

חכמת הקצין

PRINCELY WISDOM

THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF RABBI JACOB S. KASSIN





הוצאת
הנהלת החברה
שלום

RABBI JACOB KASSIN was one of the great Sefardic sages of his time. While still in his twenties, he held an important position on the Sefardic Beit Din of Jerusalem and had authored important works of both halachah and kabbalah. He was destined to become one of the leading Torah scholars of the Holy City.

But in 1932, at the age of 32, Rabbi Kassin left Jerusalem for America, where he was appointed Chief Rabbi of New York's Syrian Jewish community. For the next 63 years, he led his kehillah with great wisdom and self-sacrifice. His life was dedicated to teaching, guiding, and uplifting the Sefardic Jews of New York, and his fame and influence spread around the world.

Rabbi Kassin put aside his own brilliant future as a scholar for the good of the community, and little was known of the extent of his knowledge. After his passing, Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom of Jerusalem collected and published many of his writings in a volume entitled *Katzinei Eretz*, a work that reveals R. Kassin's great genius and his remarkable command of classic Jewish texts.

PRINCELY WISDOM — *Hochmat HaKatzin* — is a translation of over a dozen of R. Kassin's ethical writings. They are testimony to the author's wealth of knowledge, as well as his love and dedication to the welfare of the Jewish people.

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PRINCELY WISDOM

THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF RABBI JACOB S. KASSIN

(1900-1994)

Chief Rabbi of Congregation Shaare Zion, New York

Including Biography of R. Kassin and
History of the Aram Soba Community

This Special Edition of
PRINCELY WISDOM
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Sefardic Community of Brooklyn, New York

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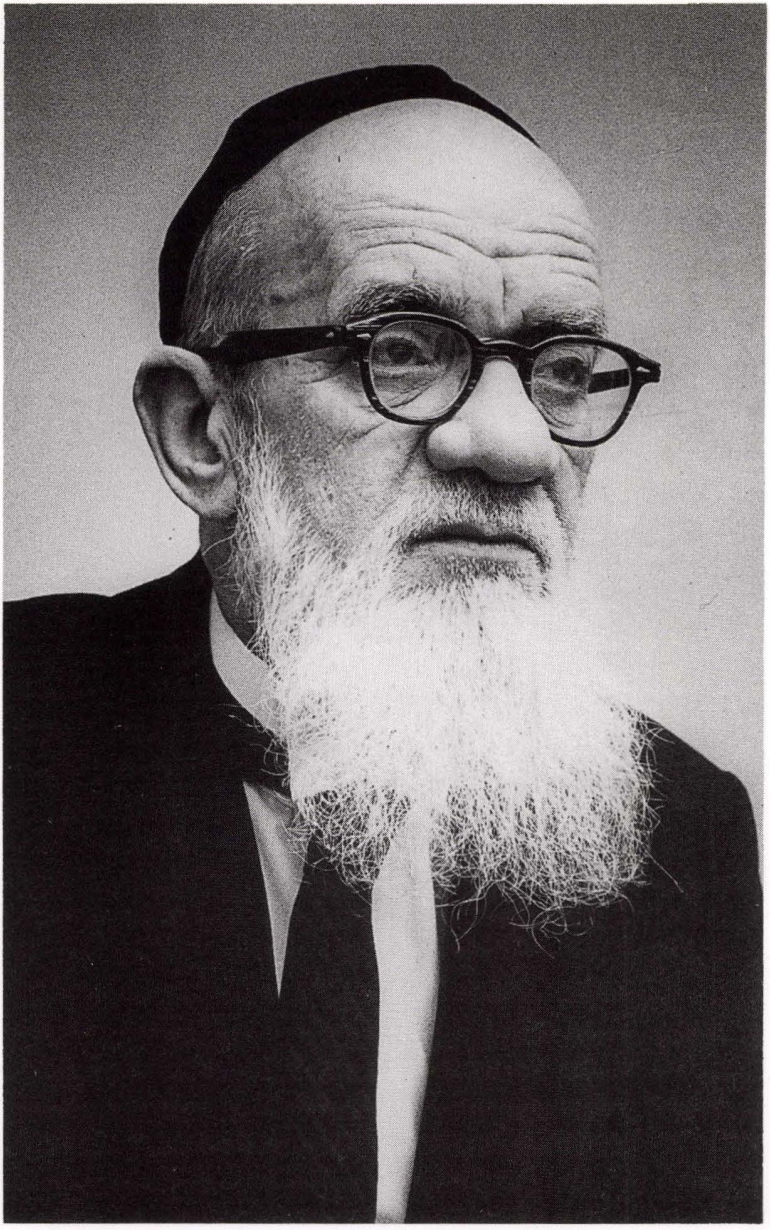
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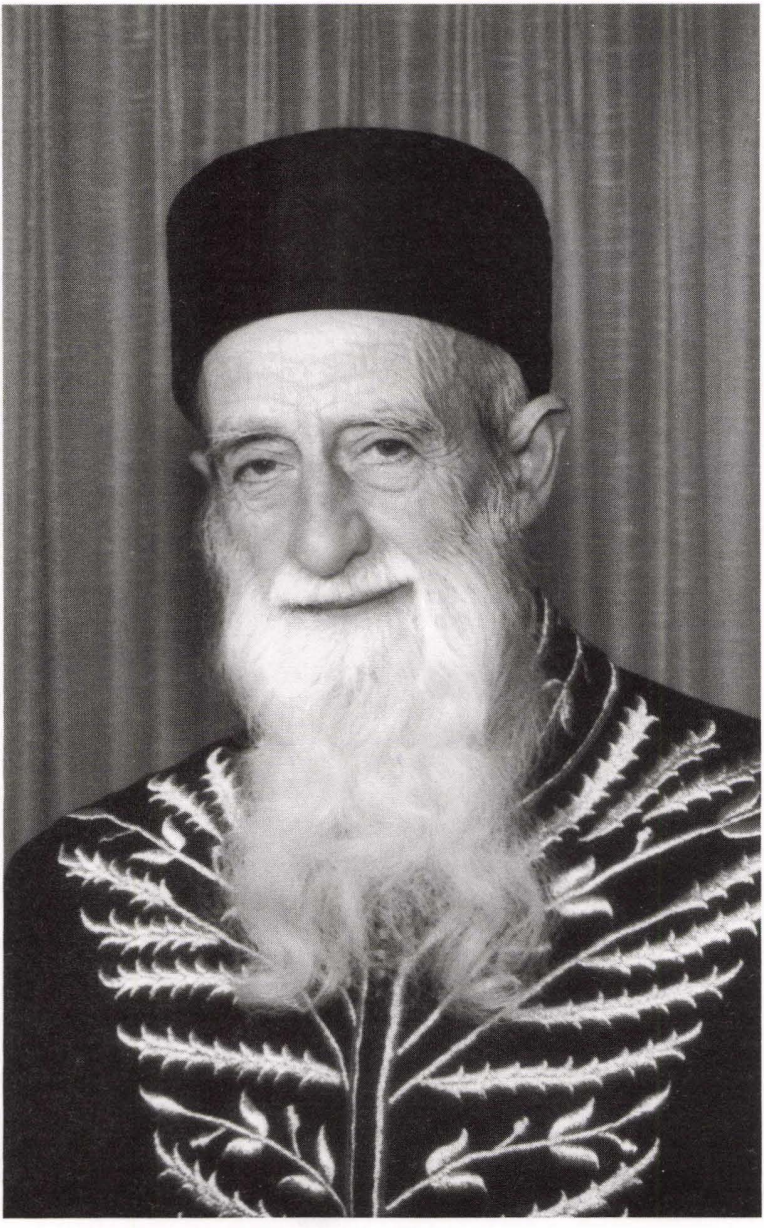
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Rabbi Yaakov S. Kassin, 1900-1994



Chief Rabbi Saul J. Kassin *shlita*,
son of the Gaon Rabbi Yaakov S. Kassin

Rabbi Saul Jacob Kassin שליט"א

Chief Rabbi of the Syrian-Sefardic Community

From the moment Rabbi Saul Kassin arrived in the United States at the age of twelve, he began to prepare for a lifetime of serve and leadership in the Syrian-Sefardic Community. A student of Ohel Moshe High School, he was ordained at the Rabbi Isaac Elchonon Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University. He taught in the Magen David congregation's Yeshiva and Talmud Torah, and is the author of *Mitzvot Hashem* (Hebrew) and *The Light of the Law* (English).

Rabbi Kassin is married to the former Freida Seruya of Chicago and was the chosen successor of his revered father, the Chief Rabbi זצ"ל, who passed away after leading the community for sixty-three years.

For over fifty years, Rabbi Saul Kassin has been known and loved for his wisdom, humility, and tolerance of all Jews, regardless of their level of observance; for his concern with the problems of individuals and families; for mediating and resolving disputes; for establishing harmony and morality in the worlds of the synagogue, home, and commerce — gently, warmly and wisely.

His greatest love is studying and teaching the Torah on every conceivable level, from mandatory classes for brides and grooms, to adult education. Countless great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and children, rabbis, doctors, attorneys, and captains of commerce are proud to call themselves his students. As a halachic authority, his rulings are the last word for multitudes.

A strong community is his passion. For over fifty years, he was groomed as his great father's strong right arm,

responding authoritatively to national and international problems. He built the first major mikvah for the community, protects its purity by shielding it against intermarriage and converts, in accordance with the edict of 1935, and published tens of thousands of books for distribution throughout the world.

Nor does his responsibility end at the borders of the community. He established *Reshet Talmude Torah* in Israel, with over 14,000 students and hundreds of schools throughout the Holy Land. In his quiet gentle way, he supports hundreds of *sh'lichim, kollels*, widows, orphans, and poor people, doing so with dignity and sensitivity. He guides representatives of institutions, making their difficult task as easy as possible.

For over fifty years, he has wept on the floor, reciting *Tikun Hatsot*, praying for the restoration of the Temple and the end of the exile — and bringing the longed for day closer, with his prayers, service, and refusal to engage in dispute and recrimination.

All his life he has fled from honor, but honor pursues him, for few deserve it more.

Written with love and appreciation by the students and congregants of Rabbi Saul Kassin

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Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom

Rabbi Yaakov Hillel, *shlita*
Rosh Yeshivah

Standing at the forefront of modern-day Torah scholarship, Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom, headed by the Gaon and Kabbalist Rabbi Yaakov Hillel, *shlita*, plays an important role in revitalizing the Sefardic scholastic heritage and restoring its age-old glory.

Rabbi Yaakov Hillel

R. Yaakov Hillel is the scion of a distinguished rabbinical family. His great-grandfather was R. Avraham Hillel, *Av Beit Din* and Chief Rabbi of Baghdad in the times of the Ben Ish Hai. Following in his footsteps, R. Yaakov Hillel has dedicated his life to teaching Torah and inspiring others to observe its statutes.

A graduate of the renowned Gateshead and Ponevezh Yeshivot, R. Hillel has earned a distinguished place among the foremost Torah authorities of our generation, who have come to rely upon his wisdom and insight, and on the breadth and depth of his Torah knowledge. In addition to his classical yeshivah training, he is extremely proud of his Sefardic heritage; the perpetuation and dissemination of Sefardic culture and tradition are among his highest priorities.

R. Hillel is widely considered to be the preeminent authority on Kabbalah of this generation. His numerous written works

include detailed elucidations of the teachings of the Arizal and the Rashash. Leading rabbis consider his expositions to be the most authoritative and reliable to date.

In the field of Halachic literature, as well, R. Hillel has made significant contributions. His numerous responsa cover a broad range of topics. His book *VaYashov HaYam* has become a benchmark in modern Halachic literature and is regularly consulted by leading rabbis in Israel and abroad.

In addition, R. Hillel has written numerous works dealing with contemporary Torah issues. *Faith and Folly*, for instance, provides clear guidelines by which to distinguish between true masters of Kabbalah and self-promoting charlatans.

Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom

In 1972, R. Hillel founded the highly acclaimed Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom, a unique center for the study and exposition of Talmud and Halachah. There are over 150 scholars in its four division: the Institute for Halachah, the Yeshivah for Advanced Talmudic Studies, the Study Hall for Kabbalists, and the Publishing House.

Scholars of the **Institute for Halachah** take time from their busy study schedule to share their knowledge with the public. The doors of the Institute are open to those seeking advice, guidance, or Halachic decisions on any of the four parts of the *Shulhan Aruch*. Responses are written to Halachic queries that pour in from around the world. The Institute also includes a Rabbinic Court, established in 1988, which meets daily to resolve litigation in monetary matters, and a *Medrash Dayanim*, in which Torah scholars are trained to become rabbinic judges.

The **Yeshivah for Advanced Talmudic Studies** provides advanced *ba'alei teshuvah* the opportunity to develop into

outstanding Torah scholars. Many graduates of this program are now serving the community as rabbis and teachers.

In the **Study Hall for Kabbalists**, a select group of rabbis renowned for their piety and scholarship delve into the works of the Arizal and the Rashash. Daily discourses are delivered by R. Hillel.

Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom Publications

The Publishing House, one of Israel's largest, makes available important Jewish manuscripts that have remained unpublished for many years. Emphasis is placed on producing reliable and accurate texts in order to preserve important works for future generations. To date, a vast collection of original manuscripts has been amassed, and over 170 brilliant works of both Sefardic and Ashkenazic origin have been published and disseminated to Jewish communities in Israel and the Diaspora. Through these publications, great strides have been made toward revitalizing Sefardic culture and restoring its glorious heritage.

The following works have appeared in English.

- *The Halachot of the Ben Ish Hai* (4 volumes)
- *The Ben Ish Hai Anthology: Volume 1: Between Heaven and Earth*
- *Faith and Folly* (in English, French and Spanish).
- *Princely Wisdom: The Life and Teachings of Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin.*

By providing dynamic, capable spiritual leaders for the future, and books from the illustrious masters of the past, R. Yaakov Hillel and Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom are working to ensure the continuity of authentic Jewish heritage based on the noble ways of our forefathers.

This Book Is Dedicated in Blessed Memory
of Our Grandparents and Parents

CHIEF RABBI JACOB SAUL KASSIN
MAZAL KASSIN
RABBI SHABETAI BEDA
SARAH BEDA
ABRAHAM & ESTHER TOBIAS
ABRAHAM & ANNA SERUYA
ELI TOBIAS



And in Honor of Our Parents

CHIEF RABBI SAUL JACOB KASSIN
FREIDA KASSIN
GLADYS TOBIAS



BY JACOB AND SARINA KASSIN

FOREWORD

by Rabbi Yaakov Hillel שליט"א
Rosh Yeshivah of Hevrat Ahavat Shalom
Jerusalem

It is our great joy and privilege to present before you this beautiful volume, *Princely Wisdom*, containing numerous sermons and insights from that outstanding scholar and Kabbalist, **Rabbi Jacob Kassin**, a descendant of the illustrious Kassin family of Aram Soba, Syria, and Chief Rabbi of Congregation Shaare Zion of New York.

The reason for our joy is twofold. First, we rejoice over the publication of this work, which contains teachings both profound and relevant. Certainly, they will be a source of insight and inspiration for many people. Secondly, we rejoice over the new light these words will shed on the personality of their author, Rabbi Jacob Kassin. For decades, Rabbi Kassin was known for his role as leader of New York's Syrian Jewish community. But due to his excessive modesty, his brilliance in Torah was often overlooked. Indeed, he was among the leading *halachic* authorities of his time, and from his youth was already answering difficult questions sent to him from around the world. Likewise, his ethical sermons are masterpieces of erudition, and reveal an extraordinary depth and breadth of knowledge. With the publication of this volume in English, this previously unknown dimension of Rabbi Yaakov will become

apparent. Both the general public and the members of his community will have the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate his princely wisdom. Truly, he was outstanding among the Sefardic Rabbis of our generation.

Furthermore, this work has been published within a year of the passing of Rabbi Kassin. It was clearly his merit that enabled us to prepare the manuscript for publication in such a short period of time. Now that the work is finished, may it be a source of additional merit to its author זי"ע. And in that, will be our reward.

It is important to note that the teachings in this volume do not constitute all of Rabbi Kassin's writings. Only a few of his personal manuscripts actually reached our hands. Hopefully, as other writings come to light, we will be able to publish them as well.

There was a very special connection between Rabbi Kassin and this writer, based upon our mutual interest in the study of Kabbalah. This connection has been preserved by his children, who have followed in their father's footsteps, and become major benefactors of our yeshivah, **Hevrat Ahavat Shalom** in Jerusalem. In fact, the yeshivah building itself is named after this noble lineage — ***Heichal Kassin***. With the publication of this volume, we are delighted to affirm our connection with the family in yet other ways.

We have prefaced Rabbi Kassin's writings with a lengthy history of the Syrian Jewish community, and of the Kassin family in particular. Special attention was given to the life of Rabbi Shaul Kassin, the author's father. Furthermore, we have traced Rabbi Jacob Kassin's life, from his youth in Eretz Yisrael, to his position in New York as a leading figure in the Sefardic community. This biography serves, as well, as a

concise history of the Syrian Jewish community in New York.

I have also included a translation of the eulogy I delivered before Rabbi Kassin's bier, prior to his interment, here in Jerusalem. Many of Jerusalem's leading Rabbis were present at the time, as well as members of the Kassin family, besides the large gathering of those who came to pay their last respects.

We have entitled the present work *Princely Wisdom,* alluding to the author's family name, Kassin (קצין), which means prince. The Syrian community has been blessed with Rabbis and leaders from the Kassin family for hundreds of years, a tradition continuing until today, in which Rabbi Jacob Kassin was an important link.

I would like to take this opportunity to offer a special blessing to the members of Congregation Shaare Zion of New York—the large and respected community of Syrian Jews, built by Rabbi Kassin, through years of effort and sacrifice. The community is a fortress of Torah, crowned by eminent Rabbis, and free of the toxic influences of the surrounding non-Jewish world. The community's love of Torah, of the Sages, of yeshivot, of charity, are known to all. Their unity and brotherly love serve as a model to all other communities. Therefore, it is only fitting to bless them now. May the merit of the holy Rabbi Jacob Kassin protect them, and may he continue — from his high place in *Gan Eden* — to pray for them and seek their good. For "*tzaddikim* are greater in their deaths than in their lives" (*Hulin* 7b). And as the Zohar says, "Were it not for the prayers of the deceased for the living, the living would not survive" (*Zohar, Shemot* 16b). May the community continue to grow and develop, enjoying both spiritual and material gains. May blessing and light rest upon their efforts, and may they see joy from their offspring.

Finally, we wish to extend our deepest thanks to the entire Kassin family, especially its spiritual heads: **Rabbi Shaul Kassin**, who now fills his father's position; **Rabbi Baruch Ben Chaim**, son-in-law of Rabbi Jacob Kassin, who has served the community for many years as Rabbi and teacher, and to all the grandchildren and descendants. All of them are beloved to us. May they merit to continue the glorious tradition of their forefathers, exhibiting greatness in Torah and charity, until the coming of the Righteous Redeemer. May the merit of their holy ancestors bring them blessings both spiritual and material, and may the Almighty fulfill all of their hearts' desires for the good.

I pray that in the merit of the Torah we are now bringing to light, Hashem will gaze upon his downtrodden nation, declare "enough" to our suffering, and send us our righteous Messiah and an eternal deliverance. May the earth be filled with knowledge of God as waters cover the sea. On that day, the Lord will be King over all the earth.

Written and signed in the honor of Torah and its students,

Yaakov Hillel
Jerusalem
Heshvan, 5756

APPROBATION

Rabbi Shaul J. Kassin
Rabbi of Congregation Shaare Zion, Brooklyn, N.Y.

"And Jacob went out . . ."

Genesis 28:10

Why does Scripture mention his departure? It is only to tell us that the departure of a righteous man from a place makes an impression. For during the time that the righteous man is in the city, he constitutes its glory. He is its splendor; he is its crown. When he departs, there departs its glory, its splendor, its crown.

—Rashi

Less than a year ago, my beloved father, Chief Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin zt'l, passed away, and indeed, he left strong impressions upon thousands of people: rabbis, students, laymen and women. During his lifetime, in Israel and in the United States, he touched the lives of tens of thousands of people. His accomplishments as an author in *halachah* and Kabbalah, as a *dayan* on the *Beit Din* in Jerusalem and America, his leadership of the community for more than sixty years as Chief Rabbi, teacher and preacher, are more numerous than can be counted.

His vast and broad knowledge, his dignity and noble character traits, were hidden by his exceeding humility. His book *Katzinei Eretz*, which was published recently through the

efforts of our dear and close friend, the renowned Kabbalist Rabbi Yaakov Hillel, head of Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom in Jerusalem, amazed the Rabbinical world. The responsa of his early years were addressed to the leading rabbis of the generation. Rabbis from across the world regularly sent him questions and solicited his opinion. His answers were always enlightening and his *halachic* decisions final.

In order to serve the English speaking public, Rabbi Hillel has compiled excerpts from my father's ethical writings. These are presented here for the first time in English, together with a biography of my father's life, zt'l.

I am sure that all who purchase *Princely Wisdom* will benefit greatly from its inspiring words. Thus will the soul of my beloved father be elevated in *Gan Eden*. Surely from his high place, he will pray for our health, happiness, and material and spiritual success.

Our family expresses great appreciation to Rabbi Yaakov Hillel *shlita*, for his efforts in publishing the Hebrew book *Katzinei Eretz*, and this present work *Princely Wisdom.*

I would also like to express my personal feelings, and the feelings of the entire New York community to Rabbi Hillel for his yearly visits to our midst. They are of great and invaluable importance. Many hundreds of us hear his talks and seek his wise advice and blessings. His presence is constantly uplifting and spiritually inspiring.

May the soul of my father pray on his behalf, that he may continue his sacred mission to lead Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom and disseminate Torah and *yirat shamayim* among the Jewish people until the coming of the Messiah in the very near future. Amen.

Rabbi Shaul J. Kassin

THE GAON YAAKOV IS NO MORE

Eulogy Delivered by the Gaon, Rosh Yeshivah and Kabbalist, Rabbi Yaakov Hillel at the Funeral of the Gaon and Distinguished Kabbalist, Our Master and Teacher **Rabbi Yaakov S. Kassin**[1]

IN FEAR, I STAND HERE TREMBLING, before the bier of the venerable sage and elder, our teacher and the crown of our head, the Gaon and Kabbalist, Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, may his memory be for a blessing. One of the last survivors of the glorious scholars of the past, he lived for nearly a hundred years. He was an accomplished master of the revealed Torah, and a genius in the science of Kabbalah. He was a holy man of piety, and Israel basked in his glory. As far back as sixty years ago, he was already regarded by the great rabbinical authorities of the world as an outstanding Gaon and as an expert in every department of Torah knowledge. While still a young man in Jerusalem, the capital city, with scholars and scribes on every street corner, he would uproot mountains with his erudition and analytical skills. His good name always preceded him, testifying to his brilliance and splendor.

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[1] This eulogy was originally written in a poetic Hebrew based entirely on the words of the Torah and the Rabbis. We have tried to retain some of its lyric qualities in the following translation.

The Story of a Righteous Man

He was born in holiness to a highly distinguished father, Rabbi Shaul Kassin—the chosen of God, a man of outstanding modesty, an eminent Kabbalist, a pious man, elevated above the mundane world, a sweet singer with a generous heart, a scion of an exalted and noble family, a link in a long and glorious chain. The Kassins of Aram Soba were among the rabbinical leaders of the community, and were judges and authors of renown. The tradition was handed down from father to son, and the scholarship of the family never ceased in Aram Soba.

At a very early age, Rabbi Yaakov's special qualities came to the fore, and his potential for greatness was recognized. He began his ascent to ever greater heights as he studied day and night with exceptional diligence. At the age of twenty, he stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries. His character was exemplary and he grew steadily in stature. He excelled in his knowledge of Torah and in the depth of his understanding. He sat in a position of authority on the Supreme *Beit Din* of Jerusalem, the eternal city. Requests for decisions on *halachic* problems poured in from around the world, for his fame as an expert in all branches of Torah learning had already spread to distant parts of the earth.

Gaon in the Wisdom of Kabbalah

But the crowning glory of his achievements was in the realm of the hidden branch of the Torah, the Kabbalah. He ascended the mountain of mysticism and scaled the summits. He was still in his youth when he merited to drink from the

fountain of wisdom of the greatest of its instructors, the holy Gaon, our master and teacher Rabbi Avraham Addes, head of the *Beit Din* in Jerusalem. He also had the merit to serve the celebrated dean of the Kabbalists, a High Priest among his brothers, our master and teacher, the Gaon Rabbi Hayyim Shaul Dweck. From these illustrious mentors, the secrets of Kabbalah were transmitted to him. He was such an adept student that the above-mentioned master wrote that he loved his brilliant disciple as the apple of his eye.

This young man continued to amaze his peers when he began to write books on the science of Kabbalah: *Pri Eitz Hagan*, *Ohr HaLevanah*, and *Yesod Ha'Emunah*. They were replete with novella from the teachings of the Rashash. His skill in presenting and clarifying the mystical intentions prescribed by that great sage revealed the author's abundant wisdom. He proceeded to further accomplishments and founded an important yeshivah called Gan HaLevanon for the study of the revealed and hidden Torah. There he raised many disciples, from whose ranks Torah instruction was disseminated to all Israel. All this he managed to achieve within a limited period, while still in his prime as a young scholar. And therefore—how will we be able to replace him now? We are an orphaned generation, which has descended to the depths. Even in eulogizing him, we are not in a position to do him justice. We are left completely destitute, and as lowly as dust.

I remember well from the days of our youth the high esteem in which he was held here in Jerusalem. The remnants of the Exile who had come to settle in the Holy City had included many veteran practitioners of Kabbalah, outstanding scholars who were themselves worthy of the mantle of greatness. Yet they acknowledged with a full heart and with deep

humility, that our master, the deceased, stood head and shoulders above all of them. If he could be compared to a fruit, then they were no more than the peel.

Therefore, in the light of all these wonderful achievements, his masters ordained him and blessed him that his success should be redoubled—in imparting his knowledge of the Kabbalah to thousands of students over many years, in writing illuminating texts, in explaining and interpreting complex subjects, in expounding brilliant novella, and in enhancing the prayers of the community, all in the way of truth and sincerity. They saw in him the chief transmitter of the hidden mysteries of the Torah to future generations. Rabbi Yaakov was to be a well of wisdom, a fountain of knowledge that would fill the waiting vessels of students in the years to come.

If this would have been done while anticipating the End of Days, it would undoubtedly have succeeded in arousing Divine favor and mercy to bring near the Redemption, already so much delayed; for Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai himself had promised in the Zohar, that in the merit of the study of Kabbalah, Israel would be redeemed.

And we see that our master was, in fact, granted a very long life, and he had the capacity to transmit his vast knowledge to a great number of disciples. The vision of his peers came close to being realized, and the day of the coming of the Redeemer to Israel, with the return of the remnant of our people to Mount Zion, could have been near at hand.

Head of the Exile

But the Holy One, blessed be He, had other designs. When the deceased was yet blossoming in His service, at the height

of his vigor, God afflicted him with illness, so that he was obliged to seek medical assistance in Israel and the Diaspora. Then, on account of the pressures of life and the lack of a livelihood, he was compelled to accede to numerous entreaties. He accepted on his shoulders the yoke of an important office. This was the rabbinical leadership of the holy communities of immigrants from Aram Soba, who had planted their roots in the New World—which was devoid of spirituality and holiness, and full of temptation and permissiveness. The wolf dwelt together with the lamb, and the standing of religion was low in the land, for it was like a desolate wilderness. Thereupon our master came, stood at its gate, and declared war against secularism and the widespread spiritual anarchy. He restored religion to its rightful place in all its glory.

As soon as our master, the deceased—may his memory be for a blessing—assumed the mantle of leadership with dignity, signs of imminent salvation could be discerned. His wisdom and his righteousness, his pleasant disposition on the one hand and his assertiveness on the other, were a wonderful combination of qualities which enabled him to perfect the art of leadership. He succeeded in drawing near those who were far away, and in gathering in the dispersed. He infused the dry bones with a new spirit, until they had taken on solid form and the community stood on firm foundations. He enacted decrees to mend the breaches and remove the stumblingblocks. He took prudent measures against the dangers of consorting with the nations and adopting alien ways. Under pain of expulsion, he forbade the acceptance of converts under any circumstances. He thus delivered a community of pure and noble origins from the threat of assimilation among the non-Jews, God forbid.

Apart from these prohibitions—which proved to be very effective—designed to remove evil from its midst, he took significant positive steps for the benefit of the community. Nights became days as he worked round the clock to imbue the youth of the Talmud Torah with an understanding of Torah and fear of heaven, in association with his companion in Torah, the exceptional Gaon, Rabbi Matlub Abadi. Together, these great educators exerted themselves to the utmost to promote the honor and fear of the Torah, by instilling into the hearts of their young pupils a deep love of the Sages and of deeds of lovingkindness, and by inspiring them to appreciate the value of Torah and its students, and the power of charity.

And God took pleasure in his deeds, and the Divine Presence rested on the work of his hands. The community prospered beyond recognition, and became the pride of Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora; for most of its members strictly observed the Torah and *mitzvot*, loved charity, supported students of the Torah, and strengthened its institutions both in Israel and the Diaspora.

And in the merit of his wise leadership, through which the authentic values of Judaism were successfully preserved, this holy community was shielded and delivered from all kinds of danger and tribulation. Love, brotherhood and understanding permeated the community in a spirit of unity. Its members were as one large family, and their rabbinate, synagogues and houses of study played central roles in their lives.

Their deeds initiated an arousal on High of abundant Heavenly mercy, which caused blessing and prosperity to be showered upon this glorious community. All the good things

of the land were granted to them, and they flourished under the hand of Divine Providence. All this was in the merit of our master and his great wisdom, and his selfless toil which bore so much fruit.

How to Perceive That God Always Controls Our Destinies for the Good

On the other hand, the question can be asked: is it right for a *bat Kohen* to become an innkeeper's wife, for a handmaiden to inherit her mistress, for one's status to be overturned in this manner? For the departed was destined from the beginning to be a giant in Torah, to enlarge the borders of creative scholarship, and to work day and night researching the revealed and mystical branches of the Torah while living in Jerusalem, the holy of holies. He could have continued to write profound and brilliant compositions, to expound the secrets of the Torah and unravel its mysteries, to elevate his own prayers and those of his brethren with the authentic mystical intentions in the Siddur of the Rashash, and thereby come closer to bringing about the unification of the Holy One and the intensification of his Divine Light.

Indeed, one thing is clear without any doubt. Even though his marvelous accomplishments in the Diaspora, in establishing and consolidating a God-fearing and devout community, were without parallel and of inestimable value, a price had to be paid in terms of Divine reckoning. When the deceased traveled from Jerusalem, the golden city, to set up a glorious community in the Diaspora, a curtain came down on his invaluable work—to reveal the innermost recesses of the Torah, and a magnificent diadem was removed from its head, as it were. A great hope was stifled,

the light of Kabbalah was extinguished, and the fire of the altar snuffed out. And now—who will replace him, for his worth cannot be calculated, for we are left without a leader, to bring satisfaction to the Divine Presence, to raise our fallen from the dust, and to bring near the time of our Redemption. For a righteous man is called the foundation of the world, and he enjoys the right of priority. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai already remarked that he and his son had the power to save the world from destruction and to advance the time of the Redemption,[2] for nothing is greater than the study of Torah, and especially the study of Kabbalah. The secrets of the Ari z'l and the Rashash have the potential of perfecting the entire world. And if they are studied in Jerusalem, the city of gold, and the wisdom of Kabbalah is disseminated there to hundreds of thousands, how much greater is the merit. For this, it is certainly fitting to weep, for the magnitude of our loss and our bereavement, and to express our bewilderment that God has afflicted us in this way, in extinguishing the burning coals which remain, the remnant of the exile and our surviving hope. Woe that this beautiful man has perished from the land!

Why the Rambam Stayed in Egypt

To help us arrive at a clearer understanding of the hidden ways of the Almighty, and at a keener appreciation of the wonderful attributes and deeds of the deceased, let us digress

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[2] *Sukah* 45b.

to clarify a puzzling aspect of the life of one of the most outstanding of the *Rishonim*, our master the Rambam, the greatest of the Codifiers. The Rambam was residing permanently in Egypt, a country where Jews were forbidden to settle, as Moses had explicitly enjoined in the Torah.[3] Indeed, whenever the Rambam wrote a letter, he would add to his signature the words: "I am the person who transgresses three negative commandments of the Torah every day."[4] How is it that this most distinguished of our sages, an undisputed giant among our rabbinic authorities, could have allowed himself to be in such a position?

I noticed in the writings of one of the *Aharonim* a thought-provoking solution to this perplexing question. How was it possible, asks the writer, that a leader of the stature of the Rambam, who was so scrupulous in his observance of the Torah's laws, could disregard so blatantly an explicit negative prohibition, and seemingly contradict the ruling of the Codifiers? He then proposes an explanation which is compatible with the reputation of the Rambam, whose every action was in accordance with the *halachah*, and whose whole life was governed by Torah-based principles.

It is a well-known fact that there existed an eccentric sect of heretics called the Karaites, whose adherents renounced the Oral Law and its ancient traditions, that were received from the Almighty at Sinai by Moses, the faithful shepherd, and transmitted from one generation to the next by the sages of the era.

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[3] Exodus 14:13; Deuteronomy 17:16, 28:38.

[4] See *Sefer HaMitzvot, mitzvot* 430, 56.

At the time of the Rambam, this sect of sinful people was gaining ground and its members were influencing others to join them in their iniquity. Intent on publicizing and finding support for their distorted ideas, they wrote books replete with falsehoods, spurious arguments, and confused philosophy. Many misguided people fell prey to their sophistry, and the sages of Israel waged a fierce and heroic struggle against the evildoers. Their stronghold and center of activity was in Egypt, where they established yeshivot and seduced many students into drinking their poison waters. Thereupon, our master the Rambam decided to take up residence among them and pit his resources against this idolatry and abomination. He hoped that through the power of holiness, which would be generated by his constant preoccupation with the Torah, the forces of impurity would be banished from the land.

And the Rambam succeeded in carrying out his plan, for by the time that he ended his sojourn in that depraved land before returning his pure soul to his Maker, the Karaites had already faded into insignificance, and from that time onwards hardly a trace of their teachings and writings remained. The self-sacrifice of our great master, the Rambam, in dwelling in the defiled land of Egypt, had not, therefore, been in vain.

On the contrary, in his merit, the power of the impure sect had been broken, and the Torah of truth had been restored to its rightful place of honor. Such a calamity, whereby the Chosen People were wilfully led astray, did not occur a second time. So may the pure truth continue to prevail, and may Israel continue to perform valiantly in the vineyard of its Creator, until the coming of our righteous Redeemer—may it be soon, in our days.

With the insight which the above case affords us, we are now in a position to resolve our difficulty and explain the bewildering fact that the Almighty apparently drove out the crown of our head, our exalted master, the distinguished Kabbalist who lies here before us, from the land which our forefathers inherited and from the abode of our glory. Woe unto us that we have sinned, that we did not have the merit to receive from his hand the Torah of Kabbalah which had been transmitted to him, in turn, from the leaders of our nation, from the greatest of the great ones! Behold, the anguish of the Divine Presence is before us, the Divine Presence which cries out for the one who will break the chains of our Exile and declare an end to our sorrows. Alas, there is no room to maneuver either to the right or to the left; for Rabban Shimon bar Yohai declared a long time ago that only through toiling in the secrets of the Torah will our deliverance from exile and servitude be brought about. And now, who will remove the dust from the eyes of our Rabbi Yaakov, the great Kabbalist of our generation, and who will return our crown to our midst as of old—to spread the wisdom of Kabbalah amongst our sages, in accordance with the authentic teaching, and to multiply the servants of the Lord our God, as it was before the loss of our hope and the one whom we desired.

The Answer: to Revive the Remnant of Our People and to Rescue the Institutions of Torah

So in our humble opinion, it seems that we have a response to the question as to why God dealt with us in this manner, and it is an authentic explanation in line with the truth of Torah; for our Sages taught us that where there is no suste-

nance there is no Torah, and that it is a Tree of Life to those that grasp it, and that its supporters are praiseworthy. Even though according to the plain truth of the Torah, the Holy Ark carries itself and those that bear it, and where there is no Torah there will also be no sustenance and an abundant livelihood will be lacking; nevertheless, the will of God is to establish the Torah through the people of Israel who take delight in it, and who dispense charity with an open hand. They make the Torah great and glorious, and delineate the four cubits of *halachah*, through the merit of which the whole world exists.

In the light of these logical observations, we can arrive at a credible explanation for the reasoning of God, who took action to rescue the Torah and ensure its ongoing survival, and to deliver it from a disastrous decline when it had few students and supporters. He sent Judah before him, to a distant and impure land, to prepare the way, and to set up the infrastructure for the raising of money to establish centers of Torah in Jerusalem, to enlarge the study halls throughout of the land, and to promote the study of Torah in all the dwelling places of the people of Israel in their exile.

The key to understanding the meaning behind these events, lies in the realization that this great Gaon and head of the Kabbalists, this pious and holy man and offspring of holy men, who has earned his share of eternal life and who has now ascended to the highest heavens—acquired greatness for himself by toiling relentlessly and fervently, with self-sacrifice and without regard for his own honor, to consolidate the holy community of Aleppo Jews, who hailed from the birthplace of his fathers. He raised them with paternal affection to love the Torah, honor its students, engage in manifold acts of charity, to erect and enhance sacred edifices, houses of study and holy

yeshivot, and to promote the cause of Torah and the welfare of its disciples.

On the other hand, the deceased never regarded himself as being the private spiritual leader and mentor of one community only; on the contrary, the area of his fatherly concern and the domain of his influence covered the entire world. With the backing of his magnificent community, he was the instrument for restoring the prestige of the Torah, so that it would not fall into a state of neglect, God forbid, without any patrons. And all who visit the palaces of Torah, both in Israel and the Diaspora, will readily appreciate why God loves the Shaare Zion congregation and its worshippers, and why He bestowed upon them blessing and success. Although there are many holy communities in the Diaspora, and they may also be worthy of the accolade of distinction, the unambiguous sentiment of all is that the Shaare Zion community, comprising immigrants from Aleppo, is exceptional.

For it is not without good reason that they have merited the special love of God who has conferred upon them blessing and prosperity. This is the reward for their devotion to the sages of the Torah and their patronage of its institutions. And what is the source of their deep and self-effacing affection for everything associated with the Torah, its scholars and its honor, backed by all the means at their disposal, if not the training which they received from our master, may his memory be for a blessing. He labored with positive results to implant firmly in the hearts of his pupils the love of Torah. Through his integrity, the Torah found a firm foothold, and it flourished throughout the world, with thousands of disciples learning assiduously in the study halls, and meditating upon the words of its mystical and revealed

branches. It is fitting to lament this beautiful soul that has perished, on the lines of the aphorism of the Talmud concerning the great Sage, Rabbi Hiyya: "How great are the deeds of Hiyya!"[5] For he exerted himself to ensure that the Torah should never be forgotten in Israel, and without concern for his own dignity or the resources which he invested, in holiness and purity he instructed the youth of Israel in Scripture, Mishnah and Talmud. He might well have elected to spend his time at the forefront of the world of yeshivot, taking his place among the greatest authorities and scholars of the generation, occupying himself with the intricacies of the Talmud, in composing wonderful novella, and in uncovering the hidden mysteries of the Kabbalah. But instead, he chose the path of humility, and sat with pupils of a tender age, reviewing with them the Humash from beginning to end—until his colleagues came and lauded him in appropriate terms: "This is the man great in deeds, who has ensured that the Torah will not be forgotten by its youthful students, who has guaranteed the continuity of the coming generations, in the fulfillment of the Torah for ever."

So these are the glorious achievements of the distinguished departed one whom we are eulogizing today. He was the praise and delight of the entire world. He sacrificed on the altar of altruistic service, and his honorable accomplishments will be exalted. His domicile was on lofty and sublime heights, but he descended the mountain to fulfill the tasks which he had assigned himself, to elevate a community of supporters of the Torah.

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[5] *Bava Metzia* 85b.

Rabbeinu Yaakov—Champion of Jerusalem

In summary, our master Rabbi Yaakov was a wholehearted man, dwelling in the tents of study and the gates of excellence. All his life he served as emissary of the community of Jews, his brethren, and as a representative of the Land of Israel and Jerusalem and their residents. He would constantly weep and bemoan in the recesses of his heart: "Until when must I remain as a sojourner in the Diaspora, and when will I return to my eternal home—to illumine the night as if it were day, together with attentive companions, in pursuit of Torah and Divine Service as previously, in study of all areas of the Torah, and praying with the appropriate mystical intentions, so that prayer and supplication will never depart from my mouth. Woe is me; when will I merit to return and dwell there forever?"

And now, woe unto us that his voice has been silenced! Who would have anticipated that this is how his prayer would be answered! And Yaakov came, complete, in a bier to Jerusalem, to find his final resting place and inheritance. Until the End of Days, he will remain buried in the ground.

For most certainly this righteous man is to be considered a true son of the Land of Israel. It is therefore fitting to lament him with the dirge with which Reish Lakish eulogized a certain scholar: "Woe that the Land of Israel is deprived of this great man!"[6] Similarly, Zion will now weep bitterly and Jerusalem will raise its voice: "Woe unto us that this beautiful mortal has perished from the Land!"

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[6] *Megillah* 28b

And therefore let us entreat and plead on his behalf before the living God, the Source of his being, that his soul may be bound up in the Bond of Life, that he may find true repose in the abode which he has earned, in the refuge on High together with the righteous of his family. May the Almighty, in His mercy and compassion, make us worthy of meeting him at the time of the resurrection of the dead, together with all who lie in the dust who will rise up to greet him. On the day of the Redemption of Israel, may our eyes behold the King in all his beauty, speedily and soon. Amen and Amen.

Part I

The Life of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin

The biography of Rabbi Kassin is from the book *Katzinei Eretz* (Ahavat Shalom Publications, 1995). It was written by R. Avraham ben R. Yaakov Hillel, and translated by R. Azriel Winnett. *Princely Wisdom* was edited by R. Eliezer Shore and proofread by Mrs. Cindy Scarr.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ALEPPO

Before we begin our history of the distinguished Kassin family, it is worth our while to take a brief look at the community in which this family had its origins and in which it flourished for nearly four centuries.

This was the proud Jewish community of the large Syrian city of Aram Soba or Haleb, also known in the West as Aleppo. It was a community of ancient origin, which for centuries was a bastion of true Jewish values and the unbroken chain of tradition. It nurtured its members in a unique spiritual ambience, which in turn facilitated their own spiritual growth.

According to tradition, there was Jewish settlement in Aram Soba even before the building of the First Temple, when Joab the son of Zeruriah, the commander of King David's army, conquered the city and built a magnificent synagogue. Legend has it that a thought once crossed his mind: "Is it possible that the Holy One, blessed be He, will leave the Holy Temple that Solomon will build in the future and rest His Presence upon the house which I built?" Thereupon, a

heavenly voice was heard to exclaim "Joab, Joab! Two Holy Temples will be destroyed in time to come, but your house will survive!"

The tradition which was handed down by the members of this community from generation to generation is that the edifice built by Joab was the Great Synagogue of Aleppo which stood right up to the time when it was destroyed by fire during a pogrom in 1948.

In one of the seven halls of this Great Synagogue, the Jews of Aleppo kept the famous Keter Tanach, written by the Massorete Rabbi Aharon ben Asher z'l, who lived in Tiberias more than a thousand years ago. This document was known to be the most ancient, authoritative and accurate text of the Scriptures in existence, and was known to have been used by the Rambam. With great self-sacrifice, the Jewish residents of the city managed to preserve the Keter through difficult times down the generations, until it was transferred almost intact to Israel in our day.

After the collapse of the Byzantine Empire in the sixteenth century, the new Turkish Ottoman rulers chose Aram Soba as their capital. Aleppo, strategically situated on the trade route between the East and the West, became the most important commercial center in the entire region. The Jewish population grew rapidly, and the community reached its height after the Turkish conquest in the year 1516. Jewish merchants began to flock to the city from Italy and the Balkans.

The original Jews of Aram Soba were known by the name "Musta'aravim." At the end of the seventeenth and during the eighteenth 18th century, however, Sefardi immigrants, who were called by the name "Frankus," arrived in the city from Italy, France, Austria and the Balkans. The veteran Musta'ara-

vim received the newcomers with great honor. Some conflict arose between the two groups, however, as a result of differences in customs and practices, and because of their different versions of the prayers. The previously established form of prayer was apparently that used in Eretz Yisrael, as had been arranged by Sa'adia Gaon. The text of the Sefardi immigrants, however, was based mainly on the version of Amram Gaon. The two communities of the Musta'aravim and the Sefardim both conducted their own prayer services in the Great Synagogue founded by Joab the son of Zeruriah, each community according to its custom.

Over the centuries, many visiting dignitaries, world travelers and distinguished rabbis have written of the wisdom, piety and generous spirit of the Aleppo Jews, and have sung the community's praises.

Rabbi Mordechai, the son of Natan Yaffe Ashkenazi, who passed through Aleppo on his way to Eretz Yisrael, wrote:

> "How can I thank the Rock of the Universe for the miracles which He has wrought on my behalf, in delivering me from the dangers of the journey, and enabling me to reach the holy community of Aram Soba, a metropolis of kings of the spirit, full of men of great piety and wonderful deeds. In their pursuit of truth, day and night, winter and summer are the same to them. They rise in the middle of the night, shake the slumber from their eyes, and toil in the Torah until morning. When I reached this holy place, I said in my heart: Thank God that there are still such righteous men to protect us, for the whole world is sustained through their great deeds . . . ."

Since its earliest days, the Aleppo community was known for its charitable deeds. Almost every householder would

provide for the needs of at least one Torah scholar and his family. Many of them would set up study halls in their homes, where ten or more sages would gather to learn, while all their material requirements would be supplied by the master of the house. Throughout the generations, the elders of the community enacted important ordinances to strengthen the Torah and its students.

The scholars and rabbis of Aleppo were famous throughout the world for their erudition and expertise in the Talmud, the Codes, and the Kabbalah. In their capacity as *dayanim*, they had a reputation for circumspection in passing judgement, and even Gentiles would bring their disputes before them for resolution. Government representatives held the sages of the community in high esteem, and entrusted them with sensitive official assignments.

According to local tradition, the leaders of the community once sent a delegation to Safed in Northern Israel, to persuade the famous Rabbi Yosef Karo, compiler of the *Shulhan Aruch*, to join Aleppo as its rav and spiritual leader. Rabbi Karo asserted that he was unable to leave Safed, but promised that he would send a man of his stature. This was Rabbi Shmuel Laniado, author of the *Kli Hemdah* and *Kli Paz*. Rabbi Laniado, and many of his descendants, were among the illustrious rabbinical leaders which served the Aleppo community.

The study of the mystical side of the Torah had a special place among the sages of Aleppo. Throughout the centuries, the study of Kabbalah flourished in the city. Already in the generation of Rabbi Hayyim Vital, the famous disciple of the Ari Hakodesh, the Kabbalist Rabbi Hayyim HaKohen of Aleppo and his students were renowned for their mastery of



Opening page from a prayerbook of the Aram Soba community, printed in Venice in 1527.

the subject. In the following generations, the Kabbalah continued to thrive in the community. Several great Kabbalists from Aleppo later settled in Jerusalem where they illuminated the holy city with their saintliness and their wisdom, as will be described in the following chapters.

It was not only its great sages and scholars, however, but above all, the rank and file householders and businessmen that imparted to the Aleppo community its very special spiritual character. Many of them were so devoted to the Torah that study became their main occupation, and the pursuit of a livelihood a sideline. The least learned among them sought every opportunity to perform *mitzvot.*

One of the great Gaonim of Aleppo, Rabbi Avraham Anatavi, zt'l, describes at great length in his book *Hochmah u'Mussar* how the men of the community would use every available minute to deepen their knowledge of the Torah. Virtually every man in the community would devote his entire Sabbath to Torah study in accordance with his ability. Small study groups, dealing with a variety of topics at different levels, would be formed in the synagogue for this purpose. On Sundays, when many of the shops and places of business were closed, most of the day would similarly be spent in study. The dedication of the Jews of Aleppo to the Torah would continue throughout the week, and many would rise regularly at midnight to study until dawn. Above all, they spared no effort to educate their sons to follow in their footsteps.

This was truly an extraordinary community.

THE KASSINS OF ALEPPO
LINEAGE OF A SAINTLY FAMILY

Generations of eminent rabbis, sages of unsurpassed

scholarship and piety, businessmen of the highest moral stature—these made up the famous Kassin family which played a dominant role in the Jewish community of Aleppo for more than 350 years.

The first of these giants of the spirit appeared in Aleppo after the Spanish Expulsion, during the age of Rabbi Yosef Karo. The spiritual influence of this saintly family was felt in the city for seven generations, until the ascent of Rabbi Shaul Kassin to the Holy Land in about 1890. From then on, the name of Kassin was to leave an indelible mark on the unique spiritual character of the holy city of Jerusalem. In time, the religious influence of the Kassin family extended to tens of thousands of Jews in the New World as well.

A Dynasty is Founded
Shlomo Kassin and His Sons

The earliest member of the family about whom we have information is Señor Shlomo Kassin, z'l, who fled from the clutches of the Spanish Inquisition and sought refuge in Aleppo, then under benevolent Turkish rule, shortly before the year 1540.

A wealthy merchant, Shlomo Kassin soon established a reputation as a God-fearing and upright Jew. His moral integrity soon attracted the attention of the city rulers and he was appointed to a senior position in the government. Although he held this post for the rest of his life, he was scrupulous in setting aside times for Torah study, which always remained his principal occupation. This devotion to the Torah set a pattern which his children and descendants would emulate for many generations to come.

Shlomo Kassin left two sons, Señor Ephraim Kassin, z'l, and Señor Menashe Kassin, z'l, who were prominent among the nobility of Aleppo. They followed in the footsteps of their father and were known for their charitable acts and consistent support of Torah institutions and their students.

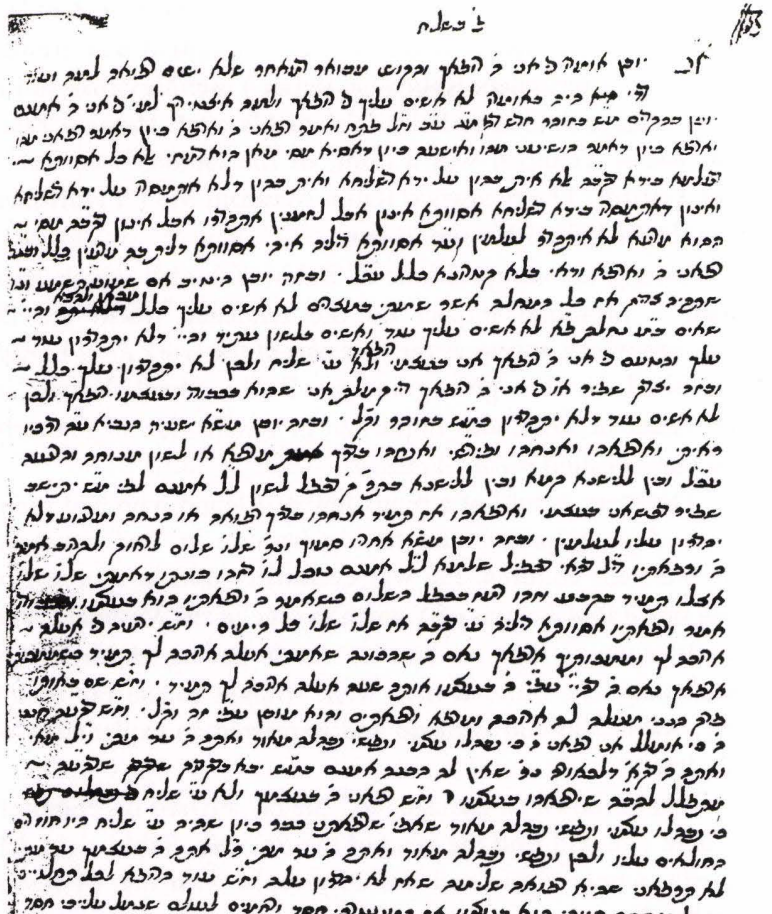
The two Kassin brothers were a tower of strength to the holy Gaon, Rabbi Shmuel Laniado, known as the *Ba'al HaKeilim*, who served as head of the *Beit Din* of the city at that time. Rabbi Laniado gratefully acknowledged their constant support in the introduction to his book *Kli Yakar.*

First Generation of Rabbis Yomtov Kassin

Among the grandsons of Señor Shlomo Kassin was the outstanding sage, Rabbi Yomtov Kassin, one of the great rabbis of Aleppo during the seventeenth century. He was the first of a long line of illustrious rabbis in the Kassin family. To our great loss, however, virtually no documentary material on his life has been preserved.

Second Generation of Rabbis Yehudah Kassin

A veritable giant in the rabbinic world, the famous Gaon and Kabbalist, Rabbi Yehudah the son of Rabbi Yomtov, was second in the Kassin rabbinical line. Rabbi Yehudah was born in Aleppo in 1708, and his future destiny became apparent from an early age.



Hand written page from the manuscript *v'Zot l'Yehudah*, by Rabbi Yehudah Kassin.

Rabbi Yehudah served for many years as *Rosh Av Beit Din* in the city. The high esteem in which he was held was stressed by the great Jerusalem Kabbalist, Rabbi Yosef Meyuhas, in his letter of approbation to Rabbi Yehudah's work *Mahaneh Yehudah*. Rabbi Yehudah was a pupil of the famous sage Rabbi Yosef Abadi. The renowned Rabbi Avraham Me'Eli HaKohen was Rabbi Yehudah's son-in-law.

Among the compositions of Rabbi Yehudah which have made a profound impact on the scholarly world are 28 responsa which appear as the first part of the work *Ro'ei Yisrael*, published by his great-grandson Rabbi Shaul Kassin in Jerusalem in 1904; also important is a collection of masterly discourses called *v'Zot l'Yehudah.*

The story is told of a pious Jew of Aleppo who had spent many days in prayer and fasting because he had not been blessed with children. He was eventually told in a dream to seek out Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh (a sage of the Mishnah) who would counsel him on how to merit having children. On awakening, the puzzled man went straight to the rav of the city, Rabbi Shlomo Laniado and requested an explanation of his dream.

"Go to the Great Synagogue," the rav advised his enquirer. "There you will find the head of the *Beit Din*, Rabbi Yehudah Kassin, whose virtue and humility ranks with that of Rabbi Levitas."

"But why is Rabbi Kassin comparable to Rabbi Levitas, rather than my master and teacher, the rav," the man asked Rabbi Laniado.

"In my position as rav of the city, I am unable to reach the appropriate level of humility," replied Rabbi Laniado. "But I can assure you that Rabbi Kassin, who is lowly of spirit to the

utmost degree, is fit to be described as Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh."

Without further ado, the distraught man sought out Rabbi Yehudah and requested a remedy for childlessness. Rabbi Yehudah advised him to set aside a tenth of his capital and future earnings to the support of Torah scholars and the needy. The man did so, and in this merit was blessed with many children.

Around the year 1738, when he was about thirty years old, Rabbi Yehudah decided to travel to Eretz Yisrael to prostrate himself at the graves of the holy *tzaddikim* of previous generations. He relates in his book *Mahaneh Yehudah* that he sojourned for close to five years in the holy cities of Jerusalem and Safed.

Rabbi Yehudah Kassin passed away in the year 1783, at the age of seventy-six. The community paid him a great honor by burying him in the Cave of the Pious opposite the Great Synagogue of Aleppo. To this day, worshippers visit the site to pray for mercy in the merit of this *tzaddik.*

Third Generation of Rabbis Bachur and Eliyahu Kassin

The two sons of Rabbi Yehudah represent the third generation in the rabbinical line of the Kassin family of Aleppo. The elder of these was the distinguished sage Rabbi Bachur Kassin, zt'l. Although there is some controversy regarding the date of his birth, there is reason to believe that he was born in 1745.

A highly respected communal figure, Rabbi Bachur followed in the ways of his father. He was known for his

diligence in Torah study and fear of heaven, and possessed outstanding character traits, crowned by a deep humility. For many years, he enthralled his listeners with his profound public discourses.

Unfortunately, Rabbi Bachur did not leave behind any writings. The date of his death is not known as there is no surviving tombstone on his grave, but we know that he lived a long life, and passed away sometime after 1851. He was buried in the section of the Aleppo cemetery reserved for *tzaddikim.*

The second son was the Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu Kassin, zt'l, who was born in 1757. He made his mark as *Rosh Av Beit Din* in Aleppo in succession to his father. Since the place of his burial has not been found, we are unable to ascertain the exact date of his passing, but from the writings of his son, Rabbi Rafael, we can deduce that he died in about 1829.

Fourth Generation of Rabbis Rafael Kassin

The fourth generation comprises two branches, as both Rabbis Bachur and Eliyahu left behind distinguished offspring. Prominent among these is Rabbi Rafael Kassin zt'l, only son of Rabbi Eliyahu. Born in 1789, he amassed a phenomenal knowledge of Torah from an early age. This was matched only by his high level of piety. For many years, he was supported financially by his father, a fact which allowed him to progress rapidly in his studies.

After the passing of his father, Rabbi Rafael composed major scholarly works: an analytical commentary on the *Hoshen*

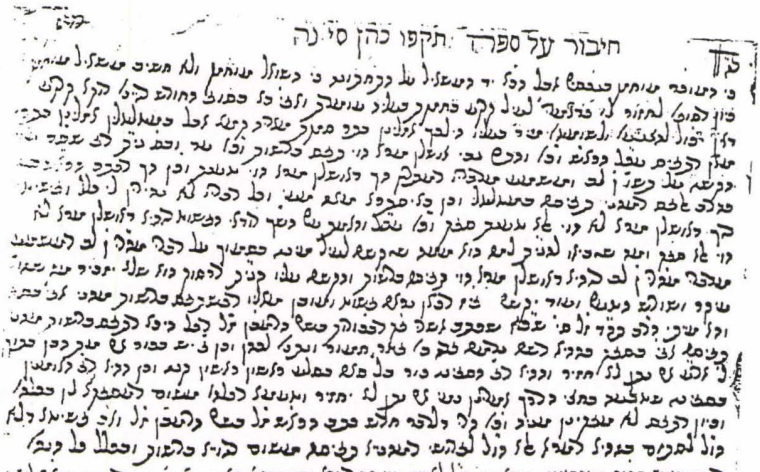
Mishpat section of *Shulhan Aruch*, including his conclusions on the practical application of each *halachah*; a homiletical exposition; and a commentary on the famous work *Tokfo Kohen* of the *Shach*. Only the latter work is extant, and was finally published a few years ago.

In addition, Rabbi Rafael wrote an invaluable book called *Derech Hayyim*, which was published in 1847. The main purpose of the work was to refute the basis of Christianity, and in particular to demolish the spurious arguments of a certain non-believer who had published a heretical work entitled *Netivot Olam* in 1839. In a style that was sharp and incisive, yet simultaneously restrained and refined, Rabbi Rafael completely demolished the heretic's arguments.

On account of his exceptional character and moral integrity, Rabbi Rafael was a favorite among the aristocracy and the rulers of Aleppo. When the governor of Babylonia once paid a visit to Aleppo, he was so impressed with Rabbi Rafael that he urged him to relocate to Babylon to serve as the city's chief rabbi. Placed in an invidious position, Rabbi Rafael reluctantly traveled to Babylon.

On his arrival, however, a major controversy soon erupted which threatened to rock the local Jewish community to its foundations. It had apparently already been decided to appoint Rabbi Ovidi z'l as chief rabbi of the city, but many of the community's leaders now favored the appointment of Rabbi Kassin. A consensus was eventually reached to appoint Rabbi Rafael Kassin as chief rabbi, and for a few years he flourished in this position.

Rabbi Rafael's prestige, however, aroused the jealousy of a few Gentile scholars, who resolved to subdue him. They apparently cast a spell over the chief rabbi, whose mind was thereby weakened and confused. He was forced to return to



Page from the manuscript *Tokfu Shel Rafael*, by R. Rafael Kassin.

Aleppo where he spent the rest of his days studying *mishnayot* and the Holy Zohar. He died in 1870 and was laid to rest with great honor.

Fourth Generation of Rabbis
The Sons of Rabbi Bachur

The second branch of the fourth generation is represented by the three sons of Rabbi Bachur Kassin. The eldest was the great rabbinic authority Rabbi David Kassin zt'l, who was born in the year 1789. Rabbi David enjoyed fame as a *dayan* and as a powerful orator whose sweet words of wisdom captivated his audiences. There was standing room only when he delivered his regular discourses at the Great Synagogue in Aleppo.

Rabbi David passed away in Aleppo at the age of eighty-seven. The inscription on his tombstone indicates the great esteem in which he was held by all in the community.

Rabbi Bachur's second son was the distinguished scholar, Rabbi Yitzhak Kassin, zt'l. Born in 1806, Rabbi Yitzhak was one of the great rabbis of the day. He did not leave any writings, but he was known to have conducted all his affairs with the greatest humility and fear of heaven. He passed away in 1896, and left four sons, Yehudah, Ezra, Shlomo and Moshe Kassin.

The third son was the renowned Gaon, Rabbi Avraham Kassin zt'l, who was born in Aram Soba in 1810. A man of exceptional piety. his powerful and rousing discourses won him wide recognition. His work *Likutei Avraham* is an inspiring collection of discourses for the Sabbath and Festivals. A small

part of it was published as part of his brother, Rabbi David's own collection, *VaYosef David.*

Rabbi Avraham traveled abroad several times as an emissary and won the hearts of all the communities which he visited. He was a man of refined conduct, sincerity and genuine humility. Towards the end of his life, he was overcome with a longing for the Holy Land. He moved to Jerusalem in 1884 where he spent the rest of his days in peace, serving his Creator. He passed away in 1896 at the age of eighty-six, and was buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

Page from a manuscript of sermons by R. Avraham Kassin.

Rabbi Shaul Kassin

A giant among men was born to Rabbi Avraham Kassin, in Aleppo, in 1863. The greatness of Rabbi Shaul Kassin zt'l was already apparent at a tender age, and he advanced rapidly not only in Torah knowledge, but in the quest towards character perfection and in deeds of distinction.

By the age of eighteen, he had reached such a high level of spiritual development that his father immediately found him a suitable wife from an outstanding family. He became engaged to Alton (Zahava), the daughter of the Gaon, Rabbi Yaakov Atia, zt'l.

After his marriage, Rabbi Shaul advanced even further in his understanding of the Talmud and wrote several dissertations on selected topics. He mastered the various Codifiers, the Rishonim and Aharonim, and composed several responsa in which he skillfully clarified difficult issues. Like his father before him, he also acquired a name for his stirring sermons which inspired the listeners with the love and fear of God.

In addition to all this, he carved himself a niche among

the scholars of the Kabbalah. Regularly at midnight, he would rise from sleep and pore over the writings of the Ari z'l and the Rashash. Throughout the years, he wrote pages of novella on Kabbalistic topics, clarifying obscurities in a masterly fashion.

By the time Rabbi Shaul had reached his mid-twenty's, he had acquired an unsurpassed reputation. He was already famous in Aleppo as a Kabbalist. On the other hand, as a result of the country's deteriorating economic conditions, he and the members of his household were under constant stress. In addition, a series of calamities overtook the family with the death of several of their young children.

But in spite of everything, Rabbi Shaul did not deviate for one moment from the spiritual path which he had set himself. With every passing day, he developed still further in his fear of heaven, his piety, and his striving towards sanctity. Above all, a deep faith in God and His justice grew strongly in his heart.

From Aleppo to the Land of Israel

When he was about twenty-six years old, a strong desire entered Rabbi Shaul's heart to move to Eretz Yisrael and dwell in Jerusalem. Hopefully, he would be able to fulfill his spiritual ambitions in tranquility and draw closer to his Creator. With the special merit of Torah study and prayer in the Holy Land, perhaps he would be granted healthy offspring.

Nor was he alone in experiencing his desire to move to Israel. During this period a large group of young Gaonim who had studied Kabbalah together in Aleppo relocated to

Jerusalem, among them Rabbi Hayyim Shaul Dweck HaKohen, Rabbi Yomtov Yedid and Rabbi Avraham Addes. These sages from Aleppo astounded the scholars of Jerusalem with their high levels of attainment in the wisdom of the Kabbalah.

Just at this time, Rabbi Shaul was involved in an ugly incident which gave him final impetus to make aliyah. A wealthy man in the local community, who lived in a courtyard adjacent to Rabbi Shaul's, made a wedding celebration one *motzoi* Shabbat. He invited a troupe of Gentile musicians, who sang immodest songs unfit for a Jewish celebration. When the singing reached Rabbi Shaul's ears, he was unable to restrain himself. His love for God and Torah compelled him to rush to his neighbor's house and forcefully voice his protest. As a result, the guests all dispersed and the party ended. An angry host, bent on revenge, burst into Rabbi Shaul's home, took hold of his Shabbat cloak—the only garment of value which he possessed—and tore it. Not content with this, the wealthy man continued to harass the hapless Rabbi Shaul for some time thereafter.

Rabbi Shaul refused to be angered by his neighbor's disgusting actions, and repeatedly declined suggestions that he should summon the man to a *Din Torah* for humiliating him and damaging his property. In latter years, his son Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, would point out how this incident showed his father's uncompromising strength when it came to fighting the battles of God, yet his amazing tolerance on issues of his personal honor.

When he took leave of the Jewish community of Aleppo in the year 1891, the rabbis of the *Beit Din* presented Rabbi Shaul with a certificate of recommendation as a token of their esteem,

and as a reminder of their deep affection for him. The exalted terms in which they described him left no doubt that at the age of twenty-six, he was already regarded as a rabbinical authority of great stature.

On his arrival in the Holy Land, Rabbi Shaul directed his steps to the city of Hebron to prostrate himself at the graves of our Holy Patriarchs. He remained in the city for three years, and became the companion of the pious Rabbi Eliyahu Mani, the rav of the city. Together, the two sages immersed themselves in the study of the secrets of the Torah.

In 1894, Rabbi Shaul arrived in the holy city of Jerusalem. He resolved to separate himself from all worldly concerns and attach himself to a small community of Kabbalists in the city. Despite his attempts to hide himself from the public eye, his colleagues soon became aware of Rabbi Shaul's greatness. His fame as a Torah scholar and Kabbalist gradually spread far and wide.

Wings of Prayer

In the month of Adar in 1896, Rabbi Shaul bought a house in the new neighborhood of Beit Yisrael, which had been founded nine years earlier outside the walls of the Old City. His house was close to another new neighborhood, Rehovot HaBucharim, where a yeshivah and synagogue known by the name Rehovot HaNahar had just been established. The director was the Gaon and Kabbalist, Rabbi Shaul Dweck HaKohen. Rabbi Shaul chose this as his regular place of prayer.

For many years, Rabbi Shaul prayed at this site, using the

kavanot prescribed by the masters of Kabbalah. He would conduct the prayer services as *Shaliah Tzibbur* every Friday, a day of great significance in Kabbalah. He would also serve as *Shaliah Tzibbur* for the Mussaf service on Yom Kippur, when his deeply moving rendition of the prayers, and in particular his recital of the Confession of the High Priest, would make a lasting impact on the worshippers.

Preacher of Distinction

Rabbi Shaul found his place in the Great Synagogue of the Bucharian community. There he would study until midday, when he would walk to the synagogue of the philanthropist Nataniel Davidof z'l, to inspire the congregation with a daily sermon.

Every Shabbat, he would deliver a discourse in the Great Synagogue of the Nahalat Shimon neighborhood, near the grave of Shimon HaTzaddik. Even when his health began to decline, leaving him physically weak, he would make the long walk to this synagogue. Towards the end of his life, when World War I broke out and the residents of Nahalat Shimon were forced to disperse, he began to preach every Shabbat in a synagogue in the Bucharian Quarter, and people flocked from far and wide to hear him.

Deeds of Charity

Although Rabbi Shaul's economic resources were limited, and he and his family had to satisfy themselves with little, he

never missed an opportunity to dispense charity. Even though his income was hardly sufficient to meet his own family's needs, he would set aside a tenth of all that he earned for the relief of the poor and the support of Torah scholars.

Likewise, he was always ready to perform acts of loving-kindness, irrespective of whether or not they were in keeping with his status in the community. He managed to set aside a certain sum to establish his own free-loan fund, from which he would lend money to all who were in need, often without stipulating a time period and taking the minimum security. On many occasions, when he saw that the debtors were unable to repay the loans, he renounced his claim to the money with a full heart.

His Compositions

Throughout his life, Rabbi Shaul continuously wrote down his thoughts and insights on all areas of the Torah. But as a man of great humility, he was reluctant to be called by the title "author." Because of his failing health, he never succeeded in publishing his holy writings. He did, however, arrange them and assign names to the works.

Kelilat Shaul was the general title he gave to a comprehensive work that covered all of his writings. This was divided into four parts: the first part comprises responsa and *halachic* rulings, and includes a valuable dissertation on certain aspects of the Laws of Blessings; the second part of the book is a large collection of sermons, arranged according to the Sabbaths and Festivals of the year; the third part is a collection of Kabbalistic novella and commentaries on the writings of the Ari z'l



Responsum by R. Yehudah Kassin, transcribed by his grandson, R. Shaul Kassin. From the book *Mahaneh Yehudah*, published by Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom.

and the Rashash; and the fourth part is a collection of sacred songs. (Rabbi Shaul was a composer of note and possessed a fine singing voice, which he put to good use at weddings and similar religious gatherings).

TIME OF TRAVAIL

Towards the end of World War I, the scourge of famine gripped the Land of Israel, bringing great suffering in its wake. Most affected were the Torah scholars who had no source of sustenance other than the funds they received from overseas. But owing to the state of chaos which prevailed in the world,

even this money failed to arrive.

Rabbi Shaul Kassin suffered along with the other scholars. Without sufficient food in his house, it was only a matter of time before he would be afflicted with one of the many diseases which had struck most of the residents of Jerusalem. Sure enough, Rabbi Shaul contracted typhus. Heaven decreed that this *tzaddik* should be an atonement for the generation, and the angels prevailed against the prayers of a distraught community on 26 Kislev 5677 (1917).

Rabbi Shaul was laid to rest with great honor. The Gaonim and rabbis of Jerusalem continued to eulogize him throughout the following year.

Sixth Generation of Rabbis
The Sons of Rabbi Shaul

Rabbi Shaul's eldest son was Rabbi Avraham Kassin zt'l, who was born in Jerusalem in 1895. In his youth, he studied at the "Ohel Moed" Yeshivah in Jerusalem. During the World War, he was forced to flee to Egypt to escape the famine, and remained there until 1921 when he returned to Jerusalem and married Sarah, the daughter of Rabbi Moshe Hadaya.

Shortly after his wedding, he emigrated to Mexico where he remained for the rest of his life. He devoted himself wholeheartedly to the needs of the community, but since he did not want to profit from the honor of the Torah, he earned his livelihood as a merchant. He loved the Torah and supported its students, and dispensed charity on a wide scale. Rabbi Avraham played a part in the establishment of many Torah and welfare institutions in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Avraham passed away in Mexico in 1965. About a year later, his sons transported his body to the Land of Israel, where he was interred at Har Menuhot in Jerusalem. It is related that when his grave was opened in Mexico, his body was seen to have remained intact—a miracle which confirmed his status as a *tzaddik.*

The second son was the great Gaon, Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, zt'l, the author of the writings in this book. In the next chapter, we present a detailed overview of his life

Rabbi Shlomo Kassin, zt'l, was the third son. He was born in Jerusalem in 1908. From a young age, he invested enormous energy in the study of the Talmud and the Codes. When Rabbi Shlomo was a young man, he was already considered an expert in the *Even Ha'ezer* section of the *Shulhan Aruch*, particularly on the laws of marital status. He was also regarded as a highly competent *shohet.*

He spent most of his life as a rabbi and *dayan* in different parts of Eretz Yisrael. He served for many years as a *dayan* on the *Beit Din* of the rabbinate in Tel Aviv. He worked hard to spread the love of Torah among the masses, and spent much time traveling to present lectures on Torah topics.

He wrote four books: *Kerem Shlomo*, comprising his novella on the Talmud; *Divrei Shlomo*, containing responsa, novella and discourses; *Taharat Benot Yisrael*, on the laws of family purity; and *Nitzutzei Ohr*, on ethics and daily conduct.

Rabbi Shlomo passed away in 5743 (1982), and was buried with great honor on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

Hand-written letter from Rabbi Yaakov Kassin

RABBI YAAKOV KASSIN

RABBI YAAKOV KASSIN was born into the rarified spiritual atmosphere which characterized the small Jewish community of the holy city of Jerusalem in the year 5660 (1900). His father was the renowned Gaon, Rabbi Shaul Kassin, zt'l.

The very special talents with which he was endowed: the refined character traits, the natural generosity, the remarkable astuteness of mind, were already recognizable during Rabbi Yaakov's childhood.

His revered father perceived this potential, and nurtured his son as the apple of his eye. Rabbi Shaul invested great energy in imparting Torah knowledge to Rabbi Yaakov—in directing him onto the straight path of traditional scholarship, and the route to everlasting life. In this manner, the boy was carefully groomed for his future place among the Torah scholars of the day.

The Gaon, furthermore, recognized the need to inspire his young son in the service of God through prayer. Yaakov was

trained to pray with the appropriate feelings, thoughts and intentions, as befitting a soul destined for greatness.

Sitting on his father's knees during prayer services, the young child—perhaps only seven or eight—would observe the Gaon's actions for hours. Rabbi Yaakov would relate in later life, how his mother had led him to his father's seat in the synagogue. His father would take an entire three hours for the regular Morning Prayers. Meanwhile, the boy used every moment to soak up the essence and sanctity of the words.

When he was a little older, Yaakov was enrolled at Yeshivat Ohel Mo'ed, one of the most prestigious Torah academies in Jerusalem. The yeshivah was founded in 5667 (1907) by the Gaon Rabbi Rafael Shlomo Landau, zt'l. Years later, this Rabbi Landau was to become the *Reish Metivta* and Rebbe of Rabbi Yaakov at Yeshivat Porat Yosef.

For a reason unknown—perhaps on account of the lad's exceptional maturity—the date of Rabbi Yaakov's *bar mitzvah* was miscalculated by a year. On his twelfth birthday, the traditional festive meal was convened, and Rabbi Yaakov began to don *tefillin* and perform *mitzvot* as though it were required of him. His new status, acquired in error, resulted in one significant change in Yaakov's life. His father lost no time in apprenticing him to an expert Scribe. After acquiring proficiency in the scribal art, the young man would be equipped with a means of livelihood for his adult years.

Within six months, Rabbi Yaakov had learnt the skills of the Scribe to perfection, and had even begun to practice the craft. But the bubble soon burst when his father came across his birth certificate. It revealed that Rabbi Yaakov was still a half year short of *bar mitzvah.* As a minor, he certainly could not be permitted to engage in the writing of *Stam.* Rabbi

Yaakov was duly sent back to the study benches of Yeshivat Ohel Mo'ed.

Thanks to his brother, Rabbi Shlomo, who published Yaakov's *bar mitzvah* discourse in his book *Divrei Shlomo*, a brilliant composition was preserved for posterity. (It appears as Chapter One of this current volume).

In a lengthy poetic introduction, Yaakov ingeniously weaves into his lines, in masterly style, Biblical verse after Biblical verse, and aphorism after aphorism from the writings of our Sages.

The young poet uses this literary vehicle skillfully to thank his Creator for bringing him to this auspicious day. He humbly begs the pardon of his learned audience for daring to preach in its presence. And he entreats the distinguished company to pray for him that "the Almighty's Torah might be firmly implanted within my soul, that I might meditate upon it when I lie down and when I rise up, so that I may carry out my obligations at all times, never deviating from my holy mission."

As he approaches the main body of his oration, Yaakov's expertise in the Talmud, the *Shulhan Aruch* and its commentaries is immediately revealed. Towards the end, he even apologizes for having shortened his sermon so as not to overburden his listeners! The depth of the youthful scholar's knowledge and the maturity of his reasoning certainly belie his age at the time of its composition.

The unremitting diligence with which Yaakov studied from that point onwards did not take long to bear fruit. By the age of sixteen, he was famous in Jerusalem for his complete command of vast areas of the Talmud.

Rabbi Yaakov was deeply conscious of his father's role in this achievement. When he published the "first fruits" of his

scholarship, *Ohr HaLevanah*, in 1925, he wrote that his motivation was "to bring satisfaction to the soul of my father and master, the crown of my head—may the memory of his righteousness be for a blessing—who raised me in my youth and directed me onto the path of truth."

His Youth and Marriage

At the end of World War One, the plight of the residents of the Land of Israel, and those of Jerusalem in particular, was critical in the extreme. Famine ravaged the land, and even a dry crust of bread was hard to find. The people were forced to subsist on corn, usually used as chicken feed, and on orange peels.

But it was the Torah scholars who suffered the most, for their constant preoccupation with their studies left them no independent source of livelihood. Owing to the terrible war, communal funds that had previously been sent from abroad were lacking. The scholars were thus deprived of even the meager stipends which had formerly been distributed to them.

The inhabitants were powerless to protect themselves against epidemics which spread with deadly swiftness. The most dreaded of which was typhoid, which claimed the lives of thousands, including both parents of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin. His father, Rabbi Shaul, died in the month of Kislev in 5677 (1917), and his mother two months later.

Rabbi Yaakov, now an orphan, suffered terribly. As difficult as this period was for all the Holy Land's residents, it was far worse for orphans who had no one to turn to for support. He suffered from constant hunger, and the barely-

edible food on which he survived precipitated a debilitating stomach disease.

In spite of all this, Rabbi Yaakov was able to write of himself: "A passionate desire welled up within me to remain true to my mission. I totally immersed myself in the Talmud and commentaries, in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of Torah study even in poverty and times of crisis."

In the month of Adar in 5679 (1919), at the age of eighteen and a half, Rabbi Yaakov met his life partner, Mazal Tov, the daughter of Rabbi Shalom Hadaya, zt'l. She hailed from one of the most respected families in Jerusalem. Together, they set up a household based on the pillars of Torah and lovingkindness.

We can catch a glimpse of the lofty spiritual standard which Rabbi Yaakov attained in those days, through an incident related in his book, *Pri Eitz Hagan*. Although Rabbi Yaakov is emphasizing the greatness of his teacher, Rabbi Avraham Addes, zt'l, we learn something about Rabbi Yaakov as well:

> "In the year 5679, shortly before my wedding, I was conversing with my rebbe, the *tzaddik* Rabbi Avraham Addes, and I told him of an astounding dream which I had dreamt. In it, a rabbi of awesome appearance came before me and informed me that he was our master, the Rambam. Rabbi Avraham then described to me, in precise detail, the form, appearance and countenance of the Rambam, exactly as I had experienced in my vision.
>
> "Astonished, I asked him how he knew. 'Be aware, my son,' he replied, 'that during the ascent of my soul each night, I encounter all the *tzadikkim*, and I can recognize them all: the Rambam, the Rif, the Rosh, the Rashba, the

Ran, as well as the Ari z'l, Hayyim Vital, the Rashash—and more!'"

Incidentally, an elder of Jerusalem once told the writer of these lines that Rabbi Yaakov's piety was known to all the citizens of the city. They attributed it to his strictness in not looking at women. It was rumored that even while standing under the wedding canopy, he did not look up from his place, so as not to stumble in this prohibition. He hardly glanced at his bride!

After marriage, Rabbi Yaakov's burning desire to study Torah became even stronger. He now had a capable helpmate to assist him with all his physical and spiritual needs. As the couple learned to satisfy themselves with little, their material condition improved. Rabbi Yaakov was therefore able to throw himself heart and soul into his studies.

Torah Novella

In 1921, at the age of twenty-one, Rabbi Yaakov began to write down the Torah novella that had crystallized in his mind since his youth. He compiled a written record of a number of responsa he had composed on all four sections of the *Shulhan Aruch*, although chiefly on *Orach Hayyim*. Three of these were included in a volume of responsa by his father-in-law, Rabbi Shalom Hadaya, published in Jerusalem in 5684 (1924).

Rabbi Yaakov deliberately refrained from publishing the rest of his novella and responsa. He felt that, being himself so young, he should first have the material subjected to revision and critical review. A number of the essays of this present volume were written at thats time.

THE WORLD OF KABBALAH

In 5682 (1922), at the age of twenty-two, Rabbi Yaakov set out upon his life long and passionate involvement in the study of Kabbalah. In the privacy of his study, after midnight of the long winter evenings, he would pore over Kabbalistic texts. Even without an instructor, he soon succeeded in grasping the profound concepts. His ardent love for all that is holy led him to invest more and more time in the study of this subject, and within a few months, he had mastered many of its secrets.

In due course, when his close acquaintances discovered that he was a student of Kabbalah, they introduced him to the greatest Kabbalist of the age, Rabbi Shaul Hayyim Dweck, z'l. Rabbi Yaakov eagerly drank from the deep wisdom of this great teacher. Together with a select group of scholars in the Bucharian Quarter of Jerusalem, he attended regular study sessions with Rabbi Dweck.

In Rabbi Yaakov's autobiographical notes, he relates how, during this period, he managed to master large portions of the writings of the Ari, Rabbi Hayyim Vital and the Rashash. In the year 1924, he began to pray with the *kavanot*—the mystical intentions of the prayer-book—codified by the great teachers of Kabbalah. He writes how he succeeded in directing his thoughts during prayer to various mystical emanations according to the prescription of the Rashash. All this he had learned from observing the conduct of the select group of mystics led by Rabbi Dweck.

FULL MATURITY

In 1923, Rabbi Yaakov was admitted to a program of

advanced Talmudic studies at Yeshivat Porat Yosef. This institution had been founded shortly before by the Gaon, Rabbi Yosef Hayyim. author of Ben Ish Hai, and with a bequest from the philanthropist, Rabbi Yosef Avraham Shalom, z'l.

At Porat Yosef, Rabbi Yaakov continued to benefit from the wisdom of Rabbi Raphael Shlomo Landau, previously the head of Yeshivat Ohel Mo'ed. Both Rabbi Landau and Rabbi Yaakov were among the pioneering faculty members and students of Yeshivat Ohel Mo'ed. Both transferred to the new yeshiva when it opened its doors.

At Porat Yosef, Rabbi Yaakov found his niche. He invested every ounce of his energy into expanding his knowledge of Torah, the Talmud, the Tur with Beit Yosef and the codifiers of all periods. He was fortunate enough to find dedicated study partners, who would join him in his efforts during all hours of the day and night. His phenomenal progress made such an impression on the yeshivah staff, that they resolved to take upon themselves complete financial responsibility for Rabbi Yaakov and his family. He was thus able to continue his labors in the garden of Torah with greater peace of mind.

One significant benefit accrued to the leading scholars at Porat Yosef was free accommodation in an apartment block built besides the main building. Here resided the head and rabbinic personnel of the yeshiva, and a number of flats allocated to the brightest members among the student body. Rabbi Yaakov was fortunate enough to be among them, and he lived in one of these fine apartments from 1926 until 1932, when he left the country.

As if his daily study program of Talmudic study was not demanding enough, Rabbi Yaakov also joined a small group of advanced scholars engaged in the Torah's mystical dimension.

The group included some of the greatest Kabbalists of the time. These scholars would pore over Kabbalistic texts for hours on end in a special room adjoining the main study hall of the yeshivah.

This study circle, officially known as Yeshivat Oz v'Hadar, was headed in turn by several illustrious scholars. Among them was the famous Kabbalist, Rabbi Saliman Eliyahu zt'l, author of the commentary *Kerem Shlomo* on the *Eitz Hayyim.* He was succeeded by another renowned personality, Rabbi Ephraim Kohen, zt'l.

There were no official teachers at that time, and each student was left on his own to study. As the full extent of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin's mastery of Kabbalah became apparent, his colleagues began to turn to him for clarification of difficult issues. In due course, he was approached to deliver a daily lecture in Kabbalah. In later years, Rabbi Yaakov would comment that the mere fact of his acceptance into such a study group—with men fifty years his elders—was itself a miracle!

Rabbi Yaakov would relate that his senior colleague, Rabbi Saliman Eliyahu, was so dedicated to the pursuit of truth that he never once hesitated to admit his inability to answer a difficult question. On the other hand, he would not rest until he had found a solution to the problem, even when this required a great deal of precious time.

In addition to their unceasing efforts to master the writings of the Ari z'l, this select circle worked to learn the prayer-*kavanot* of the Rashash. A master of this knowledge was Rabbi Yissachar Abu Aziz, who served as the group's *shaliah tzibbur.*

Yeshivat Porat Yosef encouraged its scholars to study the Kabbalah, and provided an additional stipend to those who pursued this discipline. As Rabbi Yaakov later recalled, the standard allowance paid by the yeshivah was five Egyptian pounds per month, with a bonus of two pounds to those who studied Kabbalah.

During this period, Rabbi Kassin also served as instructor in Talmud with the commentaries of Rashi, Tosafot, the Rishonim and Aharonim, to advanced students at the yeshivah.

Queries from Across the Land

As Rabbi Yaakov's knowledge of Torah grew, he became the recipient of an ever growing number of *halachic* queries. In addition, the great sages of the generation, both in Israel and abroad, would share with him their responsa, to see if he agreed with their conclusions on intricate legal issues.

The majority of questions which Rabbi Yaakov dealt with during that period were in the highly complex area of *Gittin* and *Kiddushin.* He had acquired expertise in this field when he had studied them under the direction of Rabbi Ezra Atia, one of the sharpest minds of the generation.

For example, among Rabbi Yaakov's writings, we find a query from as far away as India, on how to write a *get* in the case of a woman who had been given two names at birth, but in practice was known by only one of them.

In the preface to his reply, Rabbi Yaakov expressed his unworthiness and lack of qualifications to attempt an answer. But after taking into consideration the urgency of the question and the remoteness of the community from which it originated;

and for the sake of the honor of the holy yeshivah Porat Yosef; and above all because he had merited to study the subject with his teacher, Rabbi Ezra Atia—for these reasons, he conceded to comment on the subject. What follows is an extremely lengthy and complex discussion of the issue.

A similar question reached him about a man who was generally called by only one of two names given at birth. In introducing his reply, Rabbi Kassin claims modestly that this question, sent to his yeshivah from abroad, "entered his domain through the lack of any other quarter to which to turn."

A highly complicated matter on which his opinion was sought, related to a marriage whose validity was in question. It was unclear whether the woman could be released from the marital bond without a *get.* Rabbi Raphael Ma'aravi, zt'l, a great sage from Damascus and later a prominent member of the Jerusalem rabbinate, approached Rabbi Yaakov on this question.

Rabbi Kassin arranged his responsum, the longest he had written to date, with great care. As the case contained so many ramifications, his answer was comprised of numerous sections and sub-sections, extending to many pages. Throughout, his complete mastery of the subject is fully evident.

Because he was concerned that his ruling might cause others to stumble, he submitted his response to the chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yaakov Meir, zt'l, for approval. In glowing terms, the latter expressed his admiration for Rabbi Kassin's masterly analysis of all the sources relating to the intricate subject at hand, and for his systematic and logical treatment in the twenty-six sections of his treatise. "Fortunate are those who walk in the light of your Torah," concluded the chief rabbi. "May many more like you arise in Israel!"

קונטרס

משמרת הקידושין

אל המאור הגדול, מבצר עוז ומגדול, נר ישראל וקדושו, נזר אלהיו
על ראשו, סיני ועוקר הרים, המאיר לארץ ולדרים, עטיר מויר הגאון
המפורסם בתורתו אשר שם, נשיא וראש הרבנים, מוסדי ארץ האיתנים,
כקש"ת **יעקב מאיר** שליט"א.

האותיות מסר חבמיגם בסוכלי ספי קדסן לפני מלך כהיר לי מויל יורני ויעמר לי, מס יעלם לרצון לאמרי פי והבניון לבי בעסר מדרשתי לחוות דעתי, מפח כרב מלפך רפפל כר שמערני נרין פל פודות מסר בח לפניו שפלם בעינן ספק קידושין בזמ"ם ומח מסר שם פ' בפי לקול"ד כתבתי לכלכם ולח למעשה כי לח בי היע ובפרט בחיסור ערוה כחמורה, לי ויזהם מפרתי מנח מפסה למזרה כ"ח פל פול מסקפלירים כמחירה, גדול מדוטנו עמ"ר כי לו יחסה נדון ונסורות, כלכה למעשה נדורות, לח מבקשה יעמדו דברי פל מכן נחן במות כחזיון, וענוות דעתו עליון, בזך שכלו בחמדותיו בסטורות ומח מסר יבחר בו ויקריב פליו, ומה נפו יפזר ספר פליו, ויבחת לבי גם מני ומעתדנו שמרה פל רפשי וסלח לח מבקש מעמ"ר כבודו ומריס רחמי, ובחמ"ר.

שאלה מעשה שהיה כך היה, בחור אחד היה משוך עם בת אחת אחיך יצא שקול בעיר שהקדשה לו, ובמקדש נשב למלריס ושלחנו אחר כעדים וסעידו בפני המקדשה ויען שבמקדש נשב למלריס, סוכרחנו לעשות קבלת עדות שלא בפניו וזה נוסחת:

במותב חלחת אחת כחדא קויעת נחנת ב"ד דחכחימי למעשה, כך אחת קדמנת מרי מחיר מיור ואחר כחיום וכניחום בחם לח יניד וכו' ואחר כדויים כדחזי קם על רגליו וסניד בחזרת עדות נמוכה על נפמטוחו ועל יסדותיו אין היום אחריך אחר אחד קרוב לנכרים היתי לח מקום שקורין לי ליפחניי"ש שהייתי מבשם שם נאיזח חריר בנכר אחר שם ובחזרתי וסייתי טשח כלאיזח שנ' כמבוכסים וכשכנתי לחיים כקרובה לכניסה שקורין לה ניעיטים אל חניא רחיתי בחור אחד ע"מ שם הוא ומשרחת אחת ואח"כ נודע לי שהוא פב"פ ומשרחת פב"פ הוא לח אחר לי בחור כנ' בכנם נזהח כניכה וכניח מעשה כלאיזח מעליך ואחניא מד שני כדי שחשידו בשניל סקידושין ואני אהן לכם שכר ע"ז ואני לא רציתי לכניה שם כלאיזח שעמי אין יפגד מכם איזה אחת, אז נקח ממני לאייש אחה מסכון כדי שאלך ואחניא עמי מד שני לסעיד על סקידושין וכלכתי ואכתי אז כרי פב"פ ונכנסנו יחד אל ניעיטה אל חניא כנ' ורלינו שם בחור כנ' הוא יושב על כשפסל ושתו יושבת שנח שזו שיושבת פה עמנו היום ואז נפל בחור בידו מעשב היפל מניחי כשף ושעזרו טוען לה אמר לה כרי אי מקודשת לי בעוכעה זאת בדין מעשה וכרגל וכ"ף קיבלה שכשף מידו ואח"כ נתן לה אמר לה כרי אי מלי נייר מלרי שהוא חמשים ג"ח וכלבנו והנקנו לזיתו ניזי ובין כעד כבני ובין כמשרחה שהיתה שם, ושאלנו לכעד כנ' זיתתי שעשה כל זה בחיוב יום בחיוב חדש בחיוב שנה, וכשיב שליתו יודע שכל הוא זוכר שבקיין שם שעשה קרוב לשנה עבר מחותו יום ליום כזה ע"ב נאו דברי שעד כרחשון חויב חיכה בחיובה, וחותחקו מלבין מרני ללמון סקדש וקבלנו עדות כנ' בפני שתחקדשה ושלחנוה וסולים לדברי שעד כנ'

חתי"ב

First page of the booklet *Mishmeret HaKiddushin* (Jerusalem, 1925).

In light of Rabbi Meir's approbation, Rabbi Yaakov decided to preserve this responsum for future generations. He published it, together with some other of his responsa, in a booklet called *Mishmeret HaKiddushin* (Jerusalem, 5685). Copies were snapped up by Jerusalem's scholarly community as soon as they reached the shops, and before long the entire edition was sold out.

With the publication of this treatise, Rabbi Kassin's encyclopedic knowledge of Torah, his unique ability to analyze a subject, and his lucid and systematic style of presentation, became revealed to all. Up to now, these gifts had largely been hidden from the public. From this point onwards, halachic queries began to pour in from all parts of the world.

In Heshvan 1926, an enquiry arrived from the *Av Beit Din* of Egypt, Rabbi Yehudah Hayyim HaKohen Traub, author of *v'Zot l'Yehudah* and other works. The question concerned a woman who was subject to the law of levirate marriage, but who had also given birth to a child who died within thirty days. Was she allowed to remarry without the requirement of *halitzah*?

In introducing his request, the *Av Beit Din* addressed Rabbi Yaakov in exalted terms. After presenting the question, he appealed to his colleague to investigate the matter thoroughly. And yet, he concluded: "I urge His Excellency not to respond at such length or to expand on the subject with such comprehensiveness as he did in the case of his renowned responsum on *Kiddushin*, with its twenty-six sections. Unfortunately, we are unable to swim in such a vast sea. We would value His Excellency's kindness if he would present his interpretation of his ruling as concisely as possible."

BELOVED OF THE GREAT

Rabbi Yaakov Kassin endeared himself to all the rabbinic leaders of the age, both the authorities in the revealed Torah and the masters of Kabbalah. One of these great men was the Gaon, Rabbi Yosef Yedid HaLevi, zt'l.

Rabbi Yosef Yedid was *Av Beit Din* of the Sefardic community of Jerusalem. He would sit all day in a study-hall in the Bucharian Quarter of Jerusalem, surrounded by rare, holy books which filled the room from the floor to the ceiling. He had an aura of sanctity, and an atmosphere of holiness pervaded the entire room. All who approached him were struck by his inspiring appearance and penetrating eyes. Occasionally, someone would gather enough courage to enter into a Torah conversation with this *tzaddik,* and take advantage of his depth of knowledge and sharpness of mind.

Every morning, on his way from the synagogue to the study hall, he would buy himself a single pita. He would begin the day by washing for bread, and eating a small amount the equivalent to a *kezayit.* During the day, he would periodically take further bites from the same pita—just enough to remain within the maximum time interval between eating and the recital of Grace. He was thus able to devote the whole day to studying without interruption. Towards evening, he would finish the pita, recite the Grace After Meals, and return to the synagogue for *Minha* and *Arvit.* Such was his incredible diligence in study.

As it happens, the great Rabbi Yosef Yedid owed a debt of gratitude to Rabbi Yaakov's father, Rabbi Shaul Kassin, zt'l. This is what occurred, in the words of Rabbi Yaakov's brother, Rabbi Shlomo Kassin, zt'l.

"Our master, the great Rabbi Yosef Yedid, was brought up in our city of Aleppo, Syria. In his youth, he would sit all day in the *heder* where his father was a teacher, assisting his father, or supervising the young pupils. Occasionally, his father would find a few spare minutes to learn with him.

"But from time to time, the young boy would become overcome with a passionate yearning, and the thought would enter his mind: 'How long must I spend time in the company of these small children, and deny myself the chance to study Torah?' Slowly, the desire to immerse himself in the study of Torah, Mishnah and Gemara became overpowering.

"Yet it was a desire that had little chance of fulfillment, for his poverty-stricken father could not afford him a teacher. Sometimes, standing before the Holy Ark of the famous Great Synagogue in Aleppo, he would pour out his heart in prayer. He would beseech his Creator to help him acquire a share in His holy Torah.

"Then one day, my holy father, Rabbi Shaul Kassin, noticed the lonely figure of a small boy discreetly entering the synagogue. Following after him, he observed the lad's tears and heard his supplication. 'Weep no longer,' my father told him. 'If indeed your desire to learn Torah is so great, I will take care of the matter.' With the help of some local benefactors, he immediately arranged a standing allowance for Rabbi Yosef's tuition and living expenses.

"From that day on, Rabbi Yosef Yedid threw himself into Torah study with tremendous vigor. After he become a great authority in Torah, he emigrated to the holy city of Safed. From there he moved to Jerusalem, taking his place

among the righteous judges and teachers of the city. He became renowned for the depth of his erudition as well as for his literary output, only part of which saw the light of publication. He held a lifelong admiration for my father, for through my father's persistence, he had merited to taste of the fruit of the Tree of Life."

In Remembrance

The warm relationship which developed between Rabbi Yosef Yedid and Rabbi Yaakov owed its existence to far more than a debt of gratitude. Above all, it was Rabbi Yaakov's exceptional memory which aroused the Gaon's interest in the younger scholar.

It happened sometimes that Rabbi Yosef Yedid would be searching for a specific responsum among the classic *seforim*: *Nodah b'Yehudah, Hatam Sofer* or *Rav Pe'alim*. He would merely send for Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, who would immediately tell him in which book, which chapter and precisely on what page the desired reference could be found. Similarly, when the rabbinic authorities of the city would be seeking the source for a specific halachah or practice, they knew that Rabbi Yaakov would direct them quickly and accurately to the source, as well as telling them in which other works, and on which pages, they would find additional information on their topic.

A rumor circulated around Jerusalem in those days, that Rabbi Yaakov Kassin's astounding memory was due to a special herb he once ate. When questioned about this, he denied the rumor. "I would suggest a different reason," he said. "When I three years old, I would sit on my father's knees

while he was studying the Eight Gates of the Ari zt'l with his friends. I didn't understand a thing, but each word made its impression on my mind. Eventually, this helped me learn and remember."

It was a common—yet wondrous—sight to behold the venerable Rabbi Yosef Yedid HaLevi taking counsel with Rabbi Yaakov, his junior by tens of years. In return, whenever Rabbi Yaakov had a doubt on a *halachic* matter or required an approbation, he would turn to his teacher, Rabbi Yosef.

With the passing of Rabbi Yosef Yedid on Adar 8, 5690 (1930), Rabbi Yaakov lost one of his closest mentors. In honor of his teacher, the grief-stricken Rabbi Yaakov delivered a brilliant discourse in the Great Synagogue of the Bucharian Quarter. Although it was later committed to writing, only the first page has survived, and the text ends abruptly in the middle of a topic. Therefore, instead of including it among the complete discourses of this book, we present the surviving fragment hereunder:

> "Here follows the sermon which I delivered on the holy Sabbath, Shabbat Hagadol of the year 5690, in the great synagogue of the holy community Rehovot HaBucharim, before a gathering of rabbis and members of the congregation, to commemorate the thirty-day period after the passing of the great Gaon and head of the *Beit Din*, Rabbi Yosef Yedid HaLevi, may his soul rest in peace . . .
>
> "My masters and teachers! Before I begin to eulogize our master, the *tzaddik* and humble one, Rabbi Yosef Yedid HaLevi, zt'l, it is right that I beg his forgiveness for the fact that I am unworthy of the task. This is all the more true, since, over the past weeks, appropriate eulogies have already been delivered (as the *halachah* dictates), by the holy

and learned rabbis of the Land of Israel. Who am I to follow them?

"However, since the rabbis have urged me to say some words of Torah so that the precious soul of the deceased may be elevated, I must comply. After all, I was inspired and influenced by the brilliant light of Rabbi Yosef's Torah beyond measure. I was honored to be numbered among the inner circle of his disciples. Surely, one who has sat in such a privileged position is more aware than most of the glory and the exalted level of his Rav. I therefore consider it a sacred duty, for the benefit of his soul, to speak just a little on what I have compiled from the writings of the great preachers.

"To be sure, we are now in Nissan, the month in which God delivered us from the oppression of Egypt. During this choicest of months, we are commanded to refrain from fasting and from delivering eulogies. This is the ruling laid down by the *Shulhan Aruch* in Chapter 429.

"Nevertheless, the eulogy that we want to make today is not only permitted but obligatory. The prohibited eulogizing to which the codifier refers, is the type of lamentation where one person recites and the entire gathering responds. This is what the *Pri Hadash* writes in his commentary to chapter 429. But this does not apply to a discourse aimed at moral exhortation and the awakening of hearts to repentance and the fear of heaven. This is surely allowed.

"With this distinction in mind, we understand how our rabbis would deliver eulogies even on the holy Sabbath. On the surface, this custom seems to contradict the law, because we are commanded to restrain from expressions of grief or worry on the Sabbath. It is a day given to the

Eulogy written by R. Kassin over the passing of his rabbi and teacher, R. Yosef Yedid HaLevi.

people of Israel for pleasure and delight; a priceless gift which embodies our faith in the renewal of the world, as the Rema explains in his work *Torat Ha'Olah*.

"In order to fulfill our obligation to enjoy the Sabbath properly, we have to go much further than merely abstaining from actions which cause us sorrow, such as fasting or the confession of sins. Indeed, the Sages forbid any rejoicing if it has no connection to the Sabbath itself. And it was only with the greatest difficulty that they found a way to allow the comforting of mourners on the Sabbath.

"For example, one of the reasons why they forbade the Sanctification of the Moon on a Sabbath evening (Be'er Heiteiv, chapter 426) was to prevent another source of happiness from interfering with the greater happiness of the Sabbath. This is the opinion of the *Hayeh Avraham* (paragraph 254). It follows from this, how much more careful we should be not to arouse ourselves to lamentation and weeping!

"But a deeper investigation of this subject reveals that the reason for the prohibition against fasting or making confession on the Sabbath is that they weaken the body and depress of the soul. The injunction against mingling two forms of rejoicing has a similar basis; once we rejoice for private reasons unassociated with the Sabbath, we will inevitably push aside the chief rejoicing of the day.

"All this does not apply to the practice of eulogizing the righteous. This has a positive purpose in relation to the aims of the Sabbath, and may even lead to proper rejoicing. For the eulogy can arouse in us the love and fear of God. And the lessons which we learn from the actions of the departed *tzaddik* can provide us with incentive to emulate

his holy ways.

"This is indeed the case with this undisputed *tzaddik*, Rabbi Yosef Yedid HaLevi, a man of great accomplishments, who enlightened the whole world with his Torah, with his remarkable erudition and with the astounding depth of his knowledge. Through his supreme authority, the lack of knowledge in the world could be rectified; it was he who was the antidote to the ignorance of the masses, and he who possessed the Divine spirit to administer rebuke, and to arouse the public to the fear of God and the love of the Torah and its *mitzvot*. In truth, each one of us needs to increase his awareness of the magnitude of our loss . . . ."

Up to here is all that remains of this fine discourse; how unfortunate that the remainder has been lost!

The Scourge of Illness

During this period, Rabbi Yaakov began to be plagued by ulcers. The pain increased to the point that studying, eating and drinking became very difficult. He expressed a little of his suffering in writing, and thus he noted in the account of his life:

"To my great misfortune, I was visited during this period by the Divine attribute of strict justice. A terrible calamity, in the form of a disease of the pylorus, made my life a misery. This was accompanied by excruciating heart pain which gripped my entire body. In the year 1920, I began to suffer from a variety of terrible aches and pains, to the extent that I could no longer eat

normally. I was forced to survive on milk, soup and a few other light foods barely sufficient to keep body and soul together.

"In an attempt to stop the pain, I underwent an operation in 1924 at the Sha'arei Tzedek Hospital. My physician was the famous *tzaddik*, Dr. Wolf, may he be rewarded amply by Heaven. At this point, the pain subsided, but the disease itself had not left me and intensified in the course of time. My strength failed me, I lost weight rapidly and my body grew weak. In sadness, I waited expectantly for the salvation of God, which is always near."

First Book in Kabbalah

His physical weakness not withstanding, Rabbi Kassin made great efforts to arrange for the printing of his Kabbalistic work *Ohr HaLevanah* ("Light of the Moon"). Published in Jerusalem in 5685 (1925), the book comprises three parts: *Ohr HaLevanah*, *Ohr Hadash* and *Ohr HaHayyim*. Among its contents are the *kavanot* and *yehudim* laid down by the Ari z'l and the Rashash, and a compilation of appropriate thoughts and ideas from the Rishonim.

Largely on account of this volume, his first fruits in the field of Kabbalah, Rabbi Yaakov's reputation spread among the leading practitioners of the day. Many advanced scholars flocked to him to benefit from his wisdom. It was a fitting mark of distinction for this important work—written by an author who was only 25 years old—that it had to be re-printed several times to meet the demand of scholars and interested parties.


והיה אור הלבנה כאור החמה
(ישעיה ל' כ"ו)

ליקבה"ו בינ"ו עמ"י עש"ו

ספר

אור הלבנה

כולל סדר כונות ברכת הלבנה וכונות ר"ח עפ"י סדור מרן הרש"ש זלה"ה שחצבן מכתבי בוצינא דנהורא האר"י זלה"ה וליוקר סגיאותו אצל יהידי סגולה והסה בכתובים, אשר ערן לא יצא לאור לעולמים השתדלתי להדפיסו לזכות את הרבים, להוציא מסטמונים, סודות יקרים, מזהב וממפז נבחרים, מרזו של עולם נאמרים, ויהא רעוא שיעלה לרצון וזכות מרן האר"י והרש"ש זלה"ה יגן עלי להיות בריא ומוצלח כל הימים, ולעשות רצון צור עולמים, ויעמיד לי לכפורים, על חטאת נעורים, ונזכה לקץ הימין, בן ישי בראש יהיה קצין עלינו תשועת עולמים.

כ"ד המסדר

בהעיר יעקב בכמוהר"ש קציין יצ"ו

פעה"ק ירושלם ת"ו

ש' עד אשר ת'פ'ר'ה' לפרט קטן

דפוס הר"ש הלוי צוקרמן —

ברוך אתה י' למדני חקיך

Opening page of the book *Ohr HaLevanah*, by R. Kassin (Jerusalem, 1925).

The book featured approbations from three of the most outstanding rabbis of Jerusalem: Rabbi Hayyim Shaul Dweck, zt'l, head of the Kabbalistic yeshivah Rechovot HaNahar, and Rabbi Aharon Shlomo Maharil, zt'l, author of the commentary *To'amehah Hayyim Zachu* on the *Eitz Hayyim*, and Rabbi Yosef Hayyim Sonnenfeld, zt'l, the spiritual leader and *Av Beit Din* of the Ashkenazic communities of Jerusalem.

It is noteworthy that notwithstanding the author's youth, these three figures referred to Rabbi Yaakov with the highest terms of respect. Rabbi Sonnenfeld wrote: "The holy composition of the honored Rabbi and Gaon, our master and teacher Yaakov Kassin, has been brought before me . . . and I see that the author, has labored correctly to clarify matters of outstanding importance . . . would that there be many like him in Israel!"

Rabbi Dweck extolled Rabbi Yaakov with these words:

> "How honored is the day on which appeared this gem . . . fashioned by a man of purity, disciple of the venerable, beloved as the apple of the eye, offspring of the holy ones: he is none other than our teacher and master, Rabbi Yaakov Kassin—may his name live forever—son of that righteous, pious and holy man in Israel, the Gaon Rabbi Shaul Kassin. I will strengthen his hands, and those of all that rely on him, in his never-ceasing Torah. Happy is she who bore him! May there be many like him in Israel!"

Rabbi Aharon Shlomo, in his letter of recommendation, called Rabbi Yaakov, "the sage who knows mysteries" and gave his blessing to all who would bring his holy work into their homes.

MIRACULOUS RECOVERY

In his diary, Rabbi Yaakov described an amazing event that took place on the publication of his book. It is important to recall that during the year of publication, he suffered from the most excruciating pain. The thought entered his mind that the publication of his work might be a merit for him, so that the Almighty would send him a complete recovery. This hope gave him the strength to continue.

Thus Rabbi Yaakov noted in his diary:

"My honored lord and exalted friend, our teacher Shlomo Tsofiof, told me he dreamt that he was standing in the synagogue of his late father, David Tsofiof. During the prayer service, he noticed an old man standing in the north-eastern corner, wrapped in his *tallit* and *tefillin* and chanting the prayers with awesome concentration. He was told that this was none other than Rabbi Shalom Sherabi (the Rashash)!

"My friend approached him, kissed his hand, and entreated: 'Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, the son of Rabbi Shaul, is chronically ill. Please pray for him that he should be healed; especially since he is a diligent student of the Kabbalah, and recites his prayers with the *siddurim* that you instituted.'

"The Rashash replied: 'Yes, for this reason I have come; do not fear, he will recover and all will be well.'

"This is the good news which Mr. Tsofiof passed on to me at that time, and indeed it was so. From the year in which I completed and published my book on the *kavanot*, I began to see relief from my suffering. Part of my illness has already been alleviated, although it has not been uprooted completely."

Thus, in his introduction to his book, Rabbi Yaakov praises God, Who enabled him to prevail over his affliction.

> "How shall I repay the Lord for all his kindness to me?" (Psalms 116:12). My mouth shall give thanks to God and in the midst of the multitude I will extoll him. He has delivered me from all diseases which threatened my soul, and has acquainted me with His Torah—especially with the writings of the Ari and the *siddur* of the Rashash—through my master and teacher, Rabbi Shaul Dweck HaKohen." Rabbi Yaakov concludes, "May the Almighty put an end to our troubles, heal us completely, remove from us all illness and affliction, and fulfill all our heartfelt requests for the good."

His Masters in Kabbalah

As we have already mentioned, Rabbi Kassin was one of the veteran students of the Gaon, Rabbi Hayyim Shaul Dweck and it was from Rabbi Dweck that he had acquired the greater part of his knowledge of Kabbalah. But during this period, he also drew inspiration from another great sage: the Kabbalist and Gaon, Rabbi Avraham Addes of Aleppo. From this teacher, he learned Mussar and the art of perfecting oneself on the path of Divine service.

Rabbi Yaakov would bring all doubts or queries encountered in his research to Rabbi Avraham for clarification. In the biography of Rabbi Addes, which Rabbi Yaakov wrote and included in his book *Pri Eitz Hagan*, he noted the following:

> "During the last two years, 5784 and 5785 (1924-1925),

I (the compiler) have benefited from the powerful light of this *tzaddik*. On many occasions, whether day or night, after wrestling with a question of Kabbalah, I would approach him and request his assistance in solving the matter. I was able to recognize something wonderful in his Torah and his expertise. He was a vast storehouse of knowledge, a fountain of understanding and a well of wisdom— accompanied by extreme humility, refinement, piety and holiness as befits him.

"It is my sacred duty to relate something quite astounding which I heard from this righteous man with my own ears. Before Yom Kippur in the year 5684, I laid out before Rabbi Avraham my understanding of the order of the elevation of the supernal Worlds. Through concentration on the prayers of Yom Kippur together with their appropriate *kavanot*, my power of perception increased and my ideas had crystallized, enabling me to understand something of this profound matter.

"The *tzaddik* responded: 'My son, this is indeed the authentic order, without any doubt, for I have seen it myself. I have personally observed all the lights and Worlds arranged before me Above, precisely as I have explained them to you, without any change.' These words, few in number but overwhelming in their import, are enough to convey to us a little of the greatness, the sublime level, the splendor and the majesty of this holy figure; the epitome of purity, humility and piety."

Rabbi Yaakov quotes a further anecdote dealing with another prophetic event involving Rabbi Avraham Addes:

"One day in the year 5684, I approached my master and asked if he could lend me a certain sum of money. I needed

it urgently, but was sure that I would have it back in about two weeks. I had previously lent money to a fellow who had traveled overseas. He had sent notification that he was preparing to return to Jerusalem within fifteen days, and I was sure I would be repaid.

"My master shook his head in disbelief, and laughed.

"'Why does my Master laugh?' I enquired.

"'I will lend you the money,' he replied, 'but know that this man will not come—neither in fifteen days, nor in a month or two.' Surprised, I asked him respectfully how he could make such a statement, when he did not even know who the person was.

"'Just so, I am telling you!' he exclaimed, then continued, 'At any rate, you shall take the money and return it to me after fifteen days, as you state, because I shall need it; but your debtor will not come soon . . . perhaps he will arrive in six month's time.'

"So it was! Fifteen days went by and then another fifteen days, but there was no sign of the man until exactly six months had passed—just as my master had predicted. I was completely amazed by this . . . ."

Rabbi Yaakov did not benefit for long from wisdom of this *tzaddik,* for Rabbi Addes passed away on the 28th of Av, 5685.

Further Compositions

This period at Porat Yosef was a very productive one for Rabbi Kassin. Besides his treatise on *Kiddushin,* his responsa, and his Kabbalistic work *Ohr HaLevanah,* two other significant works were published under his hand.

The first of these was *Yesod Ha'Emunah* ("The Foundation of Belief") written in 5686. The author's objective was "to reinforce faith in the Divine arrangement of the spiritual worlds, and to reaffirm the axioms of the books of Kabbalah and the Holy Zohar, through an examination of the wonders of the Torah, and through investigation." This book was written at the request of certain individuals of the community of Cairo in Egypt, who saw a need for a polemic against the community of the Dardaim. This group denied the authenticity of the Kabbalah and ridiculed the tradition that the Holy Zohar is the work of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, claiming instead that it was written by an errant student, God forbid.

Yesod Ha'Emunah demonstrates Rabbi Yaakov's impressive ability to analyze and clarify the interrelation between the revealed and the hidden aspects of the Torah. It deals in depth with the principle of the Divine transmission of the Kabbalah and with concepts in classical Jewish philosophy and historical research. The treatise was sent to Egypt, and was said to have been printed there by the Keter Torah Society. Many years later, in 1980, it was published together with several other essays in Brooklyn, New York.

Through this treatise, Rabbi Yaakov dispelled, in no uncertain terms, the confusion which had been created by the corrupt theories of the Dardaim community. These ideas had spread like a plague and caused harm to the dispersed communities of Israel. Jews in the Diaspora, lacking the guidance of an organized rabbinate, had fallen prey to the arguments of these deviants, and had been encouraged to join their ranks. Rabbi Yaakov's dissertation, however, clearly exposed the sect's distorted views, and turned the tide against them. The masses kept far from the heretics and the latter's numbers dwindled so much that they all but disappeared.

The second part of *Yesod Ha'Emunah* is quite distinct from the first, containing a number of essays on different themes. Several of are found in this present volume. One lengthy essay, *Tochahat Meguleh* (of which Chapter 11 is an abridged version) was considered to be of such importance that it was republished in 1924 as part of a volume containing the work *Sama d'Hai*, written by Rabbi Eliyahu Moshe Ma'aravi, zt'l. In the same book there also appears a lengthy eulogy delivered that year by Rabbi Yaakov on the passing of Rabbi Ma'aravi (Chapter 6 of our book).

Finally, the third part of *Yesod Ha'Emunah* contains a number of responsa by Rabbi Kassin, as well as a reprint of *Mishmeret HaKiddushin*, the twenty-six chapter responsum that originally brought him such fame.

His Complete Recovery

We have already described how Rabbi Yaakov suffered from a serious illness which repeatedly confined him to his bed. We saw how his suffering had been alleviated, as though by Divine intervention, until he was able to continue his studies and service of God.

Unfortunately, the root of the ailment remained, and in due course, the painful condition flared up again. Rabbi Yaakov was forced to ease up on his very intensive study schedule and his creative output declined.

Once again, he consulted the doctors of Jerusalem in the hope of finding a permanent cure for his malady. The opinion of the local physicians was unanimous: an operation was required. Unfortunately, such surgery was beyond their

competence. Rabbi Yaakov would have to travel to Europe for the treatment he needed.

But Rabbi Yaakov had absolutely no means of paying for the operation and travel expenses. He delayed fulfilling his physician's orders, in the hope that salvation would come from Heaven. But when his teachers and colleagues at the yeshivah witnessed his agony—both the physical pain and the mental anguish at having to miss his studies—they took up a collection around Jerusalem, and managed to raise the necessary sum. They gave the money to Rabbi Yaakov, with the suggestion that he travel to Germany, as the doctors had recommended.

In the Spring of 1928, Rabbi Yaakov boarded a passenger ship bound for Germany. En route, the vessel anchored for about two weeks in Paris. By this time, Rabbi Yaakov's entire body was sore. He was not accustomed to sea travel, and his condition had been seriously aggravated. He disembarked from the ship and took a room in a nearby hotel, in order to recover from the rigors of the journey.

News of his arrival soon reached the ears of the chief rabbi of Paris. He paid Rabbi Yaakov a visit, and suggested that he cancel his trip to Germany. It would be better, in his opinion, to have the operation performed at the local Rothschild Hospital by the world famous surgeon, Dr. Hertz. Rabbi Yaakov accepted this advice. Upon examining Rabbi Yaakov, Dr Hertz concluded that surgery was unavoidable. A few days later the operation took place and was an outstanding success. Within a short time, Rabbi Yaakov had returned to perfect health.

In later years, Rabbi Yaakov would attribute the success of his operation to the merit of his righteous ancestors, to that of the holy city of Jerusalem, and to his companions, who had prayed on his behalf. About this, he wrote:

"God came to my rescue . . . . He oversaw the success of the operation and restored me to good health within a short time. I was delivered from the threat of death, and the words of Psalms: 'You have afflicted me sorely, O God, but you have not given me over to death,' were fulfilled in me. Praised be the Lord who has not only sent me a complete recovery, but has restored my original vigor and has saved me from all kinds of sorrows . . . ."

Rabbi Yaakov quickly returned to his family and companions in Jerusalem, where he lost no time in resuming his study program with renewed strength and enthusiasm.

YESHIVAT GAN HALEVANON

Ranking among Rabbi Kassin's greatest achievements of those days was the founding of Yeshivat Gan HaLevanon. This yeshivah attracted the finest of Israel's scholars, who flocked to hear the daily lectures in Torah and Kabbalah delivered by Rabbi Yaakov. In his diary, he discloses his motive in setting up this new institution:

"When I was suffering from the terrible disease, with my very life in danger, I made a promise to God that should I fully recover, I would make every effort to inaugurate an institution which would promote the honor of Heaven. Within its framework, I would dedicate my strength and talents to further the glory of the Torah.

"With the help of my revered rabbis and the honored community leaders, I was able to fulfill my vow. This year, 5687 (1927), we established the yeshivah Gan HaLevanon; for it is a garden of Torah in Jerusalem, the land of the

Levanon. Praised be God who has granted me the merit to make my dream a reality. Within these walls, scholars and rabbis toil day and night in both the mystical and revealed branches of the Torah. They are being supported with funds raised by our generous brethren within the country and abroad . . . ."

Rabbi Yaakov continues:

"Heaven will bear witness that I have used all the energy and resources at my disposal—and continue to do so—to strengthen and consolidate the foundations of this yeshivah. I have done this solely for the honor of heaven; without any ulterior motives or expectation of reward. If my efforts deserve any recompense at all, my only request is that God shower upon my children and me many days of fruitful activity, so that we may earn the privilege of eternal life."

Many of the scholars who came to Gan HaLevanon were sages advanced in years, who had spent most of their lives in the study halls of Torah. Nevertheless, they eagerly gathered to hear Rabbi Yaakov speak. For, despite his youth, he was recognized as an authority in the revealed Torah, and in the field of Kabbalah.

The yeshivah's board of directors were all associates of Rabbi Yaakov from Porat Yosef. The president was the Gaon, Rabbi Nissim Eliashar, zt'l, former president of Porat Yosef, and president of the board of the Sefardic community. The members of the board comprised: Rabbi Shalom Mordechai Azulai, a member of the *Beit Din* of the Adat HaMa'aravim; Rabbi Moshe Addes, (son of Rabbi Yaakov's teacher, Rabbi Avraham Addes), a member of the Sefardic *Beit Din*; Rabbi Yosef Shloush, leader of the Adat HaMa'aravim; and communal activist Eliyahu Yosef Shamah, a descendant of the great

Rabbi Eliyahu Shamah, author of *Korban Isha*, one of the founders of Yeshivat Porat Yosef.

When the rabbinical leaders of the city saw the great influence the new yeshivah was having on religious life in Jerusalem, they convinced local philanthropists to contribute generously to its upkeep. In 1931, Rabbi Yaakov himself made an appeal for donations throughout the land and abroad. He emphasized that Yeshivat Gan HaLevanon was a non-partisan institution, which represented all the different communities and which was completely endorsed by the rabbinic leadership of Jerusalem.

Despite his undisputed success of the Gan HaLevanon yeshivah, Rabbi Yaakov in no way saw it as the climax of his achievements. On the contrary, he regarded his accomplishments as mere sparks from a fire, for his soul burned to achieve more. He expressed this yearning in his diary:

> "It is obvious that all my plans and desires have been for the enhancement of Torah; the designs of my soul to increase in wisdom, and the cravings of my heart to organize and unite the disciples of Torah. My objective is to spread the light of authentic Judaism in the world and in the *yishuv* in Eretz Yisrael; to ensure that the light of Torah, Divine Service and deeds of lovingkindness—not yet revealed in this world—will shine forth in all their splendor. I have begged God at length, that just as He has already helped me kindle a small spark, so may he help me to ignite many more, for the sake of His honor . . . ."

These lines reveal something of Rabbi Kassin's aspirations and goals. With charity and humanity, he served the residents of Jerusalem, and the scholarly community in particular. His vision was always quick to take form, through his fruitful

activities both in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora. He enhanced the status of Torah in his community, and performed deeds of compassion and lovingkindness, both physically and monetarily. We shall elaborate on this in the sections which follow.

Growth in Wisdom And Humility

In 1928, the Kabbalist, Rabbi Rahamim David Shrem zt'l, was preparing to publish his major work on the Kabbalah, *Sha'arei Rahamim*, a collection of questions posed to his teachers, Rabbi Hayyim Shmuel Dweck HaKohen and Rabbi Avraham Addes, on topics in the writings of the Ari and the Rashash. The author was worried that errors might have crept into his book. He therefore sought an experienced scholar to critically review the work, and verify the accuracy of its statements.

Rabbi Shrem was elated to discover Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, who eminently qualified for the assignment. Not only his comprehensive knowledge of all areas of Torah, but his gift for writing in an elegant literary style, made him the perfect choice.

When Rabbi Shrem requested his assistance, Rabbi Yaakov accepted the assignment—but only on condition that his role as editor remain a secret. He imposed this condition, it seems, due to his extreme humility; he could not visualize himself as being chosen for a task above all the great sages in the city!

Rabbi Yaakov reviewed the entire manuscript, made corrections and added many comments of his own prefaced by the words: "the editor says . . . ." The end result was a text

that was substantially improved.

When the book finally reached publication, the leading Kabbalists of the day were as excited by the proofreader's comments as they were by the text itself. They were amazed that he had chosen to hide his identity, when the genius of his novella could have won him much glory. But in doing so, Rabbi Yaakov was giving heed to the counsel of our Sages, who taught that a scholar should compose one book anonymously, as indeed had been the practice of great men in every generation.

Rabbi Rahamim Shrem himself acknowledged that the second part of his book, which had been specifically edited by Rabbi Yaakov, was superior to the rest. In a latter part of the book, Rabbi Shrem writes that Part Two, "which contains responsa on the yearly order of prayers, was arranged by a very great scholar in the revealed and mystical branches of Torah, who added many precious and delightful novella." Indeed, it has been accepted by students of Kabbalah that this second part is the most important one in the book, and it alone is sufficiently trustworthy to rely on for practical decisions in matters of Kabbalah.

After Rabbi Yaakov read the entire book and realized its merit, he begged his friend to be allowed to write a letter of recommendation. Thus, we find his approbation appearing alongside those of the other leading rabbis of Jerusalem in that period: Rabbi Yosef Hayyim Sonnenfeld, Rav of Jerusalem; Rabbi Yosef Yedid HaLevi, head of the *Beit Din* of Jerusalem; Rabbi Hayyim Shaul Dweck HaKohen, head of the Kabbalists of Jerusalem; Rabbi Shlomo Maharil, one of the Gaonim and Kabbalists of the city; Rabbi Yaakov Hayyim Sofer, author of the text *Kaf HaHayyim*; Rabbi Hezkiyah Shabtai, head of the

Jerusalem Sefardic *Beit Din*; Rabbi Shalom Hayyim Hadaya, father-in-law of Rabbi Yaakov and author of the book of responsa *u'Dvar Shalom*, and head of the Kabbalists in Yeshivat Beit El.

On the surface, it may seem incredible that such a young man—a mere twenty-eight years of age—could have presented his approbation together with the elders of the city. Only the fact that his greatness was already recognized in those days made this possible, and thus Rabbi Yaakov's recommendation had great value.

The depth of scholarship, which earned Rabbi Yaakov a place among Jerusalem's leading scholars, was emphasized by his father-in-law in his own approbation to *Sha'arei Rahamim.* About the editor, he wrote as follows:

> "The author of this work . . . moved by his characteristic fear of heaven, was concerned that mistakes might have crept into his book, or that he may have writen something incorrect. In order to prevent this, he handed over his labour to an adept sage, a holy man of Israel, an authority in the Torah, master of deep secrets, who worked on it, improved it, and arranged everything correctly. He added comments of his own and supplied additional insights and perspectives."

In the author's introduction, Rabbi Shrem explains that he had referred most of his questions to Rabbi Hayyim Shaul Dweck and to Rabbi Avraham Addes. Then he explains:

> "But even so, I have not relied on myself in the current treatise, but rather on someone very special, who is greater than his brothers. (At his own request, his name has been withheld). His wisdom is unchallenged and his holiness and piety beyond dispute. I prevailed upon him to organize and

revise the subject matter, to verify it, to arrange everything in a consistent and logical manner, and wherever he chose, to enlarge upon it. He also took several responsa in which the text had not yet been organized systematically and in which the answers were not easily understood, rewrote them, corrected them and reaarranged them in clearer format.

"But his kindness is all the greater and his merit is redoubled, for he has enlightened our eyes with the light of his Torah. He has clarified several issues and compiled valuable annotations. His approach is logical and straightforward; his words are clearly recognizable as the truth. Would that my mouth be filled with prayer to the awesome and exalted God, that, in the merit of this great undertaking, He should guard this sage and all that is his, and bless him with length of days, abundant success and excellent health. May he merit many students, even in his old age, and may he witness the exultation of Torah and the people of Israel with the coming of the Redeemer to Zion."

Following this lavish praise of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, we find his own recommendation of the book. We present it here in full, to give the reader some insight into the purity of his language and his excessive modesty:

"The One Who knows all the thoughts of man, Who examines our hearts and confirms our deeds, is aware how reluctant I am to pen these words, simply because I am not suitable for the task; especially following the approbations of the holy Gaonim, compared to whom I have no worth and before whom I am full of shame. But after repeated requests from the author, a fine man of great accomplish-

ments, I have no alternative but to accede to his request to write these lines. This is because it has become very clear to me that he is indeed worthy of blessing, for he has merited to spread the spark of Divinity in the world.

"Indeed, the honorable author, of distinguished lineage, bearer of a good name, praised by his fellows, an accomplished sage, Rabbi Rahamim Shrem, has achieved something very special in composing this precious work, an investigation into the mystical secrets of the Torah, and an anthology of the word of our Sages. In this book, *Sha'arei Rahamim*, he has arranged every topic systematically, according to the order of the year. He has explained the *kavanot* of the Ari z'l and other masters, and has expounded the *kavanot* in the siddur of the Rashash in an accurate manner.

"Therefore I say—may it be God's will that he merit to disseminate many more Divine sparks, and may the Almighty open the gates of mercy before him, so that he might enable many others to acquire such merit, in turn. The timing of this book is propitious for it is an essential tool for those who are beginning to study the mysteries of the Kabbalah, and learning how to serve God with the proper intentions.

"The author has successfully established a yeshivah for the study of Kabbalah in the Zichron Moshe neighborhood, which has already been there for several years. He and the other Rabbanim are occupied in the pursuit of charity and compassionate deeds. He teaches and expounds the holy texts before the assembly of Kabbalists. May he continue to merit to teach the secrets of Kabbalah, in the correct manner according to the authentic tradition, even until old

age. May he merit to compose many novellae during the course of a long life filled with contentment, success and health. May he dwell in tranquility in the good and ample land of our fathers, and in Jerusalem of Gold, to occupy himself with Torah and good deeds until the arrival of the Redeemer in Zion.

"Signed in honor of the Torah, with love and in trepidation—the insignificant Yaakov Kassin."

As has already been pointed out, Rabbi Yaakov added many of his own novellae, and even responsa, to Rabbi Shrem's text.

Another of Rabbi Yaakov's original compositions to be included in *Sha'arei Rahamim*, was the small treatise: "A Concise Treatment of the Laws of *Terumot* and *Ma'aserot*, and the *Matanot Kehunah*." This comprises a lucid and systematic presentation of the laws pertaining to these subjects, relevant customs observed in Jerusalem and rulings and insights of the classical masters of the Kabbalah. Rabbi Yaakov also included the formula to be recited when separating the priestly tithes. The formula used was an accurate and authentic version, which was widely accepted among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Owing to the great importance of the laws covered in this treatise, Rabbi Yaakov's brother, Rabbi Shlomo, zt'l, reprinted the work ten years later, as part of Rabbi Shaul Kassin's work *Pri Tzaddik* (Jerusalem, 5698).

His Appointment as Dayan

During this period, Rabbi Yaakov's name was added to the roll of rabbinical judges, after which he was appointed to the

Supreme *Beit Din* of the Sefardic Community of Jerusalem. His colleagues on the bench were the Gaonim, Rabbis Hezkiyah Shabtai, Benzion Koenka and Avraham Pilusoph.

News of his admission to the *Beit Din* spread throughout the land, and soon, the report had reached even distant parts of the earth. Questions addressed to Rabbi Yaakov streamed in from all corners of the world and he was called upon to solve many complex *halachic* problems. These included enquiries of a private nature, relating to such matters as marriage, divorce and personal status, and questions touching upon communal and national issues, relevant to the time and the generation.

In his writings of the period, we find questions sent from the most distant lands. For instance, in 1930, he received a request for a ruling from Singapore on the following topic:

A minor girl had been betrothed twice to a young man in the presence of witnesses and with the permission of her mother and other relatives, but without the authority of her father who had been abroad at the time. When her father returned home, he made a declaration of *miyun* (refusal to accept the marriage as binding) and so did the girl. In former times, this was the *halachic* prerogative of the girl or her father, as long as she remained a minor, a fact confirmed by women who examined her. The questions were whether the testimony of these women was effective, and whether *miyun* is applicable in our times.

Owing to the gravity of the question, which touched on the serious and delicate area of personal status, the rav of the Singapore community, Rabbi Ezra Meir Rahamim Hazan, referred the matter to Rabbi Yaakov in Jerusalem. Once again, the latter's vast expertise and sharpness of mind were evident in the lengthy reply which he sent. His awareness of his

responsibility is reflected in the seriousness with which he considered every aspect of the issue. Thus, he began his responsum:

> "Our Sages have enjoined that in the area of forbidden relationships, it is imperative to seek the counsel of the greatest authorities . . . . It is well that His Excellency has referred the question to the holy city of Jerusalem, 'for out of Zion shall go forth the Torah.' Our Sages have stated that those unversed in the laws of marriage and divorce should not rule on the subject. This applies even to one with some knowledge of the laws, but is not experienced in all their ramifications. It is easy to err on the serious matter of forbidden relationships. In this area, all depends on valid reasoning and correct application, and it takes careful consideration and great intelligence to arrive at the truth. Indeed, those concerned with making decisions in this field need to invest every ounce of energy they possess, with awe and trembling, to penetrate to the truth and to avoid errors, God forbid."

This quotation vividly illustrates Rabbi Yaakov's approach when an important matter was brought to him for judgment—particularly in the area of personal status. He was filled with apprehension lest he make a mistake. This was despite the fact that he fully met the qualifications for ruling on these matters—as he himself had laid down!

Rabbi Yaakov's responsum, divided into three parts, was written with his customary clarity and precision. His concern over the possibility of error motivated him to submit the draft to the head of his *Beit Din*, Rabbi Benzion Koenka, for appraisal. Thus attached to the end of the responsum, we find the *Rosh Beit Din*'s heartwarming approbation:

"At the request of my friend, the erudite and accomplished rabbi, pure in his fear of Heaven, offspring of holy ones, the illustrious Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, I have reviewed what he has written. Time and physical weakness do not permit me to elaborate to the full extent. Nevertheless, I can vouch that his precious words are founded upon truth and righteousness. All his statements are rooted in law and in practice, and his rulings are just and correct . . . ."

SHOULDERING THE BURDEN

Even a cursory reading of Rabbi Kassin's responsa reveals the depth of his grasp of Jewish Law. This is especially obvious in the laws dealing with marriage, divorce, *halitzah*, and the like. Undoubtedly, his exhaustive knowledge of these subjects was responsible for his appointment to the *Beit Din*, since most decisions of a *Beit Din* fall under these areas of concern. Indeed, from the moment of his appointment, he was called upon to find solutions to a wide range of problems in this field.

In addition to his responsa on the subject of marital status, Rabbi Yaakov resolved doubts on a variety of other topics. One enquirer, for example, approached him with a number of questions on certain specially imposed local fasts: whether they required the reading of the Torah and the Priestly Benedictions as on the standard fast days, and whether the special prayers would be placing an undue burden on those who were not fasting. Another document written on 25 Shevat 5688 (1928) enquires whether false teeth need to be kashered before Pesach or beween meat and milk dishes.

Head to the Lions

Rabbi Yaakov began to officiate on the *Beit Din* around the year 1928, and held this position until approximately the end of 1932, when he set sail for America, as we shall relate below. Throughout this entire four-year period, he refused to rest, and threw himself with wholeheartedly into the task of revitalizing the *Beit Din*. He fielded *halachic* enquiries, wrote and documented judgements and rulings, and resolved difficult issues and problems. His refinement and humility won the hearts of all with whom he came in contact and people would desire and value his presence.

In Shevat of the year 5690 (1930), we find Rabbi Yaakov adding his signature to a joint approbation of the work *Yad Eliyahu*, by the Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Yitzhak Hazan, zt'l. Rabbi Yaakov also assisted the author in the editing of this text, as is reflected in its beautiful and polished style. Since the book is so rare, we cite the above-mentioned approbation here:

> "'I have observed a man zealous in his work; he is worthy to stand before kings' (Proverbs 22:29). Similarly, we, the undersigned, have witnessed our beloved friend, the venerable rabbi who seeks the welfare of his people, a man of profound intellect, a sage who occupies himself in holy matters, our master Rabbi Eliyahu Yitzhak Hazan—how he has laboured in sanctity in the cities of China for some twenty-five years. Far from eating the bread of idleness, he has lit up the darkness with his light, like one who turns night into day. He has labored in the holy Torah, probed into its secrets, and unraveled deep mysteries.
>
> "All this is evident in the words of the book before us. We have been privileged to assist in the expression and

arrangement of his invaluable ideas. The author has expressed a desire to publish some of them in order to disseminate these topics to a wider public. We have read his heartfelt and pleasant words and realized that there is a need for this. May he be granted more power in the Torah, and may it be God's will that he merit to complete and to publish many more novellae. He has called the book *Yad Eliyahu* after his good name, and its responsa correspond in number to the seventy-two letters of [God's] Name that is the source of mercy and compassion. In the merit of this, may he establish his dwelling place within the courts of the house of God in Jerusalem, and may his eyes behold the arrival of the Messiah."

Signed: Rabbi Benzion Hazan, Rabbi Ephraim Menashe HaKohen, Rabbi Yaakov Kassin.

An historic proclamation to which Rabbi Yaakov affixed his signature, together with all the sages and rabbis of Jerusalem, concerned a Jew who brazenly opened his shop in the Old City on the Sabbath. The attempts of the rabbinical leadership to persuade the recalcitrant storekeeper to desist from his shocking act ended in failure, and he stubbornly continued to keep his shop open. The sages thereupon hastened to dispatch a letter to the members of the Council of the Sefardim of Jerusalem, and to the doyen of the rabbinate, Rabbi Nissim Eliashar, urging them to impose the full weight of their authority to put an end to this ugly desecration of the holy day.

Among the names of the top-ranking sages appearing prominently on this document, dated 10 Sivan 5690, was that of Rabbi Yaakov. The letter urges its recipients "to send for the man and warn him in no uncertain terms, and if necessary to

use all the power at their disposal to ensure that he repents from his wickedness." It was no small wonder that, notwithstanding his youth, he was asked to sign ahead of such veteran and important members of the rabbinate as Rabbi Benzion Hazan, Rabbi Ovadiah Hadaya, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopas, Rabbi Ephraim Menashe Kohen, Rabbi Moshe Addes, Rabbi Saliman Eliyahu, Rabbi Shalom Azulai, and others. This is a significant indication of the status accorded to him by his peers in those days.

ALL-ENCOMPASSING VOLUME

In the year 5691 (1931), Rabbi Yaakov published his famous book, *Pri Eitz Hagan* ("The Fruit of the Tree of the Garden"). Encyclopaedic in scope, the work is a treasure-house of Torah. Rabbi Yaakov arranged the material in three parts.

The first part contains biographies of prominent *tzaddikim* and discussions about their ethical teachings. Among those presented are the Rashash and his sons, Rabbi Gedalyah Hivan, and Rabbi Yaakov's father, Rabbi Shaul Kassin. It continues with accounts of the lives of Rabbi Yaakov's master and teacher, the Kabbalist Rabbi Avraham Addes, the communal leader Nissim Nahum, and others. In addition, it includes an overview of the author's own life.

The second part of his book comprises solutions to problems raised by the Gaon Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad (the Ben Ish Hai) in his work *Imrei Binah.* In the last part, Rabbi Yaakov presents the order of the *kavanot* for the prayers and the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShannah, together with appropiate explanations for the beginner, and concludes

his book with a number of discourses and liturgical poems.

Rabbi Yaakov introduces the biographical section of the book with an essay, "Reflections of the Heart of the Compiler." Quoting it here will help us to understand the intentions of the author and will serve to demonstrate his beautiful, lyric style:

Reflections of the Heart of the Compiler
Jerusalem, Rosh Chodesh Elul 5691—14 August 1931

"The Master of all creation, Who inspires the upper regions with His own spirit, created at His pleasure the human species and filled its members with the breath of life, to perfect and to make straight the paths leading to wisdom and knowledge, and to learn the route to understanding. For this purpose He created many different branches, offshoots and clusters of fruit all originating from the supreme holy Tree in the spiritual world. Corresponding to these are diverse and mighty branches of wisdom and learning, all intertwined and originating from a division of the creation, or from an individual who is, in turn, connected to a specific root of the tree corresponding to particular areas of wisdom. This helps us to understand what the Rashash wrote in *Nahar Shalom* 'No one in Israel can do what his fellow will do.'

"Among all the sciences, disciplines, and fields of knowledge which have been pursued by men of integrity in our generation and the one preceding it, there are few which yield more profit than the study of biographies of men, and particularly those of the great sages of Israel, righteous men


ב״ה

ספר

פרי עץ הגן

חלק א׳

ענף היסטוריי מתולדות
רבני ירושלים והמסתעף
בשליש התיכון לאלף הששי.

העורך

הרב יעקב ש. קצין נר״ו

משרת בקדש ב״ד הגדול שבירושלים
לעדת הספרדים הע״א.

פעה״ק ירושלם תובב״א

שנת יתפא״ר לפ״ק

בדפוס ״המערב״

כתבת העורך: ר׳ יעקב ש. קצין.
מדריש פורת יוסף ירושלם א״י.

Opening page of the book *Pri Eitz HaGan* (Jerusalem, 1931).

of wondrous achievements. Such contemplation brings pleasure to the spirit and repose to the higher soul. It refines our inner emotions, develops in us the foundation for our spiritual striving, and helps us to attain the high standard required of us.

"Through this method, knowledge and discernment are passed on to the succeeding generations. How will we follow in their footsteps and in the paths which they have forged, and how will we train the next generation in wisdom—to grasp the pleasant way of life and to renounce ways that are inappropriate—other than by reviewing the righteous deeds of these *tzaddikim* and the eternal fruits of their holy labors? Their noble actions are a direct reproof to those whom God's light has not yet reached. It is through these awe-inspiring saints that the keys to ancient mysteries and primordial secrets, concealed since the time of the Creation, are revealed. From their personal histories we can draw inspiration without limit. Recalling their greatness provides a refuge and repose for our souls and revives our spirit.

"Apart from these considerations, biographical literature serves as a valuable educational and reference tool in directing a person along the paths of God's perfect Torah. It is important to have an adequate conception of the correct sequence of the generations. For in order to properly understand basic principles of law and to arrive at correct *halachic* decisions, accurate knowledge of the chronological order of the Sages and their times is often a prerequisite. Such information helps us to decide on the appropriate course of action."

The essay is concluded with a poem in the form of an acrostic of selected Biblical verses. The initial letters of the

verses form Rabbi Yaakov's name; his father's name, Shaul; and their family name, Kassin.

It is fitting to point out how uncommon it was for Torah scholars of that time to write biographies of the sages who preceded them. This fact serves to emphasize the greatness of Rabbi Yaakov, whose accomplishments extended to so many areas. He was an officiating *dayan* on the Supreme *Beit Din*, the Rosh Yeshivah of Gan HaLevanon, with its attendant responsibilities, and was involved in many other vital activities as well. Yet, he managed to find time for this important project—the writing of these personal histories.

There is no doubt that this book ranks among the most important of his accomplishments. Despite the limited time at his disposal, for which he apologizes in his introductory essay, he nevertheless managed to produce the most brilliant of all his creations. Therefore, whoever desires to penetrate to the heart of the wisdom of the Rashash, or is interested in acquiring a deep understanding of his life and times, cannot achieve these objectives without a thorough study of the biography written by Rabbi Yaakov. This treatment of the subject is more comprehensive and detailed than any other ever attempted. Needless to add, the same applies to the biographies of other great authorities which are included in his book.

It is worth reiterating that this masterpiece was completed in the minimum of time. Such are the achievements of Rabbi Yaakov, a man of so many facets!

This is the Book of Generations

As we have noted, Rabbi Yaakov decided to begin his work with a biography of the Rashash. He explains the reason:

"Some of the members of our holy yeshivah—which is dedicated to the study of Kabbalah—devote most of their time to the sacred texts of our pious and revered master, Rabbi Shalom Sharabi, zt'l (the Rashash)—whether it be his holy work *Nahar Shalom* with its wonderful introduction *Rehovot Nahar*, whether it be his commentary on the *Eitz Hayyim*, or whether they are making use of the Siddurim of the Rashash with his special arrangements of the *Shaharit, Minha* and *Arvit* prayers for the whole year.

"Therefore I consider it appropriate to present here a concise account of the Gaon's life and of the masterpieces which he created, and to expand on what has already been written on the subject in our generation and the previous one. This information will illuminate the life of a man who was a giant among giants, a devout man who symbolizes for us the sanctity and piety of the communities of the East, and who serves, moreover, as the inspiration of our holy yeshivah, Gan HaLevanon, which represents the glory of the eternal people of Israel in the holy city of Jerusalem . . . ."

After his dissertation on the life of the Rashash and his family, Rabbi Yaakov presents a biography of his distinguished father, Rabbi Shaul Kassin, zt'l. He follows this with some biographical information about himself, noting briefly all that had transpired in his life up to that time. In his modesty, he saw fit to apologize for including his own biography in his book:

"Heaven and earth will bear witness that I have had only one purpose in compiling this survey of my life; namely, to offer thanksgiving and praise, and to publicize the miracles of the Almighty. For He hearkens to every man in Israel,

even to those who are depressed in spirit and burdened with the sorrows of the times, and even to those who are afflicted with all the ailments in the world.

"Never despair of the mercies of the One who is abundantly able to save, for consolation shall not be hidden from your eyes. Every trouble has an end; everything has its due measure, its limit and its time. Fortunate is the man whom God chastises, for He will deliver him from his troubles and guide him towards the light. Evil deeds do not emanate from the Most High One, Heaven forbid, and no man is righteous before God. But there is an end and a limit to every calamity. From the very midst of sorrow and distress, God will direct the sufferer towards tranquility and well-being, and will help him to merit eternal life."

Indeed, in committing the events of his life to writing, he handsomely achieved his objective. Implicit in the story of his life was abundant consolation to all who suffer from protracted illness—since Rabbi Yaakov had also suffered so much, but had believed in the living God, Who heals the broken-hearted and binds their wounds.

Next in order is a biography of the author's rebbe, the Kabbalist, Rabbi Avraham Addes. This sage was the doyen of the Kabbalists, who, towards the end of his life, was recognized as one of the greatest sages of the Aleppo community, and as a miracle worker who possessed the Divine Spirit. We have already discussed how those facets touched on the life of Rabbi Yaakov. These aspects, among many others, are elaborated on in Rabbi Yaakov's work. The account which he wrote serves as a fitting tribute to this great personality.

The second part of the book, *Pri Eitz Hagan*, contains solutions proposed by the author to the challenging problems

by the Ben Ish Hai, in his work *Imrei Binah*. These problems were drawn from all parts of the Torah, particularly from the Kabbalah. They were compiled by Rabbi Yosef Hayyim in order to sharpen the minds of the sages. In certain chapters of his book, the author himself provides solutions, but many other riddles he left unsolved, acting on the principle that an intellectual challenge tackled by a wise man will make him still wiser.

Rabbi Yaakov offered solutions to a number of problems which Rabbi Yosef Hayyim had left unanswered. These solutions further demonstrate Rabbi Kassin's expertise in every area of Torah knowledge. As he answers the various problems, he passes from the revealed Torah to the hidden, from the different categories of homiletical interpretation to *gematriya*, all with exceptional skill and insight. Some of the solutions were worked out together with the Gaon Rabbi Avraham Harari Raful, zt'l, as Rabbi Yaakov points out in his introduction.

The final section of Rabbi Yaakov's volume comprises a treatise that is small in size, yet comprehensive in scope. It ranks among his most important compositions, especially those dealing with the Kabbalah. In the words of the title page, it is "a concise presentation of the principles of the *kavanot* of the Rosh HaShannah prayers, according to the Siddur of our master, the Rashash."

This composition had great practical value for students of Kabbalah who wanted to learn the authentic *kavanot* of the Rosh HaShannah liturgy. For many, the only route to mastery of the Rashash's system was intensive study of Rabbi Yaakov's treatise. His genius is fully revealed in the way he resolves difficulties and removes obstacles to understanding. Through Rabbi Yaakov's work, students were able to gain access to secrets which had eluded them for generations.

This monograph on the *kavanot* soon won fame in scholarly circles. It was reprinted several times in different formats; as a separate publication and as part of the book *Ohr HaLevanah.* The ongoing demand for further editions has continued up to our present time. This underscores the indispensability of the dissertation for serious students of the Kabbalah.

Praise from the Gedolim

Rabbi Yaakov's book, *Pri Eitz Hagan,* won the stamp of approval of the leading rabbis and leaders of his day: Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, the chief rabbi of the Land of Israel; Rabbi Yosef Hayyim Sonnenfeld, rav of Jerusalem; Rabbi Hezikayah Shabtai; and Rabbi Shalom Hadaya, leader of the Beit El congregation in Jerusalem and father-in-law of Rabbi Yaakov.

These distinguished rabbis wrote approbations which, in addition to their high praise of the book and its author, also included endorsements of Yeshivat Gan HaLevanon. They also appealed to the public to assist and support the efforts of the author in his manifold activities for the advancement of Torah and for the communal welfare.

Rabbi Kook wrote:

> "I have seen this fine book replete with holy topics, permeated with a love of Torah and fear of Heaven, compiled by my beloved friend, that pure soul, great in stature, master of secrets: our master and teacher, Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, long may he live! . . . It is like a new jug filled with the oldest and choicest wine . . . therefore I request our brothers, those of you to whom the love of

> Torah and fear of Heaven is dear, to bring into your homes this precious book. Your souls will find much pleasure in the sweetness of its words, and will bask in the bright light of the one who composed them. By so doing, you will strengthen the hand of this Gaon, one of the dignitaries of Jerusalem, our holy and glorious city, and you will be blessed with all that is good . . . ."

Rabbi Yosef Hayyim Sonnenfeld stressed that "the fear of God pervades every page of this book, whatever the topic happens to be. Fortunate indeed will be those who will take its teachings to heart." Rabbi Hezkayah Shabtai and Rabbi Shalom Hadaya pointed out that "these priceless words could only have been written by a master as great as our dear friend, a Gaon tireless in his learning, our master and teacher Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, son of the holy and pious Rabbi Shaul Kassin. The caliber of this great man is manifest through his rulings and his writings. Over and above the obvious benefits that will accrue to one who purchases this book, will also be the merit of helping the distinguished author publish more from the vast storehouse of his wisdom."

Diligence in Torah

The publication of Rabbi Yaakov's book *Pri Eitz Hagan* marks the end of an important chapter of his life. in which so much had already been achieved within a short time span. At this point, it is fitting that we quote a few lines from the book *Kerem Shlomo* by Rabbi Shlomo Kassin, in which the author describes the astounding diligence in learning displayed by his elder brother, Rabbi Yaakov Kassin:

"I have been privileged to know several of the present day Gaonim of this land, and have witnessed for myself the self-sacrifice, the fervor and the ecstasy with which they occupy themselves in Talmud study . . . . Foremost among them was my teacher, the crown of my head, my lord and master, my pious father Rabbi Shaul Kassin. In the course of his ceaseless involvement with the Torah, the Talmud and Codes, and the authentic wisdom of the Ari z'l, he would dispel the darkness before his light and illuminate the night as if it were day. His passionate love for the Torah and its students would express itself in genuine happiness and a heart overflowing with joy, in fulfillment of the words of the Sweet Singer of Israel: 'I prefer the Torah of Thy mouth to thousands of pieces of gold and silver.'

"Likewise, I have been privileged to observe the splendor of my elder brother, long may he live, our master and teacher, the Gaon Rabbi Yaakov Kassin. From his earliest years, he has been relentless in his single-minded devotion to his studies, his spirit of self-sacrifice, and his burning desire to toil unceasingly in the Torah—until he merited to master even the wisdom of the Ari z'l.

"With my own eyes, I have seen my brother fight against sleep while coming to grips with a difficult text, or composing the novellae in which God and men rejoiced. Words would flow from him as if from a spring. (It was as though his pen would magically write of its own, as they say about the Hida.) Even when he was in agony from severe heart pains (thank God, he has now recovered), the suffering did not deter him from writing his novellae. Happy is she who bore him, and may there be many more like him! May he merit to fulfill the words of the tanna Rabbi Yohanan:

'Whoever observes the Torah in poverty, will ultimately observe it in wealth.'

"He has already written several holy texts, such as his books *Ohr HaLevanah* and *Pri Eitz Hagan*. His treatise *Tochahat Meguleh* has been reprinted in the book *Samah d'Hai*. There is also the collection *Mishmeret Kiddushin* and various other writings. During his present holy mission as spiritual leader of holy communities in Brooklyn, New York, he is enacting decrees and establishing preventative measures to strengthen Torah study and observance. With an abundance of love and compassion, he is devoting himself to bringing the light of Torah to his congregants, to whose welfare he is totally dedicated. He has endeared himself to all to such an extent that he is regarded almost as an angel of God. Nothing I write can do him justice . . . ."

This eloquent testimony—by the brother closest to him while he was in Jerusalem—makes it a little easier to understand how Rabbi Yaakov could have accomplished so much by the age of thirty-one. From the writing of responsa and numerous compositions in all areas of the Torah, to founding a yeshiva and disseminating knowledge among the students, to serving as a *dayan* on a *Beit Din*, to the acquisition of various other skills which were of great benefit to many people—all this was only possible on account of his extraordinary diligence.

Rabbi and Leader

Around this time, Rabbi Yaakov decided to pursue those steps that would qualify him as a rav in Israel. Of course, the

majority of the qualifications he already possessed. He was a master of literally every facet of the Torah, as well as being a man of exceptional character and generous spirit. In addition, he was an expert *mohel*, who had performed the *brit milah* on his own sons, and also a highly skilled scribe, having learnt the craft already before his *bar mitzvah*. He now set out to acquire proficiency in *shehitah* and *bedikah* as well as a few other required subjects. For help in learning *shehitah*, Rabbi Yaakov approached his friend, Rabbi Mordechai Meyuhas, who served as chief *shohet* in Jerusalem from the year 5674 (1914) onwards, and who was also Rabbi Yaakov's colleague on the *Beit Din* of Rabbi Benzion Koenka. Rabbi Meyuhas gladly taught Rabbi Yaakov the skills of *shehitah* and *bedikah* for both animals and fowl, and afterwards conferred upon him a certificate of qualification.

Since *shehitah* licences are of special interest, and especially in Rabbi Yaakov's case, seeing that the leading rabbis of Jerusalem affixed their signatures to it, we quote the text of this certificate:

> "Among the tribes of Israel I will reliably declare, with perfect testimony and clear attestation, that my friend, the Gaon, Rabbi Yaakov Kassin—may his name live for ever—sat with me to learn the required techniques for the slaughtering and the examination of small lifestock, large lifestock and fowl. He mastered everything to perfection, in the proper way and in accordance with *halachah*.
>
> "I examined the candidate in the laws of *shehitah* and *tereifot* in all their details; he answered my questions appropriately, according to *halachah* and with impressive



Authorization to practice *shehita* granted by the Sefardic *Beit Din* of Jerusalem to R. Kassin in 1931.

expertise. Many were the defective slaughtering knives which he repaired in my presence, leaving them smooth and clean, with all their flaws removed. I tested him for his ability to detect disqualifying flaws in animals, and examined him also on the subject of blemishes on lungs. I saw that he knew how to distinguish between all kinds of blemishes and to check all parts of the lung. I similarly tested him on the topic of broken bones, and it was apparent that he could identify all kinds of fractures.

"He then slaughtered in my presence some from each category of animal and fowl. The slaughtering was kasher and proper, comparable with that of all qualified *shohtim* in Israel. The candidate undertook to review the laws regularly, according to the requirement laid down by the *Be'er Hagolah*, and also to sharpen his knives and make sure that they are fit for *shechita* not less than once a fortnight, even if they are not required for immediate use.

"I therefore attest that he is permitted to slaughter and to examine all species of animals and birds, subject to the above-mentioned conditions. Therefore, the humble shall eat and be satisfied. And all who partake from his slaughtering can rest assured that he is fit and qualified for this task, over above his greatness in Torah and fear of heaven.

"In attestation of truth and justice, I affix my signature on the second day of the month of Heshvan in the year 5691, in the holy city of Jerusalem—the insignificant Mordechai Meyuhas."

The document is countersigned by the Rabbis Avraham Pilusoph, Yehudah HaKohen Shako, Yosef HaLevi and Benzion Koenka, after the following endorsement which appears at the end:

"We, of the Supreme *Beit Din*, who have affixed our signatures below, hereby ratify the signature of the Gaon, Rabbi Mordecai Meyuhas, which confers this licence on His Excellency, the Gaon of great expertise and diligence in Torah, Rabbi Yaakov Kassin. We confirm that everything that appears on this document is correct . . . may the humble eat and be satisfied from his *shebitah*."

Underneath their signatures, there appears yet another endorsement:

"I, as the Rishon Lezion and head of the rabbis of Eretz Yisrael, confirm and sustain the signatures of the members of the Supreme *Beit Din* above . . . . signed on the thirteenth of the month of Heshvan in the year 5691, the insignificant Yaakov Meir."

ORDINATION

During that same year, Rabbi Yaakov was also ordained as a rabbi and judge by several of the senior members of the city's rabbinate, namely: Chief Rabbi Yaakov Meir, the Rishon LeZion; Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook; Rosh Av Beit Din, Rabbi Benzion Koenka; and *Rosh Av Beit Din* Rabbi Avraham Pilusoph. They issued separate certificates, bearing dates ranging from 22 Kislev 5691 to 21 Kislev 5691. Most of these documents have been preserved. The first certificate was conferred by Rabbi Yaakov's colleagues on the *Beit Din*, Rabbis Koenka and Pilusoph. This is what they wrote:

"We, the undersigned, heads of the Supreme *Beit Din* of the Sefardic Communities of Jerusalem, and members of

the chief rabbinate of the Land of Israel, hereby testify that the famous rabbi, our master and teacher Rabbi Yaakov S. Kassin—long and happily may he live—son of the known *tzaddik*, Rabbi Shaul Kassin, is indeed a rabbi great in stature, outstanding in his knowledge of Torah, exceptional in his wisdom, and steadfast in his fear of heaven.

"He has a perfect command of all the laws which are necessary for a rabbi, teacher and counselor in our generation. His vast knowledge has been acquired as a result of his exceptional diligence and fear of God, which must precede all wisdom. For several years, he has been officiating with us at the *Beit Din*, where he has made a very great impact and proved to be an asset of inestimable value.

"We therefore ordain him in accordance with our tradition, and say unto him: *Yoreh, Yoreh, Yadin, Yadin*—he is authorized to render *halachic* decisions and to pass judgments. He is competent to serve as a rabbi, spiritual leader and counselor in every city and locality. We are certain that no mishap will ever occur arising from his rulings, for it is clear that God is with him, and all can rely on his decisions with full confidence.

"Any community which chooses him as its rav, will derive much pleasure and satisfaction from his leadership; for apart from his erudition and expertise in the Talmud, the Codes and the Kabbalah, he is outstanding in his deeds of lovingkindness, his fine character and his sterling qualities, which are well-suited to the leader of a large community. He is also versed in other matters of relevance for a rabbi and spiritual guide in our times.

"In confirmation of these words, we affix our signatures

יעקב מאיר

ראש הרבנים בארץ־ישראל, ראשון לציון, ונשיא הרבנות הראשית,
בעיה"ק ירושלם תיו (ארץ־ישראל).

JACOB MEÏR

GRAND RABBIN DE LA PALESTINE, RICHON-LE ZION & PRÉSIDENT DU CONSEIL RABBINIQUE
JÉRUSALEM (PALESTINE).

Jérusalem, le December 1st, 1931. בקוהיי ירושלם תיו

RABBINICAL CERTIFICATE.

I hereby certify that my friend RABBI JACOB CASSIN son of RABBI SHAOUL CASSIN, has acquired all the necessary knowledge of Torah and Jewish Law required to enable him to officiate as a Rabbi to any Jewish Congregation and to decide questions of Law. For nearly the last 4 years he has been officiating in the Sephardi Bath Din, Jerusalem.

I have much pleasure to confirm hereby that said RABBI JACOB CASSIN is fully capable to discharge his rabbinical duties in whatever Congregation he may be appointed, as he is well versed in Talmud, Digesters etc. and his manners are most praiseworthy.

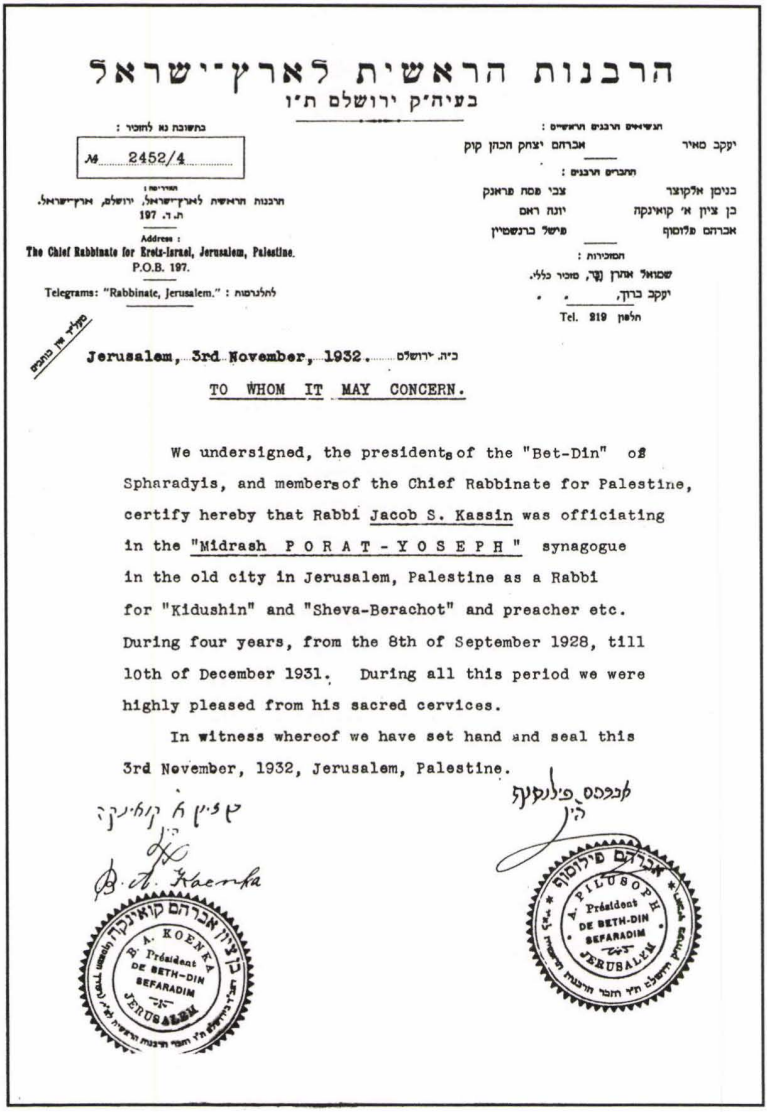
In testimony whereof I have hereunto set hands and seal, Jerusalem, Palestine, this 1st day of December, 1931.

Jacob Meir
יעקב מאיר

Richon le Zion & Chief Rabbi of Palestine.

Rishon le Zion & Grand Rabbi de Palestine יעקב מאיר ראשון לציון וראש הרבנים בארץ ישראל JACOB MEIR

Rabbinic Certification presented to R. Kassin by R. Yaakov Meir, Chief Rabbi of Israel.



הרבנות הראשית לארץ־ישראל
בעיה"ק ירושלם ת"ו

בתשובה נא לחזכר :
№ 2452/4

הרבנות הראשית לארץ־ישראל, ירושלם, ארץ־ישראל.
ת. ד. 197

Address :
The Chief Rabbinate for Erets-Israel, Jerusalem, Palestine.
P.O.B. 197.

Telegrams: "Rabbinate, Jerusalem." : להלגרמות

הנשיאים והרבנים הראשיים :
יעקב מאיר אברהם יצחק הכהן קוק

החברים הרבנים :
בנימין אלקוצר צבי פסח פראנק
בן ציון א' קוראינקא יונה ראם
אברהם פלוסוף פישל ברנשטיין

המזכירות :
שמואל אהרן נקי, מזכיר כללי.
יעקב ברוך, " "

Tel. 219 הלפון

מעלב יש בנוסף

Jerusalem, 3rd November, 1932. כ"ח. ירושלם

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

We undersigned, the presidents of the "Bet-Din" of Spharadyis, and members of the Chief Rabbinate for Palestine, certify hereby that Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin was officiating in the "Midrash P O R A T - Y O S E P H" synagogue in the old city in Jerusalem, Palestine as a Rabbi for "Kidushin" and "Sheva-Berachot" and preacher etc. During four years, from the 8th of September 1928, till 10th of December 1931. During all this period we were highly pleased from his sacred cervices.

In witness whereof we have set hand and seal this 3rd November, 1932, Jerusalem, Palestine.

בן ציון א' קוראינקא

B. A. Koenka

אברהם פילוסוף

B. A. KOENKA
Président
DE BETH-DIN
SEFARADIM
JERUSALEM

A. PILUSOPH
Président
DE BETH-DIN
SEFARADIM
JERUSALEM

Letter of Recommendation presented to R. Yaakov Kassin by the *Beit Din* of Israel, signed by R. Koenka and R. Pilusoph.

hereto on the 22 Kislev 5691 in the holy city of Jerusalem, and everything is firm and established.

Signed: Benzion Koenka, Avraham Pilusoph. "

The second and third certificates, issued by the two chief rabbis, were both written on the same day, 21 Kislev 5691, a year after the first one had been drawn up. The wording of these latter documents was almost identical to the first one.

With the granting of rabbinic ordination, the course of Rabbi Yaakov's future life was charted and his destiny as a communal rabbi and spiritual leader confirmed. On the other hand, it had not yet entered his mind to leave Jerusalem in search of a position in the rabbinate. But through force of circumstances, his life was soon to take a new direction, as we shall now relate.

Emissary of the Rabbis

In the middle of the year 5691 (1932), Rabbi Yaakov was selected by the Rishon LeZion, Rabbi Yaakov Meir, and Rabbi Ezra Raful, to travel on a fund raising mission to the United States on behalf of the Sefardic orphanages of Jerusalem. Rabbi Yaakov sought to decline this mission, on account of his full agenda and the burden of his duties in Jerusalem. His wife and four children also depended on his continued presence. However, he finally submitted to the pressure of the rabbis, who believed him to be the ideal emissary, and who could successfully carry out the mission with dignity and honor. He agreed to go abroad for two months.

On his arrival in New York, he was welcomed by the rabbis and lay leaders of the Syrian community. He quickly made friends with a group of local scholars, who were anxious

to learn Kabbalah from him, for Rabbi Yaakov's fame in this area had long preceded his arrival. Regular study sessions conducted by Rabbi Yaakov continued throughout the duration of his sojourn in New York.

The two months that Rabbi Yaakov originally intended to spend in America eventually spread out to six. This was in response to the pleas of the community, who repeatedly begged him to extend his stay in order to benefit from his knowledge a little longer. The results of his fund raising campaign also exceeded his expectations, thanks to the assistance of prominent members of the community, who collected large sums on his behalf.

The Syrian *kehillah* of New York at that time was lacking a rav. The elders and officers of the community were very impressed with Rabbi Yaakov, and entreated him to remain in their midst and to accept the position of chief rabbi. Rabbi Yaakov declined this proposal, and emphatically rejected any suggestion that he relocate to New York, for he believed his place to be in Jerusalem and not in the Diaspora.

But after relentless pleading on the part of the rabbis, and especially on the part of the community's leader, the activist and *tzaddik* Rabbi Yitzhak Shalom zt'l, and Mr. Shlomo Grazi z'l, a compromise was reached. Rabbi Yaakov signed a contract that should it enter his mind, at some future time, to leave the Holy Land to serve as rav in a Diaspora city, the Syrian community of New York would have first entitlement to his services for the period of one year.

In Great Demand

This was not the only offer of a rabbinical position which

Rabbi Yaakov received during this period. Before he returned home, he traveled to Mexico to visit his elder brother, Rabbi Avraham, zt'l, and stayed in his home for a few days.

There, he made the acquaintance of the leaders of the community, who were quick to recognize Rabbi Yaakov's greatness and special personality. They also urged him to remain with them and assume the mantle of leadership. His brother made a valiant attempt to persuade Rabbi Yaakov to accept the position. He told him about the quality of life in Mexico, about the house that would be allocated to him along with several servants to attend to his needs, and also about the handsome salary he would be receiving, two or three times larger than that which had been promised him in New York.

But Rabbi Yaakov categorically refused, explaining that he had already signed an agreement with the congregation in Brooklyn, giving them first option on his services should he decide to enter the rabbinate, and he would not go back on his word. Besides, he did not have the slightest intention of leaving Jerusalem.

A full six months after his arrival in the United States, Rabbi Yaakov returned to Jerusalem, to his family and his colleagues. He was welcomed with the honor of kings. Everyone was delighted with the results of his mission, which had rescued several institutions from their financial difficulties.

When the rabbinical leaders of Jerusalem saw how successful Rabbi Yaakov had been in collecting funds in New York, they prevailed upon him to travel to Egypt on a similar assignment. In Egypt, too, his mission was crowned with success, and there, too, he was offered a position—that of *dayan* on the *Beit Din*. This office carried an excellent salary, since

the Jewish community in Egypt in those days was among the most affluent in the world.

After his return to Jerusalem, he also received a letter of seven pages from the head of the Jewish community in Argentina, urgently requesting him to accept a position as rav, and offering very favorable conditions. Needless to add, Rabbi Yaakov did not consider any of these propositions, for he remained firm to his commitment to the Syrian community of Brooklyn, that it would be the first congregation he would lead, should he decide at any time to officiate as rabbi.

Paving the Way

In the twelve months that followed his return from New York, no less than ten letters were dispatched to Rabbi Yaakov by the leaders of the Syrian community of Brooklyn, urging him, with all the eloquence at their command, to return to the community as its chief rabbi. They informed him of their deep affection for him, and pointed out that they found separation from him very difficult.

The rabbis of Jerusalem of that time, with whom he consulted on this topic, recommended that he accede to their request. In doing so, they pointed out, not only would he be widening his horizons—for he had already achieved so much that there was little further scope for accomplishment in Jerusalem—but would also gain valuable experience in the field of the communal rabbinate. His revered father-in-law, the Gaon and Kabbalist Rabbi Shalom Hadaya, also advised him to accept the post, in order to bring merit to the community which he would be serving.

Rabbi Yaakov saw the hand of Providence in his life, and without further ado, replied to his correspondents that he would officiate as their rabbi for the suggested period. We now know that the proposed year stretched out to a period of sixty-two consecutive years as leader of the Syrian community in New York!

When he wrote to the leaders of the Brooklyn community informing them of his decision, Rabbi Yaakov attached the draft of a proclamation declaring the community's acceptance of his rabbinical authority. The community leaders were to sign it, as was the custom in all *kebillot* of integrity. The document was couched in exceptionally humble language, omitting all titles of honor. From here we can see signs of Rabbi Yaakov's special approach to leadership, one which became more and more apparent throughout the years of his service.

The text of the proclamation follows:

"We, the managers and officials of the community of Syrian Jews in the city of glory, New York, whose signatures appear below, hereby declare and confirm in the name of our association, "Magen David," and its auxiliary bodies, that it is the desire of us all to receive Rabbi Yaakov S. Kassin of Jerusalem into our holy camp, as the one authorized to manage, control and direct all the affairs of the community, both material and spiritual. He is empowered to enact decrees, initiate improvements, and exercise his leadership in any way which he considers to be for the public benefit (in consultation with the rabbis or with the council of the congregation). We willingly accept all this upon ourselves without any opposition. In true and just confirmation of the above, we affix our signatures

hereto in the month of Adar, 5693, and all our words remain firm . . . ."

When the elders of the community received this document, they immediately signed it and returned it to Rabbi Yaakov. Attached was a special letter of the rabbis, bestowing their blessings and confirming his appointment by the lay leadership. The rabbis endorsed wholeheartedly the conferring of the power on Rabbi Yaakov to direct all the affairs of the community.

Thus it was that in the middle of Tammuz in the year 5693, Rabbi Kassin and his family boarded a ship for the three week voyage to America.

Syrian Dispersion

The Jews of Aleppo began to emigrate to the United States of America around the year 5663 (1903). The migration started with a sprinkling of families who settled in Lower New York. Gradually, the number of families increased, and the nucleus of the large Syrian-Jewish community of future years was formed.

By around 5671 (1911-12), New York was home to dozens of these families, united under the name Kehillat Shaare Sedek. They built a synagogue for themselves and Talmud Torah for their children, but did not yet have a rabbi.

From the beginning of their settlement, these Jews were determined to preserve the religious and traditional character of their community. They were concerned about the compulsory secular education that occupied so much of their children's time, and ordered their sons to attend a Talmud Torah

from three in the afternoon until six at night. On the Sabbath and Sundays, they would devote more time to the study of Torah. The teachers were ordinary members of the community, who were occupied most of the day in business or trade, but managed to allocate a certain amount of time weekly for this worthy endeavor.

The high priority which the *kehillah* (known for some time as "Magen David, and later called "Shaare Zion") gave to religious education, no matter what the sacrifice involved, and even without the guidance of a rabbi, is indicative of the sublime values of its founders and members.

Most of New York's Jews at that time struggled to make a living and support their families. Many eked out a precarious existence as itinerant peddlers, who traveled from place to place hawking their wares. This work required great stamina in return for small earnings. The result was that most of the community's members lived in poverty.

A change for the better occurred in 5670 (1910), with the arrival of the prominent benefactor, Rabbi Yitzhak Shalom, zt'l. Like a messenger from God, he helped and supported thousands of immigrants from Aleppo while they were trying to establish themselves during their first few years in the New World.

Rabbi Yitzhak was also the founder and organizer of the "Shaare Zion" congregation. He laid the foundations for a flourishing communal life, and concerned himself to find rabbis and scholars to lead and inspire the new *kehillah.* It was largely due to his initiative that Rabbi Yaakov Kassin was brought to America. Thanks to all these efforts, "Shaare Zion" is today one of the best and most efficiently organized *kehillot* in the world.

As the fledgling community expanded, the need for a board of directors became apparent. Such a governing body was appointed, and became known as the "Board of the Sefardic Community." Their first official act was the founding of the "Magen David" congregation in Bensonhurst, the first large *kehillah* in the locality. With the establishment of a sound infrastructure for the community and its associated bodies, the urgent need was felt for a rabbi who would lead the *kehillah* with a firm hand. He would rule on all doubts and matters brought before him, direct the spiritual life of the community and inspire its members.

To be sure, there were a few local rabbis who were involved in communal affairs, and known for their wisdom and good deeds. However, none of them could fill the very demanding role of chief rabbi to the community. This situation changed with the arrival of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, who won the hearts of the community, its leaders and its rabbis. They regarded Rabbi Yaakov, whom they knew to possess the versatility and all-round wisdom necessary for the task, as having been sent by Providence to their aid. For the sixty-two years of his leadership, his vision and guidance never disappointed them.

Pangs of Absorption

During the early part of Menahem Av 5692 (1932), Rabbi Yaakov Kassin and his family arrived in New York. The Jewish community of the city had made extensive preparations to welcome the distinguished newcomer. As it happens, however, the ship dropped anchor in New York a day earlier

than anticipated. Nobody knew about this apart from two individuals in the *kehillah*, who learnt of the early arrival from the shipping company. These two were the only ones on hand to welcome the rabbi and to assist him with his belongings and with the immigration formalities.

The Kassin family had been exhausted by the long and arduous sea journey. The tossing of the ship and the rough sea winds had been difficult for them to bear. Rabbi Yaakov's father-in-law, the renowned Gaon and Kabbalist, Rabbi Shalom Hadaya, knew how difficult it was for his son-in-law to leave his native Jerusalem. Rabbi Hadaya therefore hastened to dispatch a letter to the benefactor Rabbi Yitzhak Shalom, informing him that the community's new rav and his family were on their way, and urging him to help them with all the resources at his disposal. This is what he wrote:

> "May the abundant peace and blessings of the Exalted One devolve upon the wholehearted *tzaddik*, honored communal leader of renown and glorious distinction, His Excellency Yitzhak Shalom. 'May God bless you from Zion, and may you gaze upon the goodness of Jerusalem.' My exalted friend of pure intellect, conceived in holiness—I bring greetings to you and your beloved ones:
>
> "It is my wish to alert the holy *tzaddik* to the fact that I have sent my beloved family to him: my dear and most charming daughter, Rabbanit Mazal Tov, with her delightful children, may God guard them forever, in the company of my son-in-law, the light of my eyes and the desire of my heart, a master of the vast sea of the Torah which includes all subjects, both material and spiritual, and which brings all authentic wisdom into its orbit.
>
> "He is illustrious in the eyes of his friends and colleagues,

accomplished and skilled in all the divisions of spiritual wisdom. All the sages have glorified and confirmed his excellent character and his straightforward conduct. He is good and does good to all. Fortunate are you, and fortunate is the community upon whom God has bestowed this precious pearl, who is beyond compare in all the land.

"But a wise man will appreciate that their transition towards a happy life in your holy domain is as traumatic for them as the separation of the soul from the body. I therefore request, after begging the pardon of His Excellency, that he stand at the right hand of the eminent Rabbi and Gaon, Yaakov S. Kassin, my son-in-law and the light of my eyes. I beseech you to extend your help to him at all levels, to satisfy all his needs and to ensure that he be blessed with peace and tranquility under the wings of Divine Providence. As a reward for your help, may merit descend upon you and those like you. Happy are the mothers that bore you! May many more like you rise up in the land! May you enjoy many successes in the midst of wealth, honor and good health.

"Time does not permit me to elaborate further because today is the eve of the Sabbath. I will conclude with best wishes for a peaceful Sabbath, and I bless you from the depth of my heart with the blessings of peace, prosperity and life . . . ."

The above has been copied from the actual handwritten letter which Rabbi Shalom Hadaya dispatched to the president of the Board.

When Rabbi Yaakov and his family eventually reached New York, they were received with great rejoicing. Thanks to the support and encouragement of both the heads of the

community and its members, the new arrivals were able to settle quickly into their new home. As the Kassin family had not yet mastered English, they were forced to remain at home for days on end, and would have been unable to make even the most routine arrangements, were it not for the help of their new friends in the city.

Blessings of the Land

As the news spread that Rabbi Yaakov had taken up his position as spiritual head of the "Magen David" community, the Board of the *kehillah* was inundated with letters of congratulation. Their writers all spoke of the great merit of the community to have found such a precious gem as Rabbi Kassin.

Among these letters, we find one from Rabbi Yaakov's associates at Yeshivat Gan HaLevanon in Jerusalem. It was written by Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Hay Ouziel, later to become Chief Sefardi Rabbi of the Land of Israel. Another letter was from Rabbi Meir Vaknin, zt'l, the rabbi of Tiberias.

The dates appearing on all these letters range from the month of Rabbi Yaakov's arrival, Menachem Av 5693, up to Tishrei 5694.

Rabbi Ouziel wrote in his letter to the officers of the community:

> "I have noted with great joy that your worthy community has chosen as its head and captain, my dear friend the Gaon, our master and teacher, Rabbi Yaakov S. Kassin. I rejoice with you over the fact that you are fulfilling the

Biblical imperative: 'That the congregation of the Lord should not be like a sheep without a shepherd.'

"And of course my joy is redoubled as a result of your excellent choice, for my friend, Rabbi Yaakov, is a man upon whom God's spirit rests. He is full of wisdom and discernment, and I am confident that he will meet his task, to draw your community nearer to the Torah and its traditions. He will prove to be the ideal instrument for passing on the chain of tradition to the next generation. Through love and affection, he will bring them near to Judaism and our spiritual and national treasures. I warmly extend the traditional blessing to your honored rabbi: in his days and in our days, may Judah and Israel be delivered in order to dwell in security . . . ."

The letter of the Gaon, Rabbi Meir Vaknin, reveals two points: his admiration of Rabbi Yaakov, and his concern for the New York community's religious commitment. Rabbi Vaknin knew the community well. Around the year 5678 (1917-18) he had paid an extended visit to New York, during which time he had helped to establish the nucleus of the *kehillah* and to direct it along the proper path. He had even been offered the post of chief rabbi, but had declined in order to return to his position as rav in the city of Tiberias. His letter reads:

"To my dear and eminent friends, men of special virtue and exalted lineage, heads of the Jewish people, members of the Board of the Sefardim in the city of glory, New York—my honored masters, I bring greetings:

"It is important to remember that your status as leaders of the community was not bestowed upon you through your diligence and industry, but rather on account of the Will of the One who chooses Zion and Jerusalem, Who

BEN ZION MEIR HAY OUZIEL

RISHON LEZION, CHIEF RABBI OF THE HOLY LAND

Phon. 5040

20.1.42.

CERTIFICATE

To Whom It may Concern

In honor of my friend, the great and learned **RABBI DOCTOR JACOB S. KASSIN,** I the undersigned issue this CERTIFICATE OF HONOR , in glorious and everlasting memory, in appreciation of his vast and comprehensive knowledge of the Jewish Law in all its branches, and in the Science of Kabbalah (Mysterious) Theology, all in accordance with and pursuant to the methods adopted by our holy Rabbis, of old and of late, the Authorities on Laws and Occultism. The Said Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin also distinguished himself by his valuable works - : "The lig ht of the Moon", on Kabbalah, "The fruit of the Tree of the Garden", already published, and his book "The Foundation of Belief", which is now in manuscript form and about to be published; as well as by his many lectures, full of sublime thought and comprehensive knowledge, held during the time he was here with us in the holy city of Jerusalem.

In witness whereof I respectfully set my hand and seal in the month and the year first above written.

Certificate of Honor presented to R. Yaakov Kassin, written by R. Ben Zion Ouziel, chief rabbi of Israel.



February 2, 1942

№ Jerusalem, le בעזהי"ת ירושלם ת"ו. יום ט"ו לחדש טבת שנת תרפ"ב הטב"ח לפ"ק

To Whom It May Concern:

This is to certify that our Holy College and Yeshivah, hereby confers upon the great and learned Rabbi-Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin, the Honorary Degree of Doctor and Magistrate in the science of Kabbalah and the Philosophic culture connected therewith and entailed therein, all in accordance with and pursuant to the methods adopted by our great and illustrious Rabbis-known as Ari and Rashash, may their virtues forever prevail with us.

THIS HONORARY DEGREE is bestowed and conferred upon Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin in token of his mommental work contained in his book entitled "THE FOUNDATION OF BELIEF" which book is now in manuscript form and about to be published for the world at large, and also in appreciation for the many lectures he held at the KABBALISTIC COLLEGES AND YESHIBOT during the many years that he was here with us in the Holy City of Jerusalem, Palestine, until the y year 5692, which year is commonly known as TARZAV.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF we have respectfully set our hands and seal in the month and the year first above written.

Dean of Yeshivath

GAN HALEVANON

Address: Rabbi Jacob S. KASSIN Pour Gan Halevanon B.P. ..... Jerusalem

Honorary Degree bestowed upon R. Yaakov Kassin by Yeshivat Gan HaLevanon. Presented to him before his move to America.

chose you and appointed you as leaders over Israel.

"Therefore the obligation devolves upon you to supervise and strengthen all matters that come within the purview of religion. This especially applies to the intensification of Torah study in the synagogue, according to a regular program from day to day: the *Hok l'Yisrael* in the morning, and books of *mussar* and *halachah* in the evening. The entire day of the Sabbath should be spent in Torah study and in the service of the Creator.

"I do, however, realize that your Excellencies are very busy with your own affairs, and simply do not have enough time to give the holy matters mentioned above the attention they deserve. You also know, my friends, the very deep affection I have for you all, and that all the waters in the world would not be able to quench the fire of our love, God forbid.

"I have now heard of the arrival in your camp of my close friend, the great rabbi of wondrous accomplishments in every branch of the Torah, descendant of holy stock, sage of glorious reputation, Rabbi Yaakov S. Kassin—may his name live forever! I am well acquainted with his greatness in Torah and his fear of heaven, and I know how pleasant is every word that he utters. It is therefore most fitting that you have transferred into his hands the authority for all matters pertaining to the Torah, and that you will act according to his directives. It is clear to me that you will derive much satisfaction from his presence, and that he will find favor in the eyes of both God and man.

"I will conclude with my warmest blessings to you and all the members of your holy congregation. May you be

blessed from Heaven with prosperity in abundance, and may the Holy One, blessed be He, grant you, together with all the House of Israel, a good and sweet year, a year of health, honor and success . . . ."

From this letter, we learn of the great responsibility which rested on the shoulders of the community rav, for his manifold obligations extended to every area of its spiritual life.

Expansion of the Kehillah

In 5693 (1933) Rabbi Yaakov Kassin took up his position. At that time, the community of Aleppo Jews in New York comprised about 600 families. The majority were united under the umbrella organization "Magen David" in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. The Aleppo community also had other synagogues, and there was, in addition, the "Ahi Ezer" synagogue of Jews from Damascus. Besides the main Talmud Torah called "Magen David," in which about four hundred boys studied, there were also other local Talmudei Torah.

Also affiliated to the local community was the "Rodfeh Sedek" Burial Society, and the "Maoz L'Evyon" institution which assisted the poor and the indigent throughout the year, and especially before the Festivals. This latter organization was especially busy, for during those years the community was far from affluent, and the entire country, moreover, was in a state of economic depression.

The community was fortunate to have among its members scholars and teachers of repute, and men of special virtue known for their good deeds, who would frequent the synagogues and study halls morning and evening.

From the moment that Rabbi Yaakov arrived, he began to organize and strengthen the community's institutions. He participated in meetings of the synagogue heads and of the Talmud Torah "Magen David." He suggested—and subsequently implemented—methods of improving the education of the youth. This was to receive the highest priority among the activities of the *kehillah*, for only the youth could ensure its future.

He worked nonstop in this holy activity, until he had virtually no spare time for himself or his family. During those first years, he would remain in the Talmud Torah to learn with and to examine the boys until late at night. In addition, he would perform *brit milah* on all the infants born in those days, although eventually, due to the rapid growth of his communal responsibilities, he was forced to pass on this function to another.

The financial situation of the Talmud Torah and the synagogue was very precarious in those days, and for many years Rabbi Kassin would devote much of his time to the arduous task of fund raising.

Over and above these undertakings, he would officiate at weddings, recite *sheva berachot*, and be present at every *brit milah*, *pidyon haben* and *bar mitzvah*. In times of sorrow, he would recite eulogies, offer solace to the mourners, conduct study sessions on behalf of the deceased, and similar duties. During his many years of service to his community, he helped to solve problems in numerous households and restored peace between husbands and wives and between men and their fellows. Wherever he was and on every occasion he would seek solutions to difficulties, and his enterprise extended to all the needs of the community, both spiritual and material.

In addition to all this, he would teach Talmud and its commentaries to young men, and to a few select individuals he would impart a little of his knowledge of the Kabbalah. He even trained a few young men in the laws and practice of *shehitah* and *bedikah.*

SITTING IN JUDGMENT

During this period Rabbi Yaakov founded a *Beit Din* to deal with monetary disputes and matters of marital status. He officiated as *Rosh Av Beit Din*, and with him on the bench sat Rabbi Matlub Abadi zt'l and Rabbi Eliyahu Hutzani zt'l. His son Rabbi Shaul was secretary to the *Beit Din.*

The other members of the *Beit Din* were accomplished *dayanim* in their own right. The most prominent among them was Rabbi Matlov Abadi, who possessed an exceptionally sharp mind and was a very profound and clear thinker. He was also a master of the Hebrew language in its purest form. He had been the founder of the Talmud Torah "Magen David" in Aleppo, and had served as a teacher there. Even after his emigration to the United States, he had served as a teacher at the Talmud Torah "Magen David." He was highly sought after by the members of the New York *kehillah,* who recognized his special virtues and talents.

Towards the end of his life, Rabbi Abadi prepared his book *Magen Be'adi* (New York 5730) for publication. This work included reponsa and novella on the Talmud, the Rambam and the *Shulhan Aruch.* However, Rabbi Abadi passed away on 23 Tevet 5730, before he could see the book through publication. Included in the book is an aprobation written five years earlier by Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, in which he drew attention to

Rabbi Abadi's achievements in the sphere of education. This is what he wrote:

"For the past twenty years he has carried the responsibility for teaching the higher grades in the Talmud Torah "Magen David." It was pious men like him that our Sages had in mind when they wrote that the verse 'Those that make the many righteous are like stars' refers to educators of children (*Bava Batra* 8). He enlightens the eyes of his pupils faithfully, with precision, and directs their hearts in the proper way—just as Rabbi Shmuel bar Shilat whom the Talmud praises for his zealousness in directing his students in the light of *halachah* . . . .

"It was also Rabbi Abadi who was responsible for establishing and consolidating the structure of this Talmud Torah, and for drawing up the curriculum according to the natural method of teaching Hebrew in Hebrew. This method is practiced until today in the Talmud Torah as well as in the Yeshivah "Magen David," which was founded some years later with his help. Despite all the obstacles and the opposition that were encountered at the time, he stood his ground and succeeded in implementing an effective study program in which everything is taught in the Holy Tongue. . . . May he enter and depart out in peace, and be victorious always in his wars on behalf of the Torah!

"It is my earnest wish, my prayer and my supplication that he will continue into the distant future, until a ripe old age, to nurture his pupils with the fruit of his Torah and his wisdom. May he merit to make the Torah great and glorious, and enjoy many years of bodily vigor, excellent health, prosperity and success in both the spiritual and

material domains. May he live to rejoice in his children and their children until the third and fourth generations, and may the blessing of King David be fulfilled in him: 'Praiseworthy are those who fear God, who walk in their paths . . . your wife shall be a fruitful vine . . . your children shall grow like olive saplings . . . may God bless you from Zion, and may you gaze upon the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life.' And may he witness the return of God to His dwelling place in Zion and Jerusalem. May this be His will . . . ."

Magen Be'adi also contains a number of *halachic* rulings by Rabbi Abadi, which he transcribed with the consent of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin. Thus, on page 226 appears his judgement, which was ratified by Rabbi Yaakov, regarding the case of a female convert married to a Kohen. There is also a ruling regarding a thirty-day period of mourning for a deceased parent which is terminated with the onset of a Festival. Here the writer notes "Regarding the custom of the Syrian-Jewish Community of New York, it was already decided many years ago at a meeting of the *Beit Din* convened by the rav of the holy congregation "Magen David," our master and teacher Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, to practice and to uphold the ruling of the Gaon Pahad Yitzhak . . ."

In the United States, Rabbi Yaakov continued to produce an ongoing stream of *halachic* rulings. These dealt with all kinds of complex situations, in all areas of daily life. Questions arrived not only from cities across the United States, but also from distant countries and even from Eretz Yisrael. Many were addressed to him by prominent members of the rabbinate. Rabbi Yaakov attended promptly to all these enquiries in his usual thorough, expert and compassionate manner, despite the

בית דין הצדק דק"ק מגן דוד (יהודי סוריא) ברוקלין, נ. י.

Beth Din Hassedek of Magen David Cong.

2025 - 67TH STREET

BROOKLYN, N. Y.

ב"ה עש"ק חשון, תשוב"ה לפ"ק. 10 / 24 / 47

פ ס ק ד י ן

נדרשתי לאשר שאלני המשנ"ח סי' איזאכו סילוירא נ"י, אודות אלמנת המנוח אחיו כה"ר סי' רפאל סילוירא נ"ע, שהיתה שומרת יבם ומתה. הכתובה בחזקת מי? ליורשי הבעל או ליורשיה?

עניתי לו שזה דין ש"ע אה"ע (סי' ק"ס ס"ז), שפסק יורשיה יורשין נכסי מלוג שלה, וחצי נכסי צאן ברזל, ויורשי הבעל יורשים עיקר כתובתה, ותוספת וחצי נכסי צאן ברזל, ע"ש. והוא דין פשוט ממשנה ערוכה. אח"כ ראיתי מכתב ע"ז מאב"ד דעי"ת צובא יע"א, הרה"ג מוהר"מ מזרחי נ"י. שכתב להביא מדברי הרב שבות יעקב ח"א סי' קכ"ד: "שנראה להדיא דכל דבריהא לן מילתא שהיבמה לא היתה ראויה להתיבם בחייה אין ליבם שום זכות בנכסים". וסיים בנדון דידן ג"כ שנפלה לפני שני יבמים, האחד זקן מופלג תושב מצרים, והשנים תושב ניו־יורק. ובריא לן שלא היה לה שום אפשרות בחייה להתיבם מאחד משני היבמים. א"כ קם לדינא שהכתובה ליורשיה בלי שום פקפוק, וכאשר פסק השבו"י. ולית דין צריך בשש וכו'. ובכן לפו"ד על היבמים לתת את כתובת השומרת יבם הנ"ל ליורשיה, וזה פשוט לדעתי. עכתד"ק.

ואני לפענ"ד לא צדק בפסקו זה משני יסודות: ראשית, שכל כתו שהביא מהשבו"י שהועתק בבאר היטב אות י', כנראה דלא עיין במקורן של דברים. שהרי נדון הרב שבות יעקב, משום שקבלו עליהם היבמים בחרם ובשבועה ליתן לה חליצה, ונתנו לה שטר חליצה מן האחים כיעו"ש. ולכן נחשבת כלא היתה ראויה להתיבם, ואם מתה אין היבם יורשה, וזה מדבר לעדת האשכנזים שקבלו עליהם חרם דר"ג שלא לישא שתי נשים. ולדידהו יש מהסוברים שחל גם במקום יבום וצריך לחלוץ, אבל אנן אין לנו חר"ג. ונוסף כי לא החרים ביבמה, עיין באה"ע סי' א'. וא"כ מה ענין שבו"י לנ"ד? ושנית אפי' להרב שבו"י, בנדון דידה שיש חרם ושבועה חשיב לא ראויה להתיבם, כמו שמבואר בדבריו שהביא מהריק"ו, הובא בבאה"ט אות ו' בשם כנה"ג, דנדון מהריק"ו איירי דיש רעותא, דלא היתה ראויה ליבום מחמת הדין, אבל כל שעומדת בין ליבום בין לחליצה אע"ג דמצות חליצה קודמת, הנכסים בחזקת יבם, ע"כ. וכן מבואר בדברי רמ"א שם בסעיף ז' ע"ש.

ולפי זה פשוט וברור לדעתי שאין זה כנ"ד שהיבמים ראויים גם ליבום, ובפרט היבם הזקן במצרים שאין לו אשה, והמקום קרוב בנסיעה קלה. וטענת זקן אינה טענה, כי אם אמרו נותנים לו עצה ההוגנת לו אין זה מניעת דין, וכאן זקן וזקנה בצד אחד. וא"כ איך אפשר עפ"י השערות השכל לומר בריא לנו שלא היה האפשרות בחייה להתיבם לשום אחד מהשנים? ומאין הכח להוציא בזה ממון מחזקתו בעד כתובתה?

ועיין בשבו"י שם שכתב להדיא בשם שארית יוסף סי' נ' ת"ל, אין לאוציא ממון מה שהוא ביד יורשי האשה. וגם לא להוציא מהיבם מה שהוא בידו. ומה שהוא ביד שליש יחלקו. עוד הביא בשבו"י ח"ג סי' קכ"ד, בענין אשה שמתה ולא נשבעה על כתובתה בשם הרב דרכי נעם סי' כ"ה, דאין להוציא ממון מיד המוחזק. והיכא דאין כאן מוחזק, ראוי והגון לעשות כעין פשרה ויחלקו יורשי האשה עם יורשי הבעל, ע"כ.

היוצא מהאמור שהדין פשוט וברור בפסק הש"ע, ואין ע"ז שום חולק, כי כתובה בחזקת יורשי הבעל שהם מוחזקים בנכסי המנוח אחיהם. ורק אם יש נכסים ביד שליש נכון לעשות כמ"ש השאירית יוסף ודרכי נעם. זהו לדעתי הנכון והישר.

וצו"י י"מ וימ"ן, ולאות אמו"ץ בעה"ח, פה ברוקלין, ניורק, באה"ב

יעקב קיש

הרב הראשי דראב"ד דק"ק „מגן דוד"

Halachic responsum written by R. Kassin in 1947 and issued by the *Beit Din* of Congregation Magen David.

many pressures of his office and his many other activities for the public welfare.

"I Am in the West but My Heart is in the East"

Time flew by, and Rabbi Yaakov soon came to the realization that, while the intended period of his stay in the United States had already expired, his holy work was still far from complete. Thus, year after year, with increasing recognition of the community's dependence upon him, he extended his stay yet again. Eventually, he resigned himself to the fact that he would remain in New York for the rest of his life, for he had become closely attached to the community. From then on, it never again entered his mind to desert his flock. Nevertheless, his deep love for the Land of Israel and for Jerusalem, the city of his birth, stayed with him until the end of his days. Indeed, as time passed, he became more aware of the degree of holiness which can only be attained in Eretz Yisrael. As his longing increased, together with his realization that he would never return to the Land, he resolved to do all in his power to support Israel and its Torah scholars, whether through charity or through helping its sages and rabbis with whatever they needed.

Although Rabbi Yaakov was physically distant from his former companions and students in the Land of Israel, his heart and soul remained finely attuned to them. A constant stream of letters flowed back and forth across the Atlantic. Thus, Rabbi Yaakov was able to keep his finger on the pulse of the Torah in the Holy Land and its students.

In the course of our research for this book, two of these letters were uncovered. These were sent by Rabbi Yaakov sent to his friend, Rabbi David Laniado z'l, who had requested his expertise in the field of Kabbalah. In his first letter dated 18 Nissan 5695 (1936), R. Yaakov wrote:

> "To his Excellency, my friend, the rabbi par excellence, Rabbi David Laniado: It is my custom to refrain from writing letters on the intermediate days of the Festivals; but since your letter included a question regarding the secrets of the Torah, it would be a matter of loss for you were I not to answer it today, for afterwards I will be preoccupied with the burdens of my office. I am more than delighted that you have renewed the study circle in Kabbalah with my good friend, Rabbi Ephraim Kohen, may his light shine . . . ."

At the end of his letter, after dealing with his writer's query, Rabbi Yaakov wrote:

> "I am most distressed regarding your situation. May the Almighty, blessed be He, open for you the gates of sustenance. Our community has tried most energetically to do what it can, and I have already sent to my teacher and father-in-law, Rabbi Hadaya, the sum of $305 which we have raised as a contribution to the Rabbis' Fund, the Talmud Torah and the poor. To raise more than this, there is no chance. May the Almighty, blessed be He, in his mercy, improve the condition of the scholars and those who study Torah for His honor and according to His will. I conclude with the fervent prayer that his Excellency and all the rabbis and all our friends will be blessed with an abundant peace."

In the second letter, dated 2 Sivan 5697, we see evidence

of Rabbi Yaakov's tireless and unceasing preoccupation with the needs of the community—to such an extent that it was difficult for him to write as long a letter as he wished. Instead, he replied to his correspondent briefly, so as not to let the opportunity pass. Thus he wrote:

> "Your letter of 15 Kislev arrived in good time, but unfortunately I did not have a spare moment to reply to you. With regard to your question . . . I thought today that I must answer it even if only briefly, for were I to wait for a time when I could write more fully, I would be allowing the opportunity to go sour . . . ."

He concludes the letter by noting:

> "I have derived much pleasure and satisfaction from hearing that new students are tackling the study of Kabbalah so diligently. I will call upon the Lord, that He bestow upon me the merit to return to the Holy Land forever, in the service of God, blessed be He. And may He spread the wings of His peace over all the rabbis and our acquaintances . . . ."

These letters bear witness to the deep longing of Rabbi Yaakov to study Torah once again on the holy soil of Eretz Yisrael, and of his desire to dwell in honor within the walls of Jerusalem, immersing himself in the study of Torah and Kabbalah, as he did in his youth.

The Souls He Influenced

Under the leadership of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, the "Magen David" *kehillah* flourished beyond all recognition. His exemplary character, compassion and deep understanding guaranteed

success in all his dealings with the community. The charm, dignity and refinement which radiated from him, together with his humility and his pleasant, gentle disposition, attracted many people to him. Thus he was able to draw them near to Torah, *mitzvot* and good deeds.

Rabbi Yaakov brought many who had strayed from Torah observance back to the authentic path of Judaism. He used all the means at his command to win over the hearts of those who were estranged from the Torah, and to draw them near once again to their heritage. Whether it was his inspiring sermons, his strong personal example or through private discussions, he facilitated the return of many to the bonds of tradition and faith.

Rabbi Yaakov guided his flock through exceptionally difficult times. At a time when many large communities in the United States were disappearing from the scene, the "Magen David" *kehillah* expanded in many directions. This was the result of the foresight, assertiveness, wisdom, patience and gentleness of its spiritual leader—who always applied the appropriate trait according to the needs of the moment.

Once, Rabbi Yaakov was asked how he viewed the conduct of several young rabbis in the *kehillah,* who were apparently devising their own stringent *halachic* interpretations, which they had not heard from the chief rabbi of the community, and which did not, evidently, carry his sanction.

Rabbi Yaakov answered that when he first came to officiate as local Rav, he had found a number of very severe problems urgently awaiting his attention. He realized that he would have to wage war on behalf of the very principles of Judaism, against assimilation, against Sabbath desecration, for the observance of family purity and the laws of kashrut. Other

pressing priorities were the establishment and consolidation of the Talmud Torah and the building of yeshivot.

Even at the present time, he explained, he was fully preoccupied with strengthening the foundations which he had laid with regard to basic requirements and concepts. He had little time to consider the stringencies and fine points of Jewish Law. Those of his colleagues who were exerting themselves to raise the spiritual standards of the community, and were encouraging stricter levels of observance, were acting in a praiseworthy manner. The observance of many laws and customs had fallen into neglect due to the weakness of the generation. Those rabbis who tried to rectify this situation were bringing merit upon themselves, concluded Rabbi Yaakov in his humility.

Important Enactments

Rabbi Yaakov's most significant activity was his persistent attempt to create a unity between the various segments of the community—a unity which ensured the success and fame of the community throughout the years. The pursuit of peace and solidarity was a trait Rabbi Yaakov had inherited from his father and ancestors; it was perhaps the most noteworthy of all his contributions to his flock.

The goal of unity was the underlying motivation for what was, perhaps, the wisest single action of his career. Immediately after assuming his position, Rabbi Yaakov issued an edict that no converts would be accepted into the Syrian community under any circumstances. Members, men or women, who married converts, would no longer have any rights in the

BENSONHURST 6-6122

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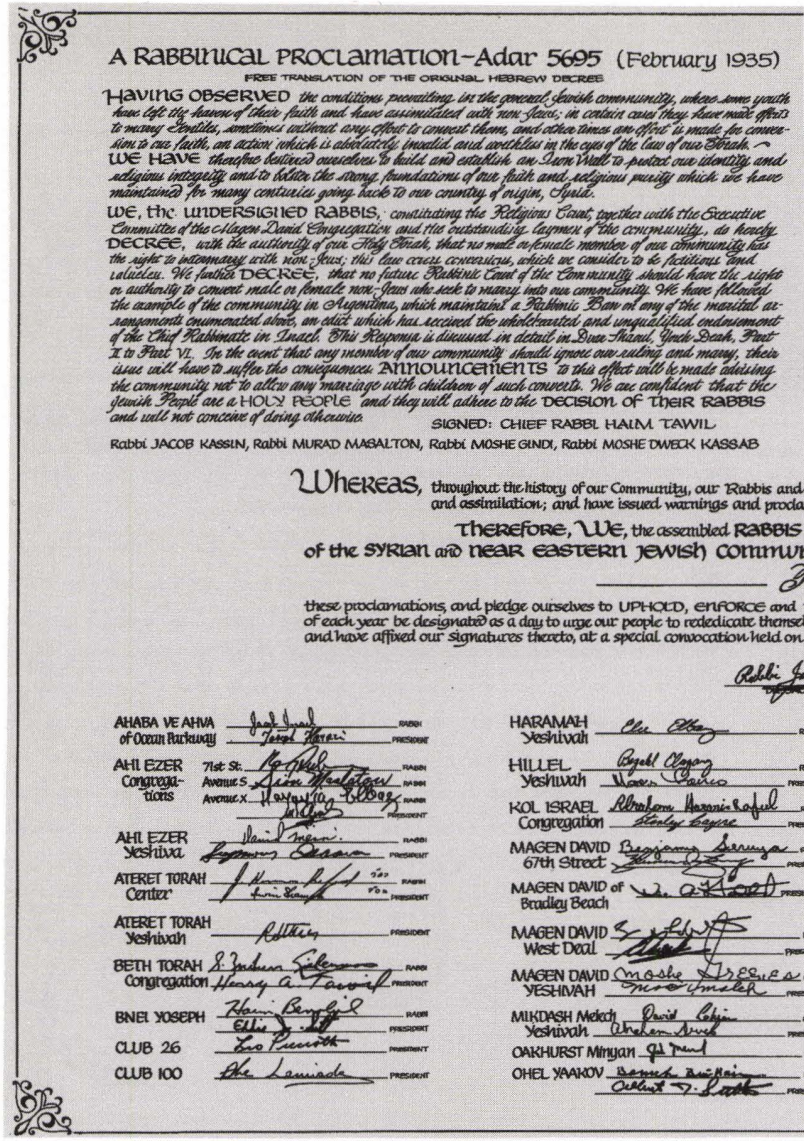
מגן דוד

Magen David Congregation

2025 - 67th STREET

BROOKLYN, N. Y.

1935



A RABBINICAL PROCLAMATION–Adar 5695 (February 1935)

FREE TRANSLATION OF THE ORIGINAL HEBREW DECREE

HAVING OBSERVED the conditions prevailing in the general Jewish community, where some youth have left the heaven of their faith and have assimilated with non-Jews; in certain cases they have made efforts to marry Gentiles, sometimes without any effort to convert them, and other times an effort is made for conversion to our faith, an action which is absolutely invalid and worthless in the eyes of the law of our Torah.

WE HAVE therefore believed ourselves to build and establish an Iron Wall to protect our identity and religious integrity and to bolster the strong foundations of our faith and religious purity which we have maintained for many centuries going back to our country of origin, Syria.

WE, the UNDERSIGNED RABBIS, constituting the Religious Court, together with the Executive Committee of the Magen David Congregation and the outstanding laymen of the community, do hereby DECREE, with the authority of our Holy Torah, that no male or female member of our community has the right to intermarry with non-Jews; this law covers conversion, which we consider to be fictitious and valueless. We further DECREE, that no future Rabbinic Court of the Community should have the right or authority to convert male or female non-Jews who seek to marry into our community. We have followed the example of the community in Argentina, which maintains a Rabbinic Ban on any of the mixed arrangements enumerated above, an edict which has received the wholehearted and unqualified endorsement of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel. This Responsa is discussed in detail in Dine Shaarei Yerushalayim, Part I to Part VI. In the event that any member of our community should ignore our ruling and marry, their issue will have to suffer the consequences. ANNOUNCEMENTS to this effect will be made advising the community not to allow any marriage with children of such converts. We are confident that the Jewish People are a HOLY PEOPLE and they will adhere to the DECISION OF THEIR RABBIS and will not conceive of doing otherwise.

SIGNED: CHIEF RABBI HAIM TAWIL

Rabbi JACOB KASSIN, Rabbi MURAD MASALTON, Rabbi MOSHE GINDI, Rabbi MOSHE DWECK KASSAB

WHEREAS, throughout the history of our Community, our Rabbis and
and assimilation; and have issued warnings and procla

THEREFORE, WE, the assembled RABBIS
of the SYRIAN and NEAR EASTERN JEWISH COMMUN

these proclamations, and pledge ourselves to UPHOLD, ENFORCE and
of each year be designated as a day to urge our people to rededicate themse
and have affixed our signatures thereto, at a special convocation held on

AHABA VE AHVA of Ocean Parkway — RABBI, PRESIDENT

AHI EZER Congregations — 71st St.: RABBI; Avenue S: RABBI; Avenue X: RABBI, PRESIDENT

AHI EZER Yeshiva — RABBI, PRESIDENT

ATERET TORAH Center — RABBI, PRESIDENT

ATERET TORAH Yeshivah — PRESIDENT

BETH TORAH Congregation — RABBI, PRESIDENT

BNEI YOSEPH — RABBI, PRESIDENT

CLUB 26 — PRESIDENT

CLUB 100 — PRESIDENT

HARAMAH Yeshivah

HILLEL Yeshivah

KOL ISRAEL Congregation

MAGEN DAVID 67th Street

MAGEN DAVID of Bradley Beach

MAGEN DAVID West Deal

MAGEN DAVID YESHIVAH

MIKDASH Melech Yeshivah

OAKHURST Minyan

OHEL YAAKOV

Reaffirmation of the original 1935 prohibition against accepting converts, written and signed by the leaders of the Syrian communities of New York in June, 1984.

A SUBSEQUENT CLARIFICATION of the Original Proclamation

Adar 5706 (February 1946)

FREE TRANSLATION OF THE ORIGINAL HEBREW DECREE

ON the ninth day of Adar I, in the year 5706 corresponding to the tenth day of February, 1946 the Rabbis of the Community and the Committee of Magen David Congregation once again discussed the question of INTERMARRIAGE AND CONVERSIONS. The following religious Rabbinic Decisions were promulgated and accepted. ——

I. OUR COMMUNITY will never accept any converts, male or female, for marriage

II. THE RABBI will not perform any Religious Ceremonies for such couples – i.e. marriages, circumcisions, Bar Mitzvahs, etc. In fact, the Congregation's premises will be barred to them for use of any religious or social nature.

III. THE MESADRIM of the Congregation will not accord any honors to the convert or one married to a convert, such as offering him an Aliyah to the Sefer Torah. In addition, the aforesaid spouse, male or female, will not be allowed to purchase a seat, permanently or for the Holidays, in our Congregations.

IV. AFTER DEATH of said person, he or she is not to be buried on the Cemetery of our community, known as Rodfe Zedek, regardless of financial considerations.

SEAL of the BETH DIN of MAGEN DAVID CONGREGATION
SIGNED: CHIEF RABBI JACOB S. KASSIN

ways recognized the threat of conversions and the danger of intermarriage
these evils in February 1935, in February 1946 and in May 1972; Now—

ITS of the CONGREGATIONS and ORGANIZATIONS
REATER NEW YORK and NEW JERSEY do now and hereby

these regulations. We further declare that שבת שובה Shabbat Shuvah
iples. IN WITNESS whereof, we have caused this document to be prepared
Sivan 5744 corresponding to the third day of June, 1984.

RABBI

PARK AVENUE Synagogue — RABBI / PRESIDENT

RODFEH SEDEK — PRESIDENT

Sephardic BIKUR HOLIM-MA'OZ LA'EBYON — PRESIDENT

Sephardic COMMUNITY CENTER — PRESIDENT

Sephardic Cong. HAR HALEBANON — RABBI / PRESIDENT

Sephardic Cong. of LONG BRANCH — PRESIDENT

SEPHARDIC HIGH SCHOOL — RABBI / PRESIDENT

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE Cong. — RABBI / PRESIDENT

SEPHARDIC TORAH CENTER — RABBI / PRESIDENT

SHAARE TORAH YESHIVA — RABBI / PRESIDENT

SHAARE ZION Congregation — RABBI (×4) / PRESIDENT

SHORE Country Club — PRESIDENT

SYNAGOGUE OF DEAL — RABBI / PRESIDENT

SYNAGOGUE of W. Long Branch — RABBI / PRESIDENT

YOUNG SHAARE ZION — RABBI / PRESIDENT

ZVI LASADIK of SOUTH DEAL — RABBI

community, nor privileges in the synagogue. Their children would not be accepted at the community's educational institutions, marriages would not be solemnized for them and they and their families would not be buried in the community's Rodfeh Sedek cemetery.

Rabbi Yaakov's bold initiative served as a strong bulwark against assimilation, which was increasing at an alarming rate across the United States. Not only were conversions discontinued, but even those who had been converted at other places were not accepted. Today, his edict is famous—its benefits are acknowledged, and it is recognized as one of his timely actions which helped promote a perfect and harmonious communal unity.

This decree was first enacted during the month of Adar in 5695 (1935). A revised and even stronger version was promulgated in Sivan of the year 5744 (1984). This is the text of the first enactment, which was written in Rabbi Yaakov Kassin's own handwriting, as copied from the manuscript itself:

> "We have seen to our sorrow that, on account of our many sins, some of the young men of Israel have transgressed the Divine statute that the Holy Covenant must never be uprooted. They have mingled with the nations and have desired the daughters of alien and uncircumcised peoples. Some of our sons marry them as Gentiles, while others have the notion to convert their non-Jewish partners, in the belief that one can purify himself while still grasping the source of the impurity.
>
> "Therefore, for the sake of the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He and His Presence, we stand firm in our determination to erect a holy barrier against the erosion of our sacred values. We, the members of the *Beit*

Din whose signatures appear below, in association with the Board of the "Magen David" Community and its leaders, absolutely forbid, with all the force of the Holy Torah, any man or woman of the House of Israel to marry a Gentile, even after the conversion of the party concerned. This *Beit Din* of the holy community of Syrian Jews residing in North America has no authority whatsoever to convert a Gentile man who desires a Jewish woman, or a non-Jewish woman who incites the passion of a Jewish man. This is in accordance with a strict ruling currently being enforced in a city in Argentina by the local Gaonim, as well as with the rabbinical consensus in the holy city of Jerusalem, as discussed at length in the book of responsa *D'var Shaul.*

"If a man or woman violates the above prohibition, the community shall make proclamation that it is forbidden to marry their children. The people of Israel, who are holy shall surely hearken unto their teachers, and the remnant of Israel shall not tolerate evil.

"All the above has been agreed and decided, in full severity and with all the power at our command, in the month of Adar in the year 5685, by the members of the Community of Syrians here in Brooklyn, New York and all its districts and the whole of North America. Those who hearken to the words of this edict shall dwell securely and in tranquility, without fear, and they shall be blessed with all that is good. Everything is established and confirmed . . . ."

This first enactment was signed by all the rabbis of the community. At the head of the signatures was that of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, who initiated and composed the edict. The

second edict was formulated and confirmed fifty-nine years later, in the year 5744 (1984). It was a lengthy document written in English, and signed by the great personalities of the city. The ban against conversions was a powerful weapon in the fight against assimilation, and enabled the community to stand firm, unaffected by a phenomenon which has decimated many major American Jewish communities.

DOMAIN OF AUTHORITY

The authority of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin extended beyond his immediate surroundings, to touch Syrian Jewry throughout the world. This resulted from his community's prominence as the largest *kehillah* of Syrian Jews, and from his position as its chief rabbi. As such, he was considered by the members of all other Syrian communities as their undisputed leader, and his decisions on *halachic* matters carried weight among God-fearing Jews everywhere.

In this capacity, Rabbi Yaakov was required to keep a firm hand on the religious affairs of communities even in distant parts of the world, to mold them and direct them on the path of holiness and purity. He constantly sought to encourage and inspire them towards higher spiritual standards, both on the personal and communal levels.

Thus we find him issuing a "stern warning" to the Syrian community of Argentina, concerning the adoption of strange children, through procedures in vogue at the time. The letter, dated 13 Kislev 5722 (1962), warned of the tremendous responsibility on the shoulders of those contemplating such an action, and the precautions which needed to be taken before-

hand. This warning gives us some insight into the energetic efforts of Rabbi Yaakov in striving to maintain the purity of the Jewish people and particularly of the Syrian communities throughout the world. This is the text of the warning:

"To my brothers and dear comrades of the holy community of Syrian Jews in the cities of Argentina—blessings and fraternal greetings!

"I have heard with a heart full of apprehension about the predicament of childless couples who want to adopt children and live normal family lives like everybody else. Some of these couples have adopted children offered to them by disreputable sources. Among these infants may be foundlings, babies of dubious parentage, and possible *mamzerim*, God forbid. In this way, a breach may be caused in the genealogy of the holy people of Israel and in the purity of their lives.

"In discussing this state of affairs with various individuals, I have often made the following analogy: Imagine a man who wants to buy an expensive diamond ring. He will be scrupulous in having the diamond examined by experts to make sure that it is pure and genuine. If so, he will be prepared to pay thousands for it. But should he find the slightest flaw in it, even though it might be invisible to the naked eye, but only detected with the aid of the strongest microscope, he would not consider the purchase for even a quarter of the price. To an even greater extent would a prospective buyer shun such an item if it proved to be a fake, and the seller would be brought to justice for attempting to deceive the public. I have also made the comparison of a house with shaky foundations; anyone would flee from the suggestion that he purchase it, even at a fraction of the

market price, owing to the danger to his life.

"If this is true, how very much more so in the case of one planning to adopt a child; whom he will rear all his days, on whom he will spend thousands, and through whom he will be honored in the continuation of his own name. How much more should the purchaser distance himself from corruption, should there be the slightest suspicion of a disqualification or fraud. Moreover, it is obvious that a dealer who is guilty of misrepresentation will be punished by Heaven.

"I am aware, my brothers and friends, that your intentions are honorable, but your actions with regard to the above-mentioned matter are unbecoming, because you are bringing upon yourselves a curse, God forbid, and not a blessing.

"A sacred obligation rests upon you not to consider an adoption until a thorough and honest investigation has been carried out to ascertain the origin and the circumstances of the child, and until it has been confirmed that the infant is fit to enter the congregation of Israel.

"The proper course of action for anyone contemplating adoption is to consult with the rav of the city or the *Beit Din* of your community at every stage of the negotiations; especially before the final decision is made. Only if this is done, will your deed be acceptable and considered a mitzvah, and only then will the words of our Sages apply: "Whoever brings up an orphan in his own home is accounted by Scripture as if he gave birth to him" (Sanhedrin 19). This, indeed, is the authentic way of rearing a child to enter the community of God's chosen people. Such an act will be to one's benefit not only in

this world but also in the next, after a long, happy and peaceful life."

This letter is another shining example of Rabbi Yaakov's fatherly concern and his insistence on maintaining the holiness and purity of the camp of Syrian Jews, in all the lands of the dispersion. His vigilance was instrumental in saving large communities from the threat of destruction.

Exceptional Humility

Rabbi Yaakov was a remarkably humble man, who sought no advantage from his position, and regarded himself as an ordinary member of the community. He was careful to enter the synagogue for the morning prayers at a time when the congregants were already standing, so that they would not have to trouble themselves to rise in his honor.

Also, after every service, he would walk around the synagogue, gathering all the prayer books which the worshippers had left behind. He would sort them and return them to the shelves. He would straighten the remaining prayer books which had been placed there haphazardly in haste, and only after he was satisfied that everything was neat and tidy would he return home. At no time did he feel that such a self-imposed duty was below the dignity of the chief rabbi of the community and the leader of local Jewish life!

Charity in Abundance

Rabbi Yaakov was committed to strengthening Torah life both in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora, and influenced

his community to support Torah institutions and welfare organizations inside and outside the Holy Land. His success in educating the members of his congregation in this important *mitzvah* ranks among his most noteworthy achievements. He would regularly expound on the need to develop a love for the Holy Land and an awareness of the value of the Torah emanating from there. Through this, a profound appreciation of the virtues of supporting the holy yeshivot was implanted in the hearts of men, women and children.

Rabbi Yaakov was always the first to contribute to worthy causes from the Holy Land, at times pledging more than his means allowed. When the Gaon Rabbi Ezra Atia zt'l, came to his community about forty years ago as an emissary, Rabbi Yaakov immediately pressed him for news on the situation of the "Porat Yosef" yeshiva, where he had studied in his youth. When Rabbi Yaakov heard that the yeshiva was still very much alive, in spite of the hardships it underwent during the war, he resolved to assist it with all his power.

He promptly organized a fund raising campaign in his community and announced that he himself would make a regular contribution from his monthly salary. It is hardly necessary to describe the impact of this pronouncement on those present. It was a forceful demonstration of the power of giving.

Similarly, throughout his life he was always ready to donate to a worthy cause. The advancement of Torah study in the Land of Israel was a mission especially close to his heart. To this end, he founded the "Magen Yisrael" fund to help sustain the hundreds of emissaries of yeshivot and charitable institutions who arrived every year in New York. Thousands benefited from this act of kindness.

Rabbi Yaakov's understanding of the importance of yeshivot is apparent in his article *Gemul Ben Hacham,* which was published for the first time in the monthly journal *Kol Sinai* (translated here in Chapter 3). He elaborates on the correct path to take in children's education, and argues convincingly that the continued existence of the Jewish people and the preservation of its spiritual integrity can only be ensured through the holy yeshivot. This is what he writes:

> "A father inherits spiritual possessions and transmits them, in turn, to his son, through influencing him by example and through education, so that he will practice these values through the study of Torah and through the performance of *mitzvot.* The unique instrument for the actualization of these holy aspirations is the 'yeshivah' as our Sages taught, 'the more study (yeshivah) the more life' (*Pirkei Avot* 2:8).
>
> "Nothing can guarantee the continued existence of the Jewish people and the preservation of its spiritual integrity other than these yeshivot. The light of Torah which is kindled in the study halls of the yeshivot spreads its protective glow over the entire Jewish nation."

Another charitable practice of Rabbi Yaakov was the money he gave regularly, from his own pocket, to orphans, widows, and any indigent party who approached him for relief. Whenever he helped, he did so with a cheerful countenance and for the sake of heaven.

After World War II broke out, he sent large sums of money to Jerusalem for distribution among needy families. He also arranged for a monthly stipend to be paid to all the Torah scholars of the city. The fund raising campaign was so success-

ful that special receipts had to be printed. Through Rabbi Yaakov's intervention, hundreds of families were saved from destitution and famine.

During this period, he also contributed generously to the support of orphans, raising money to pay for their education, their weddings and their housing. His tireless concern enabled many members of a new generation to properly establish themselves in economic life.

Personal Example

As an extension of his charitable work, Rabbi Yaakov also sought to awaken in his congregation an appreciation of Torah sages and the honor due to them. He himself was a shining example concerning the proper way to honor a scholar. Whenever a great rabbi or distinguished scholar would visit from abroad, Rabbi Yaakov would shower upon him respect. He would seat his guest close to him on his right, accord him the utmost deference and treat him like royalty throughout his visit.

Today, after more than half a century of Rabbi Yaakov's activity in this field, we are still reaping the benefits of his selfless devotion, his boundless love, and his readiness to invest all his talents and resources for the communal good. He had the merit to see, as a result of his tireless efforts, the prestige of the Torah being raised in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora, through the deeds of those who had been nurtured by him in the garden of Torah.

Growth Continues

As the community continued to grow, so did its synagogues and yeshivot, its elementary schools and its centers for the youth. Thus today, the Syrian community runs about forty public institutions in the New York and New Jersey areas. The synagogues are filled to capacity every Sabbath and Festival, as well as weekdays, and the congregants meticulously devote time to Torah study each day.

Through their virtuous deeds, they bring upon themselves and their families blessing and prosperity. All this is in the merit of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin, zt'l—the *tzaddik* whose brightness illuminated the whole city.

The community of Aleppo Jews comprised about 600 families at the time that Rabbi Yaakov arrived in New York, and today numbers more than 3000 families. It is no exaggeration to state that Rabbi Kassin personally influenced each and every member of his *kehillah,* and he never failed to participate in all the outstanding events in the lives of its members, sharing equally in their joys and sorrows. He molded and guided them as a father guides his children, and represented them with honor before the world.

Absolute Dedication

Throughout Rabbi Yaakov Kassin's life, whether he was living in the Land of Israel or in the Diaspora, he devoted every ounce of his strength, and all his talents and resources, with incredible self-sacrifice, to the service of his Creator. Not only did he uplift himself, he sought to uplift the

community. With the outstanding character traits of humility and fear of God, he drew the hearts of Israel nearer to their Father in Heaven. He would frequently pour out his heart to the Holy One, blessed be He and implore Him to bestow happiness and success upon the people of Israel, and the Syrian community in particular. His merit undoubtedly stood the *kehillah* in good stead, for the community flourished and grew beyond recognition.

Throughout the sixty-two consecutive years that Rabbi Kassin officiated as chief rabbi of the Syrian Jewish community, known as "Magen David" and "Shaare Zion," his firm but gentle hand guided all areas of communal activity, and his fatherly concern embraced all the needs of his flock, both spiritually and materially. No decision, no matter how insignificant, was ever made without consulting Rabbi Yaakov and obtaining his blessing.

Rabbi Yaakov's Passing

After a long and productive life, Rabbi Yaakov Kassin was summoned at the age of ninety-five to the Yeshivah on High on Tuesday, the third of Tevet 5755 (December 6, 1994). His funeral was attended by the thousands of members of his community who were pained by the demise of their master and teacher. Eulogies were delivered on the following day, Wednesday, the fourth of Tevet, which was the anniversary of the death of his rebbe, the Gaon and holy Kabbalist, Rabbi Hayyim Shaul Dweck HaKohen.

With Rabbi Yaakov's passing, the community was orphaned of its father and leader who stood at the helm for so

many years. The lamentation and mourning at the ceremony was great.

After the large funeral organized by the New York community, the coffin was flown to Eretz Yisrael, accompanied by family members. It arrived in Jerusalem, the city of his birth. There a second round of eulogies was delivered by the leading rabbis of the city, before a congregation of thousands which then accompanied him to his final resting place.

His Descendants

Rabbi Yaakov left behind him upright and God-fearing descendants, who all follow in his ways and the ways of his ancestors, toiling in the Torah and the ceaseless performance of *mitzvot.* He left six sons and two daughters. The sons are the Gaon, Rabbi Shaul, who has taken the place of his father in the rabbinate of the community; Reb Avraham; Reb Yitzhak; Reb Meir; Reb Yehudah, and Reb Moshe. The daughters are Charlotte, the wife of Rabbi Baruch ben Chaim, who served in the rabbinate of the Syrian community for tens of years as an educator and disseminator of Torah, and Esther, wife of Mr. Yaakov Hanano.

May the merit of Rabbi Yaakov zt'l, and the merit of his righteousness and holy deeds, protect his family and descendants, his exalted community, and all the people of Israel wherever they are. May this be His will, Amen.

Part II

The Teachings of Rabbi Yaakov Kassin

The following essays were taken from *Yesod HaEmunah* and *Katzinei Eretz*. There were translated by R. Daniel Levy and R. Eliezer Shore.

1 TEFILLIN

From the Bar Mitzvah Speech of Rabbi Kassin

THE FIRST LIGHT God shone upon the world
and created heaven and earth,
And He created the first man
beloved in His awesome image,
Our first father, and of every tongue and nation,
He breathed into him life,
his radiant soul a part of God above
until he leaves the world to see Light.

The Light of the righteous,
that makes man right.
And leads him on the path of goodness
to guard the way to the Tree of Life.
To serve and bless His Name,
every day of his life

Happy is he who toils at it,
for him the world was created.
Righteous and pure in his deeds,
beloved above his companions.
The Torah of truth is in his mouth
he walks and gives Light.

The Light of Torah shines on a babe in the womb.
God's angel lovingly teaches him Torah,
tells him his mission:
Keep the Torah; bring God's
Light into the world.

The baby is born.
Darkness replaces Light.
The angel makes him forget
what he has learned.
The evil inclination clings to him.

Until he completes thirteen years.
Then the good inclination joins him.
Return to the Light of Torah, it urges;
serve God with the good and the evil inclination.[1]

I thank the merciful God for bringing me to this day and adorning me with His glory and His might—*tefillin*. And

[1] These words are an abridged version of R. Kassin's long, poetic introduction.

although I dare not speak before the Rabbis, yet it is the custom for the *bar mitzvah* boy to say words of Torah in honor of the occasion. May I merit to study Torah day and night and to serve God faithfully throughout my life.

The Most Precious Mitzvah

How precious is the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*! "All the peoples of the earth will see that God's Name is called upon you, and they will fear you" (Deuteronomy 28:10). This refers to the *tefillin* of the head, said R. Eliezer the Great.[2]

Beloved are Israel, for the Holy One, blessed be He, surrounded them with *mitzvot—tefillin* on their heads, *tefillin* on their arms, *tzitzit* on their garments, and a *mezuzah* in their doorways. Concerning this David said, "Seven times a day do I praise You because of Your righteous ordinances." R. Eliezer ben Yaakov said: Whoever has *tefillin* on his head, *tefillin* on his arm, *tzitzit* on his garment and a *mezuzah* in his doorway is unlikely to sin, as it is written, "A threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12). And it is written, "Hashem's angel encamps round about those who fear Him and delivers them" (Psalms 34:8).[3] Reish Lakish said: Whoever puts on *tefillin* will live a long life, as it is written, "O Lord, with these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Cause me to recover and live!" (Isaiah 38:16).[4]

Today God has given me the privilege of performing this

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[2] *Menahot* 35b.
[3] *Ibid.* 43b.
[4] *Ibid.* 44a.

great *mitzvah.* This is a day for me to rejoice over the commandments. "This is the day Hashem has wrought; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalms 118:24). We find that the Sages of the Talmud rejoiced upon performing a *mitzvah*:

> Abayei was sitting before Rabbah and saw that he was merry,[5] so he said: "Is it not written, 'Rejoice with trembling'" (Psalms 2:11). Rabbah replied, "I am wearing *tefillin*."[6]
>
> R. Bruna adjoined the blessing of Redemption to the Shemonah Esreh prayer, and did not stop smiling the entire day.[7]

Therefore, it is incumbent upon me to speak words of Torah in order to double the joy, as it is written, "The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart" (Psalms 19:9). Especially since today, the good inclination makes its first intrusion into the borders formerly controlled by the evil inclination. This causes the evil inclination to rise up with full force against the good inclination. But by studying Torah, a person can subdue his evil inclination, as our Sages have said, "God says, I created the evil inclination, and I created Torah to correct it."[8]

Heart, Hand and Head

> "It shall be a sign on your hand (*yadchah)* and *tefillin* between your eyes" (Exodus 13:16).

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[5] "More than necessary, and it seemed that he had forgotten his connection to God." Rashi.

[6] *Berachot* 30b.

[7] *Berachot* 9b.

[8] *Kiddushin* 30b.

Yadchah—yad kehah—your weak arm, which is on the left, against the heart.

Menahot 37a

The Sages ask: Why does the Torah command us to first don the *tefillin* of the hand, and then the *tefillin* of the head? Is not the head more important? It is the seat of the *neshamah*; whereas the tefillin of the arm are placed beside the heart, which is the seat of the *nefesh*. It would seem more logical to put the more important one on first. The Sages answer: "We ascend in sanctity,"[9] that is, we go in order of increasing holiness; starting from the *nefesh* and moving up to the *neshamah*.

There is yet another reason. The Talmud says: "There are two brokers of sin in a person: the eyes and the heart. The eye sees and the heart desires."[10] That is, there is a type of person who sees something desirable, and then longs to attain it. His eyes instigate his heart. If you take the thing away, he will forget all about it.

But there is another type of person whose evil inclination burns inside of him. He longs for forbidden things even when they are not in front of him. This is a much more difficult inclination to overcome. On this, the verse says, "Go not after your heart and after your eyes" (Numbers 15:39), for the heart precedes the eyes."[11]

Thus, the Torah commanded us to first tie the *tefillin* of the arm on the left arm, beside the heart. The heart is the king

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[9] *Menahot* 99b.
[10] *Yerushalmi Berachot* 1:5.
[11] *Sifri, Shelach* 115.

of the limbs, and when the king surrenders, his servants—the other limbs—surrender as well. Then even if our eyes see an enticing thing, we will close them. And if we chance to see it, our heart will not desire it, for the heart has already surrendered. Thus we find that R. Yehudah bar Iloy danced before the bride, and she was like a beam of wood to him.[12]

This is why we don't wrap the hand *tefillin* around the heart itself, as we wrap the head *tefillin* around the brain. The Torah commands us to "tie them as a sign on your hand," because by binding the hand, which is the limb of action, we prevent it from actualizing the thoughts of the heart and brain. For "the eye sees, the heart desires, and the limbs complete the deed."[13] Once our actions are bound, the heart will soon follow, and the eyes will eventually be subdued as well.[14]

Thus, *tefillin* have the power to subdue all of a person's senses to serve of God. The verse says, "It shall be a sign upon *yadchah* (your hand)" (Exodus 13:9). The word *yadchah* contains an extra letter *hey*—ידכה—whose numerical value is five. The extra *hey* alludes to the five compartments (*batim)* of the *tefillin*, corresponding to man's five senses. There are four compartments in the *tefillin* of the head, corresponding to the senses of sight, hearing, smell, and speech, and there is one compartment in the *tefillin* of the hand, corresponding to the sense of touch.[15] The four compartments in the *tefillin* of the head protect the four senses of the head, and the one compartment in the *tefillin* of the hand protect the one sense in the hand.[16]

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[12] *Ketubot* 17a.
[13] *Beit Yosef, Orah Hayyim* 1.
[14] *Eshel Avraham.*
[15] Rosh, commentary on the Torah.
[16] *Yalkut Reuveni.*

Why did God choose the weaker hand to do the *mitzvah*? In addition to our Sages' answer that the left hand is closer to the heart, the verse itself gives a reason: "For by strength of hand God took us out of Egypt." Two of the Divine Attributes, kindness and strict justice, are called "hands": *Yad HaGedolah*, "the great hand" is the aspect of kindness and good; it is represented by the right. *Yad HaHazakah*, "the strong hand," is the aspect of punishment of the wicked; it is represented by the left. When Israel left Egypt, God stretched out His strong hand and inflicted the Ten Plagues upon His enemies. He therefore ordained that *tefillin* be placed on the left hand, in remembrance of the strong hand that took us out of Egypt. Another reason we do not wrap *tefillin* around the heart itself, is because of the Divine decree to remember the strong hand that took us out of Egypt.[17]

Memorial and Remembrance

> It shall be a sign for you upon your hand, and a memorial between your eyes.
>
> Exodus 13:9

As to why we put the *tefillin* of the hand on first, Rabbeinu Bahai writes:

The *tefillin* of the hand are called a "sign"—*ot*. The *tefillin* of the head are called a "memorial"—*zikaron*. A purpose of a sign is to cause something to be remembered. Thus, the *tefillin* of the hand are worn first because they are the sign that precedes the "remembrance" of the head. Likewise, when we

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[17] *Obr HaHayyim*.

take them off. First we remove the head *tefillin*, then the hand *tefillin*. For how is it possible to remove the sign, and still have the remembrance in mind?

When it is first "a sign on your hand"—when you bind your hand, which does the deed—then it will be "a memorial between your eyes"—you will remember God always, and will not come to do evil, "so that the law of Hashem may be in your mouth"—it will be considered as if you have fulfilled the entire Torah.[18]

First Mitzvah

Now we can understand why *tefillin* is the first *mitzvah* a boy performs on his *bar mitzvah*; for whoever fulfills the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* is considered to have fulfilled the entire Torah. And the purpose of the Torah is to subdue the evil inclination. "I created the evil inclination, and I created Torah to correct it."[19]

From birth, the evil inclination rules the person, as it is written, "At the entrance [into the world], sin crouches."[20] On the day of *bar mitzvah*, the good inclination encroaches on the domain of the evil inclination, to guide a person to the service of his Creator. On this day, too, the evil inclination attacks with all its might, because it does not want to relinquish the control that it has wielded since the day of birth.

The evil inclination argues: How dare the good inclination try to take over? Why, this is a flagrant violation of the

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[18] *Yalkut Reuveni*.
[19] *Kiddushin* 30b.
[20] *Sanhedrin* 91b, on Genesis 4:7.

halachah that if one is in the process of acquiring something and another takes it first, the second is called wicked.[21] I took control of the person first, the evil inclination declares, and here, on the day of his *bar mitzvah*, the good inclination is trying to take over!

The Alsheich answers that this *halachah* only applies to a person who finds something that is ownerless. But if the object has an owner, he can give it to whoever he wants. Now God is the owner of the body and the soul, and He desires the good inclination, not the evil one. "Who can bring a pure thing out of an impure thing? Not One?" (Job 14:4). Who can bring the pure inclination, out of the hands of the impure inclination after it has taken control—if not the One God, owner of the man's body and soul, Who desires the good inclination?

On the day of *bar mitzvah*, when the good inclination encroaches on the domain of the evil inclination, the evil inclination fights back with all its might and tries to ensnare the person in sin in order to vanquish the good inclination. The first *mitzvah* of the *bar mitzvah* is therefore to wear *tefillin*, in order to subdue the evil inclination.

Reward and Punishment

Even with the *halachic* question solved, we may still wonder why God lets the evil inclination precede the good inclination in man. This makes it hard for a person to vanquish it, and indeed we see that the overwhelming majority of people do follow the advice of the evil inclination.

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[21] *Kiddushin* 59; *Oni hamehapech beharerah.*

The commentators explain that the reason "sin crouches at the entrance" is in order to give us free will, to serve God or not, so that there will be reward and punishment. And since the evil inclination is so deeply rooted in man, the Torah commands us: "It shall be a sign on your arm," to be the first *mitzvah* of a *bar mitzvah*.

The expression *Vehayah*, "It shall be [a sign on your hand]," indicates joy.[22] What joy is there in *tefillin*? He who wears *tefillin* is occupying himself with Torah, and Torah study brings joy, as it is written, "The precepts of Hashem are right, rejoicing the heart" (Psalms 19:9). Studying Torah hastens the redemption, as R. Huna said: The exiles will be gathered in the merit of Torah study.[23] Just as studying Torah hastens the redemption, so does the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* hasten the redemption.

The verse alludes to three benefits that come from *tefillin*: "It shall be a sign for you upon your hand, and a memorial between your eyes"—*tefillin* remove the evil thoughts that impel to transgression. "That the law of God may be in your mouth"—the person who wears *tefillin* is considered as if he studied Torah. "For with a strong hand has God brought you out of Egypt"—wearing *tefillin* hastens the redemption. Just as God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand, so may He soon take us out of this exile with a strong hand, for everlasting redemption, and gather our exiles, send the Messiah, and rebuild the Temple speedily in our days, Amen.

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[22] *Vayikra Rabbah* 11:7.

[23] Ibid. 7:3, "When they study Torah—*yitnu*—among the nations, now will I gather them" (Hosea 8:10).

2 CHARITY

HOW GREAT IS GOD'S KINDNESS to His people Israel; for in His love and compassion, He gave us His precious treasure, the Torah, and commanded us to do the *mitzvot* for our benefit, and to give us life.

Particularly great is the *mitzvah* of charity, which sustains the House of Israel and brings redemption and deliverance to the world.[1] Charity saves a person from death, and enables him to behold the Divine Presence. King David taught us the greatness of this *mitzvah* when he said, "He has scattered and given to the needy—his righteousness endures forever, his horn shall be exalted in honor" (Psalms 112:9).

When a person sees all the great benefits that charity brings into the world, not to mention the immeasurable goodness hidden for the World to Come, it should be

[1] *Bava Bastra* 10a.

impossible for him to sleep until he has fulfilled the *mitzvah* of charity at least two or three times in the day. Even a person of limited resources, or who has fallen on hard times, must make an effort to give charity. For "whoever runs to give charity, God sends him the means to do so."[2] And, "if a person sees that his livelihood is meager, let him give charity."[3] According to the Talmud, charity is equal to all the other *mitzvot.*[4]

Even greater than giving charity oneself is encouraging others to give. As Rav Elazar said in the Talmud, "He who gets others to do is greater than he who does himself."[5] This is even a *halachah* in the *Shulhan Aruch*: "A person who convinces others to give has greater reward than one who gives of his own accord."[6]

But greatest of all is the charity a person gives to Torah scholars. "If you wish to give charity, do so with those who toil in Torah."[7] A person who gives charity can merit to behold the *Shechinah,* but one who supports Torah scholars gets an even higher reward—he clings to the Divine Presence Itself. Thus, the Gemara says, "One who gives merchandise to a *Talmid Hacham* [in order that he may do business with it], will sit in the Heavenly Academy, as the verse says, 'For wisdom is a defense, and money is a defense . . . it gives life to those who

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[2] *Bava Batra* 9b.
[3] *Gittin* 7a.
[4] *Bava Batra* 9a.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Shulhan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 249:5.
[7] *Kohelet Rabbah* 11:1.

have it'" (Ecclesiastes 7:12).[8] Furthermore, all the blessings that were promised by the prophets of Israel are meant for one who does business and shares his goods with *Talmidei Hachamim*.[9]

The verse says: "A *mitzvah* is a lamp, and Torah is light" (Proverbs 6:23). Just as a lamp eventually goes out, so does the merit of a *mitzvah*, but just as light is eternal, so is merit of Torah.[10] The merit derived from *mitzvot* can eventually be extinguished. But there is one *mitzvah* that lasts forever; that is the *mitzvah* of supporting a Torah scholar in his studies. Then the benefactor himself has a share in the Torah that was learned, and that shines forever. Thus, the verse says: "Take for yourself pure olive oil . . . that the lamps should burn continually" (Leviticus 24:2). That is, purchase for yourself Torah, which is compared to oil, that the lamps should burn continuously—the *mitzvah* of supporting a Torah scholar will stand for you forever.[11]

Chazal have guaranteed that a person who supports Torah scholars will never fall in battle; the *mitzvah* will help him emerge victorious.[12] This is a fitting reward, just as he protects a Torah scholar from poverty and hunger, so will he be protected from his enemies. It also saves a person from suffering,[13] and even hastens the redemption and the coming of Messiah.[14]

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[8] *Pesahim* 53b.
[9] *Berachot* 34b.
[10] *Sotah* 21a.
[11] From *Devash l'Fi* 50:14.
[12] *Midrash Talpiot* 138a. Quoted in *Torah v'Hayyim*, by R. Hayyim Palagi.
[13] *Yaffe Tor, Vayikra Rabbah* 25b.
[14] *Lehem HaPanim, peirush Hagadah; Tochahot Hayyim* 78b.

Our Sages ridiculed those who rise in honor of a Torah scroll but do not rise in honor of a Torah scholar.[15] But even worse are those who see a Torah scholar in financial distress, and hide their eyes. They are throwing the glory of Torah to the ground. If a Torah scroll were found lying on the ground, how much would they mourn and fast. Yet a Torah scholar is greater than a Torah scroll.[16] It follows that when someone honors Torah scholars by supporting them, it is as if he kept a Torah scroll from falling to the ground.

Now we can understand Chazal's words: "Whoever loves the Rabbis will have sons who are Rabbis."[17] A person who loves Rabbis will obviously support them. By keeping these "Torah scrolls" from falling to the ground, he will be granted sons who are Torah scholars, and who will, in turn, support him. Being scholars, they will always uphold his honor, no matter how simple a person he is. And should he become poor, he will be supported by others on account of them.

Chazal tell us that a person who supports Torah scholars fulfills the verse, "Blessed is he who upholds all the words of this Torah."[18] With this one *mitzvah*, it is as if he fulfilled the entire Torah. I believe that through this *mitzvah*, he will also merit the Holy Land, for dwelling in the land of Israel is also equivalent to all the *mitzvot* of the Torah.[19] By fulfilling the entire Torah through the *mitzvah* of charity, a person will come

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[15] *Makkot* 22b.

[16] *Torah VeHaHayyim*: *mahzik*.

[17] *Shabbat* 23b.

[18] Based on Deuteronomy 27:26. See *Vayikra Rabbah* 25:1; *Talmud Yerushalmi Sotah* 7:4.

[19] *Sifri* 80.

to fulfill it all through dwelling in the Land.[20]

By supporting Torah study, a person can also subdue his evil inclination.[21] The Holy One said, "I created the evil inclination, and I created the Torah as a cure for it." The Torah is like fire, from which the Serpent—the evil inclination—flees. Perhaps this is why the Sages said: "If you wish to give charity, do so with those who toil in Torah."[22] Since a person has an evil inclination, whose cure is the Torah, it is best to give charity to Torah scholars so that in this merit, the Torah will protect him from the evil inclination.

In another place, the Torah is compared to water, "Ho, all who thirst, come for water" (Isaiah 55:1). Thus, when the verse says, "Cast your bread upon the waters" (Ecclesiastes 11:1), it is telling us to give charity to Torah scholars. If a person thirsts for sin because of his evil inclination, let him study Torah. Even if the evil inclination is as hard as stone, it will melt.[23]

But what if a person has no Torah? He can still subdue his evil inclination by supporting Torah scholars. Then the Torah that the scholar studies will save the benefactor from the evil inclination, as well.[24] For the verse says, "Wisdom is a defense and money is a defense" (ibid. 7:12). Just as Torah study protects the scholar, so it protects the one who supports him.

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[20] *Torah v'Hayyim*, R. Hayyim Palagi 40:188.
[21] *Etz HaHayyim, sparashat Vayahkel,* by R. Hayyim Elefandari.
[22] *Kohelet Rabbah* 11:1.
[23] *Kiddushin* 30a.
[24] *Devarim Ahadim, derush* 14, p. 74b, by the Hida.

Torah and Pearls

Yet, there is a question we can ask. The verse says, "[The Torah] is more precious than pearls, and all of your possessions cannot compare to it" (Proverbs 3:15). It would seem that the Torah a scholar studies is much more valuable than riches. How then can we equate the two?

The answer, of course, is that when the two are judged independently, Torah study is far greater than the wealth of a rich man. But when a person supports Torah study, then his involvement is equal to the scholars, for it is through him that the scholar is able to sit and learn.

The Hebrew word for pearls is *peninim*, but in the verse from Proverbs above, it is spelled *peni'im*, meaning "inner." When a person keeps his wealth to himself, then the Torah is more precious than pearls. "And all of *your* possessions cannot compare to it." But if he uses it to support Torah scholars, then he becomes their equal, as we learn from Issachar and Zevulun.[25] Moses said, "Rejoice, Zevulun, in your going out, and Issachar, in your tents" (Deuteronomy 33:18). Issachar was greater than Zevulun. But because Zevulun engaged in business and supported Issachar, he is given priority in the verse.[26]

The Torah is "a tree of life for those who support it" (Proverbs 3:18). For those who *support* it, not just those who learn

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[25] R. Y. Pinto, *Kesef Nivhar*.
[26] *Midrash Rabbah* 25:1-2.

it. A Torah scholar is called a tree of life. He gives shade and protection to those who support him.[27]

Earlier, we compared the Torah to the Menorah in the *Beit HaMikdash*. In the Sanctuary, there was also the *Shulhan*—the table of the shew-bread. The *Shulhan* represents wealth. (For the *Shulhan* was placed in the North, which always represents the source of wealth.[28]) The Menorah represents wisdom, and was placed in the South.[29] The verse says, "You shall set the *Shulhan* outside the curtain, and the Candelabrum facing the *Shulhan*" (Exodus 26:35). In *Gan Eden*, the *Shulhan* and the Menorah—the supporter of Torah and the scholar—will sit facing one another.

The Baal Shem Tov told the story of two brothers, one sat and studied, the other went out and worked. But they made a deal to divide up all their profits—both in this world and in the next. When the scholarly brother died first, the other brother wept. "Don't forget our deal! Half of what you get belongs to me!" Suddenly, his deceased brother appeared to him in a vision. He laughed and nodded his head in agreement.[30]

There are still other benefits accrued to the one who supports Torah scholars. He merits eternal life, and to dwell in two worlds at once, as the verse says, "I will dwell in Your tent forever" (Psalms 61:5). How is this possible? Our Sages explained that whenever a person repeats a *halachah* in the name

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[27] R. Y. Pinto.

[28] As the verse says, "From the North, comes gold" (Job 37:22).

[29] "A person who wants wisdom, should arrange his bed towards the South. If he wants wealth, he should arrange his bed towards the North." (*Bava Basra* 25b.)

[30] *Tzeinah v'Reinah, parashat Bamidbar; Derech Hochmah, netiv* 10.

of a deceased scholar, the lips of that scholar move in the grave, as it is written, "moving the lips of those who sleep" (Song of Songs 7:10). Thus, it is as if he dwelt in both worlds at once.[31]

The supporter of Torah also has this benefit, for the Torah is called by his name, too. The Midrash quotes a *halachah* in the name of "Shimon, the brother of Azariah."[32] The Sages asked, "Wasn't Shimon greater than Azariah? Why even mention Azariah's name?" They answered, "Because Azariah supported his brother's studies, the *halachah* is attributed to him.[33]

Now we come to a more difficult question: Why all this praise for one who supports Torah study? What did he do that is so special? Doesn't the Mishnah say, "Give Him what is His, for you and all you own is His. As King David said, 'For everything is from You, and from Your own hand do we give it to You'" (I Chronicles 29:14).[34] "Who preceded Me, that I should repay him?" (Job 41:3). "Who ever put up a *mezuzah*, that I didn't first give him a house? Who ever built a *sukah*, that I didn't first give him the place? Who ever wore *tzitzit*, that I didn't first give him the garment?"[35] In a word, who ever did a *mitzvah* that God did not first send him the means, and who ever gave charity, that God did not first provide him with a livelihood?

According to this, there is no reason to receive a reward

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[31] *Yevamot* 96b.

[32] *Sotah* 21a.

[33] *Midrash Rabbah* 25:1-2.

[34] *Pirkei Avot* 3:7. Rashi explains that this verse applies to charity. Since everything is from God, one is required to give Him of His own.

[35] See *Vayikra Rabbah* 27:2. See also, *ibid.* 4:2.

for benefiting a Torah scholar. In fact, it's an obligation. It is for precisely this reason God gives the rich person money. Chazal tell us that when you give money to a Torah scholar, you should consider it as if you were returning a loan. For Torah scholars are sons of the King, and are appointed over all His treasuries, i.e. the Torah.[36]

The verse says, "You shall surely give him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give him, for on account of (*b'glal*) this matter Hashem your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you put your hand to" (Deuteronomy 15:10). On this, the Midrash comments, "Thus says the Holy One, 'I made you rich, and I made him poor. If you don't give him, I will spin the wheel (*gilgal*) and make you poor and him rich."[37]

It turns out that your being rich is not a result of your own efforts. God made you rich so that you would give the poor his portion. It is the poor man who causes you to be rich. Thus, Reb Yehoshua ben Levi said, "More than the rich man does for the poor, the poor man does for the rich."[38] Why then is there a reward for giving charity?

The answer is as follows. The commentators all explain that even though God can demand of us "Who preceded Me," for "Mine is the silver and Mine is the gold" (Hagai 2:8), nevertheless, a person who is quick to perform *mitzvot*, does precede God. Thus, the Talmud often says, "The zealous are

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[36] *Devarim Ahadim*, by the Hida, *derush* 4, p.17b, on *Bava Batra* 33b.
[37] *Midrash Tanhuma, Mishpatim* 15.
[38] *Vayikra Rabbah* 34:10.

the first to do *mitzvot*."[39] [That is, their act precedes even the requirements, and for this, they receive reward.]

Also, a person who gives charity with love and joy also deserves reward for his act. "Serve Hashem with joy," says the verse, "come before Him with song" (Psalms 100:2). That is, if you serve God with joy, you can come before Him justly, with song, to claim your reward.[40]

Also, a person who is himself impoverished, yet continues to give charity and support Torah study, deserves a reward. The Talmud says, "A person who gives money to the poor when times are hard—about him the verse says, 'Then he will call, and Hashem will answer'" (Isaiah 58:9).[41] Even when times are hard for the giver! If he gives a donation when his own income is limited, then he is truly fulfilling the *mitzvah* of charity. Because, although times may be hard for him, for the poor man, life is always difficult.[42] We find the same idea in the Midrash: "A person who gives charity even when he himself does not have—about him God says, 'This fellow has preceded Me and fulfilled My *mitzvot* even before I gave him the means. I certainly have to pay him back.'"[43]

The Ben Ish Hai writes this as well: "People might think that they are only obligated to give charity if they have more than they need for their own livelihood. The truth is, though, that giving from the excess is not a *mitzvah* for which a person

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[39] *Pesahim* 4a.

[40] See *Likutim m'Pardes: "Mi Hakdimeni"; Devarim Ahadim; derush* 22, p.118b.

[41] *Yevamot* 63a.

[42] *Likutey Chazal, parashat Behar,* from *Arano Shel Yosef.*

[43] *Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:2.

can rightfully claim reward. Is it conceivable that a person should hold onto his extra money while a pauper dies of hunger! Rather, for this *mitzvah* to shine, it must be done when the giver himself feels lacking.

There is an allusion to this in the human eye. Just as light only emanates from the black part of the eye, so too, the *mitzvah* of charity only shines in the upper and lower worlds when it is given by a person whose only financial stability is dark. Thus the verse says, "He gave of his bread to the poor" —of the very piece of bread he was eating.

The letters of *ta'avitenu*, "you shall lend him"[44] (Deuteronomy 15:8), can be rearranged to form *habet ayin*, "look at the eye." The verse teaches us to look at the eye, and learn to lend to the poor even when we ourselves are having financial difficulties.[45]

"He who has a good eye shall be blessed, for he gave of his bread to the poor" (Proverbs 22:9). He who has a good eye, and gives charity to Torah scholars, will be blessed by Heaven with wealth, happiness and success. And if you ask, why should he receive reward, since "the earth is the Lord's and its fullness," he was only giving what already belonged to God. The answer is given in the verse: "for he gave of his bread to the poor"—when he took of his own meager sustenance and gave it to the poor, then there is no argument of "Who has preceded me."

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[44] If there shall be among you a needy person . . . you shall surely open your hand to him, and you shall surely lend him (*ha'avet ta'avitenu*) sufficient for his need that he lacks.

[45] *Od Yosef Hai, parashat Re'eh.*

The verse says, "If you lend money to My people; the poor, with you . . ." (Exodus 22:24). In the Hebrew, there appears to be an extra word: the verse does not say *he'ani*, "the poor," but *et he'anim*, which may be translated "with the poor." This alludes to God, Who "stands at the right hand of the needy" (Psalms 109:31). If you lend them money, then God, Who is "with the poor," will be with you and make you wealthy.[46]

The Midrash links two verses: "If your brother becomes poor, and his means fail with you, you must come to his aid" (Leviticus 25:35), and "Happy is he who considers the poor, on a day of misfortune, Hashem will deliver him" (Psalms 41:2).[47] The Maggid of Dubnow explains the connection. The "day of misfortune" cannot possibly refer to the poor person, for "all the days of the poor are evil" (Proverbs 15:15). Rather, if the *giver* cares about the poor—despite his own present misfortune—then God will deliver him. Considering the needs of the poor when the giver himself is prospering is no great feat, as it is written, "When there is an increase in goodness, many people benefit" (Ecclesiastes 5:10). But when you care about poor when "his means fail with you"—when you yourself are suffering, then you are deserving of blessing.[48]

The Maggid of Dubnow explains this idea in another way. King David said to God, "Master of the World, let the world become straight before you—let the rich and poor be equal." As

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[46] Alsheich, Commentary on the Torah, *parashat Mishpatim*.
[47] *Vayikra Rabbah* 34:1.
[48] *Ohel Yaakov*.

the verse says, "Let the world be straightened before God" (Psalms 61:8).

God replied: "If I make my world straight, and everyone becomes rich, who will preserve kindness and truth"—that is, who will be able to do kindness when there is no one to accept charity? "Kindness and truth who will preserve?" (ibid.).[49]

The question arises: The verse mentions not only kindness, but also truth. How does truth fit in?

The answer is as follows. "There is no person who does not have his hour."[50] Although the rich appear to be successful, and the poor not, nevertheless a time can come when the poor person becomes more successful than the rich.

This can be understood with a parable. In a large forest were tall, broad, strong cedars, and there were also small, tender shoots. In quiet times, the cedars were much sought after for their wood. But one day, a fierce storm came. The mighty wind toppled the cedars and broke them. But the small plants remained intact; they merely bent toward the ground until the wind passed. Their smallness and tenderness saved them from the storm.

Similarly, when there is peace and tranquility in the world, the rich are prosperous and successful, and the poor lack everything. But when the Attribute of Strict Justice storms through the world, "He delivers the poor by his poverty" (Job 36:15), and "The low shall be exalted, and the exalted shall be lowered" (Ezekiel 21:31). So it was during the destruction of the

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[49] *Shemot Rabbah* 31:5; *Tanhuma, Mishpatim.*

[50] *Pirkei Avot* 4:3.

First Temple. King Zidkiyah and his colleagues were captured by the enemies and afflicted; but "the captain of the guard left of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and fieldworkers" (II Kings 25:12).

We see, then, that there is a time of Kindness and a time of Strict Justice. When the world is run with Kindness, the rich are successful. When the world is run with Strict Justice, the poor are successful. God wants the rich to support and help the poor during times of Kindness; then, in times of Strict Justice, the poor protect the rich.

This is the meaning of the verse, "Happy is he who [when successful] considers the poor; [because then] on a day of misfortune, Hashem will deliver [the rich man in the merit of the poor]" (Psalms 41:2).[51]

In summary, all the wonderful rewards that are promised to those who give charity and benefit Torah scholars from their wealth are meant for those who also encourage others to give, who themselves give with alacrity and joy, and for those who show their generosity, even in financially difficult times. In these cases there is no argument of "Who preceded Me." The person is considered to have given of his own money, not of God's.

Someone Else's Money

The Gemara states that if a father writes a will in which he designates only one son as inheritor, his actual intention is to appoint this son custodian over the rest of the family; for it

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[51] *Obel Yaakov.*

is unthinkable that a father would bequeath all his money to one child, and leave all his other children penniless.[52] This son is merely smarter than the rest, and knows how to apportion the money properly, or invest it, or save it. Even so, the *halachah* allows him a higher standard of living than his siblings, since, after all, he is in charge of the inheritance.

The same is true with the money God gives to a rich person. It is impossible that God should want him to keep it all for himself, while the poor die of hunger. Rather, a rich man is merely a custodian of his wealth. His obligation is to care for the poor, and see to their well-being.[53]

This means to say that the money a wealthy man gives to the poor never really belonged to him in the first place. It was the poor man's money that he was merely safekeeping. The rich man is allowed to have a higher standard of living than the poor, as befits the caretaker, but there is no reason for him to receive spiritual merit for giving charity; the money was never his to give. And yet, the reward for giving charity is much greater than that of any other *mitzvah.*

There are two parts to the *mitzvah* of charity. There is the fact that one gives, and there is the way it is given—with respect and good-will, never with anger. A person has to give charity as if he were returning a loan. When a person fulfills the *mitzvah* of charity in this way, then God also rewards him for the act of giving. The main reward, though, is for one's positive attitude.

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[52] *Bava Batra* 131b.

[53] *Rav Peninim*, by the Alsheich.

Thus, the verse says: "You shall surely give [literally, "give, you shall give"] and your heart shall not be grieved when you do so; because on account of this, Hashem your God will bless you in all your work, and in all that you put your hand to" (Deuteronomy 15:10). The verse uses the word "to give" twice, to imply "give him what he has given you." In other words, return the loan that you received. And do it gladly—"Your heart shall not be grieved." Because for reason of your good-will, "Hashem your God will bless you in all your work." You receive more reward for your attitude than for the action itself.[54]

Cure for Poverty

In any event, it is good for a person to give generously to charity. As Chazal say, ten percent of one's income is the average amount to give. Even a person in financial straits should give, since charity is the cure for poverty. "Tithe your income in order to become rich," says the Talmud.[55] And, "How do the rich people of Israel merit their wealth? Because of the tithes that they give."[56]

In all things, it is forbidden to test God—except with regard to tithes, for God said, "Bring all the tithes into the

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[54] *Bnei Avraham, derushim*; cited in *Yetiv Lev, derush* 4, p. 12a. See *Kli Yakar*, I Kings, 17.

[55] *Ta'anit* 9a.

[56] *Shabbat* 119a. See also, *Ta'anit* 32b, "On account of the sin of canceling *terumot* and *ma'asrot*, the skies withhold rain and dew, and prices rise, and wages are lost, and people run after a livelihood but do not attain it . . . . But if they give, they are blessedly given"; *Berachot* 63a; *Midrash Tehilim* 104; *Yerushalmi Berachot* 9:2.

storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and put Me to the test . . . if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you immeasurable blessing" (Malachi 3:10).[57]

Why did God choose this particular *mitzvah* for testing Him? I saw a parable in the book *Ma'on HaBerachot* that explains it.

A great merchant once came to a big city. He brought with him a wagon laden with various fabrics. Many of the townspeople came to buy. They asked him the length of each piece. "They are all the same," he replied. "Each roll contains 60 yards of fabric."

The customers were skeptical and wanted to measure for themselves. But how? To take apart the whole wagon was out of the question. The merchant suggested that they take out a single roll to measure—any one that they chose. If that measured 60 yards, then they could be sure that all the rolls measured 60 yards.

The customers had to decide which roll to test. Of course, they chose the one which looked the skimpiest. If even that one measured 60, then the fuller rolls surely did.

God gave us His merchandise: the 613 *mitzvot*. He promised us that each of them brings success and blessing. But people, being only human, want to see for themselves that the *mitzvot* indeed bring blessing. It is therefore appropriate to test one of the 613. But which? The one that looks as if it brings

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[57] *Ta'anit* 9a.

loss—charity. If even that one brings gain, then we can certainly be sure that the others do.[58]

Tithes and Charity

> "To You, Hashem, is charity, and to us is embarrassment" (Daniel 9:7). Rabbi Nehemiah said: Even when we give charity, we feel ashamed. The only time we can make a demand is when give our tithes, as it is written, "When you have made an end of tithing all of your increase . . . then you shall say before Hashem your God, . . . 'I have done according to all that You have commanded me. Look forth from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel . . .'" (Deuteronomy 26:12—15).[59]

This Midrash seems to imply that tithing is a greater *mitzvah* than charity. The author of *Ohel Daniel* offers a parable as explanation.

Upon hearing that Reuven did an improper act, the community leaders sent messengers to take a security until he would pay a fine. The securities were entrusted to a third party for safekeeping.

One day, a very distinguished Rabbi came to town. The community leaders had to raise funds in order to honor him properly. The keeper of the deposit reminded them that he was holding Reuven's securities until the latter paid his fine.

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[58] *Ma'on HaBerachot, kakdamah* 2.
[59] *Shemot Rabbah* 41:1

Reuven was informed that if he did not pay his fine immediately, his securities would be sold. He paid the fine, and the money was used on behalf of the visiting Rabbi.

However, Reuven was furious at the Rabbi. If not for his visit, Reuven could have paid the fine over time, or the community leaders might have absolved it entirely.

But, let's say the situation had been different. The community leaders had pressed Reuven to repay before learning of the Rabbi's visit. Then, when the Rabbi came, spent the money in his honor. How happy Reuven would have been; how he would have praised his fortune. For now, his money was being used to honor a great Rabbi; if not for his visit, who knows how the community would have wasted it.

This is the difference between charity and tithes. Charity is given when the poor person comes and asks. Then, the donor might feel anger—had not the poor man come, he would not have had to give. However, tithes are different. Since one may not eat of his produce until it has been tithed, he hurries to separate them. When a Levite approaches to claim them, the owner is grateful and gives it to him immediately.

Thus, Rabbi Nehemiah said, "Even when we give charity, we feel ashamed"—because we realize we do not give it with a full and joyful heart. But when we take out our tithes, we do so gladly, for we have already separated them, and they are only waiting to be taken from the house.[60]

This fits in with our thesis that when there is joy in doing the *mitzvah*, there is no argument of "Who preceded Me," and

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[60] *Ohel Daniel, parashat Re'eh.*

we justly earn our reward. But if we give charity unwillingly, the argument does apply, and therefore we have shame.

Resurrection of the Dead

> Rabbi Elazar said, "Those who are ignorant of Torah do not rise in the Resurrection of the Dead, as it is written, 'The dead live not, the lax ones will not rise' (Isaiah 26:14). The verse refers to those who are lax in the words of the Torah."
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> [R. Yohanan was upset.] Seeing his distress, Rebbi said to him: "Don't worry, I've found them a solution . . . let him marry his daughter to a Torah scholar, do business with a Torah scholar, or benefit a Torah scholar from his wealth. Then, it is as if he cleaves to the *Shechinah*."
>
> *Ketubot* 111b

How could R. Elazar say "Those who are ignorant of Torah do not live" when we know that only apostates and informers descend to Gehinom to be punished for generations.[61] Nowhere do we find such a punishment for those who are ignorant of Torah!

Moreover, if this uneducated person hears that he has no hope, he is liable to go and violate every commandment in the Torah. And don't tell him, "Go learn Torah, and you will live," for the Talmud says that "many tried to do as R. Shimon bar Yohai," who ignored the need to earn a living and only sat and

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[61] *Rosh HaShannah* 17a.

learned, "and they did not succeed."[62] Moreover, "the world needs its spice vendors and hide-makers."[63]

It seems to me that R. Elazar had a different intention. The unlearned will not live in the Resurrection through their own merits. Whatever they do, they are faced with the argument "Who has preceded Me," that is, they are merely returning to God that which is His. And since they are uneducated in Torah, they will never go beyond the letter of the law, as the Mishnah says, "The ignorant are not devout."[64] However, God will revive them out of mercy, as we say in the *Shemonah Esreh* prayer, He "revives the dead with great mercy." This refers to the unlearned, for they have no merit to live.

R. Yohanan was grieved about this point. People are born into the world so that they earn their eternal reward—not merely receive it as charity. If the unlearned live in the afterworld only because of God's mercy, then there was no purpose in their coming to this world, and in view of the danger of sinning, their coming seems only to have made matters worse.

Seeing his distress, Rebbi answered him: "I have found them a solution. Let them support Torah scholars." Then they will be considered the equal of the scholar, and receive their reward as one who has earned it justly.[65] They will merit to live in the Resurrection by right, and not through God's

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[62] *Berachot* 35b.

[63] *Kiddushin* 82b.

[64] *Pirkei Avot* 2:6.

[65] For a Torah scholar performs *mitzvot* with fear of Heaven, which is in our hands and not influenced from Heaven (*Berachot* 33b). Thus, he rightfully earns his reward *(Midbar Kedeimot)*.

mercy. Then he will not be ashamed to gaze at the *Shechinah*.

Bread upon the Waters

This explains the Midrash: "Cast your bread upon the waters" (Ecclesiastes 11:1). Said R. Bibi, "Water here refers to Torah, as it is written, 'Ho, all who thirst, come for water' (Isaiah 55:1). If you wish to give charity, do it with those who toil in Torah."[66]

Why does the verse say, "*If you wish* to give charity"—do you have a choice? If you don't wish, are you free from giving? And since the *mitzvah* of charity is to give to the poor, why is giving to Torah scholars different than giving to any other poor person?

The Midrash fits in nicely with what we have said above. If you wish to give charity in a way that you are giving *of your own*, do so with those who toil in Torah. Then you will have a share in their Torah, and receive your eternal reward fairly, without relying on God's mercy.

No Reward in This World

The Gemara says "Give charity so that you will become rich." And yet we know that "there is no reward in this world for *mitzvot*."[67] The book *Arvei Nahal*[68] explains this with a parable:

There was once a wealthy miser who would not spend a penny on himself, much less on charity. One day, he gathered

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[66] *Kohelet Rabbah* 11:1.
[67] *Kiddushin* 39b.
[68] Cited in *Kesef Tzaruf* p.168.

his entire fortune and sailed to a distant land, where he spent it all at once on a business venture.

If he had spent only half, we could understand. But how did this miser change so drastically as to spend all his money at one fell swoop?

The answer is that he was not *spending*; he was investing in order to acquire even more money. The more he invests, the more he hopes to acquire.

God withholds reward from the righteous in this world so that they will receive it in the World to Come. But this refers to someone who is not philanthropic. In this world, he receives only a fixed reward for his good deeds. If God were to give him a generous reward in this world, it would come off his reward in the World to Come.

But if a person gives charity, then the more he receives in this world, the more he uses it to earn reward in the next. In this case, God's "spending" on him in this world is only an investment, which will yield greater reward.

What Is Yours and What Isn't

Where then, is a person's true wealth? Is it in the money he owns, or in the money he gives? The verse says, "Charity will be yours" (Deuteronomy 24:13). The *Olelot Ephraim* offers the following parable.

A king once asked an extremely wealthy Jew, "How much does your wealth amount to?"

"Let me go home and make a calculation," said the Jew.

A short time later he returned to the king. "I own thirty thousand gold coins," he reported.

The king was furious. "Liar!" he exclaimed. "Everyone

knows that you possess treasures fit for a king, besides land, buildings, and livestock!"

"Your majesty," said the Jew, "all these possessions are only mine temporarily. Who knows for whom I am accumulating it—for friend or foe? Coins are round because they roll from one to another. So how can it be called *my* wealth?

"When his majesty asked how much I have, I replied thirty thousand, because that is truly mine. I have a notebook in which I record all that I have contributed to charity — and that is what is truly mine. No one else can touch it, and I can take it with me to the next world. There was once a king named Munbaz, who, in a year of famine, gave all the royal treasures to the poor. 'My fathers saved up riches for others. I am saving them up for myself—in the World to Come.'"[69]

This answer pleased the king, and the man sent him home in peace.[70]

This idea is hinted at in the verse, "If you lend money to My people; the poor, with you . . ." (Exodus 22:24).

If you lend money to poor Torah scholars, know that it is precisely the money you give away that remains with you—it is stored away for you in heaven. If a person is stingy with his wealth, and does not help the poor, he is actually causing his money to be given away to others. This is the very opposite of stinginess! If he truly loved money, he would give most of it away to the needy and to Torah scholars, and then it will remain with him forever. He should invest it on their behalf,

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[69] *Bava Batra* 11a.

[70] *Olelot Ephraim, ma'amer* 5. See *Devarim Ahadim*, by the Hida, *derush* 4, p. 16b.

and support them from the profits. This is a kindness that lasts for generations.[71]

Thus, the verse says, "There is a person who makes himself rich, yet has nothing; and a person who makes himself poor, but has great wealth" (Proverbs 13:7). That is, there is a person who makes himself rich by skimping and saving and giving nothing to charity. Yet he has nothing, for when he dies he leaves it all to others. But if he were to make himself poor—by giving his money to the indigent and to Torah scholars—he would have great wealth to take along to the World to Come.[72]

King Solomon said the same thing. "Weary not yourself to make rich; cease from your own wisdom. Will you set your eyes upon it? It is gone; for it will surely make itself wings and fly like an eagle in heaven" (Proverbs 23:4,5).

Note that the verse does not say "to become rich," but "to make rich." Some people weary themselves amassing wealth, and don't give a penny to charity, all because they have thoughts of making their children rich. King Solomon urges us to "cease from your own wisdom"—abandon these thoughts; for it is quite possible that when we set our eyes upon this wealth, it is gone. Either we will lose it, or our children will. It will surely make itself wings, and fly away like an eagle, in our lives, or after we have left this world.[73]

I heard a parable that expresses this idea.

A man asked his clever son a riddle. "Ten birds alighted

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[71] *Devarim Ahadim, derush* 4, p. 16b. See *Vayikra Rabbah* 22:1.

[72] *Devarim Ahadim.*

[73] *Od Yosef Hai, parashat Mishpatim.*

on a roof. Hunters came and shot four of them. How many were left on the roof?"

"Four," replied the son.

"You made a mistake in the arithmetic," his father said. "If you subtract four from ten, you get six."

The son explained, "Those shots sent the other six birds flying. The only ones left on the roof were the four dead ones."

"You are right, my son," said the father.

The same is true of charity. At first glance, it appears that the money a person gives to charity is gone. The money is "dead," and no further benefit can be derived from it. Whereas the money a person saves is really his—that is "live" money. But like in the parable, the live birds all flew away; only the dead ones were really the hunters'. "It will surely make itself wings and fly" to others. On the other hand, "If you lend money to My people; the poor, with you . . ."—the money that you lend as an act of kindness, and that you give as charity to the poor, will be with you and not leave your possession in the World to Come.

Charity from Above

The Ben Ish Hai continues with a true story. A wealthy man once asked a Hacham, "Why are there ten times as many warnings about the *mitzvah* of doing acts of lovingkindness in the Torah—Written and Oral—than any other *mitzvah*?"

"Because everyone needs it," replied the Hacham.

"That's not true," the wealthy man replied. "Relatively few need charity. Out of the five thousand individuals in our town,

less than a hundred take charity. And I've heard of another city with tens of thousands of citizens, and no one takes charity."

"What I meant," said the Hacham, "is that everyone needs charity and kindness from God, in the form of life, health, success, and security. If a person does not give charity and do acts of kindness for the poor, the accusers can argue before God, 'Why should You give him charity, when he does not give charity to the poor? And why should You hear his prayers and fulfill his wishes, when he ignores the cries of the poor and denies their requests?' Thus everyone needs the *mitzvah* of charity to save himself from accusation. And if you see misers who nevertheless are blessed with life, prosperity, health, and protection, that is God's mystery, of which Jeremiah (12:1) said, 'Why does the way of the wicked prosper?' and King David said (Psalms 73:3), 'I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.' On this point I cannot answer you now; I can only repeat that everyone needs charity."

The wealthy man had another question: "Why do the Scriptures describe the reward for charity in this world, when the righteous do not request reward in this world, but prefer to leave it for the next?"

"In order to increase the person's reward," explained the Hacham, "when he sees that he is entitled to a reward in this world, and yet denies it. If he gave charity in order to receive a reward in this world, it would not be a complete *mitzvah*, but rather like a business investment, like the merchant who spends a hundred in order to get back a hundred twenty."

The rich man had another question. "Why is the punishment for ignoring a beggar's pleas so severe, when perhaps he was not genuinely needy after all?"

The Hacham replied with a story. A rich man whom we shall call Yosef used to aid a *tzaddik* in his town. Every year, on the first day of the month of Heshvan, Yosef would send enough wheat, rice, oil, firewood, and warm clothing to meet the needs of the *tzaddik* and his family for the year.

One year, Yosef was so busy that he forgot to send anything to the *tzaddik*. The month of Cheshvan came and went, and so did Tevet, and still the matter remained forgotten.

One morning, the temperature plunged suddenly, and snow fell and piled up, obstructing traffic. But Yosef had an important business deal to tie up, so, without taking the time to eat breakfast, he set out in the morning for an inn, where he worked straight through the day without stopping to eat lunch. By the end of the day, his body felt like ice and he was extremely hungry. When his servants brought him home, he was almost lifeless. He could not move or even speak. They made him a fire and covered him with warm blankets until he felt well enough to eat. Then he recalled that he had forgotten to send food and winter clothing to the *tzaddik*. He was terribly distraught to think about how the *tzaddik* was managing, especially on such a cold day.

He ordered his servants to gather food and clothing, and to immediately bring them to the *tzaddik* despite the late hour.

Although it was past midnight, the servants went and knocked on the *tzaddik*'s door and gave him his yearly supply. The *tzaddik* was delighted and also surprised. The very next day, he hurried to Yosef's house and asked, "Why did you send the things in the middle of the night? Did heaven remind you in a dream?"

"Heaven reminded me," said Yosef, "but not in a dream. I was fully awake." And he related what had happened to him. "From what happened to me," he said, "I realized how much you must be suffering; and so I did not want you to have to wait any longer—not even until morning."[74]

This is what the verse means, "If you lend money to My people; the poor, with you . . ." (Exodus 22:24). When you lend money to My people, remember that the lack they suffer is sometimes "with you." You may also be subject at times to such deprivation. Then you will understand the need of the poor, who suffer constantly. Your suffering is only temporary; they suffer much more than you.

May it be the will of our Father in Heaven to plant in our hearts Torah, truth, and justice. May we merit to pursue the *mitzvah* of charity, giving both when times are hard, and all the more so, when we prosper. For perhaps in the merit of this *mitzvah* of charity, we will bring the redemption to all Israel, as the Gemara states: Great is charity, for it brings the redemption closer, as it is written, "Thus the Lord: Keep justice and do charity, for My salvation is near to come, and My charity to be revealed" (Isaiah 56:1).[75] And may Hashem rule over all the earth, speedily in our days.

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[74] *Od Yosef Hai, parashat Mishpatim.*

[75] *Bava Batra* 10a.

3 FATHERS AND SONS

> The father transmits to his son the benefits of beauty, strength, wealth, wisdom, and years, and the number of generations preceding him.
>
> *Edeyot* 2:9

A FATHER MAY TRANSMIT these traits to his son, but he also benefits from his son having them. In the area of wisdom, there are many verses that demonstrate this: "A wise son makes a father glad" (Proverbs 10:1). "My son, if your heart is wise, my heart will be glad too" (ibid. 23:15). "The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, and he who begets a wise child will have joy in him. Let your father and mother be glad, and let she who bore you rejoice" (ibid. 23:24-25).

Likewise, physical beauty is an aid to achieving understanding. Again, we find many verses that speak of the beauty of our ancestors: "Joseph was of beautiful form and fair to look

upon" (Genesis 39:6). King David "was a youth and ruddy, and of fair countenance" (I Samuel 17:42).

When the baby Moses was born, his mother "saw that the child was *tov*"[1] (Exodus 2:2). The *Seforno* explain that *tov* means beautiful. She saw that he was more beautiful than normal, and she understood that it was for a purpose known to his Creator, and that it indicated a certain perfection.

Saul, Israel's first king, "was *bahur* and *tov*, and there was not one among the children of Israel a person more *tov* than he; from his shoulders and upward he was taller than any of the people" (I Samuel 9:2). Yonatan ben Uziel translates *bahur* and *tov* as "strong and beautiful." Radak translates it as "beautiful in form and appearance."

In the Talmud, we find the following discussion of the beauty of people: "Said R. Yohanan: I am left of the beautiful ones of Jerusalem . . . . The beauty of Rav Kahana was something of the beauty of R. Abahu, the beauty of R. Abahu was something of the beauty of the Patriarch Jacob, the beauty of the Patriarch Jacob was something of the beauty of Adam."[2]

Likewise, King David said of the Messiah: "You are fairer than the sons of man, grace is poured upon your lips, God has therefore blessed you forever" (Psalms 45:3). While all of these verses contain great depth, nevertheless, their literal meaning also applies. This is because physical beauty is a gateway to spiritual beauty.

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[1] Literally: good.

[2] *Bava Metzia* 84a.

In the *mitzvot* of the Torah, as well, physical beauty is conducive to spiritual beauty. After the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, Israel sang, "This is my God, and I will glorify Him" (Exodus 15:2). From this verse, the Talmud learns: "Make before Him a beautiful sukah, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful *tzitzit*, a beautiful Torah Scroll, and write it for His Name with beautiful ink, with an expert scribe, and wrap it with beautiful silk."[3]

Likewise, in the praise of the Holy Land: "There is no beauty like the beauty of Jerusalem."[4] "Ten measures of beauty descended to the world; Jerusalem took nine, and one went to the rest of the world."[5]

Beauty if so significant that God is praised for it in song: "Beauty and eternity are the Eternal One's."[6] In the holy Song of Songs, which celebrates the love of Israel and its God, physical beauty is used as a symbol of spirituality.[7] And if beauty were not beloved of God, the Rabbis would not have instituted special blessings over beautiful sights—people, trees, or fields: "Blessed . . . is He Who has such in His world."[8] The Talmud relates that Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel once saw an extremely beautiful Gentile. "How great are Your works, O Hashem!" he declared.

Thus the Sages said the father transmits to his son the benefits of beauty, because it is a gateway to the spiritual beauty of the Torah.

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[3] *Shabbat* 133b.

[4] *Avot d'R. Natan* 28a.

[5] *Kiddushin* 49b.

[6] *Hanoi vehanetzah, leHai he'olamim*: from the Shabbat morning prayers.

[7] See Commentary of the Malbim.

[8] *Avodah Zarah* 20a; *Shulhan Aruch, Orah Hayyim* 225:10.

Strength, Wealth, and Wisdom

Strength, wealth, and wisdom may seem to be physical, as it is written, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, nor the mighty man in his might, nor the rich man in his wealth" (Jeremiah 9:22). Yet these traits are also a gateway to spirituality, as our Sages said: "The *Shechinah* rests only on one who is wise, mighty, wealthy, and tall."[9] A different version says "The *Shechinah* rests only on one who is mighty, wealthy, wise, and humble."[10] The trait of humility was added to the list because without it, none of the other qualities have any value. Humility, though, leads to Divine Inspiration, as R. Pinhas ben Yair said: Torah leads to carefulness . . . humility leads to Divine Inspiration."[11]

The Rambam understands wisdom and might to be referring to spiritual traits. "Prophecy rests only on a scholar who is great in wisdom and mighty in character traits; whose evil inclination does not get the better of him, and who has very wide and accurate knowledge."[12]

Years and Number of Generations

Years and number of generations also have value for doing God's will. These are passed from the parents to the child. "There are three partners in man," says the Talmud. "The father and mother give the body, and the Holy One

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[9] *Shabbat* 92a.
[10] *Nedarim* 38a.
[11] *Avodah Zarah* 20b.
[12] Rambam, *Yesodei HaTorah* 7:1; see also *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:54.

gives the soul, the senses and the intelligence."[13] It is known that the human body is composed of four basic elements: fire, air, water and earth. And that these correspond to the four levels of speaking beings, animals, plants and inorganic matter. While man has all of these aspects in him, he is primarily noted for his power of speech. All of these elements combine in man in their choicest forms. For man was created last, on the sixth day; he is the crowning glory of Creation. Thus, the verse says, "You winnowed[14] my going about and my lying down" (Psalms 139:3). This teaches that man is created from the choicest part, says the Talmud, like one who winnows on the threshing floor—he takes the food and leaves the chaff.[15]

The body is composed of 248 limbs and 365 sinews, totalling 613. There are also 613 *mitzvot* of the Torah. This correspondence between man's body and the number of *mitzvot* is not coincidental. Israel's accepting the Torah and striving to fulfill the *mitzvot* causes the physical parts of the body to be refined with a spiritual, holy light. We say, "Blessed are You . . . Who chose us from all the peoples, and gave us His Torah"[16] and "Blessed are You . . . Who has sanctified us with His commandments . . ."[17] for the Torah and *mitzvot* purify the physical side of man. Similarly, on the verse, "I will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried"

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[13] *Nidah* 31a.

[14] The word זרית can mean "to measure" or "to winnow."

[15] *Nidah* 31a.

[16] Morning blessings.

[17] Blessings over a *mitzvah*.

(Zechariah 13:9), our Sages commented: "the *mitzvot* were given only to purify Israel."[18]

Although in body, the people of Israel are the same as the people of other nations, in soul we are different, as we learn from the Scriptures: "For you are a holy people to Hashem your God, and Hashem chose you to be a treasured nation out of all the peoples on the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 14:2). "For as the girdle cleaves to a man's loins, so have I caused the whole house of Israel . . . to cleave to Me . . . to be to Me for a people, a name, and for praise and glory . . ." (Jeremiah 13:11).

The more a person purifies his own body, the more purity he can implant in the body of his child as it is being formed. This is the inner reason for the *mitzvah* of honoring one's parents. It is also the reason why parents love their children.

If a person has been learning Torah and doing *mitzvot* for many years, then in his old age, his body is even more purified. Thus, a child born to an elderly father will be more refined, and the father's love for him will be even greater. This was the case of Jacob's love for Joseph. "Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age" (Genesis 37:3).

In fact, the Talmud admonishes a person to continue having children even in old age: "R. Yehoshua says: He who took a wife in his youth should take a wife in old age; if he had children in his youth, he should have children in his age, as it is written, 'In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand, for you do not know which will

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[18] *Bereishit Rabbah* 54:1.

prosper, whether this or that, or whether both alike shall be good' (Ecclesiastes 11:6). R. Akiva said: He who learns Torah in his youth should learn Torah in his old age. He who produced disciples in his youth should produce disciples in his old age."[19]

Beauty, strength, wealth, wisdom, and years, are the basic benefits that a father transmits to his son in various ways, but particularly by educating him. And the best way to educate him is through the yeshivah. As the Mishnah says, "The more Torah, the more life; the more yeshivah, the more wisdom."[20]

From the earliest times, there have been yeshivot. The very first was the study hall of Shem and Ever, where Jacob studied for fourteen years. There was the Mishkan that Moses made in the wilderness when Israel left Egypt, followed by the Tabernacle in Shilo at the time of Eli and Shmuel. There were also Tabernacles throughout the period of the judges. Then there were the First and Second Temples, followed by the academy established by R. Yohanan ben Zakkai in Yavneh. Later there were yeshivot in Sura and Pumbedita in Babylonia. There were yeshivot throughout the period of the Tannaim and Amoraim, Rabbanan Savorai, Geonim, and Neggidim, until the era of the Beit Yosef in Safed. Until this very day, Israel is shaped spiritually by the yeshivot, from which the light of Torah emanates to the people.

Thus the prophet predicted:

> "It shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of Hashem's house will be established as the top

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[19] *Yevamot* 62b.
[20] *Pirkei Avot* 2:7.

of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills, and all nations shall flow unto it. Then many peoples will go and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of Hashem, to the house of the God of Jacob, and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of Hashem from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:2-3).

4 AND ISRAEL LOVED JOSEPH

"Are not My words like fire, said Hashem, and like a hammer that smashes a rock" (Jeremiah 23:29). A verse of the Torah can be understood in as many ways as there are splinters of a rock smashed by a sledgehammer.[1] In the following chapter, Rabbi Kassin explains one verse in five different ways.

And Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was a son of his old age, and he made him a fine woolen tunic. Genesis 37:3

A Wise Son

"Son of his old age" follows Rashi's translation of *ben zekunim*. But *zaken* can mean "wise" as well as "old," and Rashi

[1] *Shabbat* 88b.

also cites Targum's translation of *zekunim* as "wise." The verse then reads:

> **"Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was a wise son to him, and he made him a fine woolen tunic."**

What connection is there between wisdom and a beautiful garment? Isn't preoccupation with clothing a rather immature trait?

Everyone knows how difficult it is to teach something wise to a person who lacks intelligence, and how enjoyable it is to teach someone who is bright—the wisdom seems to fit him.

The same can be said of clothing. The beauty of fine garments is shown to advantage on a handsome person; whereas an ugly person can make even a golden garment look ugly. Thus Job said, "I put on righteousness, and it clothed itself with me" (Job 29:14). There is a person who is handsome but his garment is not, and there is one whose garment is handsome but he is not. Perfection is achieved when both the wearer and his garment are handsome.[2]

Jacob was wise, and Joseph was wise even compared to Jacob—"he was wise son to *him*." Jacob was therefore pleased to impart to Joseph all the Torah knowledge he had learned in the yeshivah of Shem and Ever.

The Torah is likened to wine, as it is written, "He brought me to the house of wine" (Song of Songs 2:4), and "Come eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mingled" (Proverbs 9:5).

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[2] *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:917.

For Jacob, teaching Joseph Torah was like pouring wine from one perfect bottle to another one, rather than into a vessel that was cracked, broken, or too small. That is why Jacob loved Joseph so intensely.

In order to make known the reason for this love, Jacob made Joseph a fine garment. Since "Joseph was of beautiful form, and fair to look upon" (Genesis 39:6), Joseph's beauty and the beauty of the fine woolen tunic suited one another.

By making the handsome Joseph a handsome garment, Jacob made known the reason that he loved Joseph more than all his children: Joseph himself was wise, and perfectly suited to receive the wisdom that Jacob wished to impart to him.

Love of Torah

Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because (*ki*) he was a son of his old age (*ben zekunim*), and he made him a fine woolen tunic.

"Israel" alludes to the Jewish people, who are called the Children of Israel. Joseph, who "was of beautiful form, and fair to look upon" alludes to the Torah, which is "beautiful as the moon, brilliant as the sun" (Song of Songs 6:10). A Jew should love the Torah more than all his children—more than all things of this world.

The word *ki*, previously translated "because," can also mean "when." The Midrash explains the word *zekunim* as a contraction of *ziv ikunin*, "facial features"; Joseph's features resembled his father's. Thus, the verse can also be read: A

Jewish person (Israel) should love the Torah (Joseph) more than all of his worldly possessions (his children). When a Jew's pursuit of Torah and *mitzvot* resembles his pursuits of worldly acquisitions—when he serves God with as much vigor, ambition, and industriousness as he runs his business—then God will make him a spiritual garment with which to cloak himself in the World to Come.

Wealth Without Toil

> **Israel will love Joseph more than all his children when he resembles him, and [Israel] will make [Joseph] a fine woolen tunic.**

We can explain this by the famous story of Avraham the Proselyte, from *Gan Sha'ashuim*.

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Many generations ago there lived in Jerusalem a carpenter named Avraham. Through honest labor, he acquired wealth, with which he generously helped the poor and fed the hungry.

One day, Avraham locked up his house and took his family on a trip. In their absence, a thief broke in and searched the house until he found the cache where Avraham hid his entire fortune. He took it and began to walk toward a village outside Jerusalem, where he planned to hide it. On the way, he suddenly fell ill, but there was no one around to help him.

The next morning, a young villager named Ephraim found him dead, with the treasure in his clothing. Ephraim buried him and kept the treasure for himself. That night, Ephraim had a dream in which he was commanded to return the treasure to its rightful owner. Rationalizing that it was not he who had stolen the money, Ephraim disregarded the dream and kept the treasure, which he hid in the hollow of a tree trunk.

Time passed, and Ephraim's father died, leaving his house and garden to his only son. During the *shiva*, the village was hit by a fierce storm that destroyed Ephraim's inheritance. The hollow tree, uprooted, floated away in the flood.

A passer-by found the tree trunk and sold it to a carpenter. When Avraham cut up the wood, he found his lost fortune. Joyfully he thanked God.

As Ephraim ruefully surveyed his ruined inheritance, he recalled the dream. Penniless, he went wandering in search of work until he came to Avraham's house. The carpenter agreed to employ him, and Ephraim took up lodgings in Avraham's house.

One day, as they were eating together, Avraham told Ephraim how God had restored his wealth. Ephraim revealed that it was he who had stored the treasure in his tree trunk. "Through you my fortune was saved from the thief," said Avraham. "You shall have a portion of it!"

"I will not take a penny of your treasure," said Ephraim firmly. "I suffered enough already on account of it."

"But I am giving it to you of my own free will," said Avraham. "No harm will befall you."

But Ephraim was adamant in his refusal.

Time passed, and Avraham celebrated the wedding of his son. Since there would be no work for a week, Ephraim decided to go visit his relatives. Avraham, who had been looking for a way to give Ephraim a share of his wealth, instructed his wife to bake a loaf of fine bread, put a hundred gold dinars in it, and give it to Ephraim as food for the road.

As Ephraim was leaving the city, a Jewish guard at the gate saw the loaf and asked Ephraim to sell it to him. The guard subsequently attended the wedding of Avraham's son, and presented the loaf to Avraham as a present. Avraham immediately recognized the loaf, and he understood that God was watching over Ephraim.

After the week of the wedding, Ephraim went back to work for Avraham. The two grew fond of each other. Avraham was mulling over the strange chain of events whereby his wealth was restored through Ephraim, thereby causing Ephraim suffering. Suddenly, he realized that God had shown him the way. He was indeed meant to share his wealth with Ephraim—by taking him for a son-in-law! From here we see that if God wishes to bless a person with wealth in reward for his good deeds, then wealth will pursue him.

This leads to another explanation of the verse above. In the language of Kabbalah, one of the names of God is "Grandfather Israel." If a Jew makes his deeds as beautiful before God as Joseph, who "was of beautiful form, and fair to look upon," then God will bless him with expensive garments and wealth without his having to toil for it.

Names, Language, and Garments

The Sages have said, "Because of three things were our forefathers redeemed from Egypt—they did not change their names, their language, and their garments."

The name of a person reveals something of his essence. This is why parents should give their children names from the Torah and the Talmud, because a spiritual spark from the original person is in the holy name. For this same reason, parents should not give their child an unflattering name, or a non-Jewish one. Preserving their Jewish names was one of the things that brought our forefathers out of Egypt.

Likewise, the Jewish people did not change their language. Jewish children should be taught Hebrew, "the Holy Tongue." This is the language of the Jewish people. The Talmud says, "A covenant was made with the tongue." This corresponds to the covenant of circumcision, for both can bring a person to spiritual purity.[3] Our Sages also said that whoever lives in the land of Israel and speaks the holy tongue is forgiven for all his sins.[4]

Finally, the Jewish people did not change their garments. This teaches us never to abandon any garment of sanctity, such as *tzitzit*, *tefillin*, or clean garments for Shabbat and festivals, all of which protect Israel. This is illustrated in a story about Rabbi Elisha "Baal Kanfaim."

Once, the wicked Roman government issued a decree that any Jew caught wearing *tefillin* would have his head split.

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[3] *Bnei Issachar*.

[4] *Talmud Yerushalmi, Shabbat* 1:3; see *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 5:14.

Rabbi Elisha put them on and went out to the marketplace. An official saw him. Elisha ran from him, and the official ran after him. Before the official caught up with him, Elisha removed the *tefillin* from his head and hid them in his hand.

"What is that in your hand?" the official demanded.

"Wings of a dove," Elisha replied. He opened his hand, and he was indeed holding a dove's wings. That is why he is called Elisha *Baal Kanfaim*—Elisha of the Wings.

Why a dove's wings? Because the Jewish people are compared to a dove, as it is written, "The wings of the dove are covered with silver, and her pinions with the shimmer of gold" (Psalms 68:14). Just as the dove's wings protect it, so do the *mitzvot* protect Israel.[5]

The word *tefillin* is related to the word *pelilah*, "judgment," for a Gentile who wears *tefillin* incurs the death penalty, just like using the King's scepter. The same is true of Shabbat; a gentile who observes the Shabbat incurs the death penalty. These precious *mitzvot* were given to Israel alone, because Israel are considered children of God:

> "Beloved are the people of Israel, for they are called sons of the Omnipresent. It is indicative of an even greater love that it was made known to them that they are called sons of the Omnipresent, as it is written, "You are sons to Hashem your God" (Deuteronomy 14:1).
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> "Beloved are the people of Israel, for a cherished utensil was given to them. It is indicative of an even greater love that it was made known to them that a

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[5] *Shabbat* 49a.

cherished utensil was given to them, as it is written, "For I have given you a good teaching; do not forsake My Torah" (Proverbs 4:2)."[6]

Let us now return to our verse:

Israel loves Joseph more than all his children when he resembles Him, and [Israel] will make [Joseph] a *kutonet passim*.

Kutonet passim, previously translated "a fine woolen tunic," also alludes to the Messianic era, as we deduce from the following Talmudic passage: Rabban Gamliel said, "In the future, the land of Israel will produce loaves of fine bread and garments of fine wool, as it is written, 'There will be *pisat bar* in the land . . ." (Psalms 72:16).[7]

Pisat bar refers to two things: loaves of fine bread, which are wide as the palm (*pas*) of the hand, and garments of fine wool, as in *kutonet passim*.[8]

The people of Israel are called Joseph, as it is written, "These are the descendants of Jacob—Joseph . . ." (Genesis 37:2). God, Who in Kabbalah is called Grandfather Israel, loves us more than the other nations when our deeds resemble the deeds of our holy forefathers, who did not change their names, their language, and their garments. Just as they were redeemed from Egypt in the merit of preserving these three things, so will we be redeemed from this long exile in the merit of preserving these three things; and then

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[6] *Pirkei Avot* 3:18.
[7] *Shabbat* 30b.
[8] *Ibid.*, Rashi.

we will be given the *kutonet passim*—the good that awaits us in the Messianic era.

Self-Control

The Torah commands us: "After Hashem your God you shall walk . . . and to Him shall you cleave" (Deuteronomy 13:5). But can a person cling to the *Shechinah*? It is written, "The Lord your God is a consuming fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24). Rather, the Gemara concludes, we cling to God by following in His ways. Just as He clothes the naked, so should we. Just as He visits the sick, so should we. Just as He comforts the bereaved, so should we.[9]

We are commanded to follow God's attributes; one of which is "might"—which means controlling one's natural tendencies. "Who is mighty? He who conquers his inclination."[10] God restrains His wrath at evildoers and tempers His reaction with kindness.

We, too, should emulate the Creator's self-control by subduing our evil inclination. A person who executes such self-mastery merits to have miracles done for him—that do not detract from his merits. The Talmud relates that R. Hanina ben Dosa came home Friday night and found his daughter sad. When he asked why, she replied that she had mistakenly filled the Shabbat lamps with vinegar instead of oil, and the family would have to sit in darkness. R. Hanina replied, "He Who

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[9] *Sotah* 14a.
[10] *Pirkei Avot* 4:1.

told oil to burn can tell the vinegar to burn." And indeed, the vinegar burned like oil—until Shabbat concluded.[11]

We find that Joseph also subdued his evil inclination, for although he was extremely handsome, he overcame temptation, and did not sin with Potiphar's wife.

Thus the verse says:

> **Israel will love Joseph more than all his children because he emulates Him, and [Israel] will make [Joseph] a fine woolen tunic.**

If a person can be like Joseph, to emulate God and overcome his evil inclination, then the Jewish people will merit the final redemption. God will love us and will make us a special garment—in the rebuilt Temple, the high priest will once again serve dressed in the golden vestments.

May it be speedily in our days. Amen.

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[11] *Od Yosef Hai* on *Ta'anit* 25a.

5 MOSES WENT UP TO GOD

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the sons.

Song of Songs 2:3

ACCORDING TO THE MIDRASH, this verse is speaking of Moses, the servant of God and teacher of all prophets, who merited to ascend to the seven firmaments. Thus it is written, "Moses went up to God" (Exodus 19:3).

When God told Moses to take Israel out of Egypt, Moses replied, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and take the Children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11).

God answered, "Since you humbled yourself by saying 'Who am I,' I swear, I will elevate you and honor you, as it is written, 'The humble shall attain honor' (Proverbs 29:23). I will deliver the entire land of Egypt into your hands, and I will raise you up to My Throne of Glory, and show you all the angels of heaven."

Then God commanded the angel Metatron, Prince of the Countenance, to bring Moses up to heaven with musical lyres and timbrels. Upon seeing the angel, Moses was frightened. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I have been sent by God to bring you up to the Throne of Glory," replied the angel.

"But I am flesh and blood," said Moses, "I cannot look at angels."

The angel turned Moses' face into a flame as bright as the wheels of the Divine Chariot. With fifteen thousand angels on each side, Moses, escorted by the angel, ascended from one firmament to the next. Metatron showed Moses all the supernal windows that join heaven and earth.

"This is the window of prayer, the window of supplication, the window of blessing, the window of famine, the window of poverty, the window of wealth, the window of peace, the window of pregnancy, of birth, of drought, of rainfall, of repentance, of rulership, of famine, of plague, and of healing." There was no end to the number of windows, and in each window, angels stood.

Then he took Moses up to the second firmament, that corresponded to the second day of creation. There Moses beheld an angel 900 miles high, with 500,000 angels of fire and water standing before him. All of them were turned to the *Shechinah* above them and were giving praise to the Holy One.

"What are these?" Moses asked Metatron.

"These are the angels appointed over clouds, and wind and rain. They run to do God's will, then return to praise Him."

"Why are they all standing with their faces turned towards

Hashem?" Moses asked.

"That is the way they have stood since the day of their creation," answered Metatron. The angel took Moses up the third firmament. There stood an angel as tall as the distance of a five hundred year journey. It had a thousand heads, and every head had a thousand mouths, and each mouth had a thousand tongues, and on every tongue, a thousand words. Around him stood ten million angels made of fire and water, and all of them were praising God.

"These are the angels appointed over the trees and fruits," said Metatron.

Moses saw what appeared to be a *Beit HaMikdash* made entirely of fire and precious stones. Inside, angels were praising God.

"These are the angels appointed over the earth, the sun, the moon, and all the stars and constellations," explained Metatron. "And all of them give praise to the Holy One." Metatron took Moses up and up, showing him all the firmaments, until they reached the seventh level. There stood two gigantic angels bound with chains of fire.

"These are Anger and Fury, that God created to serve Him," the angel explained.

"I'm frightened of these," Moses said.

Metatron hugged Moses and carried him in his breast. "Moses, love God and do not fear these angels." Immediately Moses was calmed. Afterwards, he showed Moses a hideous angel with myriads of eyes of fire.

"This is the Angel of Death," Metatron announced. "He is going now to take the soul of a *tzaddik*.

Moses prayed, "May it be Your will, O Lord, not to hand me over to this angel."

Finally, Moses saw the Angel of Torah sitting and teaching the souls in *Gan Eden*. Whereupon Moses said to God, "I will not leave until You give me a good gift."

"My most faithful servant," said God, "I will give My Torah as a gift, as it is written, 'I have given you a good gift; forsake not My Torah' (Proverbs 4:2). And what's more, it will be called the Torah of Moses, as in the verse, 'Remember the Torah of Moses, My servant' (Malachi 3:22).

"I have taken you up through the seven firmaments, revealed to you all my hidden treasures, and given you My Torah. Now go and see the Garden of Eden, which I created for the righteous, and Gehinom, which I created for the wicked."

God commanded Gabriel to show Moses Gehinom. When Moses came, the fire of Gehinom fled.

"Who are you?" asked the angel who is the prince of Gehinom.

"The son of Amram," replied Moses.

"This is not your place," said the prince of Gehinom.

"I have come to see God's might," said Moses.

At God's command, the prince of Gehinom went with Moses like a disciple before his teacher and showed Moses the various places in which the wicked were punished, each suffering in the limb with which he had sinned. Some were being hung from their hair, some from their eyes, some from their tongues. "May it be Your will," prayed Moses, "that you save me and all Israel from these places that I have seen in Gehinom."

"My servant," said God, "I created the Garden of Eden and Gehinom. Whoever does evil descends to Gehinom; whoever does good enters the Garden of Eden. 'I, Hashem, search the heart . . . to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings'" (Jeremiah 17:10).

Gabriel then took Moses to the Garden of Eden. The angels came before him and said, "Your time has not yet come to leave the world."

"I have come to see God's might," he said.

They stood before Moses and praised him, and said, "Fortunate is the people who has such" (Psalms 144:15). The term *shecachah*, "such," is numerically equivalent to *Moshe* (Moses).

The heavenly prince of the Garden of Eden showed Moses the thrones prepared for the righteous, the repentant, and the converts. He saw how they delight in the radiance of the *Shechinah*, each according to his spiritual level.

Moses rejoiced that all this good awaits Israel and exclaimed, "How abundant is Your goodness, which You have hidden away for those who fear You, which you have wrought for those who take refuge in You in the sight of the sons of men!" (Psalms 31:20).

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Moses saw the reward of the righteous and punishment of the wicked. We too should remember this when we are tempted to sin. Let us also bear in mind that this world is fleeting; we should hasten to prepare ourselves for eternity before it is too late.

6 On Dying Young

I delivered this sermon before the congregation in honor of Rabbi Moshe Maravi, a learned and pious scholar who passed away young in years. May his soul be bound in the source of life. May he know no more suffering, and may all misfortune flee. Amen.

"God has set at nought all my mighty men in the midst of me; He has called a solemn assembly against me to crush my young men; God has trodden as in a winepress the maiden of Judah" (Lamentations 1:15). The Midrash explains that "He has called a solemn assembly against me to crush my young men" refers to the death of youths; "God has trodden as in a winepress the maiden of Judah" refers to the destruction of the Temple. From the juxtaposition of the two, we learn that "the

death of youths is as tragic for the Holy One, blessed be He, as the destruction of the Temple."[1]

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A CRY IS HEARD in the heights,
weeping and lamentation,
a time to mourn the passing
of a beloved young man.
I will cry and lament for this cherished treasure.
Let the congregation join me,
all the kind men who have gathered,
to mourn and sigh in bitter lament,
over this tender sprout.
A holy seed, a precious bud,
with the Tree of Life in his heart.
Go and hear what the world is saying,
he was beloved above and below.
Moshe has departed.

A cry of affliction for Israel,
may the Lord hear their wailing,
in the first month of the year,
in the month of the mighty.
In the presence of the elders and rabbis,
I will deliver this painful eulogy.
It is a time of distress of Jacob,

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[1] *Midrash Eichah* 1:44.

and sorrow for the congregation,
when those who fear Him tremble.
My heart trembles to stir the fire,
I go along and cry over he whom God has taken,
For God mourns the passing of the righteous,
as the wise will relate,
and even more over young men.
What does the *Shechinah* bitterly lament?
My head and arms hurt me,
I am covered with wounds.
I will shed tears over him,
over the beauty that is lost to the earth,
Moshe has departed.

The voice of Jacob, words spoken bitterly
with a crushed and broken heart.
One month ago, this man Moshe was taken;
the splendor of our eyes,
the fire of our bones.[2]

* * *

The importance of mourning the death of the righteous is well known. This is even truer when one mourns the passing of outstanding young men, for their deaths are as painful to the Holy One as the destruction of the Temple. The Zohar teaches the importance of rising at midnight to weep over the Tem-

[2] This is an abridged version of R. Kassin's long, poetic introduction.

ple's destruction. If a person bewails the destruction, it is as if he is comforting God, and participating in the sorrow of the *Shechinah*. So too, when a person mourns the death of a youth, it is as if he comforts God, and joins in the *Shechinah's* pain.

This being the case, how much pain must we feel as we eulogize the fine young man over whom we have assembled. The few words which we will say are not only for his benefit, but for the benefit of the living as well. As the Talmud says, "If a person cries over [the death of] a good man, all of his sins are forgiven . . . . God counts those tears and stores them in his treasury."[3] Likewise, when a Torah scholar dies, the whole community is required to mourn him.[4] And the Tanna, Rabbi Yehudah, would even interrupt Torah study to attend a eulogy.[5]

But now we must ask a question. Why do the righteous die young? One possible answer is that a person is not *punished* for what he did, but for what he will do in the future. Thus taking a *tzaddik* before his time lest he sin is not a punishment; it is for his own good. The Gemara states that a wayward son (*ben sorer umoreh*) is punished in his youth because there are indications that he is heading for trouble: "Better that he die innocent than die guilty."[6]

Another advantage a *tzaddik* has from dying young is that as long as the soul is connected to a physical body, it cannot

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[3] *Shabbat* 105b.
[4] *Kallah, perek* 6.
[5] *Ketuvot* 17a.
[6] *Sanhedrin* 71b.

attain the spiritual delight that befits it in the eternal world.[7] Sometimes there is a young *tzaddik* who has already rectified most of his flaws in a previous lifetime. There is not much left for him to do in this lifetime; and as soon as he completes his rectification, God takes him, for he himself has no need or desire to remain here.[8]

The Fruit of One's Deeds

But what about when a young man dies without leaving behind children? That certainly seems unfair. The Talmud states: "Whoever does not leave a son to inherit him causes the Holy One to be filled with wrath, as it is written, 'That day is a day of wrath . . .' (Zephaniah 1:15)."[9] And that R. Yehoshua would not go to the house of mourning except for one who died without children.[10]

The answer is that the Torah study and good deeds of a *tzaddik* are considered his offspring. The Midrash says that when a *tzaddik* leaves this world without children, he grieves and weeps.

"Are you weeping because you have not produced children, the fruit of this world?" asks the Holy One. "You have better fruit than children."

"Master of the world," says the person, "What fruit did I produce that is better than children?"

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[7] *Baal Akediah*.
[8] Ari z'l, *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*.
[9] *Bava Batra* 116a.
[10] *Bava Batra* 141a.

God replies, "*Mitzvot*, good deeds, and Torah." Thus it is written, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life" (Proverbs 11:30). It does not say "the children of the righteous," but "the fruit of the righteous."[11]

This explains why the Tanna, Ben Azai, never married. His children were the fruits of his Torah study, since he so deeply desired to learn it.[12] He gave birth to "spiritual" children—the angels that came into being through his *mitzvot* and study. When such a person dies, these children come out to greet him, saying, "Let him enter into peace. Let them rest on their beds, each one that walks in his uprightness" (Isaiah 57:2). In a way they are better than flesh-and-blood children, over whom the father does not have control, and who, if they are wicked, may cause the father to enter Gehinom.

To Their Benefit

Now we can explain the Midrash above: "He has called a solemn assembly against me to crush my young men; God has trodden as in a winepress the maiden of Judah." Why is the death of young men likened to the treading of grapes in a winepress? Grapes are destroyed for their own benefit: to produce wine, which is of much greater value and has its own unique blessing (*borei pri hagafen*). Similarly, the death of innocent youths is to their benefit, for having completed their rectification, as the Ari z'l wrote, they ascend to delight in the radiance of the *Shechinah*. Similarly, with the destruction of the

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[11] *Midrash Tanhuma, Noah* 2.

[12] See *Shulhan Aruch, Even Ezer* 1:4.

Temple, the wood and stones were destroyed, but the *Shechinah* was released and Israel was saved from annihilation.

To what can we compare the destruction of the Temple, and the death of young men? It is like a beautiful silk robe that suddenly tears. How painful for its owner—a noble man—to have to wear an ugly, rough garment, instead. So too, in the Temple's destruction, the *Shechinah* was exiled and defilers entered God's Sanctuary. "For a slave has become a king . . . and a handmaid has become heir to her mistress" (Proverbs 30:23).

The Heart of the Nation

And so, we have gathered together to cry over the passing of this young *tzaddik.* Our sages have said that whoever is lax about mourning a Hacham deserves to be buried alive.[13] Now, this statement needs explanation. Why does this transgression warrant such a severe penalty, and what connection is there between laxness and being buried alive?

An answer is found in the writings of the Mahariya. He quotes the Talmud, that states that the death of a righteous man atones for the entire generation.[14] This is because the entire Jewish people is pained by his death. This is like the old practice of drawing blood for health reasons. The incision is made in the arm, but the blood is drawn out from all parts of the body. Likewise, all the Jewish people are bound to the

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[13] *Shabbat* 105b.
[14] *Mo'ed Katan* 28a.

tzaddik, and all of them suffer and are atoned through his death.[15]

However, if a person is lax in mourning the death of the *tzaddik*, it means that he has not felt the pain of his passing, and will not experience atonement. Then, "blood" has to be let from each separate organ—that is, from the life of that individual Jew. He therefore deserves to be buried alive.

Another explanation could be according to the *Bnei Benyamim.* He writes that just as the heart is the source of life for the body, the *tzaddik* is the source of life for the entire Jewish nation. As the Talmud says, "The entire world is nourished through the merit of Honi HaMagel."[16] When God sanctifies Himself through the death of the *tzaddik*—who is like the heart—then holiness spreads out through the entire Jewish people, who are like the rest of the body.

However, if a person does not mourn the death of the tzaddik, it shows that he was not connected to the "heart" of the people, and he will not be sanctified. He is like a dead limb, that gets no sustenance from the heart. Thus, he deserves to be buried alive.

We can find this alluded to in the verse, "The righteous one perishes, and no man takes it to heart; men of kindness are lacking . . ." (Isaiah 57:1). If people do not feel pain at the death of the *tzaddik*, it shows that they were not connected to him. They were not "one body," and the *tzaddik*, the heart, was not in the middle. And even though there were men of kindness,

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[15] This parable to bloodletting is from the Zohar.

[16] *Ta'anit* 24b.

implying that people indeed felt committed to one another, so long as they did not mourn the *tzaddik*, they were not really united and will not be atoned through his death.

Tzaddik and Hasid

> King David said, "Preserve my soul, for I am devout (*hasid*)" (Psalms 86:2). Levi and Rabbi Yitzhak—one said, "David said to God, 'Am I not devout? All the kings of the world sleep until 9:00, but I rise at midnight to give praise to You.' The other said, "David said to God, "Am I not devout? All the kings of the world sit in dignity, surrounded by their ministers and courtiers, but my hands are stained with blood [of *niddah*] and after-birth, [which I examine] in order to permit a woman to her husband."
>
> *Berachot* 4a.

The argument here is over which *tzaddikim* are taken away for the sins of the generation. The first opinion cited in the Gemara gives an example of righteousness in matters between man and God—"I arise at midnight to give thanks to You." According to this opinion, even one who is righteous only toward God is taken for the sins of the generation. The second opinion gives an example of righteousness toward man—"my hands are soiled with blood in order to permit a woman to her husband." According to this opinion, only one who is righteous toward both man and God is taken for the sins of the generation.[17] Since the righteous are taken for the sins of the genera-

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[17] R. Hayyim Moshe Eliashar, *Moshe HaIsh*, citing *Bnei Binyamin*.

tion, David prayed: Guard my soul, and do not take it for the sins of the generation, although I am devout.

A different interpretation is based on the linguistic link between *hesed*," kindness," and *hasid*, "devout." "The man of kindness does good to his own soul" (Proverbs 11:17). A man of kindness saves his soul from being taken for the sins of the generation. For the verse says "the righteous one perishes (*tzaddik*)," not "the devout one perishes (*hasid*)." Thus King David said, "Keep my soul, for I am devout," and should therefore not be taken for the sins of the generation.

Sunrise, Sunset

"The sun rises, and the sun sets" (Ecclesiastes 1:5).

The Midrash sees in this verse a promise that generation after generation, God will always send a new *tzaddik* to replace one that He takes from us:

> R. Abba bar Kahana said: Do we not know that the sun rises and the sun sets? Rather, [the verse is telling us that] before the Holy One, blessed be He, causes the sun of one *tzaddik* to set, He causes the sun of another *tzaddik* to rise. On the day R. Akiva died, R. Yehudah HaNassi was born . . . . Before He caused Moses' sun to set, He caused Joshua's sun to rise . . . . Before the Holy One, blessed be He, caused Sarah's sun to set, He caused Rebecca's sun to rise.[18]

This being the case, why do we have to mourn the death of a *tzaddik*?

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[18] *Bereishit Rabbah* 58:2.

R. Hayyim Moshe Eliashar writes a very moving answer. This Midrash only applies to earlier generations—when Torah study was their sole occupation. When people were filled with awe of God and engrossed in Torah and *mitzvot* day and night. But today, the youngsters study secular subjects, adults are engrossed in pursuit of livelihood. The holy Torah is abandoned and no one cares about the World to Come. From where shall we get more *tzaddikim* to replace those we have lost? It doesn't seem like it will ever be possible.[19]

I heard a further explanation from another great rabbi. It's true that in every generation, the world will have at least thirty-six *tzaddikim*.[20] The trouble is, when one *tzaddik* dies, the next *tzaddik* may be born in a distant place, and so there will be a lack in the native land of the *tzaddik* who died. Thus it is written, "Weep sorely [literally, "weep you shall weep"] for he who goes away, for he shall no more return and see his native land" (Jeremiah 22:10). Although another *tzaddik* has surely been born, for "the sun rises, and [only afterward] the sun sets," the new *tzaddik* may be born in a different land.[21] Similarly, even if a new *tzaddik* is born before the old one dies, the new *tzaddik* may still be a child, and the world will be lacking his influence until he grows up.[22]

This is what the verse means, "The righteous one perishes, and no man takes it to heart." No one cares enough

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[19] *Moshe HaIsh*.
[20] *Sanhedrin* 97b.
[21] *Yefeh Anaf*, citing R. S. Yafeh.
[22] *Ibid. drush* 3.

to strengthen and support the students of Torah, so that we will have a replacement for the *tzaddik* who died. Few study Torah, and "and men of kindness" who would have supported them "are lacking." No one thinks that the *tzaddik* may have been taken away because of our misdeeds. We mustn't say, "The sun also rises"—a new *tzaddik* will arise—for the next *tzaddik* may be born in a different land. It is incumbent upon each person of means to support the Torah scholars and strengthen Torah study in order to ensure the replacement of the lost *tzaddik*.

Rejoicing Above

Despite all we have said until now—about the great tragedy of the death of the righteous—the Talmud nevertheless states that "there is joy before the Holy One, blessed be He, when the righteous depart."[23] And the *Idra Zuta* describes the tremendous joy at the passing of R. Shimon bar Yohai.[24] Is the death of the righteous a tragic occasion or a joyous one?

The explanation is that there are two aspects of the death of the righteous.

For the *tzaddik* himself, whose soul returns to the *Shechinah*, there is tremendous joy. After all, the very reason man enters this world to begin with is in order to earn the right, through Torah and *mitzvot*, to bask in the radiance of the *Shechinah*; this delight is then a well earned-reward, rather than a gift of charity. Therefore when the soul of the *tzaddik*

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[23] *Mo'ed Katan* 25b.

[24] *Zohar, Ha'azinu* 296b.

returns to God, God rejoices, and the righteous themselves rejoice upon leaving this world and entering the World to Come, as it is written, "She rejoices on the last day" (Proverbs 31:25). But we, the people of the *tzaddik*'s generation, have lost our glory, our guide, and our leader. God, Who is with us in all our troubles, grieves for us. Thus joy and grief are simultaneous.[25]

Repentance

Finally, my masters and teachers, I come to the end of my sermon. Let us return once more to the Midrash with which we started. "The death of youths is as tragic for the Holy One, blessed be He, as the destruction of the Temple." The Temple was destroyed because of our sins; and when we return to God with all our hearts, it will be restored, as it is written, "Return to Me, and I will return to you" (Malachi 3:7). The death of a young *tzaddik* is because of the sins of the generation, and when we return to God with all our hearts, the redemption will come, and he will be restored to us in the Resurrection of the Dead.

"If I forget you, Jerusalem, let me forget my right hand" (Psalms 137:5). Although the Holy Temple is destroyed, we do not forget it, but pray day and night for its reconstruction. Likewise, we must always remember the passing of our young men, and to bemoan our loss. Our mourning will be an atonement for the generation. Then we will merit the redemption and the dead will rise.

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[25] Attributed to the Mahariya.

May it be God's will that in the merit of this tzaddik, the prayers of his family and of the entire congregation should be answered. May God bless us with a good new year, and may we be written in the Book of Life. And may we merit to see the coming of the righteous redeemer soon in our time. Amen.

7
EISHET HAYYIL/ WOMAN OF VALOR

The promise that the Holy One gave to the women is greater than to the men, as it is written, "Rise, you tranquil women, and hear my voice; you confident daughters, listen to my speech" (Isaiah 32:9).[1]

Rav asked R. Hiyya: How do women merit [the World to Come]? [He answered]: They bring their sons to the synagogue [to learn Torah]; they agree to their husbands' going to the *beit midrash;* and they wait for their husbands to come home from the *beit midrash.*

Berachot 17a

THE MIDRASH TELLS US that when the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt, it was the righteous woman of the

[1] Isaiah call them tranquil and confident, descriptions we do not find applied to men (Rashi).

time that upheld the spirit of the generation and paved the way for the redemption. The Egyptians, in order to prevent the Israelites from having children, ordered the men to work and sleep in the fields. But the women sabotaged the plan. They would go out to draw water, and the Holy One, blessed be He, would half fill their pails with little fish. They would go home and put two pots on the fire, one of fish and one of water, which they then brought to their fatigued husbands. They washed their husbands, anointed them, served them food and drink, and consorted with them. Thus it is written, "When you sleep between the pots, the dove's wings are covered with silver" (Psalms 68:14). In the merit of "sleeping between the pots," Israel was given the gold and silver of Egypt.[2]

These traits of perseverance and dedication that the women showed in Egypt is hinted to in the above verse, "Rise you *tranquil* women." The word tranquil, in Hebrew, is *sha'ananot*, which is an acronym of ***SHe'ainan Nachot Tamid***, "who never rest," an allusion to women who tirelessly provide their husbands with food, water, and clean clothing.

This is what Rav was asking Rabbi Hiyya: Certainly women deserve a lot of credit. They fulfill many *mitzvot*, and among them, *mitzvot* over which they are not commanded. But why should this give them more merit than men?

Rabbi Hiyya answered that just as the women worked hard to bring about the redemption from Egypt, so too today, by bringing their children to schools to learn Torah, and supporting their husbands in their studies, they are bringing

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[2] *Sotah* 11b.

about the future redemption. As the Talmud states, "Whoever learns Torah selflessly, brings redemption into the world."[3]

It was for this reason that God gave the Torah first to the women. "Moses went up to God, and God called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob, and tell the Children of Israel" (Exodus 19:3). "The Children of Israel" refers to the men. "The House of Jacob" refers to the women.[4] God told Moses to instruct the women before the men because women "are quick to do *mitzvot*" and "so that they will guide their children to Torah."[5] For women take care of their husbands and children so that they will be able to keep the Torah.

Faithful to God

And even after the giving of the Torah, when the men made the Golden Calf, the women refused to take part.

The Midrash explains that when the Israelites asked Aaron to make them a god, he tried to stall by telling them: "Break off the golden rings that are in the ears of your wives . . . and bring them to me" (Exodus 32:2). The men went and asked their wives for the golden rings, but the women refused to give them. So the men donated their own gold, as the next verse tells us, "All the people broke off the golden rings which were in *their* ears,[6] and brought them to Aaron."[7] Thus, we see that

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[3] *Sanhedrin* 99b.

[4] The Hebrew word *bayit*, which means both "house" and "home," refers to the woman who makes the home (*Etz Yosef*).

[5] *Midrash Rabbah* 28:2.

[6] I.e., the men, not the women.

the dedication and loyalty of women to Hashem never left them; it remains with them until today.

In praise of such righteous women, King Solomon wrote *Eishet Hayyil*—"A Woman of Valor" (Proverbs 31:10-31). Thus, the Midrash states: "If a man marries a righteous woman, it is as if he fulfilled the entire Torah from *aleph* to *tav*. For this reason, *Eishet Hayyil* is written according to the twenty-two letters of the *aleph-beit*." If a man marries a righteous woman, she will support his studies and help him fulfill the Torah in its entirety.

* * *

Eishet Hayyil

A woman of valor who can find? Her value is far beyond pearls.

Gold or rubies that are found must be guarded; the finder must take care of the find. A woman of valor is far more valuable; she is a find that will take care of the finder.

Her husband's heart trusts her, and he lacks no gain.

He trusts that she is righteous and will not take him away from Torah study, which is the most important gain.

She does him good and not evil all the days of her life.

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[7] *Tanhuma, Ki Tisa* 19.

The Torah is called "good", for it is much better than the material world. She gives her husband peace of mind that enables him to study Torah.

She seeks wool and flax, and works willingly with her hands.

She contributes to the family income so that her husband's mind will not be clouded by worry.

She is like the merchant ships; she brings her bread from afar.

Even from afar, she brings food to her husband so that he will not have to stop learning.

She rises while it is yet night, and gives food to her household and a portion to her maidens.

She teaches her family to be industrious like herself.

She looks well to the ways of her house, and eats not the bread of laziness.

She looks well to the ways of her family so that they will prosper in the eternal world. She is not lax in the fulfillment of Torah, which is likened to bread, as in, "Come eat my bread" (Proverbs 9:5).

Her children rise up and praise her; her husband, and he lauds her.

Her husband and children praise her for helping them to fulfill the Torah. Therefore:

Many daughters have done valiantly, but you have surpassed them all. Give her the fruit of her hands, and let her deeds praise her in the gates.

In the world of truth, she will take her rightful portion; and her deeds praise her in the gates to the Garden of Eden.

8 AN ALLEGORY

The Torah can be interpreted on various levels, all of which are true. Here, a Mishnah that teaches halachah is looked at from an allegorical point of view.

From when is the *Shema* of the night read? From the time that the priests enter to eat their *terumah* [priestly portions], until the end of the first watch, according to R. Eliezer. But the Sages say: Until midnight. Rabban Gamliel says: Until dawn breaks.

It happened that [Rabban Gamliel's] sons came from a banquet. They said to him, "We have not read *Shema*." He said to them, "If dawn has not broken, you are required to read. Moreover, whenever the Sages said, 'Until midnight,' the *mitzvah* applies until dawn. The burning of fats and limbs—the *mitzvah* is until dawn; all [sacrifices] that are eaten in one day, the *mitzvah* is until dawn. If so, why did the Sages say, 'until midnight?' To distance a person from sin.

Berachot 1:1

THE *SHEMA* is a declaration of our faith in God and our acceptance of His will. We are required to read it every morning and every evening. The Sages referred to *Shema* as "acceptance of the yoke of Heaven." "Night" is an allusion to this world, which is a place of spiritual darkness compared to the World to Come. The Mishnah is asking: "From when is the *Shema* of the night read?"—from when is a person in this world required to fulfill the *mitzvot*?

The Mishnah answers: "From the time that the priests enter to eat their priestly portions"—from the time that a girl or boy turns twelve or thirteen and is obligated in *mitzvot*. Through these *mitzvot* and good deeds, the souls, which the Zohar refers to as "daughters of priests" rightfully earn their portion in the World to Come, where they will delight in the radiance of the *Shechinah*.

"Until the end of the first watch, according to R. Eliezer." Just as the night is divided into four units, called "watches," so is a person's life in this world. If a person did not accept the *mitzvot* at the age of thirteen, he can still do so until the end of the first watch, that is, the age of twenty. The teen years are an ideal time for a man to devote himself to Torah study, for he is still free and independent. Thereafter, learning becomes more difficult, for he marries and must support his wife and children.

However, "The Sages say: Until midnight." If half of his life has not yet passed, he can still repent. Afterwards, repentance is much harder.

"Rabban Gamliel says: Until dawn breaks." The name *Gamliel* is related to *gemilut hasadim*, "doing kindness." God in

His kindness allows a person to repent until the very end of his life in this world of night, for nothing stands in the way of repentance.

"It happened that his sons came from the banquet," where the evil inclination is particularly strong. "They said to him, 'We have not read *Shema.*'" We have sinned, and have not yet repented. Is rectification still possible?

"He said to them, 'If dawn has not broken, you are required to read.'" As long as you live, rectification is still possible. But when night—life on this earth—ends, the obligation to fulfill *mitzvot* ceases.

"Moreover, whenever the Sages said, 'Until midnight,' the *mitzvah* applies until dawn." A person can repent up until his death even for the most serious transgressions. "There are some who acquire their share in the World to Come in one hour."[1]

"The burning of fats and limbs—the *mitzvah* is until dawn." Up until his death, a person can repent by fasting or affliction, which consume his fat and limbs.

"All that are eaten in one day, the *mitzvah* is until dawn breaks." "One day" is the World to Come, which is to this world as day is to night. All *mitzvot*, the reward for which is "eaten," or enjoyed, in the World to Come, can be performed until the very end of one's life. Thus it is written, "In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand, for you know not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether both alike shall be good" (Ecclesiastes 11:6).

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[1] See *Avodah Zarah* 10b. The Gemara tells the story of R. Elazar ben Dardaya who repented of his sins in the last moments of his life, and was immediately accepted into heaven.

"If so, why did the Sages say, 'until midnight?' To distance a person from sin." The Sages said that a person has until the middle of his life to repent because they wanted to distance people from sin. After a person has spent over half his life sinning, it becomes very difficult for him to return to God, for he has become steeped in impurity. It may require suffering in the form of financial losses, problems with his children, or bodily affliction to arouse him to repent.

If a person does not repent, he brings disaster upon himself and upon the entire world, as the Mishnah states: "A person who sins pushes the entire world to the side of debt. But a person who does a *mitzvah*, pushes the entire world to the side of merit."[2] He not only brings benefit to himself, but to all those who depend upon him.

King Solomon therefore advised: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (Ecclesiastes 12:1). But it is never too late. Let us return to God, for He is very forgiving (Isaiah 55:7).

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[2] *Kiddushin* 40b.

9 INTRODUCTION TO PRAYER

All Jewish prayer services revolve around the Shemonah Esreh, a prayer recited while standing. In the following chapter, Rabbi Kassin explains the first few words of this prayer.

> Blessed are You, Hashem, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, the great, mighty, and awesome God . . .
>
> Beginning of *Shemonah Esreh*

Blessed Are You

The *Shemonah Esreh* prayer begins with an expression that seems highly inappropriate. How can we call God *Baruch*, "Blessed," when He does not receive blessings from anyone; it is He Who gives out blessing! And how can we address Him so familiarly, as "You"?

R. Shimon bar Yohai explained that the word *Baruch* does not mean "Blessed," as it is commonly translated, but rather, "Source of all blessings."[1]

This explanation also accounts for the problematic "You." Even though God is hidden, and exists in a dimension totally above this world, as the prayer says, "And the dwelling place of His might is in the highest heights,"[2] nevertheless, He directs over His creation, and can be perceived through the deeds and wonders He performs for us. Thus we say "You," as if we see Him and address Him directly. *Hovot HaLevavot* compares God's relationship with the world to the soul in the body. Just as the effect of the soul is felt on the body although the soul itself is not seen, so is the effect of God felt on the world although He Himself is not seen.

We bend our knees when we pronounce the word *baruch*, "Source of all blessings," and bow when we say *Atah*, "You." Why?

The Rambam wrote[3] that in the days of Enosh, humanity made a mistake and thought that God wanted man to worship His servants, such as the sun and moon, for by honoring the king's servants, one honors the king. They built temples in which they bowed down to the stars and constellations in order to draw down their blessing. That is why the Torah warns, "Lest you raise your eyes heavenward, and see the sun and the moon, and you go astray and bow down to them" (Deuteronomy 4:19).

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[1] *Tikunei Zohar.*
[2] *Aleynu* prayer.
[3] *Mishnah Torah: Hilchot Avodah Zarah 1:1.*

They bowed down to the stars to draw down blessing from them. But God wants us to bow down to Him in order to demonstrate that He is the Source of all blessings and to show that we attach ourselves to His Name, as it is written, "For the portion of Hashem is His people" (Deuteronomy 32:9). We therefore bend our knees and bow while saying, *Baruch Atah*, "You are the Source of all blessings."

Hashem

Upon saying God's Name—Hashem—we slowly rise.

Bowing, or bending the spine, is significant because the spine is crucial to life. By bowing to God, we indicate that our life and prosperity depends on the Source of all blessings. We bend down quickly to show our desire to accept His service, and rise slowly to show our reluctance to leave it.

Another reason we rise upon pronouncing God's Name is to show our desire to cleave to His Name in this world and the next. In this world, the great and holy four-letter Name known as the Tetragrammaton (which we translated "Hashem") is not pronounced as written; it is pronounced like a lesser Name meaning "the Lord." But in the world to come it will be pronounced as it is written. Man's ultimate purpose is for his soul to cleave to the great Name in the World to Come, for God's Name is the source of the souls, as it is written, "For the portion of Hashem is His people." This can only be achieved slowly, through acquiring good character traits little by little; we therefore rise slowly.

Our God, and God of Our Fathers

The Ravad wrote that the Sages instituted that we say

"Our God, and God of our fathers" in the beginning of *Shemonah Esreh* in order to draw awe of heaven upon ourselves.

We should realize that although human beings are almost nothing when compared to the vastness of the universe, it is still possible to relate to God, and to have His Name called upon us. The Patriarchs cleaved to God always, even though they were locked in physical bodies. Thus, it is appropriate that He be called their God: God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob. We, too, are commanded to achieve this high level and to cleave to God. At least during prayer, we should clear our minds of the follies of this world and attach our thoughts to God. Then God will be with us, as King David told his son Solomon, "And you, Solomon, my son, know the God of your father and serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind, for Hashem searches all hearts, and understands all the imaginations of the thoughts; if you seek Him, He will be found for you; but if you forsake Him, He will cast you off forever" (I Chronicles 28:9).

After saying "our fathers" in general, we specify each Patriarch by name. This is because the souls of the righteous preceded the creation of the world, as our Sages say, "The Holy One, blessed be He, showed Adam each generation and its leaders." Before they entered this world, the souls of the three Patriarchs were bound together in the supernal world, like the Hebrew vowel *segol*, which is composed of three dots, ∴ . This is hinted to in God's words to Israel, "You shall be to me a treasure—*segulah*—from among all peoples" (Exodus 19:5). At that point, none of the Patriarchs had an independent identity. Only upon entering this world would

each be free to choose his own way. Then God's Name and Presence would dwell upon each one according to the path he had chosen, and God would be called "the great, mighty, and awesome God."

God of Abraham

"The world was built on lovingkindness"
(Psalms 89:3)

Abraham chose the way of loving-kindness, which is one of the Divine attributes. "As long as Abraham was in the world, I did not have to do My work" the *Sefer HaBahir* quotes God as saying. "For Abraham took My place and fulfilled My role. I bestow goodness upon the world—even to the undeserving—and plant thoughts of repentance in their hearts that they might return to Me. All this Abraham did, as it is written, 'He planted an *eshel*[4] in Be'er Sheva, and called upon the Name of the Lord' (Genesis 21:33). He gave of his bread to everyone, and spoke to them persuasively, saying, 'What are you waiting for? Serve Hashem, God of heaven and earth.' And they would return [to God]. He also had compassion for the guilty, as it is written, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I will do [to Sodom]? (Genesis 18:17). Rather, I will give tell him so that he will pray for mercy for them.'"[5]

Since Abraham adopted God's attribute of lovingkindness, He is called "God of Abraham."

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[4] Acronym of *achilah, shtiyah, linah* — food, drink, and shelter.
[5] *Sefer HaBahir.*

God of Isaac

Isaac chose to conquer his evil inclination and stretch out his neck for slaughter. He proclaimed to the world that there is a Judge and there is justice above. God will punish the wicked, so that all people of the world would fear Him[6]. And yet, the Holy One restrains his judgment, as it is written, "It came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of [Sodom and Gemorrah], that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt" (Genesis 19:29). Even at a time of strict retribution, God remembered Abraham, and saved Lot.

"Who is mighty? He who restrains his inclination."[7] Because God restrained his wrath and allowed room for mercy to do its work, He is called "mighty."

Isaac, too, adopted God's attribute of might. He restrained his feelings and stretched out his neck for the slaughter when his father bound him on the altar. That is why we say, "God of Isaac," for He holds back His judgment.

God of Jacob

"Jacob was a simple man, dwelling in tents [of Torah study]" (Genesis 25:27). Jacob chose Torah study, which is "equivalent to them all"[8] It includes deeds of kindness and enables a person to conquer his inclination.

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[6] *Zohar Lech Lecha.*
[7] *Pirkei Avot* 4:1.
[8] *Shabbat* 127a.

The entire world exists because of Torah study, as it is written, "If not for My covenant [the Torah being studied] day and night, I would not have set the laws of heaven and earth" (Jeremiah 33:25). Even in exile, the Jewish people continue their study. And the final redemption will come about because of Torah study, as it is written, "Remember the Torah of My servant Moses, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, statutes and laws. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of Hashem" (Malachi 3:22-23).

All of this is included in the term "God of Jacob."

Great, Mighty, and Awesome

We then repeat the concept that the Patriarchs emulated God by saying "the great, mighty, and awesome God." "Great" alludes to Abraham, who, through his kindness, made God's greatness known in the world. "God's kindness is all day" (Psalms 52:3). "Mighty" alludes to Isaac, who conquered his feelings and stretched out his neck for slaughter. "Awesome" alludes to Jacob, who, after the vision of the ladder to heaven said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17).

In the *Shemonah Esreh*, we mention our fathers, upon whom God rested His Presence, in order to inspire ourselves to follow in their ways. The word *Gibor*, "mighty," also reminds us to adhere to the characteristic traits of of the Jewish people, of which *Gibor* is an acronym : ***Gomlei hasadim***, "doers of kindness"; ***Bayshanim***, "bashful"; and ***Rahmanim***, "merciful."

Awesome

God is called *Nora*, "awesome," which implies that we should fear Him: fear to sin, fear that we have not met our obligations to Him, and awe of His presence.

We should fear to transgress His will, and thereby cause Him anger and sorrow. We know that sinning causes God grief, because of the generation of the Flood it is written, "Hashem saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth . . . and regretted that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart" (Genesis 6:5-6). God grieves, saying, "Did I created man to violate My will?" But when Israel fulfills God's will, He rejoices. "[God] said to me, "You are My servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (Isaiah 49:3).

We should fear that we have not met all our obligations to Him, for His kindness far exceeds anything we do in return throughout our lives. The Sages say that the very fact that the sun shines upon us each day is sufficient reward for our good deeds. Thus we pray: "Were our mouth full of song as the sea, our tongue full of song as its multitude of waves, our lips full of praise as the wide heavens, our eyes luminous as the sun and moon, our hands outspread as eagles of the sky, and our feet as swift as hinds—we still could not thank You enough."[9]

Most important of all is to come to a realization of His greatness, and to perceive ourselves as nothing compared to Him. This is an awe which leads to fear of sin, for how can a person go against His will? And this is what God asks of us: "And now, Israel, what does Hashem your God ask of you, but

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[9] *Nishmat*, Shabbat morning prayers.

only to fear Hashem your God, and to go in His way . . ." (Deuteronomy 10:12). This fear stems from love. It is the fear Jacob experienced when he slept on the future site of the Temple, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God" (Genesis 28:17). It is similar to the fear that servants feel for their king.[10]

We should have this fear in the synagogue, which is a miniature Holy Temple, a resting place of His Presence, as it is written, "They shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). In the synagogue, we should talk little and feel as if we are standing before the King of Kings. We should prepare ourselves, know before whom we are standing and praying, and concentrate on the meaning of the words, for God tests the heart.

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[10] *Totzot Hayyim*.

10 IN PRAISE OF SONG

SONG AND PRAISE,[1] melody and ballad are the very foundation of holiness and prophecy. We see this throughout the Torah: in the Song of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1), and the Song of the Well (Numbers 21:17). We know that divine inspiration only rested upon the prophets amidst melody and song. As the verse says, "And Elisha said . . . now bring me a minstrel. And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him" (II Kings, 3:14,15). This is the reason why our master, King David, composed the Book of Psalms, and why his son Solomon wrote the Song of Songs, for music is a remarkable agent for drawing down divine inspiration.

The angels and seraphim also sing songs of praise and worship to the Creator. The Men of the Great Assembly added

[1] Written to the author of *Shir u'Shevach, Hallel v'Zimrah*, a collection of songs and *piyutim*.

these songs to the morning prayers: "His ministering angels . . . all open their mouths in sanctity and purity, in song and hymn, and bless the Name of God."

The Talmud says that there are three classes of ministering angels that sing praises to God every day.[2] Thus the poet wrote: "The *hayot* sing, and the cherubs glorify."[3] There is one angel in heaven with a thousand tongues , and every tongue sings a thousand songs.[4]

Even in the thousands of years of the exile, the Jews have never ceased to sing God's praises. In the Golden Age of Spain, great poets like R. Yehudah HaLevy arose who praised the Creator, breathed comfort into the sad hearts of Israel, and aroused in them hope for the redemption and love of the Holy Land.

I found the following proofs about the greatness of song in the book *Sefer HaMidot* by the *tzaddik*, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov:

- When the Patriarch Jacob sent ten of his sons to Joseph in Egypt, he sent with them a melody of the land of Israel, as hinted in the verse (Genesis 43:11), "Take of the *zimrah* of the land in your vessels". The word *zimrah*, usually translated "choice fruits," can also mean "song."
- Each herb has its own song with which it praises God, and from the song of the grass in his field comes the unique melody of each shepherd.

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[2] *Hulin* 91b.
[3] *Tosafot, Erchin* 10b.
[4] Introduction to *Sefer Hapiyutim*, Maharam Avadi.

- In the Temple, the Levites stood on a platform and sang God's praises, with a special melody for each day. During this long exile, the melodies of the Levites have been forgotten. However, when any one of the nations collapses, that special melody of the Levites, that corresponds to that nation, begins to shine in the world.
- Through song, a person merits the World to Come.
- When *tzaddikim* become recognized in the world, new songs come into existence.
- The people of Israel sang to God in gratitude over the well in the wilderness but not over the manna. That is why when a person drinks, he begins to sing, but not when he eats.
- It is good for a person to accustom himself to singing, for a melody is a very great and exalted thing. It has the power to draw a person's heart to God. Through melody, it is discernible whether a person has accepted the yoke of Torah.[5]

However, all of this great praise only applies to songs in *Lashon HaKodesh*—the holy tongue, and not to love songs, God forbid, in no matter what language. This is a great sin, that arouses the evil inclination in listeners. Included in this prohibition are the type of songs heard in bars, or foolish, meaningless songs—the type sung by despicable cantors, who interject these indecent melodies in the middle of their prayers. All in order to please the idle-minded men and women, and the dissolute youth, who listen to them. These cantors are no better than idolaters.[6]

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[5] *Sefer HaMidot: niggun.*

[6] R. Shlomo El Ami, *Igeret HaMussar*, printed in *Mivhar Hamahshava v'Hamussar b'Yahadut*, p. 111.

Rabbi Avraham Antebe, leader of the Aram Soba community, wrote of the great reprisal that awaits people who listen to love songs:

> "These songs are all licentious. Listening to them is like opening a door to a thief, in that they invite the evil inclination into the hearts of those who hear them, and all the more so, of those who sing them. And all the more so, when they are accompanied by drunken behavior. And all the more so, if it leads to men and women standing close together to listen to the singer. There is have no question that such behavior leads to greater sins. This is the beginning of immorality, which consequently leads to transgression. It is an obligation of the leaders of the generation to notice and admonish this behavior.
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> "The Ari z'l explained that the expression *zemirot* (songs) is related to the phrase *zamir aritzim*, 'to cut off the forces of evil,' for songs of praise dispel the Other Side, and prevent it from entering the realm of holiness. A person who accustoms himself to singing songs of praise will merit to experience Divine Inspiration. Our master, King David, is proof. Never did midnight pass, without him rising to sing and praise God, and to unify the Holy One and the *Shechinah*, until the morning light; as the verse says, 'At midnight I arise to give thanks to You' (Psalms 119:62). After him, his son King Solomon continued on the same path and sang songs and praises. Of his Song of Songs, the Sages said: 'All the [Scriptural] songs are holy, but the Song of Songs is holy of holies.'

"In Safed, R. Yisrael Najara (author of *Kah Ribon*, one of the most famous Shabbat *zemirot*) would sing every Shabbat eve in honor of the holy day. His teacher, the Ari z'l, adjured him to sit with awe, with a turban on his head, for several ministering angels came to him on Shabbat eve to listen to his singing. Thereafter, R. Yisrael would sit with great awe and fear in honor of the angels.

"Since becoming Rabbi of Aram Soba, I have issued strong warnings not to sing love songs, but only songs of God's praise. I thank God that my words have been accepted. No longer do we hear such destructive melodies. The community has heeded my admonishment, and agreed not to sing these love songs, but only songs of praise."[7]

Rabbi Y. Sirkis also writes that song and melody unite the hearts of people in a powerful love that not only binds them together, but makes them realize their need for one another. In this way, the soul is purified of egoism.[8]

This was always the custom of our fathers and Rabbis in the great city of Aram Soba. There were many gifted cantors and singers who composed songs and melodies for various occasions, from holidays to weddings, or for the different sections of prayer: *Kaddish* and *Kedusha*.

On the verse, "Your cheeks are lovely with *torim*, your neck with *haruzim*" (Song of Songs 1:10), the Sages explained: *torim* are the many laws of the Torah; *haruzim*, "verse," refers

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[7] *Obel Yeshurim, sha'ar hashir.*
[8] *Mahut HaMussar.*

to the poets.[9] Likewise the Gemara records an argument between two sages. One said that the world was created only for Moses, that is, so that people would study the Torah. The other said that the world was created only for David, so that people would sing God's praises, as did King David. The truth is, both opinions are correct: The world was created for Torah and for songs of praise.[10]

Rabbi David Pardo wrote that there is nothing so beautiful as *Kaddish*, *Kedushah*, or *Barchu* when the *shliah tzibur* sings them. Of them, it is written "*Tzaddikim*, rejoice with singing in Hashem, praise is comely for the upright"(Psalms 33:1).[11]

In conclusion, the customs of the Jewish people also have a status of Torah. We see this in the story of R. Yaakov of Corbeil, one of the great men of the past, who used to ask questions of heaven and receive answers. He once asked about the poems that are added to the prayer service on holidays. The reply came: "'Then Moses and the children of Israel sang . . . I will sing to Hashem . . .' (Exodus 15:1). What is meant by 'I will sing'? I will sing before Him all manner of praises and songs that I can sing." Heaven itself taught him that all these songs are beloved to God.

We see that singing songs of praise is an established custom in Israel. It is based upon the Talmud and commentators, the Midrash, Zohar, and other holy sources. The pamphlet *"Hashirim Asher l'Shlomo"* speaks at length about the

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[9] *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:983.

[10] *Sanhedrin* 98b. See Rabbi Mordechai Antebe, introduction to *Sefer HaBakashot; sha'ar hashir.*

[11] R. David Pard, in *Orah Hayim* 10.

greatness of songs and *piyutim*, quoting many great Jewish leaders. Likewise, *Shir Tzion* records all the wonderful benefits derived from songs and praise, for song is truly a Godly thing, and very precious in Hashem's eyes.[12]

A person who protests the songs sung in the *Beit HaKnesset* on Shabbat and holidays, will never see good in his life. Proof of this is the story of Rabbi M. Levaton. As is the custom among many Sefardim, the congregation of Rabbi Levaton would rise before dawn on winter Shabbat mornings to recite *piyutim*. R. Levaton would sit among them and recite Psalms. But when the congregation came to the prayers that he himself had written, he would interupt his Psalms and join the congregation in song. This shows that singing the *piyutim* is equal to reciting Psalms.[13]

I saw a novel insight into this subject by R. Raphael Antebe Tabush—one that I believe is true. Since a melody is a spark of holiness, when one sings love songs, the spark becomes defiled. On the other hand, whenever a new melody is written by the Gentiles, it is our obligation to set to it holy words, in order to draw out the spark from the side of impurity to the side of purity. This is the same process that occurs when we bring sinners back in repentance. We are removing the pure from the impure, and selecting out the holy spark.[14]

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[12] See *Ma'amar HaShem*, who brings sources from the Gemara, Midrash, Zohar and writings of the Ari z'l.

[13] R. Mordechai Abadi, "*Shaar HaShir*," Introduction to *Sefer HaBakashot*.

[14] Introduction to *Shirah Hadashah*.

Along these lines, it is said that when Israel sings the melody of a gentile nation, we arouse God to look at that nation and see why it is oppressing Israel. Thus, the poets of previous and current generations have often taken melodies from the Gentiles and sanctified them by composing songs for God from those melodies.[15]

About this matter, let God be the judge.[16]

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[15] R. Mordechai Abadi, *Divrei Mordechai*.

[16] See the journal *Mekabziel*, published by Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Sholom, Issue 19, p. 45, for a further discussion of the use of non-Jewish melodies in prayer, and the ruling of Rabbi Yaakov Hillel, Rosh Yeshiva of "Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat Shalom."

11 MEDLEY

Short thoughts on a variety of subjects

Debate

THE FIRST THING to realize is that if a person wants to acquire fear of heaven and decides to spend extra time in the synagogue or the *beit midrash*, the evil inclination is sure to visit him there. The following argument is the type that might ensue.

"Why do you sit here alone?" the evil inclination will say. "Everyone else has been at work for hours already. Hurry, catch up with the others!"

"Leave me alone," the person replies. "I wish to learn Torah, as my Creator has commanded, 'This Book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth; You shall study it day and night, so that you will observe to do according to all

that is written in it. Then you shall make your ways prosperous and then you shall succeed' (Joshua 1:8)."

"By working you are also obeying God's command," cajoles the evil inclination. "For it is written, 'God, Who formed the earth and made it . . . . He created it not a waste; He formed it to be inhabited' (Isaiah 45:18). If everyone did as you do, the earth would become desolate."

"You are only trying to deflect me from the right course. It is written, 'For by me [the Torah] your days shall be multiplied, and the years of your life increased' (Proverbs 9:11)."

"I have your best interests at heart. I am trying to help you achieve a pleasant life. You will be prosperous, and people will respect you. 'A rich man has many admirers' (Proverbs 14:20). If you remain here and study Torah, who says you will become a great *tzaddik* or Torah scholar? And if you don't, you will have lost both worlds!"

"Since when are you, the evil inclination, interested in the good, that you seek my benefit?"

"Why, I want to help you amass wealth in this world so that you will be able to support Torah scholars and yeshivot. For it is written, 'The shelter of wisdom is in the shelter of money' (Ecclesiastes 7:12)."

"You are only trying to entice me to do wrong. You are already described in the Torah: 'The inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth' (Genesis 8:21)."

"If you listen to me, you will be loved by everyone, and the whole world will come to hear your words."

"I want to fear God," the man concludes. "Why should I be mixing in with the rest of the world? Doesn't the verse say:

[Israel] is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations?" (Numbers 23:9).

Seeing that it lost the battle, the evil inclination says, "It is written, 'Serve Him with all your heart' (Deuteronomy 11:13). The Sages note that the Hebrew word for heart is *lev*, but in this verse, it is *levav*, as if to say "two hearts." The verse thus means: serve God with both the good and the evil inclination. So come, let us study Torah together. Then you will be serving Him with all your heart and you will beloved by God and by man."

The Seven Vanities

> Vanity of vanities, said Kohelet; vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
>
> Ecclesiastes 1:2

The seven "vanities" of which Kohelet spoke[1] correspond to the seven stages of man's life: At the age of one year, he is like a king seated in a canopied litter, and everyone hugs and kisses him. At two and three he is like a pig groping in the gutters. At ten he skips like a kid. At twenty he is like a neighing horse; he preens himself and seeks a wife. After marriage he is like a donkey. When he

[1] The word "vanity" in the verse suggests one, while "vanities," because it is plural, suggests two. In total, there are seven vanities alluded to in this verse.

has children he grows brazen as a dog to support them. In old age he is like an ape.

The above refers to the ignorant. But of Torah scholars it is written, "King David was old" (I Kings 1:1)—although he was old, he was a king.

Kohelet Rabbah 1

The Talmud lists seven "names" of the evil inclination: evil inclination, uncircumcised, impure, enemy, stumbling block, stone, and the hidden one.[2] Duing each stage of life, the evil inclination assumes a different aspect. We will see that the various "names" and the verses they are derived from, support this connection.

The first stage is infancy. A one-year-old is like a king, and everyone adores him. But the evil inclination causes the baby to hurt himself and cry so that his parents have to stop studying Torah or doing *mitzvot* in order to calm him. The name "evil inclination" is suitable, as in the verse, "the inclination of a man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21).

As a toddler of two or three, he resembles a pig groping in filth. A pig has one of the two signs of a kosher animal: it has split hooves but does not chew its cud. A toddler, too, has only one sign of purity: he begins to speak and to display the beginnings of intelligence, but he does not know Torah. Then the evil inclination convinces him to put his hands in unclean places and put anything and everything into his mouth. If he eats something that is not kosher, his heart will become

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[2] *Sukah* 52a.

hardened, covered with a foreskin. During this stage, the evil inclination is called "uncircumcised," for it is written, "You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart" (Deuteronomy 10:16).

At the age of ten, the child is like a goat. He is frisky and likes to run away from school. He has begun learning Torah. Like the kosher animal, he has two signs of purity: understanding and Torah. Now the evil inclination tries to nullify one of them—Torah—by getting him to miss his studies. Then he will have only one kosher sign left, and an animal with only one sign is impure. Hence in the third stage, the evil inclination is called "impure." Thus King David said, "Create for me a pure heart, O God!" (Psalms 51:12), for there is also an impure heart—the evil inclination.

At the age of twenty, he neighs like a horse, preens himself, and seeks a wife. Here the evil inclination becomes a powerful and dangerous "enemy," bent on destroying him. Nevertheless, if a person tries to fight it, God will help him, for "when a person comes to purify himself, he is helped to do so."[3] The best way to save himself from this enemy is by learning Torah, as it is written, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him bread, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap coals of fire upon his head, and Hashem will reward (*yeshalem)* you" (Proverbs 25:21-22). The bread and water of the verse are the Torah, as in "Come, eat of my bread" (Proverbs 9:5)." The Torah is fire that consumes the evil inclination. The word *yeshalem*, "will reward," has the same spelling as *yashlim*, "will cause to make peace." In addition to rewarding you for

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[3] *Yoma* 38b.

your Torah study, God will also cause the evil inclination to make peace (*yashlim*) with you.

Having studied Torah and taken a wife, the fifth stage of life begins. Now the Midrash compares the person to a donkey carrying the burden of Torah, just as Issachar, the tribe of Torah scholars, was compared to a donkey (Genesis 49:14). At this point he has subdued the evil inclination, and it cannot cause him to transgress willfully. But it can trip him up in unintentional sins, which is why it is called a "stumbling block," over which one trips.

It was Isaiah who called the evil inclination a stumbling block—"Pave, pave, clear the way; take the stumbling block out of the way of My people" (Isaiah 57:14)—because he himself tripped over it and sinned unintentionally. Upon beholding a vision of God sitting on a throne, surrounded by angels, Isaiah exclaimed, "Woe is me, for I shall die, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah 5:5). He was punished for his unintentional sin of speaking against Israel, calling them "a people of unclean lips."

When a person has children, he enters the sixth stage, wherein he boldly seeks his livelihood. Just as a dog stays with his master even if the master hits him, so the person now stays with God's service even if God inflicts him with suffering; and he accepts the suffering with love. The evil inclination keeps its distance from him. But from a distance, it throws stones, trying to stop him from observing the fine points of the commandments.

The prophet Ezekiel was exceedingly careful with the fine points of the commandments, as he testified, "Behold, my soul

has not been polluted . . . abhorred flesh did not come into my mouth!" (Ezekiel 4:14). He did not eat of an animal on which there had been a question, even if the Rabbi then ruled that it was kosher.[4] It was fitting that Ezekiel call the evil inclination a "stone." "I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26).

In old age, a person is like a monkey. This refers to one who did not learn Torah in the previous stages of life and who followed the evil inclination. Now he is delivered into his hands for the evil inclination to do as he wishes. This sinner is only an animal in the shape of a man, in other words, a monkey. But Torah sages are like kings. "Who are kings? The Rabbis."[5] In their youth, they are little kings. As they age, their wisdom increases, and they become great kings. The evil inclination hides from elderly Torah scholars, and is therefore called the "hidden one."

The prophet who called the evil inclination "the hidden one" was Yoel: "I will remove the hidden one far away from you" (Joel 2:20). The word *yoel* is related to the word for taking an oath, as in *vayoel Moshe*, "Moses took an oath" (Exodus 2:21). The *tzaddik* takes oaths to keep the Torah, as King David said, "I have sworn, and I will fulfill, to observe Your righteous ordinances" (Psalms 119:106). When Boaz said, "As Hashem lives! lie down until the morning" (Ruth 3:13), he swore—"As Hashem lives!"—in order to overcome his evil inclination. He told Ruth to remain by his feet until the

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[4] *Hulin* 37b, 44b.

[5] *Gitten* 62a.

morning, but he did not touch her. Only a great king—a *tzaddik* in his old age—has the power to subjugate the evil inclination with an oath.

Death

A person should always remember the day of his death. This will help him study Torah, acquire awe of heaven, and perform *mitzvot*. He will be a ready vessel for the Divine Presence, and when his time comes to leave the world, his soul will depart with a kiss of God. The ministering angels will come out to greet him and will save him from harsh judgment. If he does not do this, however, the Angel of Death will slaughter him with a blemished knife.

Difficulty in Study

The Ari z'l gave the following advice: If you are studying Torah, and find the material too difficult to comprehend, you should weep and confess. Then God will heal you, and open your heart to understand the words you are studying. Thus King David said, "I am afflicted very much; Hashem, give me life, according to Your word" (Psalms 119:107). Since I am afflicted and I weep before You, please give me success in Your Torah, which is called life.

Then a person will come to the depths of understanding.

Hospitality

Receiving guests is greater than greeting the *Shechinah*.
Shabbat 127a

If a wife does not want to receive guests, but her husband does, should he invite them, at the cost of marital discord, or should he defer to his wife in order to preserve marital harmony?

The Talmud says that if a husband and wife live together in harmony, the *Shechinah* dwells among them.[6] But it also says that "receiving guests is greater than greeting the *Shechinah*." Thus, the husband should receive the guests, even though the result will be marital discord that will cause the *Shechinah* to leave his home.

"Receiving guests is greater than greeting the *Shechinah*" because receiving guests causes two of the Divine Names to be completed. The word for "door" in Hebrew is *delet*, which is spelled the same as the letter *dalet*. A door that is opened to guests is called *yesh*, "there is," because there is blessing in that house; a door that is closed to guests is called *ayin*, "there isn't." If a woman opens the *delet* ("door") to guests, she adds the letter *dalet* to the word *ayin* ("there isn't"), turning it into the Divine Name *Ado-n-ai*; and to the word *yesh*, ("there is"), turning it into the Name *Shad-dai*.[7] The last Name is the one

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[6] *Sotah* 13a.

[7] ד + יש = שד״י. ד + אין = אדנ״י.

through which the blessing of children comes, as it is written, "God said [to Jacob], I am God *Shad-dai*. Be fruitful and multiply"(Genesis 17:11). Thus by opening the door to guests, she completes two of God's holy Names.

Once the door has been opened, the essence of hospitality is to greet the guest with a smile, even if the host has nothing to offer the guest but bread and water.

Generosity saves the host from the evil eye. This we learn from Joseph, who supported his father's household and all of Egypt, thereby demonstrating the trait of generosity, which is called "a good eye." He was rewarded with the blessing that the evil eye would have no power over him: "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine upon an eye" (Genesis 49:22).

Our Sages said that a person can save himself from the evil eye by saying, "I am from the seed of Joseph."[8] This is not a lie, for all of Israel are called the sons of Joseph, as it is written, "the sons of Jacob and Joseph, *selah*" (Psalms 77:16). The expression "a fruitful vine" appears twice in the verse: once for the physical descendants of Joseph, and once for his spiritual descendants—those who adopt his trait of generosity.[9]

Our Sages said, "If the eyes of a bride are beautiful, the rest of her does not require inspection." If the bride has a good eye, that is, if she is generous, she will surely be an *eishet hayyil*, "a woman of valor."

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[8] *Berachot* 20a.

[9] Hida.

Abraham Receives the Angels

> "Let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and recline under the tree. And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and support your heart. After that you shall pass on."
>
> Genesis 18:4-5

This verse quotes Abraham's words to the three angels, disguised as humans, whom the unsuspecting Patriarch invited into his house.

Our Sages taught that Abraham slaughtered three heads of cattle in order to serve the three guests three tongues "with mustard"—*beharadal*. They also taught that one of the angels had come to overturn Sodom, one to save Lot, and one to heal Abraham.

The mission of each of the angels is expressed in the word *beharadal*. For the angel who had come to overturn Sodom, the word *beharadal* contains the letters of *herev dal*, "poor sword," an allusion to the destruction of Sodom, which was poor in good deeds and where the people showed no compassion for the poor. For the angel who came to save Lot, *beharadal* contains the letters of *levar had*, "except for one," meaning, except for Lot. For the third, who came to heal Abraham, *beharadal* in the form *herev dal*, "poor sword" alludes to the cut of circumcision.

Some of the Sages said that the same angel who saved Lot also healed Abraham. The third angel brought the good tidings that Sarah would bear a child. In that case, *beharadal* takes the form *levar had*, "for one son."

The Zohar relates that Abraham would examine his guests by means of a spring of water. The verse "His bread was given; his water was faithful" (Isaiah 33:16) refers to Abraham. His bread was available for travelers. But perhaps they were idolaters, whom it is forbidden to feed? "His water was faithful"—he tested them by means of his fountain. If they were righteous, the water rose to greet them; if they were idolaters, it did not.[10]

On another level, the verse contains an allegorical message.

Water is a symbol of Torah, as it is written, "Ho, every one that thirsts, come to the water!" (Isaiah 55:1). Abraham said, "Let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and recline under the tree." Through the Torah, wash your feet of the evil inclination within you. Then you will merit to recline under the Tree of Life; and your needs will be filled.

Besides being an antidote for the evil inclination, Torah study is also a support for the good inclination. "And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and support your heart." The Torah is called "bread"—as in "Come, eat of my bread" (Proverbs 9:5)—because it is the food of the spirit. "Your heart" is written here with one *beit* (*libchem*), rather than two (*levavchem*, reflecting the two inclinations in man's heart) to indicate the good inclination only. The verse is telling us that Torah study strengthens your good inclination.

After all these preparations—after you have accumulated Torah and *mitzvot*—"then you shall pass on" from this world to the World to Come.[11]

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[10] Yihiyeh ben Rav.

[11] *Hut Shel Hesed.*

Four Prayers

On Lighting Sabbath and Holiday Candles:

In the Name of the God of Israel. Holy and powerful God, Come to my aid, for I have strengthened myself in this name, and He will be with me. Hear the voice of my prayers. Be graceful to me and answer me. Help me, God of Abraham, the mighty sojourner; God of Isaac, who was bound upon the altar; and God of Jacob, the pure-hearted, whom you saved from Esau and Laban the Aramite. Bless my husband and I with children who will learn Your Torah, perform Your *mitzvot*, and search for You always. May we raise them on the knees of Torah scholars, and fulfill the verse, "And you will teach [these words of Torah] to your children, and speak of them, and you will make them known to your children and grandchildren." May none of our offspring die in our lifetimes. May they never be depressed, but always joyful. Enlighten us with Your Torah and make us wise with your *mitzvot*, that we may never be mistaken in judgment, nor in Torah study. Give us length of days and years of life, in love and peace; to love You and fear Your holy Name. Guard us and our children from the evil eye, from impure forces, and from every sort of tragedy. For You are God who protects us and delivers us, from now and forever. Amen, may it be Your will.

God, hear the voice of my cry. Be gracious to me and answer me. Hear me, God, accept my prayers. Do it for the sake of Your Name.

[Here one continues with Hannah's prayer] "And Hannah prayed, and said, 'My heart rejoices in the Lord, my horn is exalted in the Lord . . .'" (I Samuel 2).

Upon Entering Her Seventh or Ninth Month of Pregnancy, a Woman Should Fast, Give Charity, and Say this Prayer:

May it be Your will, our God and God of our fathers, to ease the pain of pregnancy from me (your name and name of your mother). Give me strength all the days of these days, that neither my strength, nor the strength of my baby should fail. Save me from the curse of Eve. And when the time to deliver arrives, do not subject me to pain, but let the child enter the world quickly and easily, without danger to myself or the baby. May the baby be born in a good and propitious time, for life, peace, blessing, health, grace, kindness, mercy, riches, and honor. Let me not give birth on the Sabbath, so that the Sabbath need not be desecrated on my account. Answer all my requests fully. Do not send me away from You empty-handed. My God and God of my fathers, the keys of birth are in Your hands alone. Therefore, remember your love and compassion, You Who desires life, and in Your deliverance and mercy, bless me with healthy children, whose souls are from the side of holiness. As King David said in Psalms, "Out of distress I called upon the Lord; He answered me with Divine relief. Hashem is with me, I will not fear. What can a man do to me?"

May He Who heard the prayers of David in his distress, hear this prayer of mine, as He answered the prayers of our holy mothers: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Hannah, and all the righteous women. Amen.

After Giving Birth, a Woman Should Wash Her Hands and Give Praise to God:

May it be Your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, Compassionate God, that just as You delivered me from this great pain and danger, so may You have compassion upon all the daughters of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to save them from such danger. And just as you delivered me today, so may You help me with all future births.

When the Woman Leaves her Sickbed:

May it be Your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, to prepare for this child abundant sustenance. Help me to know the proper times to nurse him, and ease from me the need to sleep when he cries. Open my ears so that I can hear him immediately, and protect him so that he not die in the crib, God forbid.

[For a daughter, continue] O my dove, who is in the cleft of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff, let me see your countenance, let me hear your voice (Song of Songs 2:14). As they blessed Rebekah, saying "Our sister, may you be the mother of thousands and ten thousands, and may your seed possess the gate of those who hate you." He Who blessed our foremothers, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, may He bless this child, and may her name be [daughter's name and mother's name] for *mazal tov*, and in a good and favorable time. May she have health and serenity, and may her father and mother share in her joy, her wedding and her children. May they have wealth and honor, joy and length of years. Amen.

Children

When a person sanctifies himself below, heaven sanctifies him from above,[12] and he can merit children who are higher in holiness than the ministering angels.

The Ari z'l relates that in a certain time of religious persecution, a child was born and orphaned soon after. At the age of seven, he hid himself in a cave and studied Torah. The enemy found him and killed him. His soul rose up before God, who gave him the Palace of Light in the Garden of Eden, and revealed to him secrets of the Torah that had not been revealed before.

There he sits, in the seventh, highest level of heaven, shining like the glow of the firmament, surrounded by seventy angels, and holding fifty keys in his hands. The righteous in the Garden of Eden love him. They sit in groups before him and learn from him the Torah's deepest secrets. When he pronounces the Ineffable Name, the letters sparkle above his head. Sometimes he falls on his face and weeps because he did not merit to have a son. Then the high priest Yehoshua ben Yehotzadak raises him up and comforts him, saying, "Rise, my teacher. *We* are your sons!"

The Rabbis investigated the matter and found that his father had merited such a son by sanctifying himself with Torah and *mitzvot*—he never looked upon an evil person, he never interrupted his Torah study, he felt the suffering of all the *tzaddikim*, and he never spoke empty words.

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[12] *Yoma* 39a.

Eating the Fruits

> These are the precepts whose dividends a person enjoys in this world but whose principal remains intact for him in the World to Come: honoring parents, doing acts of kindness, arriving early at the study hall morning and evening, welcoming guests, visiting the sick, supporting a bride, escorting the dead, concentrating in prayer, making peace between men, and between husband and wife—and Torah study is equivalent to them all.
>
> *Shabbat* 127a

When a person learns Torah, it is as if he fulfilled all of the *mitzvot.* And yet, we see that there are Torah giants who live in poverty, and do not enjoy any dividends in this world.

One reason is that these scholars do not want to receive even the dividends of their study in this world. Such was the case of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa. The whole world received sustenance in the merit of his Torah study, but he himself made do with a measure of carobs from one week to the next.[13]

Another reason is that God knows that if a certain person were to become rich, he would become lax in Torah study.

Therefore, even if a student of Torah is poor or has less honor that he would like, he should accept his status with love, in the knowledge that it is the best thing for him. As Nahum Ish Gamzu was wont to say, "This, too, is for the best."[14] For

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[13] *Ta'anit* 10a.

[14] *Ta'anit* 21a.

a person can only acquire Torah by killing himself over it.[15] Moreover, the Talmud states that even if a disciple of the Rabbis becomes poor, he will not be reduced to begging.[16] One must sit and study and trust in God, and things will be well with him.

Punishment

> They asked the Torah, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" It answered, "Let him bring an offering, and he will have atonement."
> They asked Wisdom, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" It answered, "Evil pursues sinners" (Proverbs 13:21).
> They asked Prophecy, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" It answered, "The person who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4).
> They asked the Holy One, blessed be He, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" He answered, "Let him repent, and he will have atonement."[17]

There are three types of sinners: those who do not know what is permissible and what is forbidden; those who are caught in a spirit of folly; and those who sin on purpose. These correspond to the first three questions asked above.

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[15] *Berachot* 63b.
[16] *Shabbat* 151b.
[17] See *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:702.

They asked the Torah, "What is the punishment of one who sins unintentionally, through lack of knowledge?" It answered, "Let him bring an offering," for offerings atone for unintentional sins.

They asked Wisdom, "What is the punishment of a person who sins out of folly?" Since this is close to deliberate sin, Wisdom answered, "Evil [that is, suffering] pursues sinners," and through this suffering he will gain atonement.

They asked Prophecy, "What is the punishment of a sinner; that is, one who recognizes his Creator like a prophet, and rebels against Him? It answered, "The person who sins shall die," and through death he will gain atonement.

They asked the Holy One, blessed be He, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" God, Who is All-Merciful and has mercy on all the people He created, answered, "Let him repent, and he will have atonement," for nothing stands in the way of repentance.

We cannot hide or escape from God. "Where shall I go from Your spirit? Where shall I flee from Your Presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in the netherworld, You are there" (Psalms 139:7-8). But nothing stands in the way of repentance.

Reward

To You, Hashem, is kindness, for you render to each man according to his work.

Psalms 62:13

The verse seems to contradict itself. Giving a person his just reward is an act of fairness, not one of kindness. The Midrash explains this with a parable. A king who hires good workers, and pays them for their efforts, is not doing anything special. But a king who hires poor workers, and still pays them for their labor, deserves to be praised.[18]

Human kings do not reward bad workers, but God does. Thus King David said, "How abundant is Your goodness, which You have hidden away for those who fear You, which You have done for those who take refuge in You, against the sons of man" (Psalms 31:20)—against man's way of thinking. God rewards even the bad workers, for He is infinite, and so is His kindness.

However, God only pays those bad workers who are *trying* to serve him, but are weighed down by their evil inclination and their physical nature. God knows the strength of the evil inclination. "If Hashem did not help a person, he would never be able to conquer his inclination."[19] But if a person does not try to serve God in even a mediocre way, God has no reason to treat him with mercy.

We can also look at the verse from Psalms in a different way: While God rewards each man according to his deeds, He *does* exhibit kindness in His timing of the reward. God exacts payment for sins little by little in this world, and then gives the whole reward at once in the World to Come.

On the other hand, he might shower abundance upon the wicked in this world, only in order to punish them with greater

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[18] *Midrash Shoher Tov.*

[19] *Sukah* 52b.

severity in the World to Come. It should not surprise us when we see the wicked prosper. God is perfectly just.

Awe of Heaven

The fear of Hashem is his treasury.
Isaiah 33:6

A person who studies Torah but does not fear sin has nothing.

The Midrash explains this with a parable. A man said to his friend, "I have thousands of sacks of grain, oil, and wine."

"Do you have warehouses in which to store them?" asked the friend. "If you do, then the sacks are all yours; but if you don't, you have nothing."

The fear of Hashem is a treasury in which a person's Torah knowledge is stored. If he has fear of sin, all the learning is his.

Stone and Iron

> If that villain [the evil inclination] attacks you, draw him to the *beit midrash*. If he is stone, it will melt; if he is iron, it will be shattered.
>
> *Sukah* 52b.

If a person is like a silent stone, who cannot speak in Torah, then while he is in the *beit midrash,* the evil inclination will melt like wax near a fire. For although he does not know Torah, he still has the *mitzvah* of going to a *beit midrash*, and a

mitzvah protects the person while he is engaged in it. When the unlearned person leaves the *beit midrash*, however, the evil inclination will harden again like wax that is removed from fire. But if he is a Torah scholar, who is like iron, "like a hammer that smashes rock" (Jeremiah 23:29), the evil inclination will be shattered, for the Torah that a person learns protects him even when he is not studying.

The Study of Kabbalah

In the early days, wrote Rabbi Hayyim Vital, Kabbalah was hidden and it was forbidden to write it down. However, in our generation, it is Hashem's will that we reveal the secrets of Kabbalah. This gives Him great joy, and speeds the redemption.

It is written in the *Tikunei Zohar*: "If a person prevents Kabbalah from being taught or studied, it is as if he has stopped the outpouring to the [supernal] River and the [supernal] Garden. It would have been better for him never to have been born. It is as though he returns the entire creation back to emptiness and void. He brings poverty into the world and prolongs the exile."

From this, writes the *Kisei Melech*, we see the great reward that awaits one who learns Kabbalah, and the terrible penalty for one who doesn't. Even one hour of study can repair the upper worlds in a way that an entire year of regular studies cannot. If a person does not learn Kabbalah one day a week, all the rest of his studies amount to nothing. Even one day a year

will bear fruit in his learning. If a person can set aside one hour a night for the study of Kabbalah, he is sure to have a place in the World to Come. But if a person has the ability to learn Kabbalah, either from a teacher or from books, and does not use it, it would been better for him never to have been born.[20]

Rabbi Hayyim Vital writes that each person must study all four approaches to Torah: *Pardes—**P**shat, **R**emez, **D**rush,* and *Sod;* literal, figurative, homiletic, and Kabbalistic. If not, he has not fulfilled the *mitzvah* of Torah study, and will have to be reincarnated until he does.[21]

The Hida wrote that if a person does not believe that the Torah contains deep mystical secrets, he removes the *Sod* from the word *Pardes*, and is left with *Pered*—a mule. About him the verse says, "Do not be like a horse or a mule, which has no understanding" (Psalms 41:9).[22]

Fortunate is the person who learns or supports the study of Kabbalah—he hastens the redemption, and there is no end to his reward. A person who goes in the way of Torah and *mitzvot* will see success in all of his endeavors. The way he behaves with others is the way God will act towards him. Thus the verse says, "With the pious You act pious; with the upright man You act upright; with the pure You act pure; with the crooked You act shrewdly" (Psalms 18:26-27). If a person is honest and truthful, he is assigned an angel who treats him with honesty and truth. If a person lies and cheats, he is

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[20] These are the words of the *Kisei Melech.*

[21] *Hakdamah, Sha'ar HaMitzvot.*

[22] *Midbar Kedemot.*

assigned an angel who lies and cheats. If he is pious and forbearing, he is assigned an angel who is forbearing.

The verse says, "Because you did not serve Hashem your God with joy and with gladness of heart as a result of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemy whom Hashem shall send against you in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in want of all things . . ."(Deuteronomy 28:47-48). This too is measure-for-measure punishment.

Because you did not serve God with joy—you will serve your enemies with hatred. You did not serve God when you had food and clothes—you will serve your enemy hungry, thirsty, and naked. You did not want to subordinate yourself to God—you will be subordinated to the Babylonians. You did not want to donate silver for the Temple service—you will pay silver to an enemy government. You did not want to repair the roads so pilgrimages could be made to Jerusalem—you will repair the highways to the enemy capital. Because you did not serve Hashem as a result of the abundance of all things, you shall serve your enemy in want of all things—in want of Torah and wisdom.[23]

We learn from here to serve God with joy, free of worry and sadness.

Health and Nourishment—Body and Soul

Good health is closely connected to proper eating. The Talmud teaches that eating bread in the morning protects from

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[23] *Michilta.*

a large variety of illnesses. This can be derived from the verse "You shall serve Hashem your God [with the morning prayers], and [then] He will bless your bread and your water [that you eat for breakfast], and I will remove sickness from your midst" (Exodus 23:25).[24] But if a person delays his meal until after midday, then he derives no benefit from the food whatsoever.

A pleasant, happy frame of mind while eating aids digestion; worry and grief are harmful. Rich and poor alike should consume a moderate amount of food. If the poor eat too little, they may ruin their bodies, as do the rich if they eat too much. The food should be of good quality, so that it should nourish, not poison, the body.

The food of the spirit is Torah, *mitzvot*, and good deeds. Thus all references to food and drink in Ecclesiastes are allusions to Torah and *mitzvot*.[25] One must partake of spiritual "food" as one partakes of physical food—every morning, one must have a "meal" of Torah and *mitzvot*. And just as one meal a day is insufficient, so one of these *mitzvot* a day is insufficient. Acts of kindness must be done often, and Torah must be studied day and night at fixed times. If a person does not set up fixed study periods for himself, the Torah accuses him, saying, "For the food of your body you designate fixed times, which you adhere to carefully, lest your body weaken. How much more should you designate fixed times for Torah study, lest your soul weaken!"

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[24] *Bava Metzia* 108.

[25] *Kohelet Rabbah.*

And just as a person who eats after midday gets no benefit from the food, so a person who spends the whole morning in idleness derives no benefit from the Torah he studies in the afternoon.

In addition, Torah study and *mitzvot* must be done in a happy frame of mind, not as a burden to be dispensed of as quickly as possible. Do each with interest and joy, for the reward one will receive is infinite. Imagine you are receiving a million dollars for each *mitzvah* you perform. Study Torah with enthusiasm, as if you are standing before a king, and serving him joyfully; you wish to find favor in his eyes and attain high rank and honor. Such an attitude shows trust in God. The more joy you take in doing the *mitzvah*, the greater your reward; until you become worthy of receiving the Divine light. Eventually, you will merit *ruah hakodesh*, the spirit of holiness.[26]

Mitzvot and Torah study that are tinged with arrogance or indifference, or are not done for the sake of Heaven, are to the soul as food of poor quality is to the body.[27]

"Go, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine that I have mingled" (Proverbs 9:5). The bread is Torah and *mitzvot*; the wine is secrets of Kabbalah.[28] Just as we eat our bread in a healthy way, so must we drink our wine—the secrets of the Kabbalah—in moderation, slowly, not too deeply, lest one stumble.

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[26] R. Hayyim Vital, *Sha'ar HaMitzvot*.

[27] *Manot HaLevy* 121b.

[28] "When wine goes in, the secrets come out" (*Eruvin* 65a).

12 WORDS FROM THE HEART

WHAT I SAY NOW I say only for myself and for those close to me. Even though I am unfit, I feel compelled, for the sake of Hashem, to speak out. It is enough if these words serve as a reminder—perhaps, they will even arouse us to cast out and uproot the evil inclination from within our hearts. The *mitzvah* to give admonishment—"You shall surely rebuke your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:17)—applies to all of us, even a student to his teacher.[1] And the Zohar says: "If a person is zealous for the honor of God, the Angel of Death cannot rule over him."[2]

The Zohar writes about the importance of helping others do *teshuvah*: "It is incumbent upon a *tzaddik* to run after a transgressor and acquire him [as a friend] through all possible means. Then one removes from him his impurities and

[1] *Bava Metzia* 30a.
[2] *Zohar, VaYigash* 209b.

subdues the side of evil. Then God is glorified beyond all other forms of praise. Thus the verse says about Aaron HaKohen, 'He turned many away from iniquity' (Malachi 2:6).

"Come and see. Whoever takes the hand of a sinner, and tries to convince him to abandon his ways, he rises three times—in a way no other person can: he subdues the side of evil; he raises up the glory of God, and he upholds the existence of the entire world, above and below. About such a person is written, 'My covenant was with him for life and peace' (ibid. 2:5). He will see children and grandchildren, and will have merit in this world and the World to Come. No accuser can judge him, not in this world nor the next. He can enter through the twelve [heavenly] gates, and no one can protest. Of him it is said, 'His seed shall be mighty upon earth: the generation of the upright shall be blessed. Wealth and riches shall be in his house; and his righteousness endures forever. Light rises in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious, full of compassion, and just'" (Psalms 112:2).[3]

It is also written that if people knew how much merit they acquired by turning others back from sin, they would run after them as they run after life.[4] King David said, "I will teach transgressors Your way, and sinners will return to You" (Psalms 51:15). By teaching them, he connects their souls to God, and he too receives atonement. Thus the verse continues, "Save me from blood-guilt" (ibid. 51:16). The reward for such a deed is infinite.[5]

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[3] *Zohar, Terumah* 128b.

[4] *Mussar Hachamim* in the name of *Sefer Hasidim.*

[5] *Karnot Tzaddik* 3:68; Hida, *Tziporen Shamir.*

This is my intention in the following words; perhaps they will atone for the sins of my youth, and protect me from the evil inclination in the future.[6]

Modesty

My dear friends and brothers, doesn't anyone care about the *Shechinah*—the Divine Presence? Is there no modesty in the world? Today, women walk around in the streets with their hair uncovered, with their arms and legs bare, wearing the most indiscreet garments. What an embarrassment. This is a transgression of the laws of Moses and Israel.[7] Woe to our eyes that see such things. Woe to our ears to hear such tidings in the holy city of Jerusalem—the city renowned for its modesty. What will we say on the great Day of Judgment. Were that our heads were a fountain of water, we would cry day and night over the tragedy of Jerusalem's daughters.

"All the beauty of the king's daughter is within" (Psalms 45:14). The place for a woman to show her beauty is in the home, not in the street. Thus, King Solomon said, "The wisdom of women built her house" (Proverbs 14:1). For through such modesty, a woman will establish her home properly. The

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[6] Even though it is written, "Just as it is a *mitzvah* to rebuke someone who will listen, it is a *mitzvah* not to rebuke someone who won't" (*Yevamot* 65b), and "Better people should transgress unwittingly, rather than intentionally" (*Shabbat* 148b). That only applies when the Rabbi is sure they will not heed his words, but if there is any question, he must rebuke them (*Shabbat* 25a, *Tosefos, "af al gav"*).

But I believe that the Jewish people *do* fear sin, and that when they read a book of *mussar* based on the words of our Sages, their hearts break open in love for their Creator, and they accept upon themselves all that is written, to the best of their ability.

[7] *Ketuvot* 72a; *Berachot* 21a.

Talmud says, "Everything is from the woman." The Talmud is replete with accounts of virtuous women who brought blessings to their husbands, to their children, and to the whole world. Two examples are Kimhit and the mother of R. Yehoshua ben Hananiya.

Kimhit had eight sons who served as High Priests in the Holy Temple. When asked what she did to deserve this honor, she explained that the walls of her house never saw a hair of her head. Not only did she cover her hair while she was at home, but even when she combed it, she would spread a sheet over her head.

Of R. Yehoshua ben Hananya, the Mishnah says: "Happy is his mother,"[8] for it was she who caused him to become a great Sage. Even while she was pregnant, she would visit the synagogues and study halls to soak up the words of Torah to purify his soul, and she would ask the Torah scholars to pray that her son be a scholar.

Even before Israel received the Torah, its women were already praised for their modesty, as we find with Sarah and Tamar.

When the angel-visitors asked Abraham, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" Abraham replied, "She is in the tent" (Genesis 18:9). In her modesty, Sarah did not go out to greet male guests. For this she merited to become the mother of the Jewish people, including kings, prophets, *tzaddikim*, and countless sages.

Tamar was so modest that her own father-in-law Yehudah did not recognize her, for she used to cover her face even while

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[8] *Pirkei Avot* 2:8.

in her home. Her reward was to be the mother of the Davidic dynasty, from David and Solomon to the Messiah.

If such was the level of modesty before the Torah was given, how much more so now that we have received the Torah, which commands us to be modest!

According to Torah law, a girl or woman may not sing in public, and her garments must reach up to the neck and below the elbows and knees. If she is married, her hair must be covered in public. If a woman goes out in public with her hair uncovered and her arms exposed, her husband must rebuke her, even harshly if necessary. If he does not, he is called evil for allowing her to behave in this way.[9] If she persists, it is a *mitzvah* from the Torah for him to divorce her, and she is not entitled to a *ketubah.*[10]

Granted that this position may go against the dictates of fashion and that is is difficult to be different from everyone else. We may need to remind ourselves that ultimately, our life and the lives of our loved ones are in the hands of God, not of the fashion designers. And when He inflicts His judgment on those who violate His will, we will be happy to be different from them.

If a husband or father sees his wife or daughter behaving immodestly, it is a *mitzvah* for him to rebuke her. True, this is an uncomfortable position to take. It helps to keep in mind that remaining silent in such a case does not show love and consideration. Quite the contrary: love and consideration are

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[9] *Gittin* 90a

[10] *Even HaEzer* 115:4, 119.

shown by saving a person from sin and punishment—it's like saving him from fire.

Modesty also means not attracting the attention of men other than her husband. "A woman is forbidden to go out in public with her jewelry because people will look at her. God gives a woman jewelry only for her to adorn herself at home."[11]

The woman who makes herself beautiful at home for her husband brings blessing to her house: "[If] your wife is a fruitful vine in the innermost parts of your house, [then] your children will be like olive plants round about your table. Thus shall be blessed the man who fears Hashem. Hashem will bless you from Zion; and see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life; and see your children's children; peace upon Israel" (Psalms 128:3-5). The Zohar explains:

> When a woman is modest in her home, "your children are like olive plants." What is "like olive plants?" Just as the olives are found on the tree winter and summer and the olive tree is more important than other trees, so will her sons rise in importance above other people. Moreover, her husband will be blessed with all the blessings on earth: with wealth, children, and grandchildren, as it is written, "Thus shall be blessed the man who fears Hashem . . . ."[12]

Keeping Up with the Neighbors

Every year, the fashion changes. To keep up, a woman must discard last year's wardrobe and replace it with a more

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[11] *Yalkut Shimoni, Iyov* 31.

[12] *Zohar, Nasso* 125b.

up-to-date version, whether her husband can afford it or not. It is forbidden for a woman to oppress her husband with such demands.

It also happens that after sitting next to an elegantly attired friend at a wedding, a woman comes home and angrily demands her husband to buy her an equally elegant—and costly—outfit. Since jealously is such a powerful force, wealthy women should take care not to go out in expensive garments and jewelry.

We can learn this lesson from the Talmud:

> R. Shimon bar Yohai said: There were no happier days for Israel than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur, on which the daughters of Israel would go out in borrowed white garments, in order not to embarass those who did not have.[13]

The *Hovot HaLevavot* writes about a certain town where the men all wore the same colored clothing, so that it was impossible to tell the difference between a rich person and a pauper. This was in order that the poor should not feel ashamed of their lot. In fact, it was even impossible to recognize the king, he dressed so modestly, and in his humility, associated so congenially with his servants.[14]

The result of a luxurious lifestyle is that luxury becomes necessity. Thus marrying off a child has become an enormous expense, and for those parents who can't afford it, the "joyous" wedding becomes a nightmare. The dowry, the jewelry, the

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[13] *Ta'anit* 26b.

[14] *Hovot HaLevavot, Sha'ar Habetachon.*

clothing, the furniture—all of it is enough to bury a poor father in the ground. Woe, to our orphaned generation!

Purity

Israel is a holy people, and the essence of holiness lies in staying away from forbidden relationships.

On the other hand, the strength of Israel has alway been its emphasis on family, protected as it is by the laws of family purity. These laws, based on the verse "You shall not be close with a woman in her menstrual impurity" (Leviticus 18:19), require husband and wife to refrain from physical contact for part of each month until she immerses herself ritually in the *mikveh* and returns to him like a new bride.

Even men who scrupulously observe the laws of family purity may be unaware that the prohibition against physical contact applies not only to your wife, but to any girl or woman (other than your mother and sister). But since single girls do not go the the *mikveh*, they are ritually unclean and therefore included in this prohibition.

Engagement to be married does not lift the prohibition against physical contact. Even the Torah's form of engagement—*erusin*—is not enough to permit the bride to the groom; she is permitted to him only after the seven blessings of *nissuin*. This we can see from the blessing of *erusin* with which our wedding ceremony begins:

> Blessed are You, Hashem . . . Who has commanded us regarding forbidden relationships, prohibited to us *erusin*, and permitted us women who are married to us through *huppah* and *nissuin*. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who

sanctifies His people Israel through *erusin* and *nissuin*.

Even polite shaking of hands is improper, and mixed dancing is definitely forbidden. Perhaps a person fears that he will be held up to ridicule if he abides by these rules. "Better to be called a fool all his days than to be wicked even one hour before God."[15]

The Eyes

I cannot stress enough how important it is to guard one's eyes. This is especially true for young unmarried men in yeshivah. The Ben Ish Hai explains that a sin committed with one of the limbs of the body causes a spiritual flaw in the corresponding "limb" of the soul. Even more than other limbs, the eyes must be guarded from sin. They must be sanctified and purified in this world, because the soul's ultimate delight will come through the eyes. In the Garden of Eden, the soul will be nourished from the sight of the radiance of the *Shechinah.* By guarding our eyes, we enable our souls to delight in this radiance. For, as the Talmud says, in the World to Come there is no eating, no drinking, no procreation, no business, jealousy, hatred, or competition. Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the *Shechinah*.[16]

We often hear the phrase "I didn't do anything; I was just looking." According to the Torah, however, even "just looking"

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[15] *Edeyot* 5:6.
[16] *Berachot* 17a.

can pollute a person's soul. A person draws down a spirit of impurity upon himself and transgresses the commandment, "Do not go after your hearts and after your eyes" (Numbers 15:39). Thus, a man should not gaze at girls or women, and certainly not spend hours watching shows in which they appear, because his eyes will arouse his evil inclination. "Turn away my eyes from seeing vanity," said King David, "in Your ways give me life" (Psalms 119:37). By turning our eyes from forbidden sights, we bring about rectification of the supernal worlds and eternal life. Measure for measure, God will give us life in return.

It is likewise forbidden to look at the faces of the wicked, because the image registered in our mind also damages the soul.

What should a person look at? As much as possible, he should look at holy things and holy people. This gives energy and sanctity to the upper worlds. It is good to look at the righteous, because their image enhances the mind. "Your eyes shall behold your teacher," says the verse (Isaiah 30:20).

When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, he beheld the image of his father Jacob and was able to resist the temptation.[17] The sight of the righteous Patriarch's face drew an abundance of light down to Joseph's soul which enabled him to refrain from sin.

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[17] *Sotah* 336b.

I speak from the bitterness of my heart on behalf of Jerusalem. My eyes and soul have been pained by what I see. Were that I could care more on behalf of suffering of Jerusalem and the folk that dwells within her. May God, in his mercy, raise our might, and remember the merit of Jacob our father. And may He send us our righteous Messiah, speedily and soon. Amen.

19 REPENTANCE

The Midrash tells a story:

A king was coming to a city to collect the taxes that were due him. When he was still far from the city, all the elders and the leaders of the people came out to greet him, whereupon he waived a third of the tax. As he approached the city, the people of intermediate stature also came to greet him, and he waived another third of the tax. At the city gates, all the men, women, and children turned out to greet him, and he waived the rest.

Similarly, during the month of Elul, the righteous go out to greet the King of kings with Torah and good deeds, whereupon He waives a third [of the punishment that is due us]. On Rosh HaShannah, the people of medium observance go out to greet Him with repentance and prayer, and He waives

another third. On Yom Kippur, everyone fasts, and He waives the rest.[1]

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My dear friends! We all know the importance of doing *teshuvah* at all times, and in all circumstances. What must be explained is how to do *teshuvah*, its conditions and requirements. First of all, you must know that there are three types of *teshuvah*. There is *teshuvah* out of love—without any coercion; *teshuvah* out of fear—after a person has been rebuked, and *teshuvah* that occurs as a result of suffering. These three reasons are illustrated in the following parable:

A mighty king had a treasury full of precious stones, over which he appointed soldiers to guard. At some point, the guards stole what they could from the treasury. Yet there was dissension among them. Some of the guards immediately regretted their deed, and returned the loot. The others kept it.

Eventually, the king discovered the theft, and issued a proclamation throughout the city that he was going to take stock of his treasury to see whether anything was missing. Upon hearing the proclamation, those who had already returned the stolen gems were happy, for they had nothing to fear. A second group of guards went that very night to return what they had, but in their haste, they put things back in disarray. A third group paid no heed to the proclamation; they

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[1] Cited in *Sha'ar HaMitzvot*, p. 14b.

ate, drank, and made merry. The king's policemen entered their houses and found the stolen gems. They reported the findings to the king and restored the gems to the treasury. Whereas the second group of guards got off with light punishment, the king was furious with this last group of guards, and punished them severely.

The meaning is obvious. The Holy One, blessed be He, the King of kings, has appointed us over His treasury—the Torah and *mitzvot*, "which are more precious than gold" (Psalms 19:11). But when a person sins, he is stealing from the King's treasury and giving to the Side of Impurity.

There are those who feel remorse immediately. For them, every day of the year is like Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur. The very day he sins, he repents out of love, and restores the stolen item to its place. He weeps, and corrects the flaw before the loss is even noticed. At the very least, he rectifies the flaw before he enters the following Shabbat.

Then there is a second group. They do not do *teshuvah* until the month of Elul, when they hear the proclamation of the Torah scholars urging all Jews to repent. Then they remember their Creator, regret their past misdeeds, give charity, and fast. This is called *teshuvah* out of fear. The problem with this is that the person wants to mend in a short time what he has damaged over a long period. This is certainly not the same as one who reviews his deeds on a daily basis.

But worst of all is the one who does not heed the proclamations to repent. He feels no remorse and does not repent until Rosh HaShannah. By then it takes a miracle to repent for all the days of the year, and he is likely to incur suffering. Yet

even at that late date, if he repents fully, God will forgive him and inscribe him for good life.

Paradise Island

Similarly, I saw a parable in the Midrash that explains the importance of teshuvah.

A ship bearing many passengers stood still at sea for several days. Finally a wind blew it toward a lush tropical island covered with tall trees bearing many varieties of tempting fruits, sparkling springs of water, and multi-colored birds flying overhead.

The reactions of the passengers varied. One group decided to keep safe, make due with the provisions they had, and stay on board the ship. A second group disembarked, took a brief stroll, and quickly returned to the ship, where they found themselves comfortable places. The third group disembarked and tarried on shore until a wind began to blow. The sailors, wishing to push off, blew their horns, whereupon this third group hurried to the ship. Finding their places already occupied, they had to make due with less comfortable ones. The fourth group continued strolling and eating the luscious fruits until they saw the ship beginning to take off. In panic, they made a mad dash for the ship. They barely managed to reach it in time. They clambered aboard and sat wherever they could find a spot. The fifth group decided to remain on the beautiful island and not return to the ship. But when winter came, there was no fruit on the trees, and they starved to death.

This world, with its pleasures and delights, is like the tree-covered island. We are here to collect *mitzvot* and good deeds,

not to concern ourselves with worldly acquisitions. We can imagine ourselves on a ship about to take off. If we serve God wholeheartedly in our life, rather than pursue worldly pleasures, we will enter this world in peace and leave in peace, like the first group that remained on the boat.

The second group represents those who sin in their youth, and immediately repent. The third group represents those who repent in old age. The fourth is those who repent at death's door. The fifth is those who do not repent, and they must then be purified through reincarnation or Gehinom.

Fixed Times for Torah Study

One of the important paths of *teshuvah* for men is to set aside fixed times for Torah study. For the Torah can help a person completely change for the better; whereas "an ignorant person cannot fear sin."[2] In fact, among the first questions a man is asked in his final judgment is "Did you set fixed times for Torah study?"

This is especially important for a person who works all day in business. He must set aside fixed times for Torah study that he will not cancel for any reason, not for a golden business opportunity, and certainly for a questionable one.

Rabbi A. Mani writes of three progressively worse cases of *bitul* Torah. The first is if a person cancels one of his fixed study sessions because of a business opportunity. In such a case, he has not fulfilled the *mitzvah* to "love Hashem your God with . . . all your might" (Deuteronomy 5:6), which means

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[2] *Pirkei Avot* 2:5.

"with all your money."[3] In this case, his money was more important to him than the *mitzvah*. Even worse is to cancel the study session because of the *possibility* of profit, such as: If I open my store now, customers *may* come in. Worst of all is a person who is merely sitting at home and doing nothing. If even *he* does not learn Torah, then his soul is certainly not well. He is not able to perceive the light of Torah, just as a sick person cannot see the light of a candle.[4]

The obligation to study Torah does not end with fixing times. In addition, any time a man has free, he is required to study Torah with all his might.

The Covenant

> Whoever sets aside fixed times for Torah study is violating the covenant of the Torah, as it is written, "A time for doing for Hashem—they have violated Your Torah" (Psalms 119:126).
>
> *Talmud Yerushalmi, Berachot* 9:5

This is a surprising Midrash. How can a person who fixes time for Torah study be considered violating it! One of the very first questions they ask us in heaven is whether we fixed time for Torah study!

Rather, the Midrash is referring to one who learns Torah in the appointed time—but no more. He does not also study Torah in his free moments. This is considered a violation of

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[3] *Berachot* 54a.

[4] R. A. Mani, *Siah Yitzhak*.

the covenant, because the Torah was given to Israel to study constantly, as we are commanded, "You shall study it day and night" (Joshua 1:8).

Thus on Shamai's teaching: "Make your Torah study a fixed practice."[5] Rashi comments: "Do not set aside fixed times for Torah study, but make it a fixed obligation upon yourself all day long."

It is also possible that this Midrash is referring specifically to Torah scholars, who have an obligation to study at all times, day and night, in yeshivah and at home. Most people, however, who must work for a living, should make fixed times for study. If not, they may never learn at all. For such people, it is a *mitzvah* to set aside time, and failure to do so will result in serious penalties from the Heavenly Court.

Poverty

A man may object. "I need every minute of the day to earn a living," he might say. "How can I possibly make time for Torah study? I learn *Hok l'Yisrael*, isn't that enough? I'm not doing any transgressions. I do *mitzvot* and give charity when I can. God wants the heart! I'm having a hard enough time supporting my family, do I have to set aside extra time to study, too?"

He may have a point. Times can be difficult. But his reasoning is insufficient, if he realizes that he will one day be lying in the cold ground. It may be that his present poverty is an atonement for sins he committed in a previous life. He

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[5] *Pirkei Avot* 1:15.

should rejoice in his poverty, accept it with love, and study Torah harder than before in order to rectify his past.

In the town of the Baal Shem Tov, there lived a God-fearing Torah scholar who learned continuously, day or night; but he was extremely poor. When it came time to wed his children, he had nothing to give them. He told the Baal Shem Tov his troubles and begged him for help.

The Baal Shem Tov instructed him to travel to a distant town and ask for a certain person. The scholar trudged from town to town until, exhausted from the trip, he reached the place specified by the Baal Shem Tov—but none of the townspeople had heard of this person. He continued to inquire, until finally some of the town elders told him that the person he was seeking had been dead for sixty years, and that he had been a terrible sinner.

Bitterly disappointed, the scholar returned to the Baal Shem Tov to report his findings.

"You know," said the Baal Shem Tov, "that the soul returns to this world in many reincarnations until it has rectified what it must. Know, then, that you are that sinner who died sixty years ago. Now you have returned to rectify what you damaged earlier. Do you also want wealth and worldly pleasures?"

Deeply shaken, the scholar asked the Baal Shem Tov how to repair his flaws. He applied himself to Torah and *mitzvot* with increased vigor, accepted his poverty with joy to atone for his sins, and merited to become a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.[6]

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[6] *Ma'aseh Tzaddikim*.

Rather than complaining about our misfortunes, we should accept God's judgments and apply ourselves to Torah study with all our might, each person according to his ability.

Trust in God

There is yet another reason why a person must never exempt himself from Torah study. Our Sages have said, "A person's livelihood is preordained, and he does not touch that which has been designated for another even by a hairsbreadth."[7] We must put full faith in this teaching. If God has ordained that he will become rich, he will become rich, and better for it to come easily. Moreover, even if he tries to flee from wealth, it will pursue him.[8]

Daydreams

Above all, a person mustn't waste his time thinking of ways to make a profit, for this only makes the situation worse. As the Talmud said, "Thoughts are detrimental even in matters of Torah."[9] From the verse "When you build a new house, you shall make a fence around the roof" (Deuteronomy 22:8), the Ben Ish Hai derives a wonderful piece of advice. Most people want to improve their status in life, and are lost in thoughts as to how to do so. "This project will make me so much money. This investment will earn me such and such an amount." But

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[7] *Yoma* 38b.

[8] *Od Yosef Hai.*

[9] *Sanhedrin* 26b. "When a person thinks, I will do such and such and I will achieve such and such, the thought actually hinders its accomplishment"—Rashi.

if a person is smart, he will make a "fence" around such ruminations. He will not think about these goals at all, for that will only impede their realization. This is applicable to every person, both the scholar and the laborer, for even spiritual acquisitions can be lost by thinking too much about them.[10]

The story is told about an egg seller, who brought eggs and chickens from the Arabs. He had to walk a long distance to his home, while being careful not to break his fragile merchandise. It was wearisome work that brought him a meager livelihood.

One day, while he was carrying a basket of a thousand eggs, and two clusters of chickens, he began to think.

"How long must I suffer? Instead of selling my load, I will set the hens on the eggs. In ten days, each egg will yield a chick, and I will have a thousand chicks."

His daydream continued until he saw himself a rich man. And still his daydream grew until he was as rich as Baron Rothschild. Why, compared to him, other magnates were like the skin of an onion! And when the time came to greet the king, he, of course, would be the first to enter his majesty's presence.

As he imagined himself bowing down before the king, he actually bent his body. His entire load fell into a rocky ditch. All the eggs broke, and most of the chickens died—and with them, his daydreams as well as his meager livelihood.

It is especially important to banish daydreams during

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[10] *Od Yosef Hai, parashat Ki Tetze.*

prayer and Torah study, for that is when they are particularly active. Trust in God and do your work faithfully. "Remember the Lord your God, for it is He Who gives you strength to attain wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18). Or, as Unkelos translates: It is He Who gives you the ideas to attain wealth.

If we establish firmly in our minds that God supervises over all and sustains all, from the very smallest to the largest, we should be able to clear our minds of worldly affairs and concentrate on our prayers and Torah studies.

The *Sefer HaBrit*, gives an example of just how far God's providence extends. He writes of some stonecutters, who had chiseled a large stone from a mountain to use in building. The stone was too big for their purposes, and so they used sledge hammers to break it into smaller pieces. They broke off one piece, and suddenly found an empty cavity within the stone. It was teeming with frogs! It was absolutely wondrous in their eyes how the frogs got in there, or how they stayed alive. Yet, God was able to support them. Certainly He can do the same for us.

Learning the Trade

I saw a parable that further expresses this point.

A king had an only son who was clever and talented. He wanted to teach his son a craft that would enable the boy to earn a good, easy living, so that he would be self-supporting and not have to depend on his father's kindness. He apprenticed his son for six years to a master craftsman in a different city.

But the youth was lazy, and did not make the effort to

acquire the skill. So instead of giving him work in his craft, the craftsman assigned him the task of chopping wood and drawing water.

The youth sent a message of complaint to his father the king: "Why did you deliver me into the hands of a man who gives me hard labor to do?"

"Woe to you!" replied the king. "I assigned you to this precious person to learn a craft that is clean, easy, and profitable. But you were lazy and did not do your work. Do you think that your master will support you and pamper you, while you sit idle?"

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Our Father in Heaven wants us to learn the Divine service. He sent us into this world to serve Him, not to pamper ourselves. He delivered the soul to the body for a fixed period of time, known only to Him, and during this time a person must support himself as the natural course of events.

But if a person accepts the yoke of heaven, he will not be under the rule of nature. For the righteous are above nature, as it is written, "The *tzaddik* rules through awe of God" (II Samuel 23:3). It is also written, "You shall decree a thing, and it will be fulfilled for you" (Job 22:28). Examples of this principle abound. Joshua ordered: "Sun, be still over Gibeon!" (Joshua 10:12)—and the sun stood still. And when R. Hanina ben Dosa's daughter accidentally lit the Shabbat lamps with vinegar instead of oil,

the Sage decreed that the vinegar burn just as well.[11]

On the other hand, if a person casts off the yoke of Heaven, he is subjected to the yoke of nature. He will have to work hard to earn a living, because it is not appropriate for the world to serve him while he indulges in luxuries.[12] But a person who cares about his soul, will maintain his commitment to serving God. His life will be one of peace and security.

Elul

The time for *teshuvah* out of love—for scrutinizing one's deeds, and fixing one's mistakes—is the month of Elul. The *Bnei Issachar* explains that in Elul, even if a person does not have intentions to repent, God will cause thoughts of repentance to stir in him. Thus, Elul is an acronym of the words *ina leyado vesamti lach*,[13] from the verse "I will appoint you a place to which he shall flee" (Exodus 21:13). In Elul, God provides a person a place to escape to.

The reason is that in the month of Elul, the thirteen Fountains of Mercy are opened above. Then, there is an outpouring of love and compassion, which provide special help to do *teshuvah*.[14]

Confession

Confession is a cornerstone of repentance. To repent, a person must confess all his sins—not only those he committed

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[11] *Ta'anit* 25b.
[12] *Ashirah Lashem*.
[13] אינה ליידו ויישמתי ליך
[14] *Sha'ar Ruach HaKodesh*.

throughout his life, but even those he committed in previous incarnations. When we say in *Vidui*, "We and *our fathers* have sinned," we do not mean to cast aspersion on our ancestors. (Especially if they were *tzaddikim*.) By "our fathers," we mean our own previous incarnations, each of which is a father, so to speak, of our present lifetime.[15]

The verse says, "If a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he be put to death, you shall hang [it] on a tree" (Deuteronomy 21:22). The Ben Ish Hai explains the verse homiletically. The "tree" is an allusion to the soul.[16] If a person suffers an untimely death, you can attribute it to his soul, which had sinned in a previous lifetime and is now being punished.[17]

The Tanna, Rebbe Meir, gave a suitable parable to illustrate this idea.

A lion was about to attack and devour a fox. "Wait!" cried the fox. "There is not enough meat on me to fill you up. I will show you a fat man whom you will find much more satisfying."

The lion agreed, so the fox showed him a man sitting in a field.

"I fear heavenly retribution if I eat him," said the lion to the fox.

"Don't worry," the fox said. "The sin will not be visited upon you, nor upon your son; but only upon your grandson. Go satisfy your hunger now; you still have time before you have a grandson."

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[15] See R. Y. Hagiz, *Sefat Emet*, citing the Ari z'l.
[16] *Tikunei Zohar.*
[17] *Od Yosef Hai.*

The fox's argument was convincing. The lion leaped—and fell into the covered pit the man had dug.

The fox came to the edge of the pit and looked down. "Didn't you tell me that retribution would not come now, but upon my grandson?" said the lion.

"Indeed," said the fox. "But *your* grandfather sinned, and you are being punished for what he did."

"Shall I pay for the sins of my grandfather?" demanded the lion.

"Why didn't you raise that objection when I told you that your grandson would pay for *your* sin?" replied the fox.[18]

Here again, the "grandfather" for whose sin a person suffers is a previous incarnation.

Silence

Another important part of repentance is silence, as the Tanna says, "I have found nothing better for the body than silence."[19] It's known that before a person is born, heaven ordains just how many words he has allotted to him in his lifetime. If he speaks too much, for no good purpose, he uses up his portion of speech, and may be taken from this world before his time. As the Mishnah says, "Whoever speaks excessively brings a lack."[20]

On the other hand, speaking words of Torah adds years of life, as it is written, "For they are life to those who find them"

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[18] Parable of R. Meir, cited in Rashi, *Sanhedrin* 39a.

[19] *Pirkei Avot* 1:17.

[20] *Ibid.* 1:17. The word *het*, usually translated as "sin," can also mean "lack," as in "I and my son Solomon will be lacking" [in years of life] (I Kings 1:21).

(Proverbs 4:22). Our Sages expounded: Read not *motza'eihem*, "those who *find* them," but *motzi'eihem*, "those who *enunciate* them." Words of Torah are not part of the allotment of speech; they give life to one who expresses them. Thus we find, "Will you indeed be silent [in learning Torah]? *Speak* words of Torah!" (Psalms 58:2).[21]

"In a multitude of words, transgression is not lacking" (Proverbs 10:19). Silence saves a person from the sins that can come from talking too much, such as gossip, slander, lies, and flattery.

The question arises: does needless speech really shorten a person's life? There are lots of people who talk incessantly, about the most foolish things, and don't seem to have their lives cut off. Then there are others who speak very little, a few words a day, yet they die young. A further question is, if heaven decreed for a person to live sixty or seventy years, why should he die early just because he talked a lot? Granted, a person who speaks lies and slander, gossip or flattery, deserves to die as soon as they exhaust their portion of speech. But a person who discusses permissible things—business or family matters—why should he die young? He may not have spoken words of Torah, but what was he do to?

I saw a teaching of the Hida that helps explain this. "Great is Torah, for it gives life to those who fulfill it."[22] Every word of idle speech that issues from a person's mouth causes a loss of one portion of the soul. Thus, we see that sick people often

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[21] *Hochmah u'Mussar* 63a.
[22] *Pirkei Avot* 6:7.

lose consciousness or lose the power of speech shortly before their deaths. This is because the number of components of their breath has already been used up. This is why the Sages were so against idle speech—how much more so forbidden speech!

But Torah adds life and peace to those who study it aloud, "For it is the life and the length of your days" (Deuteronomy 30:20). And it is written, "For through me your days will be increased, and years of life added for you" (Proverbs 9:11).[23]

Rose Among the Thorns

> "Like a rose among the thorns, so is my beloved among the nations" (Song of Songs 2:2). R. Abin said: "Just as the rose exists for its smell, so Israel exists to perform *mitzvot* and good deeds.[24]

We can understand this Midrash according to our discussion above. People keep roses for the scent; when the scent is gone, the roses are discarded. Just as the rose exists for its scent, so is the continued existence of the Jew through *mitzvot* and Torah, which add years to his life.

Another interpretation is that just as people plant roses because they wish to enjoy the scent; so too, God "plants" Israel in this world in order to enjoy the scent of their Torah and *mitzvot*. Were it not for this reason, there would be no need for people to come into this world. They could stay in

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[23] Hida, *Marit Ha'Ayin*, citing R. Hayyim Vital.
[24] *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 2:9

heaven, like the angels, each of whom remains at his own post. But God wants Israel to earn their eternal reward through their own efforts; He therefore sends them here to perform Torah and *mitzvot*.[25]

Thus, a person should realize the greatness he brings to the world, and to himself, by mending his deeds, and following the ways of God. Such a person stands at the peak of creation, and is even greater than the angels. For the souls of Israel are carved from beneath the Throne of Glory, whereas the souls of the angels stem from a lower source. Thus, the verse says, "If you will go in My ways and keep My charge . . . I will give you to walk among those who stand" (Zechariah 3:7). "Those who stand" are the angels, explained the Arizal, for they remain always on the same level. But human beings can always progress. They are called "those who walk."

"Know, my brother," writes *Sefer HaBrit*, "that a person can even be like our teacher Moses, in his good deeds and character traits. Only in prophecy can he not equal him; for 'there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses' (Deuteronomy 34:10). A person can even get to the level of an angel through his good deeds."

Although this seems to contradict what we just said, by implying that an angel is higher than a man, there really is no contradiction. Man's soul is greater than that of an angel, but physically, an angel's body is pure and spiritual—much finer than man's. And yet, through good deeds and character traits, a person can purify himself to such an extent that even

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[25] See *Maggid Meisharim*.

physically, he can reach the level of the angels.

Likewise, our Sages taught that Hanoch and Elijah purified themselves until they reached the level of the angels. That might seem like lesser praise, since we know that a man can ascend higher than an angel. But Rabbi Moshe Cordovero explained that our Sages were speaking only of their bodies. Certainly, the souls of Hanoch and Elijah were higher than those of the angels. The merit described to them here is that the bodies they donned—the garments of the soul—were pure and spiritual like that of angels.[26]

The Talmud says, "If the Sages were like angels, then we are like men in comparison. But if they were like men, then we are like donkeys."[27] Once again, we have a problem. Doesn't a man have greater potential than an angel? But this statement is pointing to another difference between the two. Angels stand in one place, but they stand in that place perfectly. Each one has reached his unique level. Therefore, they lack nothing themselves and are able to bestow upon others. This is not true of men, who are imperfect, and whose main concern is to bring themselves to completion. Thus, if the Sages were like angels—they reached perfection and only sought to bestow upon others, then we can be like men—still imperfect, but nevertheless able to go in the way of the Torah, each person according to his ability. But if the Sages were only like men—who did not reach perfection, then we will remain like donkeys—lacking all intelligence.

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[26] R. Moshe Cordovero, *Sefer HaPardes, sha'ar heichalot.*

[27] *Shabbat* 112b.

In Conclusion

All of these words are relevant to our time; for we live in a weak generation, when men of faith are few, and no one to defend us. Each person must take pity on his soul, the precious daughter of the King, and do everything in his power to return in *teshuvah*. Especially, one must give charity to Torah scholars, which also brings benefits to the giver. And in this area, it is even permissible to test God, to see if He returns our expenditures.

Thus, the verse says, "Like a rose among the thorns, so is my beloved among the nations" (Song of Songs 2:2), referring to the Jewish people. In earlier times, Israel was like a rose in the field. They were surrounded by *tzaddikim* and holy men, who prayed to God from the bottom of their hearts, and whose presence upheld and protected their generation. Thus, we were blessed with both physical and spiritual success.

But this is no longer true of these last generations. The great men of the past have gone to their rest and left us trapped in the materialism and turmoil of the physical world. No one knows where to turn for help. But God says to Israel: A rose may be surrounded by thorns, yet it maintains its beauty and fragrance. So you, Israel, are surrounded by the evil inclination and the cares of daily life; yet you must keep Torah and *mitzvot*, for that is your life, and the path to constant awe of Heaven. This will be a source of blessing and merit for eternal spiritual joy, which is the purpose of man's coming into this world.

GLOSSARY

Aharonim: later *halachic* authorities, from the Fifteenth Century onward.
Amoraim: Sages of the Gemara.
Arvit: the evening prayer.
Av Beit Din: head of a religious court.
Ba'alei Teshuvah: returnees to Torah observance.
Bahur: a young man.
Bat Kohen: daughter of a Kohen.
Beit HaMikdash: the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.
Brit Milah: circumcision.
Dayan, Dayanim: religious judge/judges.
Din Torah: a court case brought before *dayanim.*
Drush: homiletic approach to Torah interpretation.
Gan Eden: Literally, "The Garden of Eden." Also refering to a spiritual realm that the soul enters after death to receive reward for its good deeds in this world.
Gehinom: A spiritual realm where the soul goes after death to be purified of its misdeeds in this world.
Gematriya: the numerical equivelant of a Hebrew word.
Geonim: Talmudic sages of the Sixth to Eleventh centuries.
Get: divorce paper.
Hacham: A Sefardic title for "Rabbi."

Halachah: Jewish Law.
Halitzah: A process that exempts a woman from a leverite marriage.
Hasid: a pious person.
Hey: the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, ה.
Humash: the Pentateuch.
Kaddish: a prayer praising God, often recited in memory of the dead.
Kedushah: a prayer sanctifying God's holiness.
Kehillah: congregation.
Kezayit: a measurement approximately the size of an olive.
Kiddushin: marriage ceremony.
Lashan HaKodesh: the holy language; Hebrew.
Ma'ariv: the evening prayer.
Ma'aserot: Tithes taken from produce and livestock and given to the Kohen.
Mikveh: ritual bath.
Minhah: The afternoon prayer.
Mishkan: the Sanctuary in the desert.
Mishnah: A collection of concise statements of Jewish Law, collected in the First Century by Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi; forms the basis of the Talmud.
Mishpatim: Jewish laws, usually concerning monetary matters.
Mitzvah, Mitzvot: Torah commandments.
Mussaf: Additional morning prayers recited on Shabbat, Rosh Hodesh and Festivals.
Mussar: the study of Torah ethics and values.
Nefesh: the lowest part of the soul, corresponding to a person's vitalizing nature.

Neshamah: the third highest level of the soul, corresponding to a person's intellectual faculties.
Pardes: a garden. An acronym for the four levels of Torah interpretation: Pshat, Remez, Drush and Sod.
Pidyon Haben: the ceremony of Redeeming the First Born.
Pshat: the literal meaning of a verse.
Remez: allusion. A method of biblical exegesis.
Rishonim: early *halachic* authorities. Eleventh to Fifteenth centuries.
Ruach Hakodesh: Divine inspiration; a lesser form of prophecy.
Shaharit: the morning prayers.
Shaliah Tzibbur: prayer leader.
Shechinah: the Divine Presence within creation.
Shehitah: kosher method of slaughtering livestock and fowl.
Shema: the primary statement of Jewish faith—"Hear O Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One."
Shemonah Esreh: Eighteen Blessings. The silent prayer at the center of the daily prayer service.
Sheva Berachot: "Seven Blessings" recited at weddings and during the following week.
Shlita: an acronym for "May he live for many long, good years, amen."
Shulhan Aruch: the Code of Jewish Law.
Siddur: prayerbook.
Sod: secret. The Kabbalistic teachings of Torah.
Talmid Hacham: A Torah scholar.
Tallit: prayer shawl.
Tanaim: Sages of the Mishnah.

Tefillin: phylacteries.
Tehillim: the Book of Psalms.
Tereifot: animals rendered unkosher because of improper *shehitah* or illness.
Terumah, Terumot: produce tithes.
Torah: Specifically, the Five Books of Moses. In general, the entire body of Jewish wisdom, both written and oral.
Tov: good.
Tzaddik: a holy person.
Tzitzit: four sets of specifically knotted threads attached to the corners of a four cornered garment, such as a Tallit. At times, refering to the entire garment plus the threads.
Yeshivah, Yeshivot: academy of Torah study.
Yirat Shamayim: Fear or awe of G-d (literally, Heaven).
Yishuv: the old, pre-state ettlement in Israel.
Zimrah: song.

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