

The Sixteenth Gate

The Gate of Laziness

Laziness (הַעֲצָלָוּת) is an extremely evil trait. The lot of him who allows this trait to take possession of him will be defective, both in this world and the next. About such a one King Shelomo, may peace be upon him, said (*Mishlei* 24:30-31): “I passed by the field of the lazy man and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding, and behold it was all grown over with thistles, its face was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down.” He compares a lazy man’s wisdom to a lazy man’s field. Not only does the lazy man’s field not yield produce because he does not work it as he should, but also it gives forth defective things, such as destructive nettles and thistles which spoil the produce. And even if he labored in his field until it did yield produce, his laziness would cause him to lose it, for the stone wall is broken down and in his laziness he does not repair it, so that animals and thieves enter it and take everything. He says, “Its stone wall was broken down.” Even though a stone wall is very strong, it fell down because of his laziness in that he did not repair its flaw before it fell completely. Such is the case with those who are lazy in Torah and in mitzvot. Lazy men love rest, and because of this, mitzvot are difficult for them and Torah study a burden to their souls. They flee from the house of study to a place of rest, and when they sit in the synagogue they sleep, as it is written (*ibid.* 19:15): “Laziness casts a deep sleep,” for laziness induces slumber in a man’s nature. And King Shelomo, may peace be upon him, has already exhorted (*ibid.* 6:10): “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep [and your poverty will come like a marauder, and your want as an armed man].”

Not only will the lazy man not attain knowledge of Torah since he does not study Torah as he should, but his laziness will even cause him to conjure up erroneous ideas. For the lazy man rationalizes, saying: “It is good that the body rest, so that it will be strong, and a strong man can do more than a weak one.” And he inclines his ear to idle talk, saying that this will make him more receptive. Laziness, then, causes one to seek rationalizations whereby he can tell himself that he is performing a mitzvah by abstaining from Torah study. And even though it is indeed true that it is good to rest to regain our strength or to listen to some jesting to stimulate our receptivity (*Shabbos* 30b), this is only in respect to a zealous man who occupies himself with Torah study as he should. For a man’s power is not

the power of stone, nor are his bones made of copper so that he can labor interminably. He sometimes must rest to regain his strength. But the lazy man adopts this idea and pursues it until he is completely idle, and always, for all the mitzvot that involve some exertion, he will invent a rationalization consistent with his laziness to free himself of the mitzvah. In sum: The lazy man will rationalize everything in accordance with his laziness.

The lazy man is softhearted and will not exile himself to a place of Torah. King Shelomo, may peace be upon him, said seven things about the lazy man. If one says to him: “Your teacher is in the city; go and learn Torah from him,” he answers: “I am afraid of the lion on the road,” as it is written (*Mishlei* 26:13): “The lazy man says: ‘There is a lion in the way.’” If they say to him: “Your teacher is already in the province; get up and go to him,” he answers: “I am afraid that a lion might be in the streets,” as it is written (*ibid.*): “A lion is in the streets.” If they say to him: “He is lodging right near your house,” he answers: “The lion is right outside,” as it is written (*ibid.* 22:13): “The lazy man says: ‘There is a lion outside; I shall be slaughtered in the middle of the streets.’” If they say to him: “He is in the building,” he answers: “And if I go and find the door locked, I will have to return.” They say to him: “It is open,” but he still will not get up, as it is written (*ibid.* 26:14): “The door is swinging on its hinges — and the lazy man is on his bed.” In the end, not knowing what to answer, he says to them: “Whether the door is open or locked, I want to sleep a little more,” as it is written (*ibid.* 6:9): “How long will you sleep, you lazy man? When will you rise from your sleep?” When he gets out of bed, they give him something to eat; but he is too lazy to put his hand into his mouth, as it is written (*ibid.* 26:15): “The lazy man buries his hand in the dish; he is too weary to return it to his mouth.” And what is the seventh? As it is written (*ibid.* 20:4): “The lazy man will not plow in the winter.” Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: “This refers to one who did not study Torah in his youth and wants to do so in his old age, but is not able, as the verse concludes: ‘Therefore, he shall ask in the harvest, but have nothing.’” Thus far did King Shelomo condemn the lazy man, but Moshe our teacher, may peace be upon him, said something greater than everyone, as it is written (*Devarim* 30:14): ‘For this thing is extremely close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it’ — only take the thing from out of your mouth” (*Devarim Rabbah* 8:6). And there is no laziness greater than that of failing to emit the words from one’s mouth.

See how far the lazy man is from all the good traits and how completely unfit he is for any mission, just as vinegar is unfit for teeth, as it is written

(*ibid.* 10:26): “As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the lazy man to those who sent him,” and (*ibid.* 21:25): “The lust of the lazy man will kill him, for his hands refuse to do,” and (*ibid.* 26:16): “The lazy man is wiser in his eyes than seven who return sound substance.” The last verse is to be understood as follows, by way of analogy: A king had many couriers and emissaries who all performed the king’s embassy and even submitted a report to him upon returning from their missions — all except one of the king’s servants, who, being lazy, feigned illness, rested, and ate from the king’s table. When he saw his friends weary from the toils of the road, he regarded himself as wiser than all of them. This, of course, is the height of folly, for it is written (*ibid.* 22:29): “Have you seen a man quick in his work? He shall stand before kings.” Here, too, the king will reward those apt ones who did his bidding, and will pay no heed to the lazy one. In summary, the lazy man is fit neither for this world nor for the next, for his hands refuse to do good. The Sage has said: “The laziest of men is he who is lax in acquiring as close friends men who are wise and who fear the Blessed LORD. And there is one even lazier than he — one who has had such friends and has lost them.”

The Holy One Blessed be He has created a frail creature that stores up its food and exerts itself for its food in order to make the lazy man wise, as it is written (*ibid.* 6:6): “Go to the ant, you sluggard; see her ways and grow wise.” Therefore, the lazy man should be ashamed when he sees the frail ant, zealous and careful in its affairs, and he should learn from it to adopt the trait of zeal, to free himself from laziness, and to rescue his soul from the pit.

But there is a kind of laziness which is extremely beneficial — laziness to do evil and pursue lust. They tell about a man whom the king wanted to send on a dangerous mission and who refused to go. When the king cursed him, he said: “It is better that you curse me and I live than that you pray for me and I die!” About this our Rabbis have said (*Pesachim* 50b): “There is a zealous man who is rewarded and a zealous man who loses; a lazy man who is rewarded and a lazy man who loses. A zealous man who is rewarded — one who works the whole week but does not work on the eve of Sabbath. A zealous man who loses — one who works the whole week, and also works on the eve of Sabbath. A lazy man who is rewarded — one who does not work the whole week and does not work on the eve of Sabbath. A lazy man who loses — one who does not work the whole week and works on the eve of Sabbath.” See how the Sages postulated that there is positive and negative

zeal. And so with laziness. There is positive and negative laziness. Therefore, give thought to doing good with all of your limbs and with all of your actions, and select in each of your limbs some lightness and some heaviness — and all for the sake of Heaven. Find it “light” to sit with friends who gather together for Torah and mitzvot and good deeds, and “heavy” to sit with scoffers and doers of evil. Be light with your eyes to see justice, judgment, and matters of mitzvah, and heavy to see vain deeds and to gaze at idols and at women. Be light with your ears to hear reproof, chastisement, and words of Torah, and heavy to hear profanity and idle talk. Be light with your wrath to be angry with the wicked, and heavy to be angry with the righteous. And be heavy with your mouth and tongue in quarrels, lies, levity, and slander, and light in Torah, chastisement, and exhortation to good. Be heavy with your hand in lifting it against your friend and in closing it to the poor, and light in giving charity and doing your work faithfully. Be heavy with your feet to walk in the ways of the wicked, or to go to taverns or on excursions, and light to run to houses of prayer and of study, to visit the sick, to provide escort, to go to houses of mourning, and to do all the mitzvot. Be heavy with your heart to think evil thoughts, to envy, and to hate, and light to think thoughts of Torah and attain the levels of love for the Blessed One and pure fear of Him. Doing so, you will be light and quick in your heart to cleave to the Heavenly Light.