



Likkutei Sichos

Volume 19 | Iggeres HaTeshuvah | Sichah 1

A Spreading Stain

Translated by Rabbi Eliezer Robbins

Editor: Rabbi Y. Eliezer Danzinger | **Content Editor:** Rabbi Zalmy Avtzon

© Copyright by Sichos In English 2023 ◦ 5783

A note on the translation: Rounded and square brackets reflect their use in the original *sichah*; curly brackets are interpolations of the translator or editor. The footnotes in curly brackets are those of the translator or editors and do not correspond to the footnotes in the original. Words in bold type are italicized in the original text.

Considerable effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation while maintaining readability. As in all translations, however, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists.

Feedback is appreciated — please send comments to info@projectlikkuteisichos.org

1.

THE 20TH OF AV AND *TESHUVAH*

My father's¹ *yahrzeit* falls on the 20th of Av, which coincides with the week of Shabbos Mevarchim Elul — a month dedicated to repentance.² Therefore, we will study my father's first note on the Alter Rebbe's *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*.

2.

THE ALTER REBBE'S EXAMPLE

In *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,³ the Alter Rebbe quotes the opinion that if a person commits the same sin many times, he must fast the set number of fasts ordained for that sin {according to Kabbalah} “according to the number of times he transgressed.”⁴

Subsequently, the Alter Rebbe illustrates this formula with “one who emits semen in vain,” for whom 84 fasts were ordained.⁵ And “if someone commits this sin, say ten or twenty times, he must then fast ten or twenty times 84; וְכֵן לְעוֹלָם, and so on.”

In his glosses on *Tanya*,⁶ my father explains that the Alter Rebbe gives the example of “ten or twenty times” because this sin creates a blemish in the person's soul faculty of *chochmah*.⁷ [As it says further on in *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,⁸ this sin “blemishes the intellect,” referring (primarily) to the

¹ {Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneersohn, the Rebbe's father.}

² {*Teshuvah*, lit., “return” (to Hashem), denotes repentance.} See *Likkutei Maharil*, beg. of “*Hilchos Yamin Noraim*”; Arizal's *Likkutei Torah*, beg. of *parshah Ki Seitzei* on *Devarim* 21:13, “She Shall weep... a month of days’ — this refers to the month of Elul”; *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” beg. of sec. 581.

³ *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,” beg. of ch. 3.

⁴ {*Tikunei Teshuvah*,” by the Arizal.}

⁵ *Mishnas Chassidim*, “*Maseches Teshuvah*” (mentioned later in *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*), ch. 10, *mishnah* 11.

⁶ *Likkutei Levi Yitzchak* on *Tanya*, p. 29.

⁷ {Usually translated as “wisdom,” the first of a person's three cognitive powers, associated with the initial, creative spark of an idea; the seminal point of a concept then developed by *binah*, and integrated by *da'as*.}

⁸ *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,” ch. 9 (99a).

intellectual faculty of *chochmah*.]⁹ Therefore, the Alter Rebbe gives the example of “ten or twenty,” because the letter *yud*¹⁰ (of Hashem’s name¹¹ *Havayah*)¹² alludes to *chochmah*. Also, this letter is linked both to the numbers ten and twenty — the numerical equivalent of *yud* is 10, and the *milui*¹³ of *yud* is ך ך ך, numerically equivalent to 20.

We need to clarify: This opinion that the Alter Rebbe discusses here — that a person must fast “according to the number of times he transgressed” — applies to all sins. The case of “one who emits semen in vain” is given by the Alter Rebbe only as an illustration (“**for example**, one who emits...”). So what is the point of the Alter Rebbe alluding **here** to the part of the person blemished by this particular sin (which is given merely as an example)?

This question is even more perplexing: The difficulty with Alter Rebbe’s nuanced wording, “ten or twenty,” is —

(not over his choice of **these** numbers as opposed to other numbers. If this were the issue, one could answer [albeit with difficulty] that since he had to specify a particular number, he chose a number that alludes to the blemish caused by the sin he gave as an example. Instead, the issue is)

— that specifying numbers is unnecessary. Also, if the Alter Rebbe had said, “he must fast 84 times for each time he transgressed” (or something similar) without specifying numbers, his explanation would not in any way be unclear.

This is perplexing: How does it make sense to say that the Alter Rebbe **added** specific numbers (as an example, which by itself, is unnecessary) to allude to the blemish of a particular sin he mentioned only as an illustration?

⁹ Note the conclusion of *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*, ch. 9: “Therefore, his rectification is secured by engaging in the study of the Torah, which derives from **chochmah**.”

¹⁰ {*Yud* is numerically equivalent to the number ten.}

¹¹ *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,” ch. 4 (4b), et passim.

¹² {*Havayah* is the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of Hashem: *yud - hei - vav - hei*.}

¹³ {The way the word “*yud*” is spelled out in Hebrew.}

3.

WHY BRING A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE?

Similar to the question as to why the Alter Rebbe brings specific numbers as an example — “ten or twenty” — there is a more general question (not raised by my father): Why, in any event, does the Alter Rebbe need to give an example of a specific sin?

Had the Alter Rebbe said, “For someone who transgressed a particular sin... {he must fast} the number of fasts appropriate to that sin...,” we would also have understood what the Alter Rebbe was trying to convey. Why does the Alter Rebbe add an example of a particular sin, “one who emits semen in vain”?

Similarly, we need to clarify why after the Alter Rebbe says, “If someone commits this sin ten or twenty times, for example, he must fast ten or twenty days, times 84,” and then adds, “and so on.” Meaning, if a person sinned even more than twenty times, he must fast 84 times for each additional occurrence.

What does this come to teach us? Why would we think that “he must fast... according to the number of times he transgressed” means that the person has to fast only up to twenty times? Why did the Alter Rebbe have to add, “and so on”?¹⁴

¹⁴ This question is especially sharp since after writing “ten or twenty times,” the Alter Rebbe adds, “**for example**”; additionally, he writes subsequently, “This is comparable to the *chatas* sacrifice, which he is required to bring **for each and every instance** {that he violates the same prohibition}.”

4.

THE EXAMPLE IS REPEATED

In the gloss mentioned above, my father unpacks, parenthetically, another instance of nuanced wording in *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*:

Further on in the same chapter,¹⁵ the Alter Rebbe says:

Every man of spirit... should be stringent with himself: During his lifetime, he should complete, at minimum, the number of fasts for every one of the grave sins {he has committed} that are punishable by death. For example, for emitting semen in vain {he should undergo the series of} eighty-four fasts once in his lifetime. He may postpone the fasts... and undergo some ten fasts, for example, in one winter....

My father explains that the Alter Rebbe says “some ten fasts” because “‘some ten’ is also {numerically equivalent to the letter} ‘yud.’” There is also a more general question regarding this passage (not noted by my father): Why does the Alter Rebbe give an example here (“for example, for emitting semen in vain...”)?

Likewise, we need to clarify: Since the letter *yud* is not associated exclusively with the number ten — it is also associated with the number twenty, as discussed — when the Alter Rebbe says, “and undergo... in one winter,” what is the (deeper)¹⁶ reason for him mentioning only the number ten, and not the number twenty?

¹⁵ *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,” end of 92b ff.

¹⁶ As for the simple reason, we can posit that it is (generally) “more than his ability” for one to undergo twenty fasts in one winter.

5.

ONE EXPLANATION RESOLVES MANY QUESTIONS

We have explained numerous times that for several reasons (such as a scarcity of paper and ink), my father jotted his reflections on the *Zohar* and *Tanya* very concisely. When we study his notes with the requisite focus, we find that his notes resolve several questions (questions arising from the passage on which he commented, and sometimes also questions arising from other places), aside from the nuances he notes in the course of his explanation.

Moreover, although in most of his glosses (as far as we observe), my father focuses on nuanced wording and the like, we find that in many places (when we delve into this work appropriately), these glosses also clarify the general subject matter of the passage on which he remarks.

The same applies in our case: Although this gloss outwardly examines only the Alter Rebbe's nuances in giving the example "ten or twenty" and "some ten fasts," the gloss also explains other instances of nuanced wording, including those discussed in Sections 3 and 4.

Moreover, this gloss clarifies the general subject matter — the reason why (according to one opinion) "he must fast the number of fasts appropriate to that sin according to the number of times he transgressed." It also clarifies why "every man of spirit... should be stringent with himself and complete, at minimum..." as explained below.

6.

BLEMISHES AND RECTIFICATION

The proposed explanation of all the above: The blemish caused by sin and, likewise, the correction of this blemish (namely, through *teshuvah*) has, in general, three components:

- a) Since by sinning, a person violates the command of the King of Kings, the Holy One — this is the overarching point and the common denominator of all sins — when a person commits any sin, including failure to perform a positive mitzvah, the person casts off the Heavenly yoke¹⁷ and assumes the status of a *rasha*.¹⁸

To correct this {blemish}: “A sinner should abandon his sins... and resolve in his heart, never to commit them again.”¹⁹ [In the words of the Alter Rebbe:²⁰ “He must resolve in his heart, in perfect sincerity, never again to revert to folly to rebel against Hashem’s rule, and that he will never again violate the King’s command, G-d forbid.”] By means of this resolution, which is the **essence** of *teshuvah*,²¹ the person immediately²² relinquishes the status of *rasha*. This {transformation} is possible even in an instant.²³ As the Gemara and the works of the *poskim*²⁴ rule, an utter *rasha* can be transformed into a total *tzaddik*²⁵ with a single thought of *teshuvah*.

- b) The health and integrity of the soul’s limbs depend on {the performance of} mitzvos. Consequently, disregarding a positive mitzvah or violating a negative

¹⁷ *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,” ch. 1 — even a person who failed to perform a positive mitzvah has “rebelled against His rule”; see also *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 30 (beg. of 39a); et al.

¹⁸ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 1, and the sources listed there.

¹⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Teshuvah*,” ch. 2, par. 2.

²⁰ *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,” ch. 1 (91a).

²¹ As Rambam says in *Mishneh Torah*, *ibid.* — “**What** constitutes *teshuvah*? That a sinner abandons... and resolves in his heart...”; see *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*, *ibid.* — “The mitzvah of repentance... is **just** the abandonment of sin.” See at length *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 17, pp. 197 ff.

²² Even before he has rectified the sin — see *Chelkas Mechokek* on *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Even HaEzer*,” sec. 38, sub-par. 44.

²³ *Zohar*, vol. 1, end of 129a.

²⁴ {Halachic decisors.}

²⁵ *Kiddushin* 49b; *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Even HaEzer*,” sec. 38, par. 31; *Or Zaru’a*, “*Berachos*,” sec. 112; and in *Likkutei Torah* (“*Devarim*,” 1b): “A complete *tzaddik*.”

mitzvah blemishes the particular part of the {soul's} anatomy corresponding to the particular mitzvah that was violated.

In order to rectify this particular blemish, the person must do *teshuvah* and carry out a correction tailored to this particular sin, including fasting the number of times ordained for this particular sin.²⁶

- c) Since the blemish of a particular limb generates a resemblance of this blemish in all limbs, each sin causes a blemish in **all** a person's faculties and limbs. This effect can be derived by means of a *kal vachomer*²⁷ based on the fact that a person's every action makes a global, external impact.²⁸

Therefore, a person "distancing himself from the object of his sin" is not the only characteristic of a person engaged in *teshuvah*. In addition, as a penitent, characteristically, he will also "change **all**²⁹ of his deeds to the good and to the path of righteousness."³⁰

7.

THREE EFFECTS OF BLEMISHES

The Torah's "general principles and specifics were {all} conveyed" {at Sinai}.³¹ Therefore, each of the three general components discussed (above in Section 6) {in turn} contains (a spin-off of) all three components in a specific way.

Concerning our discussion of the set number of fasts ordained for specific sins related to a particular blemish (the second component above), this blemish itself resembles all three components.

²⁶ *Likkutei Torah*, "Nitzavim," 45c; et al.

²⁷ {Lit., "light and heavy," *kal vachomer* is a Talmudic logical proof comparing two cases; in this context, it means that what happens on a macro level certainly applies on a micro level.}

²⁸ *Mishneh Torah*, "Hilchos Teshuvah," ch. 3, par. 4; *Likkutei Torah*, "Bamidbar," beg. of 5b; and in *Maamar VeChol HaAm 5700*, end of ch. 2: "Aside from the purification of those entities in which the mitzvah is encloded... a purification is (also) brought about in the **entire** world's materiality."

²⁹ {Because the entire person, and everything he does, was negatively affected by any sin.}

³⁰ *Mishneh Torah*, "Hilchos Teshuvah," ch. 2, par. 4.

³¹ See *Tanya*, "Introduction" (3b); and see *Chagigah* 6b.

To explain: Since all limbs are interrelated, each limb has three affiliations: (a) its {unique, identifying} principle property; (b) the way the limb incorporates the {unique, primary property of} other limbs; and (c) the way in which the {unique, primary property of this} limb is incorporated by within the other limbs.³²

On this basis, it is clear that a blemish in any particular limb caused by a particular sin affects all three of these affiliations.

8.

THREE METHODS OF RECTIFICATION

We can posit that the limb's own essence-character {and property} is **wholly** blemished immediately the first time a person commits this sin. And even should the sin be repeated, this blemish is not exacerbated (at least not significantly).³³

The other particular properties incorporated by the limb — the {property of the} “limbs” included within it — are wholly blemished only when a person repeats the transgression a third time. As the Alter Rebbe quotes³⁴ from *Zohar*:³⁵ “The third time a person transgresses, the stain is diffused (through the limb that is linked to the sin) from one side to the other.”

³² See Tzemach Tzedek's *Sefer HaMitzvos {Derech Mitzvosecha}*, “*Mitzvas Ahavas Yisrael*” (28b); et al.; it says there: “Within it is the other... and it is included in the other.”

³³ We can posit an **example** — a person who is ritually impure, who again comes in contact with the same type of impurity repeatedly {does not become any more impure}. See *Nazir* 42b: “*He shall not profane — ... this excludes the one who is already profaned*”; {a similar halachah:} “One prohibition does not take effect where another prohibition already exists” {*Pesachim* 35b}; et al.; see *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*, ch. 7 (97b): “Through an accumulation of sins, there can eventually be {a defect as grave as from one prohibition involving excision or death}” — but this is not the place to discuss this.

³⁴ In *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,” ch. 3 (92b).

³⁵ *Zohar*, end of “*Noach*” (73b); see *Toldos Levi Yitzchak on Sanhedrin*, p. 173, which says that this doesn't contradict the teaching of our Rabbis (*Yoma* 86b): “The third time {he commits the sin}, they forgive him; the fourth time... {they do not}.”

The blemish inflicted on the other limbs {since all other limbs also incorporate the primary property of the limb used to transgress} occurs immediately the first time the sin is committed, but the blemish never affects the other limbs entirely because the other limbs were not used in the commission of the sin. So, it makes sense that the blemish spreads {to other limbs} every time the sin is repeated.

This explains all three opinions (keeping in mind, “these and those are the words of the living God”)³⁶ as to the number of times a person has to fast the set number of fasts ordained for a particular sin if he sinned multiple times: (According to the first opinion) a person must fast the set number of fasts for each time he sinned; (according to the second opinion) the person must fast the set number of fasts once; (and the “accepted ruling” is that) the person must fast the set number of fasts three times.

To rectify the blemish in the essence-character of the limb {with which the person sinned}, it is sufficient for a person to fast the set number of fasts once. To rectify the blemish made in other limbs, he must fast the set number of fasts for each time he sinned. And to rectify the blemish in the other limbs as they are included within this limb, he must fast the set number of fasts three times.

This is also the reason that although the Alter Rebbe concurs with the “accepted ruling” — “he must fast the set number of fasts three times” — he rules that the first time a person fasts “the set number of fasts,” the person must be stricter than the latter two times he undergoes these fasts [the last two times, “two half-days are considered as one full-day,” but not so the first time].³⁷ For³⁸ the blemish in the essence-character of the limb {with which he sinned} that is rectified by fasting the set number of fasts once is more severe than the blemish in the limbs included within that limb, the latter being rectified by observing two additional sets of fasts.

³⁶ *Eruvin* 13b.

³⁷ *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaTeshuvah*,” ch. 3 (93a).

³⁸ In addition to the fact that undergoing the set number of fasts once is {required} according to **all opinions**.

9.

THE PURPOSE OF THE ALTER REBBE'S EXAMPLE

We can posit that this is one of the reasons that after citing the first opinion — “he must fast... according to the number of times he transgressed” — the Alter Rebbe adds: “For example, one who emits semen in vain...”:

Concerning semen, the Rambam says:³⁹ “The more frequent the emissions, {the greater} the damage to the body and to its strength, and {the greater} the loss to one’s life {span}.” On this basis, it is clear that the sin of emitting semen in vain illustrates more clearly (a) how sin also affects all the limbs of the body,⁴⁰ and (b) that every time a person commits this sin, the blemish spreads.

This is why the Alter Rebbe adds, “For example, one who emits semen in vain...”: With this example, we can understand the reasoning behind the opinion that a person must undergo the {set number of} fasts for each time he transgressed — and this applies to **all sins**.

10.

THE BODY'S VITALITY

Before the Rambam says, “The more frequent the emissions, {the greater} the damage to the body... and the loss to one’s life {span},” he prefaces and states, “Semen is the body’s vitality, its life {force}.” In other words, semen influences the entire anatomy because semen is the “body’s vitality.”

We can posit that being “the body’s vitality” (which also includes the vitality of the whole body)⁴¹ is not the essence-character of semen; it is a

³⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Deos*,” ch. 4, par. 19.

⁴⁰ As discussed at length in *Reishis Chochmah*, “*Shaar HaKedushah*,” ch. 11 (167c); ch. 17 (204d); *Shelah*, “*Shaar HaOsiyos*,” (99a).

⁴¹ See *Reishis Chochmah*, “*Shaar HaKedushah*,” ch. 16 (20d): “The semen... includes in it an aspect of all {the body’s} limbs.”

secondary characteristic. It is essentially a drop (a nucleus) beyond definition or description.

Moreover, the nucleus of a drop of semen is connected with the nucleus of the soul.⁴²

Since its essence-character is that it is a nucleus (a drop) connected with the essential character of the soul, **therefore**, it also includes “the body’s vitality.”

11.

THE SEVERITY OF THE BLEMISH

Based on the above, it is clear that the severity of the blemish caused by the sin of emitting semen in vain relates to each of the three components discussed earlier (sec. 7):

Since a drop of semen is (and includes) “the body’s vitality,” and affects the entire body, the blemish caused to other limbs {not involved in the sin} — as these other limbs are included in this limb {used to sin}, or as these other limbs exist individually — is more severe than the blemishes caused by other sins.

Because of the essence-character of (a drop of) semen, the blemish in the essence-character of the other limbs caused by this sin is also more severe than the blemishes caused by other sins. (This is because this sin doesn’t only blemish the essence-character of a specific limb.) It (also) blemishes the essential character connected with the soul's nucleus.

⁴² See *Hemsech Samach Tesamach 5657*, p. 93 (*Sefer HaMaamarim 5657*, p. 269): “This drop conveys the entire essence of the concealment of the soul.” It says further there that this is the reason there is a possibility that “the ability of the son is greater than the ability of the father” {*Chullin 63a*}; see there; and see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 8, p. 154, fn. 35.

12.

THE EXAMPLE IS GIVEN THREE TIMES

On this basis, we can understand why the Alter Rebbe brings the example of emitting semen in vain three times in this chapter {of *Iggeres HaTeshuvah*}: Concerning the opinion that a person “must fast... according to the number of times he transgressed,” the Alter Rebbe adds, “for example, one who emits semen in vain...” Concerning the “accepted ruling” — “he must fast {the set number of fasts} three times,” the Alter Rebbe adds, “that is, 252 fasts for emitting semen in vain.” And concerning the appeal that “every man of spirit... should be stringent with himself and complete, at minimum, once...,” he adds, “for example, for emitting semen in vain {he should undergo the series of} eighty-four fasts once...”

A person “must fast... according to the number of times he transgressed” because other disparate limbs are {also} blemished by committing this sin. A person “must fast {the set number of fasts} three times” because of the blemish in the limbs that are included within the limb (that was involved in the sin). And a person must “complete, at minimum, once” the entire set number of fasts (and not fast “two half-days”) because of the severity of the blemish caused in the essence-character of the limb (as explained above at length in Section 8).

All three of these perspectives are explained by giving (in the three places mentioned above) the example of emitting semen in vain because this sin most powerfully emphasizes all three perspectives.

13.

TEN, TWENTY, AND SO ON

Based on everything that we have discussed, we can understand why, in the example that the Alter Rebbe gives for the opinion that a person “must fast... according to the number of times he transgressed,” he doesn’t say simply, “he must fast 84 times for each time he transgressed” or the like. Instead, he specifies: “ten or twenty... וְכֵן לְעוֹלָם, and so on”:

By fasting “many times, corresponding to the number of times he transgressed,” a person fixes all three types of blemish: By fasting “the number of fasts” the first time, he fixes the blemish affecting the essence-character of that limb. By fasting an additional two times, he also fixes the blemish affecting the limbs included in this limb. And by additional fasts, more than three times {the set number of fasts}, he also fixes the blemish caused to the individual limbs themselves.

For this reason, the Alter Rebbe specifies “ten,” “twenty,” and “לְעוֹלָם, so on” because these three regimens {of fasts} reflect the three sorts of blemishes and rectifications mentioned above, as will be explained below.

14.

PERMUTATIONS OF THE LETTER YUD

In Chassidus,⁴³ “the *milui* of letters” is explained as follows: The *milui* of every letter⁴⁴ functions to enable “communicating with others,” as in fact illustrated in the example given above regarding the *yud*. In thought (or in writing), one can simply think of (or write) the letter “י” alone. But if a person wishes to verbalize the letter (to articulate it to someone), the person must add the *milui* of the letter — the letters “יָ יוּ.”

⁴³ Regarding this topic, see *Siddur Im Dach*, 115b, 159b, 192b.

⁴⁴ {The letters that spell out each letter, for example, the *milui* of the letter כּ is כִּי'ת'ך'.

Despite this {that the letters “ו' ד'” are audible and manifest only when the *yud* is spoken}, the *milui* “ו' ד'” are already included in the letter “י'” itself {even if not articulated}. But although they are included **within** the letter, they are not “considered the essence {of the letter}, but only something added to the essence” because the function of the *milui* is only “communicating with others.”

On this basis, it is clear that the three regimens of “ten,” “twenty,” and “לְעוֹלָם, so on” are connected to paradigms discussed above: “Ten,” the numerical value of the letter “י'” — which is “in the shape of a drop”⁴⁵ — is connected to the blemish and the rectification of the brain itself. “Twenty,” the numerical value of the *milui* of the letter “ו' ד'”, is connected to the blemish and rectification of the body’s other limbs as they are included in the brain. And “לְעוֹלָם, so on” {lit., “for the world”} — numbers {of fasts} greater than twenty — is connected to the blemish and the rectification of the body, which is “a microcosm of the world.”⁴⁶

On this basis, it is also clear why the Alter Rebbe brings the number *ten*, and not *twenty*, when he says, “and undergo {ten fasts}... in one winter” — it is because he is referring to the regimen of fasting “eighty-four fasts **once** {in his lifetime}.” Therefore, only the number *ten* is relevant.

— From the talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Ekev*, 5730 (1970)

⁴⁵ Note of the Rebbe’s father in *Likkutei Levi Yitzchak* on *Tanya*, p. 29.

⁴⁶ *Tanchuma*, “*Pekudei*,” beg. of sec. 3; *Tikunei Zohar*, “*Tikun 69*” (90a); et al.