

“Say to the Kohanim the sons of Aharon”

The Incredible Lesson Learned from the Kohanim: How to Overcome the Yetzer without Recalling the Day of Death

In this week’s parsha, parshas Emor, we read (Vayikra 21, 1): **“ויאמר ה' אל משה אמור אל הכהנים בני אהרן ואמרת אליהם לנפש לא יטמא בעמיו—Hashem said to Moshe: Say to the Kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and you shall say to them, “To a dead person he shall not become impure among his people.”** In his commentary, Rashi reconciles the redundant language employed by the passuk—**“say” and “you shall say”**; it conveys that the adult kohanim are commanded to make sure that the kohanim who are minors not make themselves impure.

The Midrash (V.R. 26, 5) provides us with another explanation regarding this redundancy: **“העליונים שאין יצר הרע מצוי בהם, אמירה אחת דייה להם, שנאמר (דניאל ד-יד) בגזירת עירין פתגמא ומאמר קדישין שאלתא, אבל התחתונים שיש בהם יצר הרע, הלואי לשתי אמירות יעמדו, הדא הוא דכתיב, ויאמר ה' אל משה אמור אל הכהנים בני אהרן ואמרת אליהם—**for the heavenly angels, who lack a yetzer hara, a single statement suffices; for human beings down on earth harassed by a yetzer hara, however, hopefully two stated warnings will convey the message.

Nevertheless, this Midrash requires further explanation. What is the message of the two statements HKB”H addresses to the creatures down on earth? How do these statements actually help human beings to overcome their yetzers and better serve Hashem? Furthermore, the Midrash seems somewhat skeptical whether even two statements will suffice to help mortals overcome their yetzers; and if they fail to do so, what benefit do the two statements serve?

Aharon Is Rewarded for His Absolute Reverence

Let us begin our attempt to unravel our sages’ cryptic messages by presenting an adjacent Midrash (V.R. 26, 6): **“אמור אל הכהנים, הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים יט-י) יראת ה' טהורה עומדת לעד, אמר רבי**

לוי, מיראה שנתירא אהרן מלפני הקב“ה, זכה וניתנה לו הפרשה הזו, שאינה זזה ממנו ולא מבניו ולא מבניו בניו עד סוף כל הדורות, ואיזו זו, פרשת המת, שנאמר—as a result of Aharon’s absolute reverence, he merited receiving this specific passage; it is a legacy for him and all of his descendants throughout the generations—the passage related to the dead.

The commentaries on the Midrash find this statement perplexing. What is the connection between Aharon’s extreme reverence toward HKB”H and this passage dealing with the dead? What is the “midah k’neged midah” here? In Ohel Yaakov, the Maggid of Dubno provides us with a wonderful explanation. We shall expand on his explanation based on what we have learned in the Gemara (Berachos 5a):

“אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש, לעולם ירגיז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע, שנאמר (תהלים ד-ה) רגזו ואל תחטאו, אם נצחו מוטב, ואם לאו יעסוק בתורה, שנאמר (שם) אמרו בלבבכם, אם נצחו מוטב, ואם לאו יקרא קריאת שמע, שנאמר (שם) על משכבכם, אם נצחו מוטב, ואם לאו יזכור לו יום המיתה, שנאמר (שם) ודומו סלה.”

Rabbi Levi bar Chama said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish: A person should constantly agitate his yetzer tov to fight against his yetzer hara . . . If he vanquishes it, fine; but if not, he should engage it in Torah study . . . If he vanquishes it, fine; but if not, he should recite “krias shema” . . . If he vanquishes it, fine; but if not, he should remind himself of the day of death.

We learn from this passage that three strategies exist for overcoming the yetzer hara: a) Torah, b) “krias shema” and c) contemplating the day of one’s death. The commentaries ask an obvious question. If the strategy of considering the day of one’s death is so effective—seeing as it works even when the first two suggestions fail—why don’t the sages recommend utilizing this strategy immediately from the get-go?

Recalling the Day of Death Is Liable to Lead to Sadness

The Agra D’Kallah (Toldos) provides an answer. There is a fear that contemplating the day of one’s death will lead to sadness; this will prevent the person from serving Hashem in a state of “simchah”—joy and happiness—resulting in the loss of “ruach hakodesh.” Hence, it is preferable to try to eliminate the yetzer first by engaging in Torah study and by reciting “krias shema.” Both of these activities lead to service of Hashem with “simchah,” in keeping with the passuk (Tehillim 19, 9): **“פקודי ה’—the orders of Hashem are upright, gladdening the heart; the mitzvah of Hashem is clear, illuminating the eyes.** If these two strategies fail to thwart the yetzer, then a person should resort to the third option—recalling the day of death—even if sadness ensues. For it is preferable to experience sadness rather than to succumb to the persuasions of the yetzer and violate the precepts of the Torah. Here is the passage from the Agra D’Kallah:

“מה שאמרו בדברי חכמינו ז”ל, לעולם ירגיז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע, נצחו מוטב, ואם לא וכו’, ואם לאו יזכיר לו יום המיתה, הוא רפואה בדוקה יותר מקריאת שמע ותורה, מה היא המגיעה שלא יזכיר לו יתכף וינצל מכל רע. אך הוא בוודאי שאינו מהראוי לעורר יראה פחותה הלזו המביאה לידי עצבות, אם לא על צד ההכרח שיראה שאין עוזר לו נגד היצר הרע.

על כן מוטב לו לבוא לידי עצבות, ולא יעבור על התורה לשמוע לעצת היצר הרע, אבל כל זמן שיש באפשרי לעמוד נגד יצר הרע באיזה תחבולה אחרת, ירחיק את עצמו מיראת העונש ומוכרון יום המיתה, בכדי שלא יבוא לידי עצבות, כי על ידי זה ירע לבבו ולא יעבוד את השי”ת בשמחה, ויסתלק ממנו הרוח הקודש.”

Based on this idea, the Agra D’Kallah interprets the significance of Yitzchak Avinu’s statement to the wicked Eisav prior to his death (Bereishis 27, 2): **“ויאמר הנה נא זקנתי לא ידעתי—and he said, “See, now, I have aged; I know not the day of my death.”** Now, it is well-known that Yitzchak Avinu served Hashem with fear and reverence, as it is written (Bereishis 31, 42): **“אלקי אברהם ופחד יצחק”—the G-d of Avraham and the Dread of Yitzchak.** Thus, we might have thought mistakenly that he achieved and maintained his attribute of “yirah”—fear--by constantly contemplating the day of death and the fear of punishment.

Therefore, Yitzchak Avinu revealed to all future generations the source of his “yirah” with the following statement: **“ויאמר הנה נא זקנתי לא ידעתי יום מותי”** In other words, even though I have aged, I have successfully combated the yetzer hara

without ever having to contemplate the day of my death; for that might have brought about sadness. Instead, I overcame it by engaging in Torah-study and the mitzvah of “krias shema.” Both of these endeavors result in the service of Hashem with “simchah” and reverence. This is far more preferable than merely serving Hashem out of fear of punishment. This concludes his explanation.

“For on the day you eat of it you shall surely die”

Concerning this topic it is worthwhile presenting three precious gems from the incredible teachings of the brilliant author of the Hafla’ah in his commentary Panim Yafos on the Torah. The first is regarding HKB”H’s admonition to Adam HaRishon in parshas Bereishis (Bereishis 2, 17): **“וימעץ הדעת טוב—and from the Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa you shall not eat thereof; for on the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.**

As we know, in the aftermath of the sin, the inevitability of death was imposed upon Adam and upon all of creation. Concerning this decree, it is written (ibid. 3, 22): **“ויאמר ה’ אלקים הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע, ועתה פן ישלח ידו ולקח גם מעץ החיים ואכל וחי לעולם, וישלחהו ה’ אלקים מגן עדן לעבוד את האדמה אשר לוקח—and Hashem G-d said, “Behold man has become like one of us, to know good and bad; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the Eitz HaChaim, and eat and live forever!”** The simple reading and understanding of the passuk suggests that this was also part of the punishment—that Adam not be allowed to eat from the Eitz HaChaim and live on for all eternity. The Panim Yafos, however, explains that the decree of death and preventing Adam from partaking of the Eitz HaChaim were imposed for man’s benefit.

Let us explain. After Adam HaRishon sinned by eating from the Eitz HaDa’as, the yetzer hara entered his being. Let us refer to Rashi (Bereishis 2, 25): **“לא נתן בו יצר הרע עד אכלו מן העץ ונכנס—the Almighty did not place the yetzer hara in Adam until he ate from the tree; once the yetzer hara entered his being, he knew of the difference between good and evil.** Prior to the sin, before the yetzer hara had invaded his internal self, he was able to overcome the “nachash”—the external embodiment of the yetzer hara—by means of Torah-study and “krias shema.” After partaking of the forbidden fruit, however, and being invaded by the yetzer hara, it was only possible to subdue the yetzer hara by contemplating the day of death.

This then is the significance of HKB”H’s admonition to Adam HaRishon: **“ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע לא תאכל ממנו כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות—תמות—and from the Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa you shall not eat thereof; for on the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.** HKB”H is informing Adam that due to the presence of the yetzer hara within his very being, it will be necessary to impose the decree of death upon all of creation. For, only then will it be possible to awaken the fear of Hashem by recalling the day of one’s death. Hence, HKB”H feared that Adam might partake of the Eitz HaChaim and live forever. In that eventuality, he would no longer possess the option of contemplating the day of death in order to defeat the yetzer. Therefore, HKB”H expelled him from Gan Eden for his own good. He and all of creation would then be subject to the decree of death, providing them with a way of overcoming the yetzer.

Based on this concept, the Panim Yafos goes on to interpret David HaMelech’s statement (Tehillim 89, 49): **“מי גבר יחיה—ולא יראה מות ימלט נפשו מיד שאול סלה—what man lives and will not see death; who will rescue his soul from the grasp of the grave? Selah.** In other words, what man wishes to live a life engrossed in Torah without experiencing death? That is impossible! For, without the eventuality of death, he is liable to fall prey to the yetzer. Therefore, only by visualizing death will it be possible for him to overcome the yetzer and save his soul from hell. In this manner, he explains the following statement in the Mishnah (Avos 2, 4): **“אל תאמין בעצמך עד יום מותך”—do not trust in yourself until the day of your death—**until you have contemplated the day of your eventual demise. This is also the meaning of David HaMelech’s statement (Tehillim 30, 3): **“ה’—העלית מן שאול נפשי חייטני מיורדי בור—Hashem, you have raised my soul up from the lower world; You have spared my life from my descent to the grave.** In order to preserve a life dedicated to Torah and the service of Hashem, it is essential to always have in mind that you are destined to die and descend into the grave.

**“And you shall choose life,
so that you will live--you and your offspring”**

Here is another precious gem from the writings of the Panim Yafos (Re’eh). He focuses on HKB”H’s statement to Yisrael (Devarim 30, 15): **“ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים ואת הטוב ואת המות—ואת הרע—see, I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil.** HKB”H concludes His statement with the words (ibid. 19): **“ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך”—and you shall**

choose life, so that you will live--you and your offspring. It seems unimaginable that a person would not choose to live. So, why does HKB”H have to request of man to choose life?

First he explains why it is preferable to overcome the yetzer by means of the first two strategies—engaging in Torah-study and reciting “krias shema.” For, engaging in Torah-study is a tremendous mitzvah. In fact, the Mishnah teaches us (Peiah 1, 1): **“ותלמוד תורה כנגד כולם”—and the study of Torah is equal to them all** (all of the other mitzvos). Similarly, “krias shema” is an invaluable mitzvah; for it involves accepting upon oneself the yoke of the sovereignty of Heaven and the yoke of mitzvot. Having in mind the day of death, on the other hand, in and of itself is not a mitzvah at all. It is merely a device for thwarting the efforts of the yetzer, which is about to overwhelm him.

Therefore, it is clearly preferential to overcome the yetzer hara by employing the first two strategies—engaging in Torah-study and reciting “krias shema.” For, they themselves constitute valuable mitzvot. Nevertheless, our blessed sages added a third strategy for the masses—for those who are not capable of learning Torah with proper intent or reciting “krias shema” with proper intent. For them to overcome their yetzers, it is necessary to consider the eventuality of death.

Based on this premise, he interprets the passuk as follows: **“ראה נתתי לפניך היום”—I have provided you with two strategies for overcoming the yetzer.** First of all: **“החיים והטוב”—**by means of Torah and “krias shema,” representing **“life and good.”** By employing them, it is unnecessary to recall the day of death; one need only consider life and good. Secondly: **“ואת המות ואת”—**contemplating the day of death and recognizing that HKB”H will mete out punishment in Gehinnom for all of your wrongdoings. Hence, HKB”H requests: **“ובחרת בחיים”—**that you please choose the strategy involving life to overcome the yetzer, utilizing Torah and “krias shema”—**“למען תחיה אתה וזרעך”** .

“By the word of two witnesses or three witnesses shall the condemned person be put to death”

Finally, we have arrived at the third precious gem of the Panim Yafos (Shoftim), which explains magnificently the following pesukim (Devarim 17, 6): **“על פי שנים עדים או שלשה עדים ידועתו וידועתו לא יומת על פי עד אחד, יד העדים תהיה בו בראשונה להמיתו ויד כל העם באחרונה ובערת הרע מקרבך”—by the word of two witnesses or three witnesses shall the condemned person be put to death; he shall not be put to death by the word of a single**

witness. The hand of the witnesses shall be upon him first to put him to death, and the hand of the entire people afterward, and you shall destroy the evil from your midst.

It can be suggested that the holy Torah is alluding here to the three strategies employed to overcome the yetzer—Torah, “krias shema,” and contemplating the day of death.

Here is the allusion: “עלפי שנים עדים”—the two witnesses alluded to are the two strategies of Torah and “krias shema”; “או שלשה” —here the passuk alludes to all three strategies, including recalling the day of death; this third method is employed when the person cannot overcome the yetzer by means of the first two strategies—Torah and “krias shema”; “יומת המת”—in this manner, the yetzer hara shall die; however: “לא יומת על פי עד אחד”—it is not recommended to eliminate the yetzer by means of the third method alone—recalling the day of death.

His interpretation continues: “יד העדים תהיה בו בראשונה” —“להמיתו”—first a person should rely on the two witnesses alone to exterminate the yetzer; “ויד כל העם באחרונה”—but for the masses of people who are incapable of overcoming the yetzer by means of Torah and “krias shema” alone, they have no other choice but to resort to the third and last strategy—contemplating the day of death. For, all of these strategies share a common goal: “ובערת הרע מקרבך”—eliminating the yetzer hara from our midst. This concludes his explanation.

We have learned from this discussion that one should make every effort to overcome the yetzer by means of the first two strategies—Torah and “krias shema”—and not resort to the third strategy—envisioning the day of death. For, as the Agra D’Kallah explained, it is best to serve Hashem with “simchah” rather than sadness. Alternatively, as the Panim Yafos explained, when a person employs Torah and “krias shema,” he is serving Hashem and performing mitzvot; he is not merely employing a strategy for overcoming the yetzer hara. Notwithstanding, if a person is unsuccessful in his efforts to thwart the yetzer by means of the first two strategies, he must resort to the third strategy—envisioning the day of death.

Where Is Our Torah and Where Are Our Mitzvot?

Continuing onward and upward along this exalted path, let us now return to the words of the Ohel Yaakov, authored by the Maggid of Dubno. He focuses on these three methods recommended for overcoming the yetzer hara, and uses them to interpret an enigmatic passage in the Gemara (Berachos 31a):

“אמרו ליה רבנן לרב המנונא זוטי בהלולא דמור בריה דרבנא, לישרי לן מור, אמר להו, ווי לן דמיתנן, ווי לן דמיתנן, אמרי ליה אנן מה נעני בתרך, אמר להו הי תורה וחי מצוה דמגנו עלך.”

The Rabbis said to Rav Hamnuna Zuti at the wedding feast of Mar the son of Ravina, “Let the master sing for us.” He said to them, “Woe to us that we are destined to die! Woe to us that we are destined to die!” They said to him, “How are we to respond after you?” He answered them, “Where is the Torah that we have studied and where are the mitzvot that we have performed that can protect us?”

Let us explain. Rav Hamnuna Zuti wished to awaken their sense of “yirah”—lest the wedding festivities arouse in them, chas v’shalom, inappropriate levity, not for the sake of a mitzvah. Therefore, he adopted the extreme strategy of reminding them of the day of death. He did so by proclaiming: **“Woe to us that we are destined to die! Woe to us that we are destined to die!”** He was alluding to them that one can overcome the yetzer by remembering the eventuality of death. In response, his students asked: **“How are we to respond after you?”** If an important, accomplished person such as yourself can only prevail over the yetzer by means of contemplating the day of one’s death, what are we, your young students, to do?

He answered them, “Where is the Torah that we have studied and where are the mitzvot that we have performed that can protect us?” It would have been nice if we had the power to overcome the yetzer by means of Torah and “krias shema.” Yet, due to our countless sins: **“Where is the Torah that we have studied?”** Additionally, **“Where are the mitzvot that we have performed?”**—referring to the mitzvah of “krias shema”—**“that can protect us”** from the yetzer. Therefore, we are forced to employ the strategy of considering the day of death.

To this the Maggid of Dubno adds that involvement with the burial of the dead serves a tremendous purpose. For, it allows one to envision the day of death more readily—enabling one to overcome the yetzer. This being the case, why did HKB”H command the Kohanim, the sons of Aharon: **“לנפש לא יטמא”**—**he shall not become impure among his people** (by involving themselves with the dead)? Seemingly, it would have been preferable had they involved themselves with the dead in order to recall the day of death.

Addressing this issue, the Midrash states: **“הדא הוא דכתיב יראת”** **“ה’ טהורה עומדת לעד”**. In other words, when a person achieves a sincere, unmitigated level of “yirat Hashem”—revering HKB”H because he recognizes that He is supreme—he no longer needs to avail himself of option number three—recognizing that death and accountability are inevitable. This incredible level of “yirah”: **“עומדת לעד”**—protects a person forever, even without resorting to the strategy of contemplating the day of death.

This then is the significance of Rabbi Levi’s statement: **“מיראה שנתירא אהרן מלפני הקב”ה”**—he was lauding Aharon for his amazing, genuine “yirah” of HKB”H; as such, it was unnecessary for Aharon to employ strategies such as recalling the inevitability of one’s death. Therefore, **“midah k’neged midah”**—measure for measure—he was rewarded in kind: **“זכה וניתנה לו הפרשה הזו, שאינה זזה ממנו ולא מבניו ולא מבני בניו עד סוף כל הדורות, ואינו זו פרשת המת שנאמר ויאמר ה’ אל משה אמור אל הכהנים בני אהרן וגו’”**.

In other words, it is precisely for this reason that HKB”H gave Aharon and his sons, the Kohanim, this passage of the Torah—commanding them not to contaminate themselves by involvement with the burial of the dead in order to contemplate the day of death. HKB”H was conveying the message that as Kohanim, servants of Hashem, they were supposed to be on a higher level—making it unnecessary for them to achieve “yiras Hashem” by means of contemplating the day of death. Rather, they should engage in Torah-study and the recitation of “krias shema,” and they would succeed in defeating the yetzer by means of pure, genuine “yiras Hashem.” This is the gist of his beautiful explanation.

Two Uses of the Root “אמר” Alluding to Torah and “Krias Shema”

Now, we can explain very nicely the first Midrash presented in this essay regarding the redundancy in the first passuk of the parsha--**“אמור ואמרת”**:

“העליונים שאין יצר הרע מצוי בהם, אמירה אחת דייה להם, שנאמר בגזירת עיריין פתגמא ומאמר קדישין שאלתא, אבל התחתונים שיש בהם יצר הרע, הלואי לשתי אמירות יעמדו, הדא הוא דכתיב, ויאמר ה’ אל משה אמור אל הכהנים בני אהרן ואמרת אליהם”.

The heavenly residents, the malachim, do not possess a yetzer hara. For them, it suffices for HKB”H to tell them once what to do; they immediately proceed to complete their missions without any delay or hindrance; for they are not burdened with a yetzer hara, over whom they must overcome. On the other hand, human beings possess a yetzer hara over whom they must overcome. Hence, they must be told twice what is desired of them—these are the two strategies we have been discussing, Torah and “krias shema,” the instruments which enable us to overcome the yetzer hara.

This also explains the Gemara’s (Shabbas 88b) statement concerning Moshe’s ascent to the heavens to receive the Torah. Seeing Moshe, the malachim approached HKB”H with the argument: **“מה אנוש כי תזכרנו ובן אדם כי תפקדנו, תנה הודך על”** **“מה אנוש—what is a mortal that You should remember him or the son of man that You should recall him, rather You should bestow Your glory upon the heavens.** In other words, the malachim were staking their claim to the Torah. To which Moshe responded with incredulity: **“יצר הרע יש ביניכם”**—**do any of you possess a yetzer hara?!** In other words, you do not possess a yetzer hara for which you would need to engage in Torah-study in order to overcome it. Only human beings, who are plagued by a yetzer hara, require the Torah; so that they may engage in it in order to overcome the yetzer hara.

Thus, the Midrash concludes: **“הלואי לשתי אמירות יעמדו”**—would that Bnei Yisrael would merit to be like Aharon and his sons—being able to overcome the yetzer hara by means of the two strategies of Torah and “krias shema.” As we know, for many Jews these two strategies alone do not suffice; they need to resort to a third strategy—contemplating the day of death. With this understanding, the Midrash states: **“הדא הוא דכתיב, ויאמר ה’ אל משה אמור אל הכהנים בני אהרן ואמרת אליהם”**—regarding the exemplary Kohanim, the passuk employs the root “אמר” twice. The Torah is alluding to us that it is HKB”H’s desire that every Jew should succeed in overcoming his yetzer hara with these two devices—Torah and “krias shema.”

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