

# אור פני משה

שיחות מוסר על התורה

מאת הרה"ג ר' משה אליעזר רבינוביץ זצ"ל

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Shmuessen from  
Harav Moshe Rabinowitz zt"l

## פרשת ויגש

*Volume 6 Issue # 11*

לעילוי נשמת מורנו  
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## פרשת ויגש

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חַי וְלֹא יָכְלוּ אֶחָיו לַעֲנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנָיו:  
(בראשית מ"ה ג')

*And Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef! Is my father still alive?!" And his brothers were unable to answer him because they were disconcerted from before his presence.*

The Medrash in this parsha (תנחומא סוף אות ו') describes in great detail the scene that occurred when Yosef revealed himself to his brothers. The Medrash recounts that the initial reaction of the *Shevatim* when learning of Yosef's identity was to attempt to **kill Yosef** right then and there. They were thwarted in their attempt by a *malach* who came and dispersed them to the four corners of the room.

### Understanding the Reaction of the Shevatim

This story seems difficult to understand. The behavior of the *Shevatim* that is described here does not seem to be consistent with their behavior throughout the time they had spent in Mitzrayim, as we will illustrate:

Chazal tell us that although the original reason why the *Shevatim* came to Mitzrayim was for the purpose of purchasing grain for their families; once they were going, they had another intention altogether. After so many years of witnessing Yaakov Avinu's pain over the loss of Yosef, the *Shevatim* were planning on utilizing the opportunity they had as they came into Mitzrayim, to try to find Yosef and bring him back home. As Chazal tell us, they originally entered Mitzrayim through ten different gates with the intention of searching for Yosef throughout Mitzrayim. Once inside Mitzrayim, they did not proceed directly to the grain-sales location, but instead traversed through Mitzrayim. They even brought themselves to the *שוק של זונות / marketplace where the immoral women would frequent* – a place which the *Shevatim* would ordinarily shudder at the very thought of being there. Now, though, they reasoned that perhaps on account of Yosef's exceptionally handsome appearance, he had been brought by his masters there for 'business'.

Nor did the efforts of the *Shevatim* consist of a mere 'search' for Yosef. They were prepared to go full lengths to find their brother, even at the cost of their own lives. As Rashi tells us, Yosef's accusations against them were based on this intention.

*Yosef interrogated them about their intentions in coming to Mitzrayim.*

*"If you were only planning on purchasing grain," he demanded, "why did you enter through ten different gates? You are obviously spies, who were looking to discover the country's weak points!"*

*The brothers replied that they had entered through the different gates because they were searching for their lost brother.*

*Yosef continued to question them. "And if you find him, and you are then told that he would only be returned to you for an enormously large amount of money, what would you do? Would you redeem him even for the large amount of money being asked?"*

*"We came with the intention of paying whatever amount of money is asked for him."*

*"And what if you are told that he will not be given to you for any amount of money?"*

*"We came with the intention of either killing or being killed [i.e. we will free him at all costs]!"*

*At this last reply, Yosef pounced. "This is exactly what I told you! You have come to destroy Mitzrayim!"*

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The brothers' efforts on behalf of Binyomin would also seem to be in contradiction with their sudden wish to kill Yosef. After all, they had put themselves out completely for Binyomin, in large part to spare their father Yaakov from undergoing the pain of losing another son of his beloved wife Rochel. Just minutes earlier, Yehuda had taken the incredible step of offering himself as a slave to the ruler instead of Binyomin. Clearly, they understood their father's pain, and they considered it a number one priority to prevent it from recurring.

### **Their Expression of Remorse**

Aside for their actions taken toward the goal of freeing Yosef and keeping Binyomin, the *passuk* records their direct, explicit regret for their sin of selling Yosef. During the particularly difficult interrogations and accusations that Yosef had put them through, they engaged in their own soul-searching to investigate why they were being paced through their terrible ordeal. They concluded that it was a punishment for the cruel way that they had treated Yosef. ויאמרו איש אל אחיו אבל אשמים אנחנו על אחינו אשר ראינו / *And they said to one another, 'Indeed we are guilty about our brother, that we observed his anguish when he pleaded to us and we did not give heed; therefore this hardship has befallen us!'*

Based on the clear mindset and intention that the brothers demonstrated through their actions and words in all the events which surrounded this incident, their behavior in the incident under discussion is extremely difficult to comprehend. It was so important to them both to find Yosef and return him to Yaakov Avinu, and to prevent a repetition of Yaakov's pain through the loss of Binyomin – and they sincerely regretted their previous behavior as well; and suddenly they make a complete about-face and again attempt to kill Yosef?! What would have caused this dramatic change of attitude and goal?

## **The Explanations of the Ohr Hachaim**

The Ohr Hachaim (פסוק כ"ו) deals with this question, and he seems to suggest two possible explanations for the *Shevatim's* behavior.

### **The Brothers Were Acting in Self-Defense**

Firstly, the *Shevatim* believed Yosef would try to take revenge against their behavior toward him 22 years earlier, and he would possibly kill them as punishment. As such, they felt that Yosef had a *din of a rodeif* at that moment, and they were permitted – and supposed to – kill him first in self-defense. The Ohr Hachaim explains further that although the brothers did originally have the intention of redeeming Yosef at any cost, in their minds the circumstances changed drastically when they ended up being 'found' and detained by Yosef, rather than they being the ones to find him and redeem him. Whereas in their planned-upon scenario, they would have been doing Yosef a tremendous service of redeeming him from his captor, thus 'earning' his forgiveness by their somewhat reversing their previous cruelty toward him; in the present circumstances, the opposite occurred. They were the ones to be discovered by Yosef, after he had been freed on his own and had attained a position of power. Now, they had no protection in the form of a kindness that they had done to reverse their original behavior. If so, they reasoned, Yosef would surely avenge their previous actions toward him, and they were therefore compelled to preempt him by killing him first.

### **The Brothers' Sense of Shame**

The second explanation of the Ohr Hachaim is based upon the burning shame that the *Shevatim* felt when they were exposed face-to-face with Yosef. The power of this intense shame over their past deed was so great, that despite all their previous intentions, they could feel the urge to kill Yosef right then in order to escape this shame.

This explanation provides us an insight into the great force that exists in a person's feeling of shame. Indeed, Rashi (דברים א' ג') tells us that Yaakov waited for the end of his life before rebuking Reuven for his deed regarding Bilhah, so that Reuven should not forsake Yaakov and join the family of Eisav. How

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could such a possibility even enter the mind of Yaakov Avinu? Reuven of the *Shivtei Kah* would abandon the elevated, *heilige mishpacha* of Yaakov for that of Eisav Harasha?! He had absolutely no connection to such terrible ideas! The answer, though, is that Yaakov Avinu understood the full searing strength of the power of shame, and how even Reuven would have a *nisayon* of forsaking the family of Yaakov on its account.

*Everybody, without exception, likes a compliment – no matter how insignificant it is. Conversely, no one likes being ‘told off’. It hurts, and people will go to all lengths to avoid it. Even those people who strive to grow, and who are happy to be told their faults, must still struggle past the feeling of shame that they experience.*

What we must learn from this is to take steps to avoid the ultimate shame that can be experienced *chas v'shalom* in the Next World. As Chazal teach us, the *בושה* of the brothers in their exposure to Yosef teaches us how great the shame will be in the Next World. We need to use the vision of that shame to spur us to great accomplishments in *ruchniyus* while we are in this world, so that we will be able to earn our *s'char* in a 'dignified' way when we arrive at the *Olam Ha'emes*.

## Another Explanation

### The Greatness of the Shevatim

Perhaps we can offer another explanation for the behavior of the *Shevatim*. However, before presenting this understanding, we must first make absolutely clear that in truth, we have absolutely no comprehension of the greatness of the *Shevatim*, as we shall demonstrate.

To appreciate this point, let us first consider the fact that even the *gedolim* of our own and the previous generation are almost beyond our comprehension. We cannot fathom the extent of Rav Moshe Feinstein z"l's all-encompassing knowledge of the entire breadth of Torah in an in-depth fashion, such that he could publish complex, lengthy *teshuvos* about all different sections of Gemara and *halacha*. His tremendous *hasmadah*, coupled with his singularly pleasant and elevated *middos* and his ability to have seemingly endless time and patience for every person, are *madreigos* which we can only hope to reach a minute level of understanding. Rav Ahron Kotler z"l's vast knowledge of Torah and his ability to deliver the most brilliant, complex *shiurim*, combining both the entire breadth of each *sugya*, down to the detailed *lomdus* of all of the *sugya*'s individual facets, are incomprehensible to us. His flaming, passionate *ahavas haTorah*, with his vision of uncompromised *ameilus b'Torah* in America, Eretz Yisroel, and throughout the world, to us seem supernatural.

I personally witnessed such greatness in my own rebbe, Rav Chaim Brim z"l.

*Rav Brim z"l headed a kollel, in which he was responsible to pay the stipends for the yungerleit each month. It was hard for him to raise the necessary money, given his busy schedule of learning and running the kollel.*

*At one point, he had fallen into much debt, and he did not know how he would be able to continue paying the yungerleit. I heard then that he had decided to bring two more yungerleit into the kollel.*

*Having the zechus of being very close with my rebbe, I took the liberty of questioning him about his seemingly odd decision. "Rebbe," I said, "I heard that you are having trouble paying the yungerleit."*

*"Yes," was the response.*

*"And I heard that you have also decided to take more yungerleit."*

*"Yes."*

*'But Rebbe,' I asked incredulously, "you can't cover your payroll, so you take in even more yungerleit?!"*

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*"Moshe Eliezer," he tells me, "you think it is the collecting that brings in the money? It is the learning that brings the money! If we are not having hatzlacha, it is because the learning in the kollel is too weak. We will take more yungerleit to strengthen the limud haTorah, and with that we will merit hatzlacha in the financial aspect as well!"*

Such a *hanhagah* of accepting even more responsibility because one is unable to fulfill the original responsibility, is something to which we can hardly relate.

And now let us consider: The *gedolim* of each generation were vastly greater than the following generation. If we cannot even comprehend the greatness of our own *gedolim*, do we have any connection to the Vilna Gaon z"l or Rabbi Akiva Eiger z"l? To Rashi and the Rambam?! The *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*, and the *Nevi'im* before them, were vastly greater than the succeeding generations. Is there any way we can even think of having any connection to comprehending the greatness of the *Shivtei Kah*?!

We can certainly not understand the *Shevatim's* greatness, nor can we presume to understand their failings. All we can do is use the words that the Torah presents to us as a reflection of their lives according to our level of comprehension, and we should try to understand or suggest ideas within the framework of the words. The true reality of their greatness, and hence the explanation of their sins, we understand to be something far deeper than our limited minds can grasp.

Now let us return to our question about the *Shevatim*. We questioned how they could have desired to kill Yosef, given their clear demonstration of their desire to find him and bring him home. To explain this, let us refer to a lesson that Rav Chaim Shmulevitz z"l used to ingrain within us constantly.

### **Tzadikim Avoid Confronting their Yetzer hara**

Rav Chaim z"l would teach us that *tzadikim* avoid fighting their yetzer hara! What does this mean? Isn't the definition of a *tzaddik* one who does not succumb to his *yetzer hara*? The answer is that defeating the *yetzer hara* is a feat which Chazal tell us is not humanly possible. Even *tzadikim* are not exempt from this rule. True, if they are faced with a *nisayon*, they can receive a *siyatta d'shmaya* to succeed, but that is not their only defining barometer of greatness. The greatness of *tzadikim* lies as much as in overcoming *nisayonos* as in actively seeking ways to avoid coming face-to-face with the *nisayon*.

*One who wishes to refrain from viewing all the inappropriate content on TV or the internet, must refrain from keeping one in his home. One who decides that he will have a TV or unfiltered internet in his home but resolves that he will only watch the news, is leading himself down a path of destruction. He will be unable to control himself from watching all the trash that is out there, and he will waste many hours – and brain space – each day glued to the screen. To avoid falling in the *nisayon*, one must avoid the *nisayon* entirely.*

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*Shloimy has a certain friend who is not careful about talking during Chazaras Hashatz and Krias HaTorah. As davening is about to begin, Shloimy wishes to sit next to this friend, but he resolves that he will not allow himself to be dragged into talking during these times. Of course, Shloimy is making a terrible mistake. To avoid talking during davening, he must be sure to place a great distance between himself and that friend. Otherwise, he is placing himself in a situation where it can be almost impossible for him to defeat the yetzer hara.*

### **The 'Hands' of Aveirah**

The Gra z"l teaches this point on the *mishnah* in Avos which says **הסתכל בשלשה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי** (אבות ב' א') / *Consider three things and you will not come to the hands of sin*. What is meant by the hands

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of sin? Do sins have a body, with hands and feet? The Gra explains<sup>1</sup> that once a person has fallen into sin, it is as if the sin is holding him in an iron grip. Once he has reached that point, it is impossible for him to wrest himself free from its grasp through Fear of Hashem alone. Only fear of man will be able to stop him.

*A man decides he will rob an item off a store shelf. Before he reaches the store, he can still have a change of heart and decide against his original plan. Once he is in the store, however, it is too late. His temptation has taken hold of him, and he will be unable to turn back. If, however, he senses the manager approaching ready to catch him in mid-act, he certainly will control himself. His fear of being caught overpowers his temptation to steal.*

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*Shloimy is in the waiting room of a doctor's office, and he sees magazines containing inappropriate material. If he controls himself and does not pick up a magazine, he is safe. Once he has picked up the magazine, however, it will be nearly impossible for him to put it down when he reaches the negative content. If, though, he notices a good chaver walk in – one from whom he would be terribly embarrassed to be caught looking at those magazines – he will drop the magazine like a hot potato, hoping his friend didn't notice him looking at it.*

### **Focusing Solely on the Temptation at Hand**

Let us delve more into this facet of human nature that we are discussing. Why is it so much more difficult to control oneself when actually faced by the *nisayon*? True, the temptation is there, but the person has already made the firm decision, based on clear logical *cheshbonos*, that he will not succumb. Why can't he hold out?

The answer to this question is that a person's brain was formed with a function of zeroing in on whatever the person is focused on at that moment. This property certainly has many positive aspects to it; through this a person can focus on a *sugya*, or on any issue that he is working on dealing with. Regarding the power of desire, however, this trait has a negative effect. When a person experiences a desire, all other feelings or thoughts other than the desire to succumb to his temptation, recede into the background.

Let us illustrate this point with a *mashal*:

*Joe is an acute alcoholic. On any given day, he may be found completely drunk in the street – or wherever he was able to get his hands on a bottle.*

*Joe's wife has warned him that she cannot stand for his shameful behavior any longer. It is hard on the family's functioning, and it is a terrible disgrace for the children. She told him clearly that he has only one more chance. The very next time he is drunk, she is filing for a divorce, and based on his behavior, she will receive full custody of the children. Joe loves his wife and children dearly, and he desperately wishes that this will not happen.*

*Joe's boss has warned him that he will absolutely not tolerate his unreliable work performance any longer. The boss tells Joe that the very next time he either misses work or shows up drunk, he is fired on the spot. There will be no further chances. Joe understands that without his job, he will have no money to cover any of his living expenses. He knows that he must hold on to his job.*

*Joe's doctor has warned him that all his alcohol is beginning to burn away at his liver. If he continues his habit, there will be severe medical repercussions for him, possibly fatal. Joe is petrified of this prognosis and he desperately wishes to be healed and live a healthy lifestyle.*

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<sup>1</sup> ז"ל הספר חסדי אליהו פרק ב' משנה א', (לקט פירושי הגר"א על מסכת אבות) הסתכל בג' דברים ואי אתה בא לידי עבירה, לפני שהאדם מתחיל בעבירה יש עוד תקנה להתגבר על יצרו מחמת יראת שמים שיש בו ולהתרחק מן העבירה, אבל כשהאדם כבר נמצא בשעת עשיית העבירה כשאש התאווה כבר נדלקת ובווערת, אז לא יועיל מורא שמים שיש בו רק מורא בשר ודם. (מפי השמועה). עכ"ל הספר חסדי אליהו.

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*Joe is filled with dread about all these forewarned scenarios, and he promises his heart out that he will never touch another drop of alcohol. And yet, with all of Joe's very real worries and fears, and with all his sincere commitments, it happens the next day that he sees a bottle of whiskey, and he begins to drink. Five minutes do not pass before Joe downs the entire bottle. His wife begins divorce proceedings, his boss fires him, and he feels terrible pains in his stomach. When he sees the doctor, he is diagnosed with liver failure.*

*What happened to Joe? Why does he not let his fears and his promises stop him from drinking? He made a rational decision; what prevents him from keeping to it?*

*The answer is that when Joe sees that bottle, he is tempted to drink. That temptation becomes so strong in his mind, that all other thoughts almost cease to exist. All he knows at that moment is that he absolutely must have a drink. Some abstract thoughts of his fears and his commitments do haunt him, but he is so set on having his bottle, that he dispels them with some vague rationalizations and excuses. Later, after the temptation has gone, Joe returns to his usual functioning brain. He then feels such regret over his action because all the real fears and cheshbonos are brought back to the forefront.*

**Yiras Shamayim is not Equipped to Help a Person in the Midst of the Nisayon**

As we know, addictions are not limited to dangerous substances. Negative behaviors can be equally addictive and require much toil to free oneself from them. It can be anger, laziness, *loshon hara* etc. Each person is faced with his *nisayon*, and as the Gra tells us, when he is in the midst of the temptation, it is virtually impossible to use one's *Yiras Shamayim* to overcome the *nisayon*.

*Suppose one is trying to smell besomim during Havdalah but discovers that he has a stuffed nose. After trying unsuccessfully to smell the besomim with his nose, the person sticks the besomim in front of his ears, hoping that they can smell the besomim for him.*

*This person is obviously acting irrationally. Ears have never smelled, and they never will, no matter how hard a person tries to make them do so.*

Similarly, the Gra tells us that *Yiras Shamayim* will not be able to prevent the person from sinning, once he has reached the point of *nisayon*. His brain is so bent on sinning at that point that nothing else matters. One may try to change the way that his brain works, and program it not to zero in on the temptation, but such 'programming' is not in his control.

*When a person is in a frightening situation, his brain sends a message to his heart to beat faster. Can a person train his brain not to send that message to his heart? That function of his brain is not in his control.*

Likewise, one cannot train his brain not to zero in on the temptation when he is confronted with it. That is a built-in function of the brain. Our only recourse is to avoid the setting of temptation so that we will not be placed that situation.

**The Behavior of the Shevatim**

Let us now return to our discussion regarding the *Shevatim*. The question was, based on all the *Shevatim*'s attempts to find Yosef and return him to Yaakov, and based on the sincere remorse that they felt, how could they have again tried to kill Yosef when he revealed himself?

Based on our discussion, perhaps we can suggest that although the *Shevatim* did sincerely wish to return Yosef to Yaakov Avinu; still, when they were faced with the same *nisayon*, they were thrust for an instant into the same feelings of jealousy that they had felt 22 years earlier. They had assumed that Yosef was a slave, but when they saw him in power, he was suddenly that younger brother who is trying to rule over them unjustly. Certainly, the *Shivtei Kah* were *misgaber* on this *nisayon*, and afterward they did not

attempt to harm Yosef. However, at that first instant of confusion, their old feelings of jealousy would have prompted them to kill Yosef, had the *malach* not intervened and dispersed them.

### **The Lesson for our Lives**

The lesson for us from this is clear. We must do our absolute utmost to avoid situations of *nisayon* and temptation, because that is our only hope of succeeding in our fight against the *yetzer hara*. If we are placed in a *nisayon* against our will, we can daven to Hashem for *siyatta d'shmaya*; but if it is in our hands to avoid the *nisayon*, then that is where will receive the *siyatta d'shmaya*. Once entering the *nisayon*, we are treading upon dangerous territory indeed. Restraining oneself from sin after he is already in the situation of temptation, when his brain focuses only on the temptation at hand to the exclusion of all other thoughts, is almost completely beyond a person's control.

The intent here is obviously not to absolve a person from the obligation of trying to control himself after he has placed himself into the *nisayon*. Once in the *nisayon*, a person must express true remorse for having brought himself into the situation, and he must beg HaKadosh Boruch Hu for *siyatta d'shmaya* against the *yetzer hara* even at that point. What HaKadosh Boruch Hu will actually do is His prerogative; the person's obligation then is to try his hardest to control himself. In fact, knowing that it his own fault that he is in the *nisayon* places an even stronger obligation upon a person to apply himself with his utmost efforts; he can then daven and hope that Hashem will help him even at that point.

Iy"H we should be *zoche* to *siyatta d'shmaya* in fighting our *yetzer hara*, by avoiding the *nisayon*, and by defeating the *yetzer hara* when we are placed into one.

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