his friend in mind also.

The same idea applies to the revelation at *Har Sinai*. All of *Klal Yisrael* were literally in the same "boat." They had been imprisoned by the degenerate Egyptians for hundreds of years. They had been subjected to the most cruel, degrading slavery and torture. This was only the physical aspect of their incarceration. From the spiritual perspective, they were living in a culture that was infamous for its licentiousness. The Jews were trapped in the spiritual filth of Egypt with no hope of escape. Suddenly, Hashem liberated them. He extricated them, leading them into the desert and exposing them to *kedushah*, holiness, and *taharah*, purity. They thirsted for more. They had only been given a taste of the spiritual nourishment that would save them. Their lips were parched. Their souls cried out, "Please give us to drink. Quench our spiritual thirst!" When they came to *Har Sinai*, their thirst became more intense. They were closer to the Source. They felt it now more than ever. Moshe told them to surround

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the mountain and prepare themselves for three days. The anticipation was overpowering; their thirst for a spiritual experience, an opportunity to come closer to Hashem, was unparalleled. During those three days, they counted the hours and even the minutes, as their countdown to *kabollas Ha'Torah*. Their wait was over. Moshe *Rabbeinu* appeared, notifying them of Hashem's commandments and His demands of them. The nation listened intently with an overwhelming desire to absorb as much *ruchnious*, spirituality, as possible. Just like the thirsty prisoners who were availed water, the Jews all responded, "We will do and we will listen." They were all in this together; they all knew what the other wanted. Is there any question why they all responded in unison - "We will do and we will listen!"?

"And Moshe was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights." (24:18)

The *Yalkut Shimoni* cites a *Midrash* from which we can derive a valuable lesson. The story is recounted that Rabbi Chiya *bar* Abba was crying when he heard that Rabbi Yochanan had sold all his possessions in order to be able to study *Torah*. He was concerned that nothing had been put aside for Rabbi Yochanan's old age, when he would have no source of, or ability to earn, an income. Rabbi Yochanan assuaged Rabbi Chiya by saying that it was well worth it, since he had exchanged earthly possessions -- which were created in six days -- for *Torah* which was given in forty days. Simply put, *Torah* has greater value than anything material. *Torah* took longer to be "created" than the earth, which took only six days.

Let us analyze this *Midrash*. Rabbi Chiya cried when he saw the dismal state of Rabbi Yochanan's material life. His financial status and lifestyle obviously left much to be desired. Rabbi Yochanan, on the other hand, did not seem to be concerned. Why? Rabbi Chiya's concerns were realistic. He took one look at his colleague's material conditions, and he began to weep. What was the difference in perspective between these two Torah scholars that engendered two such disparate reactions?

Horav Henach Leibowitz, *shlita*, suggests that Rabbi Yochanan teaches us a profound lesson. Rabbi Chiya was concerned about his colleague's material condition because he viewed it in an inappropriate context. An individual must not observe the material condition exclusive of spiritual circumstances and the success he has attained. It is essential that one look at both conditions simultaneously. If he does not, the picture he will see will be ambiguous and distorted. One must see the spiritual benefits that the individual reaped as a result of his lack of material success. One who waits a long time and searches all over for a very precious jewel will not be concerned with the expense and sacrifice involved in attaining this gem. His only thought is of the treasure he has finally procured.

Rabbi Yochanan told Rabbi Chiya not to be concerned with what he had lost. Instead, when he perceives what he has gained and the loss would pale in insignificance. We should learn to accept life's challenges with joy, by viewing them in the context of the spiritual advantage that we realize.

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