

“Everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will obey!”

Solving the Puzzle Concerning Rava Who Was So Engrossed in His Studies that He Failed to Notice that His Fingers Were Oozing Blood

In parshat Yisro it states (Shemos 19, 7): **“ויבוא משה ויקרא לזקני העם וישם לפניהם את כל הדברים האלה אשר צוהו ה' ויענו כל העם יחדיו ויאמרו—Moshe came and summoned the elders of the people, and put before them all these words that Hashem had commanded him. And all the people answered together and said, “Everything that Hashem has spoken we shall do!” Moshe brought back the words of the people to Hashem. Regarding this passuk, we find the following elucidation in the Mechilta: **“וישב משה את דברי העם אל השם, ומה היו דברי העם, כל אשר דיבר ה' נעשה ונשמע”**—and what were the words of the people? **“Everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will obey!”****

According to the Mechilta, the Torah here recorded an abbreviated version of the people's response. They didn't merely respond: **“We shall do!”** but rather **“We will do and we will obey!”**—**“na'aseh v'nishma”**—as it states explicitly in parshat Mishpatim (ibid. 24, 7). As Rashi points out (ibid. 1), this latter passage was said prior to Matan Torah, but is consistent with the principle of **“ein mukdam u'miuchar baTorah”**—the Torah does not necessarily record events in chronological order.

The Tzadduki Who Saw Rava Engrossed in His Studies

Since it is related to Yisrael's response of **“na'aseh v'nishma,”** it is fitting that we examine a wonderful story regarding Rava, one of the great scholars of the Talmud. The incident is depicted in the Gemara as follows (Shabbas 88a):

“ההוא צדוקי דחזייה לרבא דקא מעיין בשמעתא ויתבה אצבעתא ידיה תותי כרעא וקא מייץ בהו וקא מבנין אצבעתיה דמא.”

אמר ליה עמא פזיזא דקדמיתו פומיכו לאודניכו אכתי בפחזותייכו קיימיתו ברישא איבעיא לכו למשמע אי מציתו קבליתו, ואי לא לא קבליתו.

אמר ליה אנן דסגינן בשלימותא כתיב בן (משלי יא-ג) תומת ישרים תנחם, הנך אינשי דסגן בעלילותא כתיב בהו (משלי יא-ג) וסלף בוגדים ישרם.

A particular Tzadduki saw Rava engrossed in his studies; his fingers were lodged beneath his legs; he was crushing them with his legs, and his fingers oozed blood. He said to him (the Tzadduki to Rava): **You are an impetuous people who placed your mouths before your ears** (by declaring **“na'aseh v'nishma,”** agreeing to obey the precepts of the Torah before hearing if you could even live up to your rash declaration); **you still maintain your impetuous nature. First, you should have heard if the demands of the Torah are something you could live by, and if not, you should not have accepted it. He (Rava) answered him: Regarding us who followed Him wholeheartedly** (trusting that he would not require of us anything that was beyond our capabilities), **it is written: “The innocence of the upright will guide them.” Regarding those people who find numerous excuses** (for not obeying the precepts of the Torah), **it is written: “But the corruption of the faithless will despoil them.”**

We must endeavor to understand the deeper message conveyed by the incident involving Rava—who pressed on his fingers while learning until they oozed blood. Furthermore, what is the connection between the fact that he pressed on his fingers while engrossed in Torah-study and Yisrael's proclamation of **“na'aseh v'nishma”**—which prompted the Tzadduki to characterize them contemptuously as an **“impetuous people,”** accepting something before hearing what it entailed?

require rest? What else is written in it (ibid. 7)? *You shall not take the name of Hashem, your G-d, in vain.* Are there any business transactions among you that might lead to oaths taken in vain? What else is written in it (ibid. 12)? *Honor your father and mother.* Do you have a father or mother?"

This passage demonstrates that the performance of mitzvos and good deeds are essential and are in fact the source for attaining Torah-knowledge. Otherwise, the malachim would have received the Torah instead of Yisrael. Therefore, a person whose chochmah (wisdom) exceeds his deeds--because he engages in the wisdom of the Torah but fails to apply it to actually serve Hashem to a higher degree—he is compared to: **"A tree whose branches are many but whose roots are few; the wind comes and uproots it and turns it over upon its face."**

To remedy this situation, one should strive to have his deeds exceed his wisdom. In accordance with the amount of chochmah in Torah one possesses, one must search for various ways to put that chochmah to practical use so as to perform more mitzvos and good deeds. As a result, he will be compared to: **"A tree whose branches are few but whose roots are many; for even if all the winds in the world were to come and blow upon it, they would not move it from its place."**

In the Merit of "Na'aseh" We Merit Attaining Torah-knowledge in the Sense of "V'nishma"

Let us expand on this notion that mitzvos and good deeds represent the roots for chochmah in Torah, based on an explanation presented in Leket Imrei Kodesh (Shavuot) in the name of the holy Admor Rabbi Yehoshua of Belz, zy"ta. He addresses the matter of Yisrael declaring "na'aseh" prior to "nishma" when they declared: **"כל אשר דיבר ה' נעשה ונשמע"**—**everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will obey!** For, at the revelation on Har Sinai, Yisrael saw clearly that a corporeal human being, composed of flesh and blood, cannot possibly fathom the true meaning of the Torah, representing the chochmah of HKB"Ha. For, the material, physical body is a hindrance.

Hence, the solution to this dilemma is to first perform Hashem's mitzvos with one's 248 limbs and 365 sinews even without grasping the true significance of one's actions. For, in the process, one will sanctify and purify one's entire body. Thus, the physical body will not obstruct his path and hinder him from attaining Torah-knowledge. This is implicit in Yisrael's declaration: **"כל אשר דיבר ה' נעשה ונשמע"**. By means of "na'aseh"—

the actual performance of all of the mitzvos—"v'nishma"—we will merit hearing and comprehending the true meaning of the Torah. A similar explanation is provided by the Sefat Emet (Mishpatim 5637): **"זוה פירוש נעשה ונשמע, שעל ידי העשיה זוכין אחר 'נעשה'—by means of the actual performance, we subsequently merit the hearing, which is the ability to grasp its meaning."**

Thus, we can now appreciate the message conveyed by Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah. He compared the actual performance of the mitzvos to the roots of a tree and the chochmah of the Torah to the tree's branches and fruit. For, in reality, the performance of the mitzvos—which sanctify and purify a person's body—constitute the roots enabling a person to attain the chochmah of the Torah. Without mitzvos and good deeds, it is impossible to grasp the true meaning of the Torah.

Now, the words of the Avos D'Rabbi Natan make perfect sense. He associates a person's obligation to ensure that his deeds exceed his wisdom with the fact that Yisrael said "na'aseh" prior to "nishma." As explained, they realized that it is impossible to grasp the true meaning of the Torah without first refining and sanctifying the physical body by means of mitzvos and good deeds. For this very reason, it is essential that a person's deeds exceed his chochmah, just as the roots of a tree supply the life-force and vitality to its branches and its fruit.

The Two Trees—the "Eitz HaChaim" versus the "Eitz HaDa'as"

Let us now luxuriate in the wonders of the Torah! The Tanna Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah with his incredible wisdom chose to compare the two distinct paths to two trees. The tree with feeble roots alludes to the situation where **"one's chochmah exceeds his deed"**; in this case, the wind can easily uproot the tree. In comparison, the tree with strong roots alludes to the situation where **"one's deeds exceed his chochmah"**; in this case, all the winds in the world cannot uproot or displace the tree. So, let us explain why he specifically chose to compare these two situations to two types of trees.

It appears that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah was providing us with a delicate insight to better understand the concept of the two trees that HKB"Ha planted in Gan Eden for Adam HaRishon. It is written (Bereishis 2, 8): **"וַיֹּטֶעַ ה' אֱלֹקִים גֵּן בְּעֵדֶן מִקְדָּם וַיִּשֶׁם שָׁם אֶת הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר, וַיַּצְמַח ה' אֱלֹקִים מִן הָאֲדָמָה כָּל עֵץ נֹחֵם לְמִרְאָה וְטוֹב לְמֹאכָל, וְעֵץ**

“Hashem G-d planted a garden in Eden, to the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. And Hashem G-d caused to grow from the ground every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food; also the “Eitz HaChaim” in the midst of the garden and the “Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa.”

Apropos this phenomenon, we find the following passage in the Zohar Chadash (Bereishis page 18, column 3):

“רבי אבא בשם רבי חייא אמר, עץ ממש היה, והיו שנים, האחד הנותן חיים לאדם, והאחד שהאוכלו ידע הטוב והרע, לדעת הדרך הטוב והישר שיוכשר האדם, והדרך הרע שיתקלקל בה האדם, ולפיכך צוהו הקב“ה שלא יאכל ממנו, פן ידחה הטוב ויחזיק ברע, ועל כן נאמר מכל עץ הגן אכול תאכל, זהו עץ החיים שהיה לו לאדם לאכול ממנו, והוא לא חטא אלא בעץ הדעת טוב ורע שנצטווה שלא יאכל ממנו, הדא הוא דכתיב ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע לא תאכל ממנו כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות.”

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Rabbi Chiya: It was an actual tree, and there were two—the one that gave man life (chayim) and the one those who ate from it became aware of good and bad . . . Therefore, HKB”H commanded him not to eat of it, lest he abandon the good and embrace the bad. Thus, it was stated: “From all the trees of the garden you shall eat freely”; this statement refers to the “Eitz HaChaim,” which man was supposed to eat from. He only sinned with regards to the “Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa,” from which he was commanded not to eat. For regarding it, it is written: “And from the ‘Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa,’ you shall not eat; for on the day you eat from it, you will surely die.”

Upon careful examination of this passage, it is apparent that when HKB”H instructed Adam (Bereishis 2, 16): **“מכל עץ הגן אכול תאכל—of every tree of the garden you may eat freely—HKB”H intended for Adam to partake of every tree in the garden including the “Eitz HaChaim”; so that by doing so he would live forever without dying. In contrast, he was commanded not to eat from the “Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa”; for, if he would partake of it, HKB”H would impose upon him the death decree. At first glance this seems very surprising! It seems unimaginable that the entirety of Adam HaRishon’s responsibility in Gan Eden prior to the sin can be distilled down to merely eating from the “Eitz HaChaim” and not eating from the “Eitz HaDa’as.”**

The “Eitz HaChaim” Represents the Situation where One’s Deeds Are More Numerous The “Eitz HaDa’as” Represents the Situation where One’s Chochmah Is More Numerous

It appears that the matter can be explained based on a precious introduction from the incredible teachings of the great Rabbi Chaim of Sanz, zy”a, in Divrei Chaim (Bereishis). He explains the root of Adam HaRishon’s sin based on the passuk (ibid. 2, 15): **“ויקח ה’ אלקים את האדם ויניחהו בגן עדן לעבדה ולשמרה”—Hashem G-d took the man and placed him in Gan Eden to work it and to guard it.** The Zohar hakadosh provides the following clarification (Bereishis 27a): **“לעבדה במצוות עשה ולשמרה—to work it” via mitzvot aseh “and to guard it” via mitzvot lo ta’aseh.** With this understanding, the Divrei Chaim explains that the root of Adam HaRishon’s sin was that he engaged in too many forms of wisdom and enlightenment to the point that his chochmah outweighed his deeds. As a consequence, his chochmah did not endure and he faltered in the matter of the “cheit Eitz HaDa’as.”

We now stand enlightened and can rejoice at having gained a better understanding regarding the two trees HKB”H planted in Gan Eden for Adam HaRishon. On the one hand, there was the **“Eitz HaChaim,”** which Adam HaRishon was commanded to eat as a mitzvah aseh: **“Of every tree of the garden you shall eat.”** On the other hand, there was the **“Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa,”** which Adam HaRishon was commanded not to partake of as a mitzvah lo ta’aseh: **“And from the “Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa you shall not eat.”**

Based on our current discussion, the **“Eitz HaChaim”** represents **“a tree whose branches are few but whose roots are many”—alluding to service of Hashem in the sense of “מעשיו מרובים מחכמתו”—one’s deeds exceeding one’s wisdom.** Such a tree, **“even if all the winds in the world were to come and blow upon it, they would not move it from its place.”** Therefore, it is called **“Eitz HaChaim,”** because it lives forever and cannot be displaced from its proper place.

In contrast, the **“Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa”** represents **“a tree whose branches are many but whose roots are few”—alluding to service of Hashem in the sense of “חכמתו מרובה ממעשיו”—one’s wisdom exceeding one’s deeds.** Such a tree, **“the wind comes and uproots it and turns it over upon its face.”** Hence, it is called **“Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa,”** since it has

both a good aspect and a bad aspect. It is good in that man engages in Torah-study, but it is bad in that he fails to apply his Torah-wisdom so that his deeds will exceed his chochmah.

This coincides beautifully with the explanation we learned from the teachings of the Divrei Chaim. He explained that the root of the “cheit” of Adam HaRishon was that his chochmah exceeded his good deeds; as a consequence, he ate from the “Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa” rather than from the “Eitz HaChaim.” This is why Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah compared these two ways of serving Hashem--“מכמתו מרובה” and “מעשיו מרובים מחמתו”--to two trees. These two trees located in Gan Eden represent these two distinct ways of serving Hashem.

This explains very nicely the manner in which HKB”H dealt with Adam HaRishon. Had he partaken of the “Eitz HaChaim,” he would have lived forever. Now, however, that he partook from the “Eitz HaDa’as,” he was condemned to die. Based on what we have learned, this truly exemplifies the principle of “midah k’neged midah”—measure for measure. Had he chosen to eat from the “Eitz HaChaim” and serve Hashem in the sense of **“one whose good deeds exceed his chochmah,”** he would have resembled a tree with many roots--**“even if all the winds in the world were to come and blow upon it, they would not move it from its place.”** Therefore, “midah k’neged midah,” he, too, would have remained alive and no force could have uprooted him from this world.

Now, however, that he chose to eat from the “Eitz HaDa’as Tov VaRa,” serving Hashem in the sense of **“one whose wisdom exceeds his good deeds,”** his service of Hashem resembled a tree with few and feeble roots. Such a tree cannot survive, because **“the wind comes and uproots it.”** Therefore, “midah k’neged midah,” he, too, was condemned to die, such that he could not withstand the forces and damaging effects of nature—resulting in his ultimate death in his old age.

He Shall Be Like a Tree Deeply Rooted alongside Brooks of Water

I would like to offer up on the table of Kings a pleasant thought. The Arizal in Sefer HaLikutim (Ha’azinu) teaches us that David HaMelech was a gilgul and a tikun of Adam HaRishon. As the Midrash explains (Yalkut Shimoni Bereishis 41), Adam HaRishon was supposed to live one thousand years; however, he donated seventy years of his life to David, leaving Adam only 930 years. The reason he gave David those seventy years was so that

he could rectify the damage Adam had wrought. Accordingly, we can suggest that this is why David HaMelech chose to begin sefer Tehillim with the following pesukim (1, 1):

“אשרי האיש אשר לא הלך בעצת רשעים ובדרך חטאים לא עמד ובמושב לצים לא ישב, כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה ויללה, והיה כעץ שתול על פלגי מים אשר פריו יתן בעתו ועלהו לא יבול”

--**“Praiseworthy is the man that did not walk in the counsel of the wicked, and did not stand in the path of the sinful, and did not sit in the company of the scornful. Rather his desire is Hashem’s Torah, and in His Torah he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree deeply rooted alongside brooks of water, that yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf never withers.**

David HaMelech is teaching us that while it is commendable to engage in the study of Hashem’s Torah day and night, nevertheless there is one prerequisite: His good deeds should exceed his wisdom following the model of the “Eitz HaChaim.” This is the implication of the words: **“He shall be like a tree deeply rooted alongside brooks of water.”** Since it is planted alongside streams of water, its roots are plentiful; hence, it: **“Yields its fruit in its season and its leaf never withers.”**

With this thought in mind, we can appreciate Shlomo HaMelech’s statement regarding the merits of the Torah (Mishlei 3, 18): **“עץ חיים הוא למחזיקים בה ותומכיה מאושר”**—**it is a tree of life (eitz-chaim) to those who hold fast to it and its supporters are praiseworthy.** In his commentary on Mishlei, the Vilna Gaon explains: **“עץ חיים הוא למחזיקים בה, כי דרך המחזיק ב' כ' ידים הוא מחזיק, כלומר למקיימין אותה והיינו במצוות עשה ולא תעשה”**—**one who holds fast to something, usually does so with both hands. In other words, those who observe the precepts of the Torah, observe both mitzvos aseh and mitzvos lo ta’aseh.** The two hands represent the tools with which we fulfill Hashem’s mitzvos.

Based on what we have discussed, we can add that this is why Shlomo HaMelech described the Torah as **“eitz-chaim.”** He is teaching us that a person who engages in Torah-study must strive with all of his might to ensure that his good deeds outweigh his wisdom. In that case, he will resemble a **“tree of life”** that perpetually lives on, since its roots are abundant and strong. If his chochmah exceeds his good deeds, however, he will resemble a tree whose roots are few and is easily felled by the wind; thus, his chochmah will not endure.

The More a Person Advances in Torah the More He Must Perform Mitzvos

Following this line of reasoning, let us rise to the occasion and solve the riddle of Rava's curious behavior. Recall that he was so engrossed in his studies that he crushed his fingers until they bled. Now, we have learned from the Tanna Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa with Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah's clarification that every person should strive to have his deeds exceed his wisdom in order to ensure that his wisdom endures.

It turns out, therefore, that the more a person advances in his Torah-study and the more wisdom he attains, correspondingly, he must perform mitzvos to a greater degree than he did previously. Failing to do so would mean that his wisdom will exceed his deeds and, as a consequence, his wisdom will not endure. How sweet and relevant are the words of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh (Bechukotai) commenting on the following passuk (Vayikra 26, 3): **“אם בחוקותי תלכו ואת מצוותי תשמרו ועשיתם אותם—if you will go in My decrees and observe My mitzvos and perform them:**

“עוד יתבאר על פי דבריהם ז”ל במשנת חסידים, כל שחכמתו מרובה ממעשיו וכו' וכל שמעשיו מרובים וכו', והוא מה שרמז הכתוב באומרו אם בחוקותי תלכו שהוא עסק התורה, ולפי ערך זה תהיה שמירת המצוות וקיומן, כדי שלא תהיה חכמתו מרובה ממעשיו, והוא אומרו סמוך למצות עסק התורה, ואת מצוותי תשמרו ועשיתם אותם.”

When the passuk states: **“אם בחוקותי תלכו”—it is referring to the study of Torah—and it continues “ואת מצוותי תשמרו ועשיתם”—informing us that the observance of mitzvos and the performance of good deeds should be commensurate with and reflect one's study of Torah; so that his chochmah should not exceed his deeds.**

This now illuminates for us the amazing incident involving Rava. Due to the intensity of his study, he achieved tremendous

Torah-knowledge and wisdom. This caused him to panic lest his wisdom exceed his deeds. For, as we learned, he was of the opinion: **“מרגלא בפומיה דרבא תכלית חכמה תשובה ומעשים טובים”—**that the purpose of chochmah is to lead to teshuvah and good deeds. Therefore, he crushed the fingers of his hands—the instruments with which a person performs all of his deeds—so that he would remember to use them with added vigor, to the best of his abilities, to fulfill Hashem's mitzvos in actual deed. Without realizing it, he exerted such intense pressure on his fingers that they began to bleed.

Upon seeing this, the Tzadduki grasped Rava's intent. Therefore, he ridiculed him for continuing in the ways of Yisrael, who proclaimed **“na'aseh”** prior to **“nishma.”** As we learned from the Avos D'Rabbi Natan, this declaration implied that they accepted upon themselves **“na'aseh”—the obligation to perform the mitzvos even without understanding them. They would perform the mitzvos even prior to achieving the state of “nishma”—understanding the Torah's underlying reasons and meaning. They did so in order to serve Hashem in the manner of: “מעשיו מרובות מחכמתו”—their deeds exceeding their wisdom. Thus, the Tzadduki protested: “עמא פזיזא”—you are an impetuous people; you impetuously accepted upon yourselves the obligation to observe without knowing or understanding the reasons underlying the mitzvos you were going to observe.**

To which Rava responded that this was indeed the case. For, we are proud of this fact and it is the source of our continued existence. By declaring **“na'aseh”** prior to **“nishma,”** we obligated ourselves to fulfill the will of Hashem by performing mitzvos even before appreciating and understanding their reasons. Thus, we serve Hashem in accordance with the model of the **“Eitz HaChaim,”** whose roots are abundant, illustrating that our deeds exceed our wisdom. As a result, we fulfill the paradigm of: **“עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה ותומכיה מאושר”—it is a tree of life (eitz-chaim) to those who hold fast to it and its supporters are praiseworthy.**



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