



# Likkutei Sichos

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## The Fall in Between

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## YAAKOV'S REQUEST

In the famous letter<sup>1</sup> the Alter Rebbe penned “after he returned from Petersburg,”<sup>2</sup> the Alter Rebbe explains the verse,<sup>3</sup> “I have become small from all the kindness.” He says “every act of kindness” Hashem does for a person should foster humility since every act expresses “actual closeness to Hashem.” The more kindness a person experiences, the more he feels Hashem’s presence and the more humble he feels: “like nothing, naught, and non-existent.” Therefore, Yaakov said, “I have become small from all the kindness....” With every kindness Hashem performed for Yaakov, Yaakov became more unworthy in his own eyes. This humility was a result of being brought closer to Hashem.

Rashi, whose commentary presents the straightforward meaning of Scripture, says:<sup>4</sup>

My merits have been reduced through the kindnesses and the truth that You have done for me. Therefore, I am afraid that since the time You promised me, perhaps I have become soiled with sin, and it will cause me to be given into Esav’s hand.

Rashi clarifies why Yaakov requested, “Rescue me, please,”<sup>5</sup> even though Hashem had promised him that “I will guard you...”<sup>6</sup> and “I will be with you.”<sup>7</sup> Yaakov feared that “since the time You promised me, perhaps I have become soiled....”

The Alter Rebbe explains the phrase, “I have become small from all the kindness...,” as a “Torah” — a lesson<sup>8</sup> in our *avodah*,<sup>9</sup> applicable and relevant to every Jew: The revelation of Divine kindness must humble a person.

This exposition also aligns with the difference between Yaakov’s declaration, “I have become small,” and the Alter Rebbe’s explanation in *Iggeres HaKodesh*: Yaakov made this statement as a prayer and petition when he was in danger and had feared Esav. Therefore, Rashi explains why Yaakov was afraid and sought Hashem’s protection.

Conversely, the Alter Rebbe wrote his letter “*after* he returned from Petersburg” when he was already out of danger. His letter (in addition to expressing gratitude to Hashem) was

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<sup>1</sup> *Tanya*, “*Iggeres Hakodesh*,” ch. 2.

<sup>2</sup> {The city in which the Alter Rebbe was imprisoned, “Petersberg” is how Chassidim refer to the imprisonment.}

<sup>3</sup> *Bereishis* 32:11.

<sup>4</sup> {Rashi on *Bereishis* 32:11.}

<sup>5</sup> {*Bereishis* 32:12.}

<sup>6</sup> *Bereishis* 28:15.

<sup>7</sup> *Bereishis* 31:3.

<sup>8</sup> {“Torah” is etymologically related to the Hebrew word “*horaah*,” which means “lesson,” or, “directive.”}

<sup>9</sup> {Divine service.}

meant to serve as a lesson and warning to his followers: “Accordingly, I am now making an important advisory to everyone in our Chassidic fraternity regarding the abundance of kindnesses, “the great things that Hashem has done with us...”<sup>10</sup> Let them not become haughty....” In this context, the explanation, “That with every single kindness that Hashem bestows upon a person, he ought to become very humble,” is fitting.

## 2.

### SEEKING CLARIFICATION

However, this requires clarification (according to the narrative’s deeper dimension):<sup>11</sup> Yaakov was worried that perhaps he had sinned, as it says, “{since the time You promised me,} perhaps I have become soiled with sin.” But how could Yaakov have sinned? Yaakov’s declaration, “My merits have been reduced through the kindnesses and the truth that You have done for me,” makes sense. For it is understood that when “a miracle is performed for a person,” the miracle is “deducted from his merits.”<sup>12</sup> This rationale, however, only explains why it is “deducted from his merits.” But a miracle performed does not entail a sin on the person’s part that would possibly cause Hashem’s promise of protection to be rescinded.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, the Alter Rebbe’s letter also needs to be examined:

The Alter Rebbe not only mentions in this *Iggeres HaKodesh* that “this is also the hallmark of Yaakov”; he also continues interpreting the verses:

And with that, Yaakov justified his fear of Esav and did not rely upon the {Divine} promise given to him, “Behold, I am with you....” Yaakov regarded himself as utterly unworthy because of the abundant kindness Hashem had shown him, {as he said,}<sup>14</sup> “For only with my staff....” Yaakov considered himself unfit and unworthy to be saved.... This aligns with the teaching of our Sages,<sup>15</sup> “Perhaps sin would cause {him not to be saved},” for it appeared to him that he had sinned.

This implies:

- a) The Alter Rebbe’s interpretation of “I have become small,” referring to the humility that comes from the abundant kindness due to Hashem’s closeness, is related to the simple

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<sup>10</sup> {*Tehillim* 126:3.}

<sup>11</sup> The following question is posed in the *Maamar* “*Katonti* 5679.”

<sup>12</sup> *Shabbos* 32a; *Taanis* 20b.

<sup>13</sup> See *Re’em* on Rashi, *Bereishis* 32:11; *Maharsha’s Chiddushei Aggados* on *Berachos* 4a.

<sup>14</sup> {*Bereishis* 32:11.}

<sup>15</sup> *Berachos* 4a.

interpretation — Yaakov was afraid because “it appeared to him that he had sinned.”

- b) **This** point is also germane to the feelings of the Alter Rebbe after his return from Petersburg.

We can posit that the Alter Rebbe also intended to allude to the following: While the Alter Rebbe was in prison, the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid had **promised him** that he would be released and that he would be allowed to reveal Chassidus more widely than before.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, “after his return from Petersburg,” the Alter Rebbe still **requested** Divine assistance.

This requires clarification:

How could Yaakov’s predicament, “*I have become small* — it appeared to him that he had sinned,” apply the Alter Rebbe?

### 3.

#### AN ATTEMPTED EXPLANATION

The overall explanation of this subject is as follows: After a person ascends to a higher level, an innocent act performed at an earlier lower level may now be considered sinful. This principle means that not only would the same act be considered sinful if performed **again** (which is not a very startling idea), but an act **performed previously**, which was not considered a sin at the time, is now considered sinful. And **now** that a person is on this higher level,<sup>17</sup> he is judged regarding past actions and must repent for them.<sup>18</sup> This may plausibly be the cause for the fear expressed by Yaakov and the Alter Rebbe. {Namely, they feared their earlier act was now considered sinful given their elevated spiritual stature.}

However, this explanation falls short: True, when the person acted, his action was not sinful, and nonetheless, **after his ascent**, it was considered a sin. However, according to this understanding, we must also say that something not entirely kosher had to have occurred. After all, repentance would not have been required later if the act had been performed flawlessly.

So the question remains: How can this explanation be given regarding Yaakov and, afterward, regarding the Alter Rebbe?

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<sup>16</sup> See *Beis Rebbi*, vol. 1, ch. 16.

<sup>17</sup> See *Pri Eitz Chaim*, “*Shaar HaTefillin*,” ch. 10; *Shaar HaGilgulim*, intro. 22; *Shaar HaKavanos*, end of “*Inyan Seudas Shachris Shel Shabbos*.”

<sup>18</sup> *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 29 (36b); explained at length in *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 4, p. 1197.

## A RELATIVE DESCENT

*Panim Yafos*<sup>19</sup> explains the statement, “I have become small from all the kindness” {by first quoting a Talmudic teaching}:<sup>20</sup>

“The righteous have no rest..., as the verse says,<sup>21</sup> “They ascend from level to level.” When ascending from one world to a higher one, souls revert to a diminutive state before ascending to the next higher world. (This is discussed in the Introduction {to *Shaar HaYichud veHaEmunah*, entitled} “*Chinuch Katan*,”<sup>22</sup> in connection with the concept underlying the verse,<sup>23</sup> “a tzaddik may fall seven times but will rise.”)

In the words of *Panim Yafos*: “Between the first and the second stages of spiritual expansiveness<sup>24</sup> that a person experiences, there is a second diminutive stage.”<sup>25</sup> This is the meaning of the verse, “I have become small”: When Yaakov ascended from *chutz laaretz*<sup>26</sup> to the **land of Israel**, he experienced this diminution before the ascent — “I have been diminished.”

On this basis, it is understood why Yaakov pleaded {to Hashem}, “Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav.” Since after Hashem’s promise and the previous ascents, Yaakov underwent this reversal — “I have become small” — he implored: “Rescue me, please.” As *Panim Yafos* explains, although the second diminutive state is loftier than the first expanded state of expansiveness, since it remains, after all, in a reduced state, Yaakov needed first-rate protection.

[Along these lines, we can clarify the connection between the Alter Rebbe’s interpretation and Rashi’s interpretation: The word נִטְּוּ in the phrase, “(perhaps I have become soiled with) נִטְּוּ {lit., sin},” is etymologically related to the word נִטְּוּ used in the verse,<sup>27</sup> “My son Shlomo and I will be regarded as traitors, נִטְּוּ.”<sup>28</sup> In this context, נִטְּוּ indicates a deficiency (smallness) in his *avodah* when compared with his **new** state.

<sup>19</sup> {Lit., “Beautiful Faces”; commentary on Chumash, based on both Halachah and Kabbalah, by R. Pinchas HaLevy Horowitz of Frankfurt (c. 1730-1805), a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch.}

<sup>20</sup> Tractate *Berachos*, at the end; tractate *Moed Katan*, at the end (the wording there: “Torah scholars”; see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 15, p. 137 ff.); see *Pri Eitz Chaim*, “*Shaar HaTefillin*,” ch. 10; *Shaar HaGilgulim*, intro 22.

<sup>21</sup> {*Tehillim* 84:8.}

<sup>22</sup> {Introduction. to *Tanya*, “*Shaar HaYichud VeHaemunah*.”}

<sup>23</sup> *Mishlei* 24:16.

<sup>24</sup> {In the much terser original, “*gadlus*,” alluding to expanded spiritual consciousness.}

<sup>25</sup> {The first diminutive stage is before the first stage of spiritual expansiveness.}

<sup>26</sup> {Lit., “outside the land,” this term refers to all places outside the land of Israel.}

<sup>27</sup> *Melachim I* 1:21 {Rashi interprets this phrase to mean, “we will be lacking and barred from any greatness.”}

<sup>28</sup> {See *Mezudos Tzion*, ad loc., who explains that the term in the verse denotes “deficient.”}

This new state itself is connected with the “abundant kindness” that Hashem performed for Yaakov. This kindness not only resulted in a reduction in Yaakov’s merits — “My merits have been reduced” — it also caused his *avodah* to be (diminutive and) deficient.<sup>29</sup> This is because as a result of “Hashem actually bringing him close, far more intensely than before,”<sup>30</sup> a person’s *avodah* is also required to be performed “far more intensely than before.” If his *avodah* is not at this level, he is in a state of descent, falling, and smallness.]

## 5.

### THE ALTER REBBE

We can similarly understand the Alter Rebbe’s {self-deprecating statement that his spiritual state had diminished}:

As known,<sup>31</sup> the Alter Rebbe’s mission of “disseminating your wellsprings outward”<sup>32</sup> primarily began after his time in Petersburg {his imprisonment}. This demonstrates the remarkable ascent (the greatness) the Alter Rebbe attained after “Petersburg” compared with his greatness before “Petersburg.”<sup>33</sup> Between his greatness before “Petersburg” and his (higher level of) greatness after “Petersburg,” he experienced a diminution — “I have become small” — during the period of his imprisonment.

The imprisonment had entailed severe suffering. As known,<sup>34</sup> Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev confronted the Alter Rebbe regarding his arrest: Why did you take so much upon your shoulders — “so much suffering for the Jewish people, Heavenly suffering, and your own physical and spiritual suffering? We could have dealt with this opposition using *makifim!*”<sup>35</sup> The Berdichever said this regarding the suffering of the imprisonment itself. Subsequently, the Alter Rebbe experienced even more suffering in the three hours following his imprisonment. As he said, during these three hours, he had experienced “greater suffering than during the entire imprisonment.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> To the extent that “it is considered as a sin” — see the end of the *Maamar* “*Katonti 5679*”; see, at length, the *Maamar* “*Veyikanu Ami 5651*”; *Maamar* “*Heichaltzu 5659*,” sec. 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Tanya*, “*Iggeres Hakodesh*,” ch. 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Toras Shalom*, p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> {When Mashiach replied to the Baal Shem Tov’s question as to when he would come, Mashiach quoted the wording of the verse (*Mishlei* 5:16): When “your wellsprings will be disseminated outward.”}

<sup>33</sup> See *Likkutei Dibburim*, vol. 1, 22b ff.

<sup>34</sup> *Likkutei Dibburim*, vol. 1, 29a.

<sup>35</sup> {Transcendent levels of Divine revelation. Due to *makif*’s transcendence, it does not conform to the laws of nature; it supersedes them. Employing *makifim* would have resulted in a supernatural victory.}

<sup>36</sup> *Likkutei Dibburim*, vol. 1, 40b.

It is understood that (visibly) this was a period of constriction and descent, even compared with the {lower} **earlier** levels of the Alter Rebbe's greatness.

This is evident from a talk by the Rebbe Rashab:<sup>37</sup> “Although it is difficult to say so, this was indeed the case. The revelation of light after “Petersburg” was in line with the teaching of our Sages,<sup>38</sup> “When the olive is pressed, it releases its oil.” From this parable, it is understood that during the time of imprisonment, there was a period of diminutiveness, even compared to before “Petersburg”:

When an olive is crushed, it lacks two qualities when it lies under the press: It has not yet attained the potential of its next stage, as it has still not produced oil to illuminate the world, nor does it retain the integrity of its original state when it was an intact fruit. Although before it was crushed, it could not be used for kindling oil, it was an edible fruit. In contrast, while it is being crushed, it loses this quality as well.<sup>39</sup>

The same concept can also be applied to the time of the Alter Rebbe's imprisonment: Not only was he prevented from disseminating the wellsprings as he did after “Petersburg,” he also could not continue to teach Chassidus on the scale he did before “Petersburg.”

This idea — that during his imprisonment, the Alter Rebbe couldn't disseminate Chassidus — was (also) distressful to the Alter Rebbe. This is exemplified by Avraham, our forefather, who was prevented from performing the kindness of inviting guests when there was no one to invite.<sup>40</sup> Avraham was distressed by being prevented from extending material benevolence to {nomadic} Arabs, *before* the Giving of the Torah. How much more painful must it have been for the Alter Rebbe, who lived *after* the Giving of the Torah, to be prevented from fulfilling his mission of benefiting the Jewish people through Torah study. This pain would have been even greater when it came to public Torah study, and especially the teaching of the Torah's esoteric dimensions.

Therefore, the Alter Rebbe wrote: “I have become small from all the kindness....”

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<sup>37</sup> *Toras Shalom*, p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> See *Menachos* 53b; *Shemos Rabbah*, ch. 36, par. 1.

<sup>39</sup> See, at length, the talk on Shabbos *parshas Vayeishev* 5742.

<sup>40</sup> *Bava Metzia* 86b; cited by Rashi, beg. of *parshas Vayeira*.

## 6.

### HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

These themes repeat themselves every year,<sup>41</sup> and, like all matters, spring from the Torah. Therefore, on the Shabbos before Yud Tes Kislev<sup>42</sup> (or on Yud Tes Kislev itself), we read from the Torah: “I have become small from all the kindness....”

This was the plea of Yaakov, our forefather, and the Jewish leaders (as recorded in *Kehillas Yaakov*,<sup>43</sup> the term, “נְשִׂיא” {leader} is an acronym for “נִיּוּצוֹ שֶׁל יַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ” {the spark of Yaakov, our father}), and especially of the Alter Rebbe. —

They pray, and they also pray for all Jews, that despite their diminution — “I have become small” — the **promise**,<sup>44</sup> “I will surely do good with you, and I will make your descendants like the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to be counted,” will be fulfilled.

— From a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Vayishlach*, 5725 (1964)

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<sup>41</sup> See *Lev David* (Chida) ch. 29; Mishnah, *Gittin*, end of ch. 3; Responsa of Rabbi Yosef Ergas (end of *Mavo Pesachim*), sec. 5, at length.

<sup>42</sup> See *Shelah*, “*Torah Shebiksav*,” beg. of “*Vayeishev*” {which states: “The holidays of the entire year... all have a connection to the Torah portions that are read at the time in which they fall.”}

<sup>43</sup> *Kehillas Yaakov*, “*Rebbe*,” explained in *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 4, p. 1051, in a fn.

<sup>44</sup> {*Bereishis* 32:13.}