

The second of the two *Parashot* we read this week begins, "These are the journeys of *Bnei Yisrael*, who went forth from the land of Egypt . . ." R' David Twersky z"l (1808-1882; first *Tolna Rebbe*) writes: Here, the Torah is hinting at the way to serve *Hashem--i.e.*, that a person must journey from point to point and from level to level until he reaches the highest level. For the simple Jew, who cannot merit complete *D'veikut* / attachment to *Hashem* all at once, this means beginning with "*Sur mei'ra*" / "distance yourself from bad," from physical desires, and from bad *Midot* / character traits. After that, one can progress to "*Asei tov*" / "do good," *Mitzvot* and good deeds. [Of course, one is obligated to perform *Mitzvot* even before ridding himself of negative traits. The *Tolna Rebbe* is merely addressing which aspect of Divine service a person should focus on.]

The *Tolna Rebbe* continues: Torah scholars, who are already on the level of "*Asei tov*," also must progress step-by-step until they reach true *D'veikut*. Thus, we read (*Tehilim* 84:8), "They advance from strength to strength." Likewise, we read (*Zechariah* 3:4), "I shall permit you movement among these immobile ones." The "immobile ones" is a reference to angels, who always remain on the same level, because they have no *Yetzer Ha'ra* to challenge them. Man, in contrast, is a physical creature, and he must constantly fight the *Yetzer Ha'ra*. The weapon man has for this fight is the Torah.

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Shabbat

R' Ben-Zion Meir Chai Uziel z"l (1880-1953; *Sephardi* Chief Rabbi of Israel) writes: Incorporated into the *Mitzvah* of *Shabbat* are two remembrances that are fundamental to the Torah of *Yisrael* and to its nationhood. These are: remembrance of Creation and remembrance of the Exodus. *Shabbat* proclaims, writes R' Uziel: Remember Creation, and remember that you, man, are the crown of Creation! The heaven and earth do not operate automatically, like a machine with gears that keep on turning without a particular purpose or mission. Rather, Creation is renewed constantly solely due to the will of He who renews it, it is illuminated by the light of *Elokim* from above, and it continues to exist through His will and for a lofty purpose, at the pinnacle of which is you, man. Remember Creation and know its secrets and hidden things, its causes and effects, and choose your path in life accordingly.

R' Uziel continues: Remember, man, who is seemingly as insignificant as one atom is to the entire world, that you are the purpose of Creation! With your Divine soul, you are different from and have dominion over all living things. Know, man, that you are not a small and insignificant creature that is subservient to the never ending cycle of day and night. You are not a small creature like an ant, whose sole activity in life is to store food during the summer. Neither bread nor any other physical desire, no matter how pleasurable, is your purpose in life. You are the pinnacle of Creation, and you are here to prepare, to traverse the foyer in front of the banquet hall--*i.e.*, the World-to-Come. Your purpose is to know what is above you and to use that knowledge to ascend to there.

As for remembering the Exodus, recall how you were subject to the will of others, like a slave, whose sole purpose is to fulfill the will of his master. Remember how you were enslaved in Egypt to a pot of meat and to a serving of fish (see *Shmot* 16:3, *Bemidbar* 11:5)! There is nothing more lowly than being subservient to a *Perutah* / small coin and to the one who gives it to you. But now, recognize that you are free in body and soul, and unite with the *Shabbat* Queen, which turns you into royalty and fills your soul with the joy of freedom. (*Shabbat U'mo'ed* p.39)

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10815 Meadowhill Road, Silver Spring, MD 20901 / 301-775-9623

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“Nachnu na’a’vor / We shall cross over as a vanguard before Hashem to the land of Canaan . . .” (32:32)

R’ Sadka Hussein z”l (18th century; Aleppo, Syria and Baghdad, Iraq) observes that the word “Nachnu” / “we” appears in the following four contexts in *Tanach*:

- “Nachnu pashanu / We have transgressed . . .” (*Eichah* 3:42);
- “Nachnu na’a’vor / We shall cross over as a vanguard . . .” (our verse);
- “Nachnu mah / What are we?” (*Shmot* 16:7); and
- “All of us, *Bnei ish echad nachnu* / we are sons of one man.” (*Bereishit* 42:11).

What can we learn from the use of this unusual word in these four contexts?

R’ Hussein answers: *Hashem* sometime punishes a *Tzaddik* together with-- maybe even, before--his generation, though the *Tzaddik* did not sin, because all of the Jewish People are guarantors for each other (“*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh b’zeh*”). A *Tzaddik* may ask: “*Nachnu Mah?*” What are we? What did we do wrong that “*Nachnu na’a’vor*,” that we should be at the forefront of suffering for our generation? The answer is: “*Nachnu pashanu!*” We as a People have sinned! Even if the righteous themselves did not sin, “*Bnei ish echad nachnu*”-- we are all brothers, and we are guarantors for each other!

(*Avodat Ha’tzedakah*)

“Aharon Ha’kohen went up to Mount Hor at the word of Hashem and died there . . . in the fifth month on the first of the month.” (33:38)

The *Gemara* (*Ta’anit* 26b) teaches: When the month of *Av* arrives, we lessen our joy.

R’ Michel Zilber *shlita* (*Rosh Yeshiva* of the *Zvhil yeshiva* in Yerushalayim) observes: The first day of *Av* is the *yahrzeit* of Aharon *Ha’kohen*. Our Sages relate that when Aharon died, the Clouds of Glory disappeared. The holiday of *Sukkot*, which commemorates the Clouds of Glory, is referred to as “*Z’man Simchateinu*” / “The time of our joy.” Conversely, then, the day when the Clouds of Glory vanished should be a day when our joy is lessened.

(*Tipah Min Ha’yam*)

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At the highest level, the *Tolna Rebbe* writes, a Torah scholar studies and prays because it is the right thing to do, with no conscious awareness of his own accomplishments. To achieve this very high level, one must perfect his *Yir’ah* / awe of G-d. This, he writes, is alluded to in the verse with which we began, “*Eleh mas’ei*” / “These are the journeys. . .” The *Gematria* of that phrase (216) is the same as the *Gematria* of “*Yir’ah*,” and also of “*Gevurah*” / “strength.” By journeying step-by-step until one acquires “*Yirah*,” one will have the “*Gevurah*” to conquer his *Yetzer Ha’ra*, as we learn in *Pirkei Avot*: “Who is a ‘*Gibor*’ / ‘strong person’? One who conquers his *Yetzer Ha’ra*.”

(*Magen David*)

“Take vengeance for *Bnei Yisrael* against the Midyanites . . . Moshe sent them--a thousand from each tribe for the legion--them and Pinchas son of Elazar the *Kohen* to the legion . . .” (31:2, 6)

Midrash Rabbah asks: *Hashem* told Moshe himself to take vengeance from Midyan; why did he send others in his place?

The *Midrash* answers: Moshe had lived among the Midyanites (after he fled from Pharaoh--see *Shmot* 2:15), and he reasoned that it was not proper for him to harm a nation that had been kind to him. As the popular expression goes, says the *Midrash*, “If you drank from a well, do not throw stones into it.”

Why did Moshe send Pinchas? continues the *Midrash*. Because one who began a *Mitzvah* should finish it. Pinchas had mollified *Hashem* by killing the Midyanite princess; now he had to complete his *Mitzvah*. [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R’ Yoshiyahu Pinto z”l (Damascus, Syria; died 1648) explains: The *Midrash* is not suggesting that Moshe ignored a direct command of *Hashem* based on his own reasoning. Rather, “Take vengeance” is subject to two interpretations: “Take vengeance personally” or “Cause vengeance to be taken.” Moshe therefore asked himself what *Hashem*’s will in the matter must be, and he concluded that *Hashem* would not want him to personally harm a nation that had been kind to him.

R’ Pinto continues: Based on this principle, the *Midrash* asks, “Why did Moshe send Pinchas?” Pinchas’ own mother was a Midianite, a daughter of Moshe’s father-in-law Yitro; why then was Pinchas any better a choice to lead *Bnei Yisrael* into battle against the Midianites? To answer this, the *Midrash* teaches another principle, explains R’ Pinto: “One who began a *Mitzvah* should complete it.”

(*Tzror Ha’kesef*)

“Moshe said to them, ‘If you do this thing, if you arm yourselves before Hashem for the battle, and every armed man among you shall cross the Jordan before Hashem, until He drives out His enemies before Him, and the Land shall be conquered before Hashem, and then you shall return--then you shall be vindicated from Hashem and from Yisrael, and this Land shall be a heritage for you before Hashem.’” (32:20-22)

R’ Yoel Leib Herzog z”l (1865-1934; rabbi in Lomza, Poland; Leeds, England; and Paris, France; father of Israel’s first *Ashkenazi* Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Halevi Herzog z”l) asks: Why does Moshe Rabbeinu mention *Hashem*’s Name five times in telling the tribes of Reuven and Gad what their obligations are?

He answers: We read (*Tehilim* 105:44-45), “He gave them the lands of nations, and they inherited the toil of regimes, so that they might safeguard His statutes and observe His teachings.” This teaches that *Eretz Yisrael* was given to us on the condition that we observe the Torah. Otherwise, we will be exiled.

The tribes of Reuven and Gad reasoned that, given this condition, exile was inevitable, so why bother fighting for the Land? In contrast, the land on the east bank of the Jordan is not subject to this condition. But, Moshe told them that they were wrong; as part of the Jewish People, they were subject to the same condition as their cousins from other tribes. The only way to secure their land, Moshe told them, was by observing the Five Books of the Torah--alluded to by the five mentions of *Hashem*’s Name.

(*Imrei Yoel: Matot, Drush 2*)