

## Bringing the Farbrengen Home

### FROM THE REBBE'S LETTERS

#### Four Questions

by Rabbi Shaul Wertheimer



Of the copious letters the Rebbe received, a recurring theme was Torah study. Many asked the Rebbe to explain difficult passages in all areas of Torah; others asked what volume of Talmud they should study; yet others asked for guidance in other areas of Torah.

In a letter dated 28 Sivan 1957, the Rebbe addresses four questions (not all about Torah). My free translation follows.

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In response to your letter from 24 Sivan, in which you present questions for which you have not yet received clear solutions:

1. There are times when you have a desire to learn, and other times when the opposite is the case, and you turn to other matters. You ask in how you can attain constant energy [in Torah study]?

The advice given to such a situation is that when one repeats something regularly, it becomes their second nature. In order to ascend from level to level, one should indeed go level-by-level, not jumping from one extreme to another [as such a jump cannot be sustained]. Moreover, this ascent need be a result of vigorous effort, for as our sages tell us, "if one says that they succeeded without effort -- do not believe them."



2. In what way will you be able to remember the new things you learn in Torah?

In general, people are not the same in this matter, because it depends on their talents and so forth, as our sages say, "people's opinions are not the same and their appearances are not the same."

For general guidance, reference the second chapter of the Alter Rebbe's Laws of Torah Study; there, one will find guidance how even a person who is naturally forgetful will be able to amass a great wealth of Torah knowledge.

3. What is the concept of intent and prayer?

The general *kavana* (intent) of prayer is to know before Whom one is standing. This itself is subdivided into three categories: Who is standing; before Whom one is standing; and the connection between them via prayer. There is also a more specific type of *kavana*, which differs based on the section of prayer, the meaning of the words, and so forth.

4. Which book of ethical teachings (*mussar*) will enable you to reach the level that every Jew must attain?

In order to "reach a level," a book alone will not suffice. Rather, you have to work with great exertion, and then you will have success. You should fix times to study the Tanya, and other works of Chassidus; when you delve into them with proper focus, your eyes will be illuminated.

An overarching point: Turn away from your questions, and instead, learn Torah with diligence -- then you will see the fulfillment of our sages' words, "If you toil, you will succeed."

You certainly adhere to the recitation of the daily allotment of Tehillim (Psalms), as it is divided according to the days of the month. And if you do not yet recite it, you will certainly begin to do so going forward. 

### Hayom Yom

20 Shevat

My father wrote in one of his letters: According to the glosses of Ashri, when washing the hands for a meal, pour water over each hand three times consecutively; this was the practice of my father (R. Shmuel). He would leave a little water from the third pouring cupped in the palm of his left hand and, with this water, rub his hands together.



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## א גוט שבת!

# The Heiliger Ruzhiner

## Engraved

by Rabbi Shaul Wertheimer

We all strive to do the right thing, to live meaningful lives that make a difference. The Torah gives us the "do's and don'ts" of day-to-day life, and this often makes decision-making much easier. Have a hankering for some shellfish? Sorry, it's not kosher. Looking for a tale of suspense and intrigue? Purim is just around the corner. Not sure what to do this Friday night? May I suggest a Shabbat dinner with the fam?

But what about the grey areas of life? What about those situations that fall somewhere in between the clear directives of the Torah?

In this week's Torah portion, Yisro (Exodus 18:1-20:23), we read of the watershed experience of the Jewish people, the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Let's take a look at three letters in the Ten Commandments, as viewed by the Chassidic Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin (1796-1850).

There was once a group of Chassidim sitting around the table discussing whatever was on their mind. As with any worthy Chassidic gathering, the table was adorned with some light refreshments and a little schnapps with which to say L'chaim.

Without notice, their Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael, entered the room. They gathered from the look on his face that he did not approve of the gathering. One of them mustered up the courage to declare that Rabbi Pinchas had stated that such camaraderie could be equated with the greatness of Torah study.

"I will certainly not contradict the words of the righteous Rabbi Pinchas... but it all depends on how something is done.

In the Torah, we find precedent for this idea. There is a word which, while appearing in one context, has holy connotations,



while when appearing in a different context, is rather profane. When Moshe is instructed to carve the Second Tablets, the verse states, 'Engrave for yourself -- **פסל לך**.' The Hebrew word for engrave is comprised of three letters: *pey*, *samech* and *lamed*. Now this exact same root word appears in the Ten Commandments, 'You shall not make for yourself a graven image -- **לא תעשה לך פסל**.' In this context, those same three letters refer to an idol.

"How could the very same letters mean completely opposite things? In the first verse, the word refers to the holy Tablets, while in the second verse they refer to idols! What is the difference between them?" asked Rabbi Yisrael.

Without waiting for a response, he continued, "I will tell you the difference between them. When those three letters signify something holy, then the word 'yourself' comes after it; but when when the word 'yourself' comes before it, then not only is it profane, but it is prohibited by the Second Commandment of 'You shall not make for yourself a graven image!'"

Friends, the guide to those grey areas of our lives is "yourself." When we do something positive without thinking first and foremost about our own self-interest, then this can be likened to "carving the Tablets," a most holy activity. On the other hand, if we perform the very same action, but put ourselves first, then we transgress, so to speak, the commandment of not making a graven image.

These sharp words of the holy Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin are certainly still pertinent, and can help us in navigating the grey areas of life. It's not enough what you do, but we also must be mindful of how we do it. 

## Chassidic Story

Moshe was an inn keeper in a village belonging to a Polish nobleman, Count Tadeush Vissotzky. He was one of many Jews who rented various properties from the Count. Before Moshe, his father had rented the inn from the Count's father. He was, in a sense, grandfathered in.

As with any business, some years were better than others. His income depended largely on the weather; during harsh winters he had fewer travelers, and dry summers were no more favorable.

When it was hard to pay the annual rent, the Count's father was always understanding, and would graciously extend an extension to Moshe's father. Not only was the Count's son and current landlord not so accommodating, but he also enjoyed hosting opulent parties and would frequently spend way beyond his means.

One year, when time came to pay the rent, Moshe arrived at the Count's home and requested an extension. Begrudgingly, the Count gave him six months to pay in full.

Six months came and went, but the flow of travelers to Moshe's inn was sparse, and he still did not have the means to pay. Another year passed, and he now owed the Count two years' rent.

Moshe came to the Count and pleaded for another extension. The Count was enraged, and warned Moshe that if he didn't pay up the entire debt on the first day of the next year, he would kick him out, jail his family, and take the inn away from him forever.

Moshe returned home and told his wife the sad story.

"Do you recall when we once hosted a traveler who told us about a very holy man who lives in the nearby Mezibuzh?"

"Yes, I believe so. Are you referring to Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov?" inquired Moshe.

"That's him! Remember the miracle stories the traveler told us about him? How he has helped so many people? You should go see him, I bet he can help us!" said his wife. (to be continued...)

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