

Ameilus BaTorah is the Key

Yesterday we mentioned that there are seven levels of a person going away from Torah and ending up a *kofer*, one who denies the existence of Hashem. Step one is by not learning with toil.

The first thing I want to clarify is that many people have heard that nowadays, people go off because of the internet. They get involved with the internet. They get exposed. We've heard of people getting involved with bad friends and the bad friends take them off the *derech*. So what's the *pshat*? The *pshat* is, if a person gets bad friends, you know what he does next? He stops learning. Even if he was learning, and then he gets bad friends, he stops learning. So it's not the bad friends that caused him to end up denying Hashem and go off the *derech*, but the bad friends caused the person to weaken his commitment to learning Torah. A person gets involved with the internet, so he weakens his resolve and his ability to learn Torah *b'ameilus*, because *kol zman* the person is really *amal baTorah*, he has a protection. It says the *me'or shebah*, the light of the Torah, could bring a person back *l'mutav*. It could bring him back.

Now, in this Rashi that's brought down in this *parshah*, the *Rebbi* (Rav Meir Halevi Soloveichik) was *medayek* that you shouldn't simply think that through the fulfillment of *ameilus baTorah* you will be *zocheh* to all kind of *brachos*, and if you're not *mekayem imb'chukosai teileichu*, you're going to be visited by the whole slew of curses like it says in the *passuk*. No. It's telling us much more than that. So *vas shtait dah*? What it really is saying here, is that *ameilus baTorah* is the key to sustain one's *emunah*, one's observance of *mitzvos*, and one's *Yiddishkeit*. If a person is not *amal baTorah*, his own *emunah* will end up falling by the wayside.

Many people think that they need *emunah*. And what is going to bring them to *emunah*? They think maybe they will read the *sefarim* of Rabbi Miller. Maybe they'll listen to some stories of *bitachon*. Maybe they'll listen to the *bitachon* hotline and similar things. But all the hotlines and all the *sefarim* on *emunah* will not preserve your *Yiddishkeit* unless you're *amal baTorah*. My *Rebbi* saw that as a massive *chiddush*, that *pashut ameilus baTorah* is the key to a person's *Yiddishkeit*! It's the key to his believing in Torah, believing in *mitzvos*, believing in Hashem.

Now you know that's what leads you to break the covenant with Hashem - it starts with *lo lamad*, you didn't learn.

Simple but Erliche Yid

I once heard this from my *Rebbi*. Somebody asked his grandfather, Rav Chaim Halevi Soloveichik, how it was that in Europe there were some *balebatim* who didn't know how to learn a word. They were just simple *Tehillim zuggers*, and they were *erliche Yidden*. They didn't end up being *kofrim* in Hashem. How was that possible? How in the world was that possible?

So Rav Chaim said, those people never had an opportunity to learn. They were never granted the opportunity to learn, and that's not called someone who rejects learning. Someone who rejects learning Torah is a person who is not learning Torah because he decides that learning Torah is not something he has to do. It's not something he wants to do. It's not something that resonates with him. And that's where the *kilkul* lies. But if a person was never given the opportunity to learn, *nu*, so that's not going to necessarily turn him into a *kofer*.

Sustaining the World with Torah

He says, that's the *pshat*, the depth of the *pshat*, in the *mishnah* in *Pe'ah*. In the *mishnah* in *Pe'ah* it says, ותלמוד תורה כנגד כולם. What's the simple message of this *mishnah*? What would you say the subject is? *Sechar*. The subject of that *mishnah* is, what are you getting *sechar* for in This World, and what's the biggest *sechar*? *Talmud Torah is keneged kulam*.

But my *Rebbi* said that based on these *pessukim* and this *Chazal*, the *mishnah* is saying more than that. It is telling us that *talmud Torah* is the greatest sustainer of all the *mitzvos* in the Torah, while *bitul Torah* is the greatest force that undermines them.

That's what *Chazal* say. Rabbeinu Yonah (Shaarei Teshuva 3:14) brings this down, כשם ששכר תלמוד תורה גדול מכל המצוות כך עונש המבטל גדול מכל עבירות. It's not simply that the biggest mitzvah is *talmud Torah*. The reason why *talmud Torah* is the biggest mitzvah is because that's what sustains a person's *Yiddishkeit* more than anything else. *Limud Torah* is the most powerful sustainer of *Yiddishkeit* and *emunah* in Hashem and *bitul Torah* is the greatest underminer of that.ⁱ

Therefore *ameilus baTorah* is not *stam* a *ma'alah*, it's not just simply a *middah tovah* but it's an absolute *chiyuv* that the whole world - all the *Yiddishkeit* in the world - hangs on this singular *mitzvah*. All the *brachos*. All the *klalos*. All the *emunah*. All the *mitzvos*. They are all dependent upon this - and this alone.

And the *Rebbi* said, when it says in *Pirkei Avos* there are 48 ways to acquire Torah, what it means is, one of the ways it says to acquire Torah, one of the things is *talmud*. *Talmud* means *ameilus baTorah*, because *ameilus* is a condition in how Torah is supposed to be learned.

Everybody has to have a *rebbi*. My *Rebbi* spoke about this. If you don't have a *rebbi* who can teach you what *ameilus baTorah* is, you're never going to know what *ameilus baTorah* is, and you're not going to know how to reach that level. You're not going to know. But after all the *ameilus baTorah* and all the *hasmadah*, on top of that, you need a lot of *tefillos* and *siyatta di'Shmaya* to really reach a good level in understanding the Torah.

My *Rebbi* used to repeat a story about his great-great-uncle, the Netziv, Rav Hirsch Leib, who was the *rosh yeshivah* in Volozhin. From a young age, he was known to be a tremendous *masmid*. Once, his father-in-law told someone, "You want to see my son-in-law's *hasmadah*, diligence?" He said, "Yeah. How are you going to show it to me?" So it was Motzoei Yom Kippur, and they had just concluded *Ma'ariv*. What does everybody do at that time? What would you do if you just finished *Ma'ariv* on Yom Kippur? What do you do? You go and eat. You just fasted 25-26 hours, so you go and eat. That is the first thing you do. Rav Itzele Volozhiner told this man, "Come with me." He took him to a room. They opened the door, and inside, they saw the Netziv sitting and learning there. That's what he was doing on Motzoei Yom Kippur. He was already toiling in Torah.

The Netziv later explained what the *pshat* was. Wasn't he hungry? Sure. But he said, "The world needs toiling in Torah to exist." He knew, at this time, throughout the European continent, everybody is going to eat. He figured he'll *chap arein* and carry the world. He'll hold up the world. You hear that *cheshbon*?

All his life, the Netziv would sleep in the *yeshivah* without going home. He lived down the block, but he stayed in the *yeshivah*. When he got old, he was very weak, and the doctors told him he should go to sleep in a bed, in a house, and then he would go to sleep in his house. But he would get up a number of times in the middle of the night, and he would go and keep an eye on the *bachurim* in the Volozhiner Yeshivah, to see how they were learning. The Brisker Rav said that to get up a couple times during the night, took greater strength from him than to remain in the *yeshivah* a whole night and learn straight. These people were a different type of people. And then, when it came to *Shacharis*, he would *daven* with tears, every *Shacharis*, when it came to *Ahavah Rabah*. Every day, buckets of tears would run from his eyes when he said *Ahavah Rabah* and he asked Hashem to give him love and understanding of Torah. The floor around his seat would be wet with tears when he finished. After all the toil, after all the *hasmadah*, he had such a strong connection to his *Yiddishkeit*, to the Torah, and to *emunah* in Hashem. These people were on a different plane.

The Fire of Torah Still Exists

There was once a group of people who were involved in *zikuy harabim*. They were trying to help Klal Yisrael. A *yungerman* came to the Chazon Ish - a *yungerman* who used to sit and learn all day long. He told the Chazon Ish that he wants to join this group, and he'd like to be involved in the *zikuy harabim*. The Chazon

Ish told him as follows: To become a *talmid chacham* and to give that gift to Klal Yisrael, the gift of another *talmid chacham*, is the greatest *zikuy harabim* that you can possibly do for Klal Yisrael. That is the *zikuy harabim*. These people understood. The fire that they had for Torah was unbelievable.

Once, in the city of Vienna, before the war, late in the evening someone began knocking loudly on the door of one of the *chashuve* people in town. The guy ran to the door and he said, "Who's there? Who's there?" And the person answered, "Kotler. Kotler." He opened the door and he saw Rav Aharon Kotler there. The person got all emotional and he said, "Rosh Yeshivah of Kletzk, what are you doing here, in the middle of the night?" Rav Aharon said, "I heard that you have a guest in your house, a brother of yours. Is that true?" His name was Rav Yechiel Michel Shlesinger. He said, "Yes he's sleeping." He said, "Go wake him up." He said, "Go wake him up, and tell him I have a *teretz* for his *kasha* that he asked me before." This Rav Yechiel Michel Shlesinger became the *rosh yeshivah* of Kol Torah in Eretz Yisrael.

It sounded from Rav Aharon that he just asked him the *kasha* before he went to sleep. He went to wake his brother up. His brother came out, washed his hands and Rav Aharon said, "I have a *teretz* for you!" and he told him the *teretz*. They argued a little bit. The person who was the *balebus* of the house, the brother, said, "When did you ask him this *kasha*?" He said, "Eight hours ago." For eight hours Rav Aharon was thinking about that *kasha*. Now, he was in Vienna for the *Kenesiah Gedolah*. It was a big gathering of *rabbanim*, but this Yid asked him a *kasha* and boom, the *teretz* was the most important thing. That's how it is. People were different back then.

Rav Aharon introduced America to what *ameilus baTorah* meant. Rav Moshe Shternbuch lives today in Yerushalayim. He is a famous *adam chashuv*, and the head of the Eidah HaChareidis. He said that he once came to Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer's house, the *Even Haezel*, and he posed a *kasha* to him, and at that time Rav Aharon was in the house. Rav Aharon heard the *kasha*. It was on a *Tosfos* in *Chullin*, in the *sugya* of *mefarcheses*, not the easiest *sugya*. Rav Isser Zalman turns to Rav Aharon and he says, "Nu, give him an answer. Answer him." He said, Rav Aharon began to say a *shiur* with such a fire, with such a *bren*. He brought in so many *sugyos* to build this humongous *shtickel Torah* all in a few minutes. He started from *Taharos*. He went to *hilchos treifos*. He went to *eiver min hachai*. He spoke for one hour until he came to an answer. Rav Isser Zalman was looking at him and his eyes were popping out. Wow! This is how it's supposed to be.

There was a story with Rav Lazer Silver. Rav Lazer Silver was a *rav* in Cincinnati. He was an *adam gadol meod*. He was a genius. The famous story was once told of him, that he was driving a car and he got *fatracht*, and he ended up running into a tree. His first reaction was, "Which *meshugne* put a tree in the middle of the road?"

At the end of his life he was very sick and he was on his deathbed. He wasn't conscious and the doctors tried to bring him back to consciousness in a number of ways. Rav Motel Gifter was close to him. He used to come to Telz a lot to visit. A relative asked Rav Motel Gifter, "Could you maybe try to talk to him and see if you can get him to stay awake?" Rav Gifter knew the *mehalech* of Rav Lazer Silver. He was a *gaon*, and he knew there was one thing he couldn't tolerate. Crooked *sevaros*. False *chiddushim* used to burn him up like crazy. He bent down to the ear of Rav Lazer Silver and he started to say *krume Torah*. Crooked things. At first Rav Lazer didn't react at all but they saw his face contorting. His face made movements. Nu, so that showed he heard. So Rav Gifter continued, and they saw his face getting red and it looked like he was about to explode. Rav Motel Gifter kept going. *Nucha silly kasha*. Finally, Rav Lazer got up with *aza bren* and he gave a scream out, "*Genuk!* Enough! Stop already!" He said, "You're saying such *krume zachen* without a stop. How much can you talk like that?"

Rav Gifter used to tell people this story, to show what it means to be a person who is an *amel baTorah*. The doctors asked Rav Gifter what did you use to get him back to *hakarah*? He said, "*Krume sevaros*." Did anybody else understand that? No.

There was a famous *adam gadol*, Rav Yisrael Gustman. He was a toiler in Torah, like, unbelievable, magnificent! There was a wedding for his grandson, and at the wedding a lot of *gedolim* were present. There

were two famous *iluyim* there at the wedding. One was Rav Chaim Zimmerman, who was a known *iluyishe mentsch*, and Rav Moshe Zaritzky, and these people, *mamish*, got into it. A lot of funny stories are told about both of them, how they used to fight in learning and argue in learning. *Bekitzur*, they started getting into a *machlokes* at the wedding. He said, the voices that were raised there and the movements of the hand and how one said to the other, “You don't know how to explain the *pshat* in the Rambam, and if you are right, the Mishneh Lemelech did not know how to learn.” The other one answered him, “*Nu*, you're talking *hevel*. The Mishnah Lemelech is a *ra'ayah* to me. It's not against me.” And it went on and on. Rav Gustman was the grandfather of the *chassan*. He was the *baal hasimchah* there. He knew this *machlokes* was going to go on through the whole wedding. He went over to Rav Chaim Zimmerman and he whispered in his ear. He said, “Be careful with the *kavod* of Rav Moshe Zaritzky. He's a *talmid chacham* and he's a very big *lamdan*.” He then went over to Rav Moshe Zaritzky and he whispered in his ear, “Be careful with the *kavod* of Rav Chaim Zimmerman. He's a *talmid chacham* and a big *lamdan*.” And he got the fires to die down.

I was once at a wedding with Rav Gustman, when his *talmid muvhak* was getting married and he insisted that the *talmid muvhak* say Torah at the *chossan tish*. He said a *longeh shtickel Torah*. Everybody was falling asleep. They tried to sing him *Yoses ali'ech, Od yishama*. Oh, no, he wasn't going to have any of that. Anyway, he finished the *shtickel Torah*. Rav Gustman got up and he said, “I have to ask *mechilah* from the *olam* and I have to be *modeh* and *misvadeh*, I'm not who you think I am. I'm a tremendous *baal ta'avah*. I'm a tremendous *ba'al ta'avah*.” He said it a couple of times. People couldn't believe it. How could you come to a wedding and say, “I'm a *ba'al ta'avah*”? He said, “I must hear *nach a shtickel Torah* like this from my *talmid*. Would you all excuse me? *Nu zug nach*, say more.” He *pashut* felt a *hishtokekus*, a desire for Torah. There was a burning fire in him. These were people from a different world. It was not *stam*.

They fought about this *machlokes* that they started by this wedding for tens of years. For tens of years, they fought about this *machlokes*. *Nu*? When they spoke sharply to each other, Rav Moshe Zaritzky sent *shluchim* to Rav Chaim to ask him if he spoke too harshly against him. Rav Chaim said, “I don't understand. He has to ask me for *mechilah*? *Adaraba*. I owe him a tremendous amount of *hakaras hatov*. He gave me *aza nachas ruach*, unbelievable.” He said, “For forty years I was looking for somebody who's bothered by the *pshat* in this Rambam. I'm looking for somebody who's bothered by this *pshat* in Tosfos. I didn't know that in our generation there's somebody who is so bothered by a *pshat* that he's able to call another *talmid chacham* ‘an *am ha'aretz*’ because he understood a different *pshat* in Tosfos. Ah! I'm thankful to Hashem that he was *mezakeh* me that after the Holocaust there is *nach gebliben*, and there still remains a Jew like this. Tell him he should be at ease because he put me at ease. I have a lot of *hakaras hatov* to him.’

Do you understand? This is the *pshat* what *ameilus baTorah* is. It has to bother you. Hakadosh Baruch Hu should help us that we should be *zocheh* to be bothered by something besides the air conditioning, or the fan, or the coffee, or the tea, or the *narishkeit*, but something about the learning. *That* should bother you.

In Summary:

What do we have to give in order to learn Torah with *ameilus*? More importantly, what does *ameilus baTorah* give us? We give a commitment to learning Torah, the energy to be excited by Torah, and to care and be bothered by *inyanim* in *limud haTorah*. We get back far more. We get protection to stay on the path of Torah and not to do *aveiros*, and if our resolve weakened, to return to Torah. We get *chizuk* in all things connected with *emunah*, such as believing in the existence of Hashem, observance of *mitzvos*, and feeling alive in one's *Yiddishkeit*. This week (*bli neder*) in order to strengthen my feelings that *ameilus baTorah* is the key to our *Yiddishkeit*, I will read a story every day about a *gadol* who had exemplary *ameilus baTorah*, and then *daven* to Hashem that I, too, should merit practicing *ameilus baTorah*, by taking my learning seriously.

ⁱ יוש אנשים רבים בהמון העם חושבים כי אין עקר האבדון והפסד הנפש זולתי בעברות שיש בהם מעשה. וכי אין אבדן נפש אל האיש אשר הוא טהור מחטוא במעשה ובדרך העברות לא הלק וחדל מעשות מצות ומעשים טובים. על כן אנו חייבין להודיע תועי רוח בינה כי אמרו רבותינו זכרונם לברכה ותר הקב"ה על ע"ז וגלוי עריות ושפיכות דמים ולא ותר על עון בטול תורה. ואמרו כשם ששקר תלמוד תורה גדול מקל המצות כך ענין המבטלה גדול מקל העברות. ואמרו (במדבר ט"ו:ל"א) כי דבר ה' בזה ואת מצותו הפר נאמר על מי שאפשר לו לעסק בתורה ואינו עוסק. וכבר זכרנו לך כל אלה בשער התורה.