

Rabbi Yisroel Lipkin of Salant

How to Earn Your Right to Life

In 1881, a booklet was issued to raise conscious-ness of and support for the *kolel* (institute for advanced Torah studies) that had been founded in Kovno, Lithuania, under the aegis of Rabbi Yisroel Lipkin of Salant, renowned as Rav Yisroel Salanter. The major essays in the booklet, *Eitz Peri*, are a lecture by Rav Yisroel and one by Kovno's renowned rabbi, Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spector. Rav Yisroel's essay was excerpted and translated by Yehoshua Leiman.

1 **G-d Helps Those Who Help Themselves**

THE TALMUD TEACHES,⁵² "A person's evil inclination surges up over him every day...and if not for the Holy One, blessed is He, helping him, he could not over-come it." Since the evil inclination was created solely for a person's benefit – if he overcomes it he will be rewarded, and if he succumbs to it he will be punished – then to what end did the Holy One make one's evil inclination so powerful that a person by himself cannot defeat it without G-d's help?

This question can be answered using the discovery of psychologists that the human psyche has two sets of powers, conscious and subconscious. For example: When we begin to study the alphabet or a new language, how

⁵² *Talmud Bavli, Sukah 52b.*

much difficulty do we encounter until we learn to pronounce the letters and then again till we learn how to combine them to form words, and then till we learn how to combine the words into whole sentences! Afterwards, however, when by conscious effort we have grown accustomed to the external factors, we find ourselves visualizing and grasping many sentences at once. And our vocal chords produce the sounds of the language instantaneously without us being aware of how it is done. This happens because we have internalized many verbal links and thus can produce them automatically. Though they are sublimated within us, with minimal effort we can produce them clearly and consciously.

Whom to Save First?

The same is true for human character traits. There too, two sets of forces are at work, external and internal, conscious and subconscious. The subconscious ones obviously exercise far more influence on a person than the conscious ones. A man, for example, has a favorite disciple who is the apple of his eye and for whom he does many favors, and he also has a son whom he hates and against whom he openly displays his hatred. When the man is asleep, fires break out in the son's home and in the disciple's home at the same time, and both are in danger. If the man is aroused to save both from the fire, we will see him running to save his son first. Why? Because his subconscious natural love for his son is much greater than the conscious-external love he bears his disciple. Consequently when we rouse the man from sleep – at which time his external-conscious forces are not alert – his internal-subconscious forces are aroused; they overwhelm his conscious forces and he rushes to save his son first.

The major means in the battle against one's evil inclination is to increase fear and awe of G-d in one's heart commensurate with the temptations wrought by one's evil inclination: To whatever degree one finds a temptation powerful, so must he increase his fear of G-d to vanquish his inclination. Our forefather Avraham's test at Mount Moriyah was a great test that required overcoming subconscious natural love for a son. This is expressed in the Divine declaration made there,⁵³ "Now I know that you are a man who fears G-d, for you have not withheld you son, your only one, from Me."

Whole Heart with Tears

In the Midrash⁵⁴ we find two apparently conflicting statements. One is, "Tears were dripping and falling from Avraham's eyes, so that his full height was soaked in tears."⁵⁵ The other is, "The Holy One, blessed is He, saw the father binding his son wholeheartedly."⁵⁶

If Avraham was truly acting wholeheartedly, how could all those tears have been pouring down?

According to the premise above, both descriptions are accurate. He bound his son wholeheartedly, using all his conscious forces – which Avraham possessed at the highest possible level – to overcome his inner resistance to this action. But the tears were pouring down because of his unconscious forces, which, as part of human nature, are even stronger. From this we see that even our forefather Avraham, peerless in his fear of G-d and righteousness, was affected by his subconscious forces to such a degree that tears poured down, even though his

⁵³ *Genesis* 22:16.

⁵⁴ *Yalkut Shim'oni*, §101.

⁵⁵ On the verse (22:9), "He placed him on the altar."

⁵⁶ On the verse (22:9), "Avraham built an altar there."

action was done with great thoroughness, wholeheartedly, even with joy!

Fear of G-d versus the Evil Inclination

Fear of G-d is not at all implanted in human nature. But every person has the power to reason and understand how to perfect himself and increase his fear of G-d so that he can vanquish his temptations at a high level. Our Sages expressed this in *Tana Devey Eliyohu*,⁵⁷ "Every Jew is obligated to say, 'When will my deeds match the deeds of my forefathers, Avraham and Yitzchak?'" For every person has the ability to uplift his fear of G-d far beyond his temptations as in the case of the binding of Yitzchak.

Generally, however, one's fear of G-d is not perfected to the highest possible degree and one is therefore unprotected from the greatest possible temptation. Only when a person foresees a difficult trial coming up and that he may be ensnared by sin or that he may fail to perform a mitzvah – then he realizes that he must seek some means to increase his fear of G-d to so high a level that he can be certain that his fear of G-d will overcome his temptation.

Now, against his conscious forces and also against those subconscious forces that he is aware of, a person can calculate and know how far to fortify himself and bolster his fear of G-d to overcome temptation. But what is a person to do about those subconscious forces that he knows nothing about, that he is unaware of? What if they have the power to overcome him? Here a person is struggling to perfect his conscious forces, and he must worry that he may fall into the snare of his evil inclination on account of his subconscious forces. So our

⁵⁷ *Tana Devey Eliyahu Rabbah*, 25.

Sages, in their holy words, reassure this person that the Holy One will help him: When he does all that is in his power in order to perfect his conscious forces, G-d will provide His aid to perfect that person's fear of G-d and fortify him against his subconscious forces.

2 ***Conscious Versus Subconscious Forces***

NOW, THERE ARE TWO KINDS of forces within people. There are forces that operate within every person, such as love of children or the desire to eat, which people possess to greater or lesser degrees. And there are other forces that not everyone possesses. One person may possess one of these forces to a very great degree while another person may possess no part of it at all.

Universal and Individual Forces

Take love of money as an example. There are people who love money, not because they can buy all their requirements with it, but because of an intrinsic love for money itself. The proof of this is that even when they have piled up money like dirt they spend it only for absolute necessities, but never for pleasure.

Then there are people who do not love the money itself at all. The proof of this is that even though they are not wealthy they do not save their money but spend it for every minor gratification. The same is true for the other forces of man's soul such as jealousy, hatred, the need to win, and their like.

Consequently, we can judge from the case of our forefather Avraham only about those psychological forces that are universal, such as love of children. The

subconscious aspects of such forces cannot be perfected even in a *tzadik* like Avraham. But those psychological forces that exist in some people and not in others, the person who rises to righteousness through Torah and fear of G-d is empowered to totally alter these tendencies – even where he was born with them and even on the subconscious level – from one extreme to the other.

Good and Bad Forces

We must also be aware that the conscious and subconscious forces vary from person to person. Sometimes a man will have very good conscious forces, but his subconscious ones will be very bad; and sometimes the reverse will be true. For a person's external-conscious forces are based primarily on his education.

If a person is raised and trained by G-dfearing parents and teachers, and in a place whose inhabitants are also G-dfearing, his external-conscious forces are formed ethically and justly. But his internal-subconscious forces may still be bad, because he was born with them that way. So long as his good conscious forces have not affected them very strongly to improve them, they will remain naturally bad.

Sometimes the reverse happens: A person's external-conscious forces are very bad because of training by immoral parents and teachers, or because of association with wicked people. Nevertheless his internal-subconscious forces may be naturally very good.

This explains why we sometimes see a person who has great fear of G-d who, through some powerful circumstance, was easily turned into a wicked person: His subconscious forces were bad, and the powerful circumstance roused those forces until they overcame

his good conscious forces and altered them from one extreme to the other. Sometimes the reverse happens: A person may be very bad consciously and, through a circumstance, will turn into a G-dfearing person. This is because his subconscious forces are good. As a result, the circumstance was able to rouse them to overcome his conscious forces.

All the foregoing leads us to the conclusion that if a person has a trait that is externally-consciously a good trait, but is internally-subconsciously corrupt, a small crisis or a change of circumstances can arouse his subconscious forces so much that they alter the conscious ones. Although a person is aware only of his conscious forces but not of his subconscious ones, most of the ease or difficulty of his functioning are factors of his subconscious alone. Consequently, if a person wishes to do something perfectly, but foresees that he may encounter even the slightest hindrance, he should be wary and take steps to counteract his evil inclination, since he cannot know all the minor factors that may affect his subconscious adversely.

Ease and Difficulty of Acts

Accordingly, a person may perform two *mitzvos*, one with conscious difficulty, and the other with great subconscious difficulty although it was consciously easy. At first glance the consciously difficult mitzvah is greater than the consciously easy one, but the Holy One will sometimes reckon the second one greater, because He knows the subconscious.

The same is true for transgressions. A person commits two *aveiros*, one of which, due to conscious-external factors, was difficult to transgress, but was subconsciously easy; and the other was the other way around – insofar as sub-conscious-internal factors are

concerned it was difficult to transgress, but it was externally-consciously easy. The transgression the person had greater difficulty refraining from, is regarded by the Holy One as a light transgression, whereas the one he could more easily have avoided is regarded as a serious transgression. Just as G-d evaluates the mitzvah according to its ease or difficulty, so does He evaluate the sin that is subconsciously difficult to guard against as a light transgression.

Regarding the evaluation of *mitzvos* and *aveiros*, Maimonides writes:⁵⁸

This evaluation is not according to the quantity of *mitzvos* and *aveiros* but according to their value. One merit may offset several sins...and one sin may offset several merits.... This is evaluated solely according to the intelligence of the Almighty who knows minds.... He knows how to evaluate the merits and the sins.

This evaluation is obviously dependent on the difficulty one has in fulfilling the Torah's *mitzvos*, and the difficulty he has in refraining from committing an *aveirah* – as the Mishnah states,⁵⁹ "Reward is according to difficulty."

When it is difficult to refrain from transgressing an *aveirah* -- (no matter how hard it is, it is still a sin and its transgressor will be punished) in contrast with a sin that it is easier to guard against – it is considered a much lighter transgression. This is consonant with the following statement of our Sages:⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Yad, Hilchos Teshuvah*, 3:4.

⁵⁹ *Mishnah, Avos*, 5:22.

⁶⁰ *Talmud Bavli, Menachos*, 42b.

The punishment for [not wearing] the [seven] white [fringes] is greater than the punishment for [not wearing] the [single] blue [one].

3 ***Three Systems for Successful Living***

The Natural System

IT IS WELL KNOWN that G-d set up human life to function in accord with the laws of nature that He established. Man's life and death, health and illness, wealth and poverty, and the other aspects of his life all follow a natural process. Sometimes, however, the natural processes are hidden so that it is beyond the eye of the sagacious or the penetration of the analytical to fathom them. For example, when a healthy man dies suddenly or a sick man lives long, the natural process involved is beyond the greatest of doctors, yet it may be the result of a hidden natural process and not at all miraculous. For an obvious miracle can only take place for a noted *tzadik* in a righteous generation in an era when miracles are normal, or for a noted evildoer at a time when miracles are commonplace.

Similarly we see that a poor man grows wealthy under unpredictable circumstances, and a wealthy man becomes poor under unusual circumstances – all this happening through natural processes. Since the

abnormal natural processes do not occur too frequently, a person must always seek normal ways of furthering his affairs, even though he is aware that the best plans can be turned on their head. This is what Scripture means with the words,⁶¹ "Not to the wise is bread, nor also to the analysts wealth." Even if a person cannot guarantee positive results, he does his best by calculating all his actions and planning his business so that he is likely to make gains and unlikely to suffer losses.

The Torah System

There is a second system that functions according to the laws of the Torah. A person is rewarded or punished in this world, in all areas of endeavor, in accord with his Torah and mitzvah behavior. Sometimes he will have a preponderance of merits and fewer sins, as a result of which he will suffer in this world in order that he receive all his reward in the world of the future. At other times he will have a preponderance of transgressions and fewer merits, as a result of which he will be rewarded in this world and will receive his punishment after death. The Talmud expresses this in the following words:⁶²

To what can the righteous be compared in this world – to a tree whose trunk stands in a place that is uncontaminated and whose branches stand in a place of contamination! When the branches are lopped off, the entire tree stands in an uncontaminated place. Similarly, the Holy One brings suffering upon the righteous in this world in order that they

⁶¹ *Ecclesiastes*, 9:11.

⁶² *Talmud Bavli, Kidushin* 40b.

should receive [their share in] the world of the future....

And to what can the wicked be compared in this world? To a tree whose trunk stands in a place of contamination and whose branches lean over a place that is uncontaminated. When the branches are lopped off, the entire tree stands in a place of contamination. So does the Holy One grant good to the wicked in this world so as to banish them and bring them down to the lowest level.

Measure for Measure

Our Sages taught us that the Holy One rewards and punishes measure for measure – *midah kenegged midah*.⁶³ This means that if a person performed a mitzvah that the Holy One reckons to be mostly merit and only partially sinful, then the Holy One will punish him in this world *midah kenegged midah* for the sinful part. But if he transgressed a sin that the Holy One evaluates as mostly sinful but partially meritorious, He will reward the merit in this world measure for measure. This provides an insight into why a person sometimes has it good in one area of his life while he suffers in another area.⁶⁴

This may be what Rashi means in his commentary to the following statement of the Talmud,⁶⁵ "If a person

⁶³ *Talmud Bavli, Sotah 8b.*

⁶⁴ For in one area he is primarily meritorious and in the other primarily sinful. Thus a swindler may grow rich because he once dealt honestly, and an honest man may become poor because he once handled money crookedly.

– Rav Alexander M. Lapidos

⁶⁵ *Talmud Bavli, Berachos 5a.*

finds himself suffering, let him examine his deeds. If he examined and did not discover, let him assume it is because of failure to study Torah." On the words, "If he examined and did not discover," Rashi comments, "any sin that he committed for which he deserves this suffering." In other words, the sufferer failed to find a sin for which this suffering would be a measure-for-measure punishment.⁶⁶ It is, however, difficult for a person to know how the Holy One's system of *midah kenegged midah* operates, especially according to my earlier conclusion that it depends on the conscious and subconscious difficulties a person encounters in his actions, which a person cannot know perfectly.

The Combined System

For most people, except for the rare spiritual progressives whom the Holy One considers perfect *tzadikim*, He combines the Torah system with the natural system. Consequently, if according to his regular natural system a man should be rich, but according to the Torah system there is some reason to deny him wealth, then the Holy One exchanges his regular natural system for another natural system, and the man is entirely unaware that he has been moved out of his regular way of life.

Conversely, a man continuing along his regular natural course would be poor, but the Torah system requires that he become rich. So the Holy One switches his bad natural course for an improved natural course. Here, too, the man is unaware of any change in his regular course. This applies to all of man's affairs, whether for good or the reverse.

⁶⁶ Compare at length *Nefesh HaChayim* 4:29.

This may help us understand the incident related in the Talmud⁶⁷ in which Benayahu ben Yehoyada, King Shlomo's general, asked Ashmedai, the king of the demons, "Why, when you saw that drunkard wandering off the road, did you lead him back onto the road?"

Ashmedai replied, "They announced about him in Heaven that he was an incorrigible evildoer, so I made him feel good in order for him to use up his credits in this world."

This seems extraordinary. For so small a matter as being led onto a highway does a man use up his mitzvah credits? According to what I have set forth, it may be that although the natural course of the drunkard required that he get lost in his wanderings, the Holy One set him onto a different natural course that he was unaware of, and had him led onto the highway. By making him feel good through not losing his way, He caused the man to use up some of his mitzvah credits.

Cause for Worry

It follows then that every person, regardless of his own situation, should worry lest he is being paid in this world part of the reward he would like to collect in the world of the future. For he cannot know what and how his normal course operates. It is possible that according to his normal, natural course, things should be worse for him than they are now, and that the small amount of benefit he is presently enjoying beyond what his natural course would have provided, is being deducted from his share in *olam ha-ba*, the world of the future.

Even if a person sees himself replete with Torah and *mitzvos*, and his situation in this world is very poor, he can nevertheless not conclude from this that his present

situation will atone for his sins. For he may be underestimating his subconscious powers, and may therefore possibly be considered a predominantly sinful person whose natural course would have led him to be worse off than he is now. That is why even such a person must fear that his future world credits are being used up here.

The solution for this is that a person must bend every effort so that every deed and every acquisition of his assist him in serving his Creator. As a result, all the personal pleasures and needs he derives from his wealth and from his possessions will not be subtracted from his merits. For it is common sense alone that if a rich man lights a candle for his own use he will not demand payment from the pauper who incidentally derives benefit from the same light. Similarly, if a person performs an act of value before G-d for which He wants that person to live longer and consequently grants him benefit of any sort, He will not subtract that benefit from the person's *olam ha-ba* credits.

4 **Suffering and Atonement**

A person should always regard himself as balanced — 50% sinful and 50% righteous. Should he perform a single mitzvah he is fortunate, for he has weighed himself down as righteous. Should he perform a

⁶⁷ *Talmud Bavli, Gittin* 68b.

single *aveirah*, woe unto him for he has weighed himself down as a sinner.⁶⁸

THE SAGES OF THE TALMUD [in the above statement] sought to arouse a person to perform one mitzvah [at a time] and to avoid each sin [as it comes] by getting him to think that that mitzvah will give him a majority of *mitzvos* or that that sin will give him a majority of *aveiros*. On that same page they also state that a person most of whose behavior is *mitzvos* will be punished for his minority of *aveiros* in this world, and a person most of whose behavior is *aveiros* will be rewarded [for his minority of *mitzvos*] in this world.

Very few people really dedicate their intelligence to G-d and strive their utmost to attain the future world rather than this world. As a result of this suggestion of our Sages, ordinary people who greatly value this tangible world and strive to attain it more than they strive for the world of the future, will be further discouraged from serving G-d. They will say, "We are better off being in the category of 'mostly *aveiros*' so that we'll enjoy this world, than being in the category of 'mostly *mitzvos*' and being punished in the world of the future."

According to the premises I laid down earlier, in every instance we follow the majority. Thus when a person is in the category of "mostly *mitzvos*" he is considered G-d's. This is comparable to the statement – though we cannot fully grasp it – "*Avodah tzorech gavo'ah*, service for G-d's sake." All the this-worldly benefits this person receives may be of great advantage to him in improving his service of G-d; in which case, even if according to his natural system his situation in

⁶⁸ *Talmud Bavli, Kidushin 40b.*

this world should be very poor, the Holy One will arrange his natural situation in the best way possible – provided he has not committed any great sin that has the power to weigh him down toward misfortune.

Should the person be, however, in the category of "mostly *aveiros*," he must live on his own account. Even if he has much Torah and many *mitzvos* to his credit, he does not rank with the person who is "mostly *mitzvos*" and is sheltered by G-d and lives on His account.

Our Sages advised a person to make the effort for every mitzvah; for perhaps that one will weigh him down into the category of "mostly *mitzvos*," in which case he will automatically have it good in this world, too. That is also why they advised as well that a person be wary of a sin lest he fall into the category of "mostly *aveiros*"; for then, even if under his natural system he was to be the victim of evil and suffering, his situation will become absolutely bad, and the minority of *mitzvos* he has will not suffice to get him off his natural track. Even the little he does get in this world for his food and basic needs, is given him only as reward for his few *mitzvos*.

Immediately or Later?

We can now proceed to explain the following statement of the Talmud:⁶⁹

Three books are opened on Rosh HaShanah, one of the absolutely wicked (*resha'im*), one of the absolutely righteous (*tzadikim*), and one of in-between people (*beinonim*). The absolutely righteous are inscribed and immediately sealed for life. The absolutely wicked are inscribed and immediately sealed for death. The in-between

⁶⁹ *Talmud Bavli, Rosh HaShanah 16b.*

people are held in abeyance from Rosh HaShanah until Yom Kipur. If they merit it, they are inscribed for life. If they do not merit...

*Rishonim*⁷⁰ (early talmudic commentators) found this statement difficult to understand, for we see absolutely wicked people who continue to live. Additionally, according to the premise of *Tosafos*⁷¹ that the absolutely wicked person referred to by the Talmud is one whose sins are in the majority yet also has *mitzvah*-merits, the Talmud's statement that the wicked are immediately inscribed for death contradicts the statement in *Kidushin* cited earlier according to which a wicked person is supposed to live in order to receive the reward for his merits in this world. It is improbable that the Talmud here is referring to a wicked person who has already been rewarded for his merits.

Why the Righteous Fear Sin

Using the earlier premises, we can explain the Talmud's intention correctly, after citing another Talmud text:⁷²

Rabbi Ya'akov bar Idi queried, "[G-d promised our forefather Ya'akov] 'I am with you and will guard you wherever you go.' Yet Ya'akov said, 'Perhaps sin will affect [the promise].'"

We see here that even in an instance where G-d has made an absolute promise, sin may cause it to be altered. Yet the Talmud, five pages later,⁷³ states:

⁷⁰ See Ramban and Rabenu Nissim cited below.

⁷¹ *Talmud Bavli, Rosh HaShanah*, 16b, "V'nechtomin."

⁷² *Talmud Bavli, Berachos* 4a.

⁷³ *Loc. Cit.* 7a.

Any statement made by the Holy One to do good – even if it was made conditionally – He never retracted.

How can these two statements be reconciled? We know that suffering atones for sin. Now what kind of suffering atones – the suffering of a desire-plagued individual when he cannot fulfill his desires? Even if such a person never enjoys life, we cannot entertain the idea that such suffering atones. The only suffering that atones for sin is the suffering that results when a person was destined for good according to his natural system, and G-d switched it to bad. But if according to a person's natural system his situation was destined to be bad, and he lacked the merits for which, by *midah kenegged midah*, he could earn a change for the better, and G-d did not improve his situation – for G-d does not give a person for free what he has not earned – the bad that befalls him under his natural system is not considered suffering that atones.

The Creditworthy Person

At times, however, a person who was not destined for good may be granted good by G-d, not in his own merit but [on credit], in order that he should be able to serve Him. If that person later fails to fulfill G-d's will and, as a result, G-d takes away the good He granted him, that suffering, too, may be reckoned atonement for sin, since he already had the good and it was taken from him.

This is the difference between the good granted a person in the world and the bad that befalls him: G-d does not send bad upon a person before he sins, even if

He knows that he will sin later,⁷⁴ as stated by the Talmud,⁷⁵ "A person is judged solely by his current behavior" (See Rashi's commentary). But G-d grants a person good in advance, even if he has not yet proven himself righteous. This seems to be implicit in the Torah's words,⁷⁶ "The blessing [so] that you will heed, etc." G-d sends the blessings in advance in the hope that the person will thereby perform *mitzvos*. Regarding the curse, however, the Torah writes,⁷⁷ "And the curse if you do not heed," implying that a person is punished only **after** he has performed evil.

This may explain the terminology of the Talmud in another passage,⁷⁸

"*Hodu ladon-y ki tov*" – Praise G-d Who collects what a man owes him *betovaso*:⁷⁹ the rich man through his ox, the poor man through his lamb, etc.

Rashbam comments, "He causes his possessions to be destroyed to atone for the person himself." There seems to be nothing new in this statement, for it is no special act of mercy if a person suffers financial loss in accord with his wealth.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ G-d's foreknowledge is not for us to discuss, as Rambam explains in *Hilchos Teshuvah* that the foreknowledge is the divine perception of man's behavior whereas the freedom of choice is man's.

⁷⁵ *Talmud Bavli, Rosh HaShanah* 17b.

⁷⁶ *Deuteronomy* 11:27.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 118a.

⁷⁹ Literally: "for his good." Alternatively: "In a manner that is beneficial to him."

⁸⁰ That is the principle of the *korbanos* in the Torah.

Retraction of Boon Equals Suffering

According to our premises, we may explain this statement so: If a person received good from G-d as a reward for his *mitzvos*, and then G-d takes that good away from him, the resultant suffering surely atones. But if the person did not yet earn his wealth by his own actions, yet G-d granted him a boon in advance, and then that man fails to fulfill G-d's will, and G-d consequently takes back His boon, that suffering **ought not to atone**. That it **does** atone is the novelty of the Talmud's statement, "Praise G-d Who collects what a man owes him *betovaso*" – by retracting the boon He granted him only out of His goodness.

We can thus conclude that if a person was granted something by G-d and it was later taken from him, this is considered suffering that atones; also that if a man deserves good for his actions and it is not given him, that too is considered suffering. But if he deserves nothing – neither under his natural system nor because of his actions – and nothing was indeed given him, that is surely not considered suffering.

It follows apparently, that if G-d promises a person good conditionally – as in the case of Moshe whom He promised,⁸¹ "I shall make you into a great nation," conditional on G-d's annihilating the Jewish People – it stands to reason that if the condition were not fulfilled, G-d would be under no obligation to keep His promise. Not receiving that good would not be considered suffering that atones. That is why our Sages informed us about G-d's yardstick, that even if He promised good conditionally, it is as if He promised it unconditionally; even if the condition is not met, G-d will not retract, and the person is **owed** that good by G-d. It is possible,

⁸¹ *Exodus* 32:10.

however, that he will never receive it; and his gain will then be that his non-receipt will serve as atonement for his sins. But if he did not deserve the good, then its non-receipt could not be considered suffering to atone for his sins.

It is natural for a person who realizes that there may be suffering ahead for him – even though he knows that it will atone for his sins – to be afraid and to worry even if he is a great *tzadik*. It is now clear how the Torah can state,⁸² "Ya'akov was very worried" even though G-d had promised him,⁸³ "I am with you and will guard you." He was afraid lest sin cause [him to use up that good for atonement].

Assessing Your Situation

A person's assessment of his situation in this world may thus take the following form: He may have some good or the reverse in accord with the Creator's decree at the time of his birth. Our Sages state in the Talmud⁸⁴ that at the outset of a person's existence it is decreed whether he will be wealthy or poor (this is the basis for his natural system and his situation in the world). It seems reasonable that a person for whom wealth was decreed – if he commits no sins for which he deserves to have his wealth taken from him – will not lose any part of his future-world reward because of this wealth. Should G-d take his wealth from him, it will be considered suffering and will atone for his sins.

Conversely, the person for whom poverty was decreed at his birth and to whom it comes as part of his natural system – if he has no great merit to earn him wealth –

and consequently he remains poor all his life, his poverty is not considered real suffering that atones for his sins. If G-d should give him some wealth, it would be deducted from his reward in the world of the future.

Consequently, any man in any situation, even in the poorest of circumstances, even if he has no pleasure in life and success has never shone upon him, must nevertheless worry that it may have been decreed at his birth that his situation should be **worse** and that the little he does have is a reward for his merits and is being deducted from his share in the future world.

About the Absolutely Wicked

We can now explain the Talmud's statement in *Rosh HaShanah* [about the three books that are opened]. The term righteous (*tzadikim*) refers to people who have mostly *mitzvos*, which means that they are in G-d's service and are "inscribed for life." This means that they "belong" to life, that according to the natural order of things they ought to live. Everything they need for life is included in the word "*Lechayim* – for life," as explained by Ramban in *Sha'ar HaGemul*.⁸⁵ When such a person lives and has everything he needs for life, nothing at all is deducted from his share in the future world. Should any evil befall him afterwards it is considered suffering that atones for his sins.

Evildoers (*resha'im*), who have mostly *aveiros*, are "inscribed for death." According to the natural system they deserve to have nothing to keep them alive. If they do get anything it is deducted from their merits.

⁸⁵ *The Gate of Reward*, §1 in Ramban: *Writings and Discourses*, C.B. Chavel, Shilo, New York, 1978.

⁸² *Genesis* 32:8.

⁸³ *Genesis* 28:15.

⁸⁴ *Nidah* 16b.

This approach is also appropriate according to those *rishonim* (early Talmud commentators)⁸⁶ who explain *tzadikim* to mean those who are adjudged *tzadikim* in the Rosh HaShanah judgment even though they may not have "mostly *mitzvos*." For it is uncommonly difficult for a person to be a *tzadik* who performs only *mitzvos*. But to be a *tzadik* only over the judgment of Rosh HaShanah so that the decision is rendered that one is to live and to be granted all that he needs for living – not in exchange for some major merit that is deducted from his share in the future world – that is easy enough nowadays if we study the situation of our generation and derive the appropriate lessons.

5 **How You Can Live on G-d's Account**

IN STUDYING the moral condition of our people in our times, it takes little effort to see that, for the majority of our people, there is a great difference between the past and the present. Originally, G-d's service was the most respected facet of the Jew's life. We know that every Jew, even if he could not personally attain a high level of divine service, desired heart and soul that his sons be trained to be G-d's servants and students of His Torah.

As a result he did not have to worry too much about his position in the world, for his life and his requirements were granted him on G-d's account so that

he should be able to raise his children and train them for G-d's service.

Nowadays in our country⁸⁷ the situation has, due to our many sins, been reversed. The desire to raise and train children for Torah and G-d's service has declined and is even less than the parents' own desire to attain G-d's service. Even those parents to whom the road of Torah and fear of G-d is precious, ignore their children and do not pay attention to directing and improving them in serving G-d. Thus, these people are living on their own accounts.

Anyone Can Do It

Nevertheless, even in our times there are great and lofty matters that enable every person, regard-less of his station in life, to live for his Creator's sake. In this way his life and all his life's necessities are on G-d's account. What he needs to do is to gear all his mental and physical efforts toward fortifying G-d's service. In the past not every man was able to do this, only a *tzadik* who was a leader of his generation. But in our own days it is obvious that anyone can do it.

Let me give one instance. Everyone knows that Torah-study is more important than anything else. Our Sages declare,⁸⁸ "Torah-study is the equivalent of all of the [*mitzvos*]." It is the life-breath of the Jewish People, constantly keeping them alive.

The highest level of Torah-study is studying in order to guide Jews to act in accordance with Halachah: in-depth study of the Talmud and the codifiers so that one can reach halachic decisions without having to search

⁸⁶ See Rabenu Nissim to *Rosh HaShanah* 12b (3b in Alfasi), s.v. *Tzadikim Gemurim*, citing Rabbi Yeshayah the Elder of Trani.

⁸⁷ Russia in the 1870's. The same seems to apply universally today, Ed.

⁸⁸ *Mishnah, Pe'ah*, 1:1.

through the rulings of latter-day rabbis. Even nowadays we find young men with great capabilities, who possess quick minds and are intellectually honest in their studies, and are fit to teach Torah and Halachah to Jewry. Most of them, however, are not wealthy or even well off. Our Sages said,⁸⁹ "Be careful with the children of the poor, for Torah will come forth from them."

Even when their powerful desire to study Torah fills their hearts, and they energetically struggle against all the vicissitudes and tribulations of life in order to attain their goal of reposing in the tents of Torah in order to concentrate on it, they lack the wherewithal to persevere at their studies for many years, for ultimately the problem of providing for themselves and their families overwhelms them. For things are not as they were in years past; the cost of living has risen while income has declined.

The Nation Protected Torah

Besides, the sources of income available for Torah scholars have diminished. In the past, a young man who had completed his course of study and was fit to render halachic decisions when problems were presented to him and was qualified to judge litigation, but had not yet found a position in a community – or even one who had not yet completed his studies – was still sure of support for his studies. It was easy for them to find what they needed for their food and other needs, because the Torah's honor was great in those days and well-to-do householders who had sons whom they considered gifted and hoped would grow in Torah-knowledge spent much money on them, hiring expert teachers like these [scholars to study with their sons]

⁸⁹ *Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 81a.*

who earned large sums for little labor and time. Thus they had a source of income, and the rest of their time they dedicated to preserving and increasing their Torah knowledge.

Now that secular study has become widespread among our children, this is no longer so. The Torah is honored less and less, and the desire to study Torah has declined. Since fathers and sons alike lack the motivation, the results have diminished. Whence, then, will come help for those individuals who sit in G-d's Presence and study Torah day and night? If they will not find financial support to provide their needs then all their effort and labor will go up in smoke. And the loss is irreplaceable. For it results in the diminution of the seekers of Torah and its students and [ultimately], G-d forbid, to the collapse of the first of the three pillars that support the world.⁹⁰

They Will Lack Torah Teachers

Without the Torah the life of a Jew is meaningless and negligible, for his physical and moral condition are based solely on the Torah. As we see the Torah losing more students from day to day, we wonder what will be with our children in the next generation. In quest of the Torah's paths, they will certainly stumble. They will walk in the dark without a guide to light their way in the Torah's illumination, for they will lack teachers of Torah-law.

Any Jew with integrity whose love-flame for his people and his Torah is still burning will understand how important it is for us to quickly repair this breach, which may lead to the collapse of the entire wall of faith. It is within our capacity to prevent this by

⁹⁰ *Mishnah, Avos 1:2*

strengthening the wall so that it will not collapse. We can do this easily if every person who has some fear of G-d will contribute some of his energy and some of his money to support the young students who have dedicated themselves and consecrated their lives to undisturbed study – to make sure they are provided for and to support their families.

All that this project needs are people who will arouse others. Every person is to some degree capable of arousing others. Although an important person is in a better position to arouse others, in this matter, which everyone understands to be vital nowadays, every person is capable of arousing others. As the Talmud teaches,⁹¹ "One who causes others to act is greater than one who acts himself." Whoever takes heart to promote this great mitzvah whose roots strike deeply into the wellsprings of Torah in order to raise fresh, luscious fruit in the Torah's orchard, will earn the reward Scripture promises:⁹² "It is a tree of life for those who hold on to it and its supporters are praiseworthy."

⁹¹ *Talmud Bavli, Bava Basra 9a.*

⁹² *Proverbs 3:18.*

Rabbi Naftoli Hertz Ehrmann

Meeting of Giants

In 1876, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Yisroel Lipkin of Salant (Salanter), met to discuss the future of Orthodox Jewry in Russia. The rabbi who arranged their meeting published his report 30 years later, in 1906.

IN HIS LIFETIME, Rabbi Yisroel Lipkin of Salant was considered an authority within Russian Jewry. Today, 23 years after his death (in 1883), he is valued even more highly: "*Tzadikim* are greater in death than in life."

Rav Yisroel Salanter never occupied any public office. He was neither a businessman nor an artisan. He belonged to none of the categories that the Russian government considered eligible to obtain a passport legally. In order to travel he used the passport of a merchant friend.

The Inkmaker

Rav Yisroel's pure character did not allow him to keep up this unlawfulness for long. When he visited Berlin in the early 1870's to seek a cure for his ailing health, this aging man of 63 or so decided that he would not travel home until he had learned a skill that would enable him – on his return to Russia – to obtain a legal passport. It seemed to him that the easiest and most promising skill to learn was ink-making, and he took lessons from a chemist.

A friend gave him a whole floor in his house to use as a laboratory. For weeks, Rav Yisroel occupied a good part of his day and his nights with intensive theoretical and practical study of chemistry.

This was not as easy as it sounds. He and his chemistry teacher could at first only communicate with each other through an interpreter. But Rav Yisroel learned to read and write German, and soon progressed so far that he could read the daily paper. With some help for the more difficult words and the chemical terms, he was soon able to study chemistry books. A few weeks later, Rav Yisroel understood the composition of all types of ink, including gold and silver ink. He had accomplished his goal so rapidly and so thoroughly that his chemistry teacher declared that his elderly chemistry student had nothing more to learn from him.

The Lobbyist

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was a frequent traveler from his home in Frankfurt-on-the-Main to Berlin in the 1870's. He was preparing the way for the *Austrittsgesetz*⁹³ that was finally passed in 1876. Three years older than Rav Yisroel Salanter, he was under great strain, beset with many different types

⁹³ This was a law that permitted a group of Jews to form an autonomous community outside the jurisdiction of the government-recognized "official" Jewish community. In Rabbi Hirsch's case it allowed his Orthodox community in Frankfurt-on-the-Main to separate itself from the Reform-controlled "official" community.

of work that made great demands on him at all hours of the day and night throughout his visits in Berlin. Rabbi Hirsch spent his days seeking out ministers, ministerial advisers, and influential men in every area. By personally presenting his case, he tried to win over powerful people and factions in favor of the law. In the evenings, his correspondence and writing awaited him, and this often kept him occupied until well into the night.

Respect for the Regenerator

Rav Yisroel had a great longing to become acquainted with Rabbi Hirsch and to learn his views on the means needed to consolidate traditional Jewry in Russia. He had great respect for the regenerator of German Jewry, and no one else was more deeply convinced of the desperate need of Russian Jewry for such a personality. Questions of etiquette – such as which of the two should visit the other first – did not exist for Rav Yisroel. As I was helping Rabbi Hirsch a little during his stay, Rav Yisroel asked me to ask Rabbi Hirsch when would be the most convenient time for Rav Yisroel to visit him.

When I came to Rabbi Hirsch that evening in his room at the Hotel Arnim. I found him very busy. Before I had a chance to state Rav Yisroel Salanter's request, he asked me to acquire for him as soon as possible a few books from the Royal Library on the subject of the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. It had been suggested to him that he put down his concepts of the subject in a memorandum to be distributed in Parliament among the

individual members. Among other things, he had to present thorough proof that the contrast between observant Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism was much greater than that between Catholics and Protestants. This he wanted to document with detailed quotations from the books he had so urgently requested. Since the library was already closed that evening and I would only be able to get the books the next morning, he asked me to come by early in the morning, as perhaps he would need other books.

“Any time”

When I saw how this great man's time was so completely filled, I hardly had the courage to express Rav Yisroel's wish; I knew that its fulfillment would cost Rabbi Hirsch precious time. Yet when I actually did place Rav Yisroel's request before him, Rabbi Hirsch declared that “any time” would be available for a visit from Rav Yisroel Salanter. He asked me what time would suit Rav Yisroel, and I said that Rav Yisroel had left the choice to him. He suggested the next evening, as then he would be undisturbed. I knew what a sacrifice this was for Rabbi Hirsch just when he had to make the most of every single minute in order to complete the unfinished memorandum. Since his days were occupied with audiences and visits, he could only write it in the evenings. I noted that the matter was not urgent and the visit could easily be postponed a few days. Rabbi Hirsch refused to hear of it, and asked me to ask Rav Yisroel to honor him with his visit the very next evening.

Finished the Memorandum

When I came to Rabbi Hirsch the next morning in order to receive any more possible requests for the library, he told me with a smile that he would not be troubling me as he had finished writing the memorandum the previous night. He just wanted me to bring it to the printer so that it could immediately be composed, printed, corrected, and bound. He wanted to hand it out in Parliament two days later.

Rabbi Hirsch had thus gained the necessary time to be able to devote the evening to his honored guest without infringing on the purpose for which he had come to Berlin. By sacrificing a night of his own he had gained an evening for Rav Yisroel Salanter.

The Meeting

More than 30 years have passed since that memorable evening. But the overwhelming impression of the meeting between those two great personalities has remained with me until this day. Their similarities and their differences, the overflowing wisdom of their thoughts, and the restrained modesty of their spoken words; the expression in Rabbi Hirsch's eyes from which his great, noble soul seemed to pour forth, and the flashing sparks that shot out from the gaze of Rav Yisroel and blazed around his learned brow. All that and so much more – all of it remains in my memory as vividly as if it had just happened yesterday.

How different were the two great men in speech and bearing, and in other external aspects. Yet how similar were they in their thoughts and their

spiritual lives – in short, in everything that makes a man a Jew. Never have I sensed the binding and the brotherly strength of the Torah to purify and ennoble people more deeply than in the moment when these two men reached out their hands to each other.

Rav Yisroel who, even in general conversation, never let a word leave his lips that had not been carefully considered from all sides, and who knew in addition how precious Rabbi Hirsch's time was, came straight to the matter which lay on his heart more than on anyone else's.

The Future of Russian Jewry

He explained the dangers that he believed threatened the future of Russian Jewry and asked Rabbi Hirsch for his views on how best to combat them. Rabbi Hirsch, in his modesty, said that he was not familiar enough with Jewish life in Russia to be able to express an authoritative opinion. Surely Rav Yisroel must have thought about the problem a great deal himself, and he asked him to state his opinion.

Rav Yisroel thought that the best means of preserving the younger generation for Jewry – to win back their respect – was through literature in the Russian language permeated with the true Jewish spirit. He had no doubt that only the most salutary benefits would result from writings of this kind. The tragedy was, however, that those Russian Jews who were permeated with the truth of Judaism could not write Russian, while those who had acquired a secular education and mastered the Russian language

had broken with traditional Judaism. This situation made producing such writings unimaginable.

Jewish Literature from German

Rabbi Hirsch suggested that it might then be proper to translate into Russian works written in the German language for this purpose. If necessary, the translation could even be done by a non-Jew.

This idea met with Rav Yisroel's full approval. When he asked Rabbi Hirsch to specify a few works suitable for this purpose, he suggested the works of Salomon Plessner.⁹⁴

At this point, I asked whether the writings of Rabbi Hirsch himself would not be suitable, particularly such a work as *The 19 Letters*. Rabbi Hirsch replied that it would naturally please him greatly if this great undertaking could be furthered through a translation of his writings.

Neither of them was fundamentally opposed to a translation into Hebrew (I later heard this from them both), but they believed that the great benefits they hoped would result from the propagation of these writings could be achieved more easily and more permanently if the remedy were given in the language in which the disease had been transmitted.

On the way home, Rav Yisroel asked me to procure for him a copy of *The 19 Letters* and to read through it with him so that he might be able to form

⁹⁴ Rabbi Shlomo Plessner was the famous *darshon* of Posen (Poznan), then in German-speaking Prussia, from 1843 until his death in 1883.

an opinion for himself. That was easier said than done, for at that time, Rav Yisroel had hardly begun to read German. So we read until deep into the night and for still another few days after that until we finished the first letter. Another few weeks passed before we finally completed the book. Rav Yisroel summed up his opinion of this work, "The book must not only be translated into Russian, but also into the Holy Tongue."⁹⁵

--Translated by Gitta Starrett from *Der Israelit*, 47: 12, 22
March 1906

⁹⁵ The Editor of *Der Israelit* noted, "Just in those circles of Russian Jewry for whom a translation of Rabbi Hirsch's works is reckoned to be most essential, the knowledge of Hebrew is especially widespread. One must add further that a Hebrew translation would also mean an extremely valuable enrichment of our national literature, and it is therefore decidedly preferable to a Russian translation."