

The First Gate

The Gate of Pride

In the first gate we shall discuss the trait of pride. It is fitting that it precede all of the other gates because man has an obligation to separate himself from it, for it is the gateway to many evils and we have not seen anything as evil as it among all the other traits. Therefore, a man must be wise and use it with discretion and he must reject it completely whenever it is not in its proper place.



Pride is the coin which the great, Blessed King has invalidated and which He has exhorted us about in His Torah, as it is written (*Devarim* 8:11): “Take heed lest you forget Hashem your God.” For the proud man forgets his Creator, as it is written (*ibid.* 8:13-18): “And when your cattle and flocks multiply, and gold and silver accrue to you... then your heart will grow haughty and you will forget Hashem your God... and you will say in your heart: My power and the might of my hand have wrought this wealth for me. Then you should remember Hashem your God, for it is He who gives you the strength to amass wealth.” And in relation to a king it is written (*ibid.* 17:20): “That his heart not be lifted above his brothers.” If the Torah exhorts even a king in this respect, it goes without saying that average men should not vaunt their wealth in front of each other.

Pride takes two forms. The first is the pride a man has in his body; the second, the pride a man has in his actions, in the quality of his wisdom, and in his good deeds. The pride a man has in his body takes two forms — one good, the other evil. The following is the evil variety: When pride grows in a man’s heart, it rules over him from the crown of his skull to the sole of his foot. In his head and his throat, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 3:16): “Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks.” In his hands and his feet, as it is written (*Tehillim* 36:12): “Let the foot of pride not come upon me and the hand of the wicked not move me.” For the foot of pride the daughter of Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon was punished, it being decreed upon her that she dwell in a brothel. For once, passing before some Roman dignitaries and hearing them say: “How beautiful are the strides of this young woman,” she took special pains with her walk (*Avodah Zarah* 18a, see Rashi). It is manifest in one’s eyes as it is written (*Tehillim* 6:17): “Haughty eyes.” It is manifest in one’s ears by not paying

heed to the words of the poor, unfortunate ones. It is manifest in one's nose if, when standing near the poor or upon entering their houses, they smell offensive to him. And it is even in his speech, when he speaks impudently and with pride against the righteous. Pride can also be manifested in eating and in drinking and in clothing one-self ostentatiously in gentile apparel. We have been exhorted against this in the Torah of Moshe, as it is written (*Vayikra 20:23*): "And do not walk in the ways of the nations," and (*ibid.* 18:3): "Do not walk in their ways," and (*Devarim 12:30*): "Take heed lest you be ensnared after them." The point is the same in all of these instances: Israel is exhorted to stay separate from the nations in its apparel, its speech, and all of its customs, as it is written (*Vayikra 20:26*): "For I have set you apart from the peoples."

The proud are despicable in the eyes of Hashem, as it is written (*Mishlei 16:5*): "The abomination of Hashem are all who are proud of heart." And the proud man is given into the hands of his evil inclination; he does not receive Divine assistance since he is the abomination of Hashem. And though he does not elevate himself above any man in speech or indeed, but only in his heart, he is still called an "abomination," as it is written: "The abomination of Hashem are all who are proud of *heart*" — though his pride exists in his heart alone, he is still called an "abomination." Our Rabbis taught (*Sotah 4b*): "Everyone who is haughty of spirit is as one who serves idols, as it is written in one place (*Mishlei 16:5*): 'The abomination of Hashem are all who are proud of heart,' and in another (*Devarim 7:26*): 'And do not bring an abomination into your house.'" There are others who say: "It is as if he has relations with all those who are forbidden to him, as it is written (*Vayikra 18:27*): 'For all of these *abominations* they did.'" And there are others who say: "It is as if he erected a provisional altar (*bamah*)." They say further (*Sotah 5a*): "All who are haughty of spirit in the end are diminished, as it is written (*Iyov 24:24*): 'They are exalted a little.'" And he deserves to be uprooted as an *asherah* [a tree devoted to idol worship], as it is written in one place (*Yeshayahu 10:33*): "And the haughty of stature shall be uprooted," and in another (*Devarim 7:5*): "And their *asheros* shall you uproot." And his dust will not awaken [for the Resurrection]. And the Shechinah wails over him. And the Holy One Blessed be He says: "I and he cannot live together in the world," as it is written (*Tehillim 101:5*): "The haughty of eye and the broad of heart — him I cannot abide." Read it not "him" but "with him" I cannot abide (*Sotah 5a*). And they said (*Bava Basra 98a*): "The proud man is not even accepted by his own household, as it is written (*Chavakkuk 2:5*): 'The proud man shall not inhabit' — even in his own habitation."

Pride leads to the pursuit of honor for the purpose of lording it over people. You are well aware of what happened to Korach and his congregation as a result of his pride. He desired to aggrandize himself and to arrogate to himself greatness which had not been conferred upon him by Heaven. Because of this he entered into controversy which resulted in envy and hatred, and all of these are low traits, as will be explained with the help of God.

In sum, if one adorns his body in order to flaunt him-self, he forgets Hashem, Blessed be He, he pays no heed to the mitzvos, and he does not pursue good deeds for he is entirely intent upon himself — to adorn his ephemeral body, whose end is to be devoured by worms and maggots. And one who adorns his body borders on licentiousness, for he will cause women to look at and admire him as a result of which he will come close to them and fall prey to levity and lightheadedness. The woman, too, who adorns herself for men, inflames their hearts and stirs up lewd thoughts within them, and her punishment, therefore, is very great, for she becomes a stumbling block to many men. Our Sages (*Avodah Zarah* 20b) have forbidden gazing at the colored apparel of women that is spread out on a wall. If such is the case even when she is not actually clothed in this apparel, how much greater, then, must be the prohibition and the punishment for a woman who dresses up for men who gaze at her.

Further, pride leads to lust, for the proud man's heart is expansive and desires everything. And lust is the worst of all the traits, for one will lust through his pride to wear expensive garments and build stately mansions and eat gourmet foods. For the proud man always desires exotic things, and if he cannot afford these things, he may come to steal or rob. For the heart of the proud man is desirous and his pocket is spread wide to accumulate wealth; he will not be happy with his lot, for the great expenditure of his pride's lust will cause him to belittle what he has. Further-more, pride causes one to lack patience in bearing the yoke of his fellowman. And it is not necessary to elaborate upon the defectiveness of impatience, as it is acknowledged by all.

There is a positive aspect of pride in one's body, lest he say: Since pride is such an evil trait I shall separate myself from it to the extreme — so that he will not eat meat, nor drink wine, nor take a wife, nor live in a comfortable home, nor wear becoming garments, but only sackcloth and stiff wool, and garments that are torn and besmirched, and he will use dirty, ugly utensils, and he will not wash his face, hands, and feet until he looks worse than other men — and all this to remove himself from pride and lust to the farthest possible extreme. One who follows this course is called a sinner, for it is written in relation to a Nazirite (*Bemidbar* 6:11):

“And he shall make atonement for him-self for sinning against his soul,” concerning which our Sages have said (*Ta’anis* 11a): “Now if a Nazirite who abstains only from wine is called a sinner, how much more so one who abstains from everything!” Our Sages have stated further (*Yerushalmi Nedarim* 9:1): “Is it not enough for you what the Torah forbade, that you have to forbid yourself other things?” About such courses and similar ones King Shelomo wrote (*Koheles* 7:16): “Do not be overly righteous, and do not be overly wise — why should you destroy yourself?” The proper course for a man to follow is to be clean in all of his affairs, for cleanliness is the road to good deeds. What shall he do? Let him wear plain clothing — neither expensive, gaudy attire that everyone stares at nor paupers’ clothes that shame the wearer — but plain, pleasant, clean garments, the poor man according to his state and the rich man according to his. And it is forbidden to wear stained or soiled garments. They should not be torn, and they should not be stylized in the manner of the haughty. His food, too, should be clean. He should not eat royal fare, but plain food and plain drink, as he can afford. He should not drink or eat from ugly vessels, lest he transgress (*Vayikra* 11:43): “Do not abominate yourselves” — but all should be done with cleanliness. His table and his bed, too, should be clean, and all of his affairs should be clean. His body, too, should be clean and not sweaty. He should take care to wash his face, hands, and feet, and also his entire body at regular intervals, as we find in the case of Hillel the Elder (*Vayikra Rabbah* 34:3): “When he took leave of his disciples and walked along with them, they asked him: ‘Where are you going?’ He answered: ‘To do a mitzvah.’ They asked: ‘Which mitzvah are you going to do?’ He answered: ‘To bathe in the bathhouse.’ They asked: ‘Is that a mitzvah?’ He answered: ‘Yes! Now if with respect to the statues of kings that are set up in theaters and circuses their caretaker polishes and washes them, for which he is not only fed but also brought up among the royal dignitaries, I, who have been created in the image of God and the likeness of God, as it is written (*Bereshis* 9:6): “For in the image of God did He make man,” how much more so should this apply!” And it is written further (*Mishlei* 16:4): “Hashem made all for His sake.” All who are heedful of these things for the sake of the mitzvah and are not intent upon adorning and aggrandizing themselves, though what they do may have the semblance of pride, since their intent is the glory of God, there is in this a great mitzvah.

A man’s pride in wisdom and in good deeds, takes two forms, one good and the other evil. The evil form is scorning men in heart and word, regarding them as small and inferior, praising and extolling oneself constantly as a paragon of wisdom, and because of this pride, not admitting the truth. In the proud man’s eyes, his wisdom, counsel, words, and deeds will always seem superior to those of

his friends, and he will always flaunt himself in his wisdom and deeds, desiring praise and honor for his cogent words. About such a one King Shelomo has written (*Mishlei 27:2*): “Let a stranger praise you and not your own mouth.” The proud man will always take credit for himself, and because of this he will not exert himself adequately over Torah, not being solicitous of God’s glory, but only desiring that all men acknowledge him as a good and wise man — such acknowledgment being sufficient for him. He always rejoices when his friends stumble and is happy in the paucity of their knowledge and takes honor in their dishonor. And this is one of the twenty-four deterrents to repentance. A man whose deeds are all good and who boasts of them to gain honor is like a fine dish prepared with all manner of seasonings and the best of spices, but which stands by the fire so long that it overcooks and spoils, becoming inedible because of its bitter, burnt taste. Similarly, the man who boasts of his deeds befouls his good deeds through such boasting. And there is no trait worse than or comparable to glorifying oneself for wisdom and good deeds that one does not possess. As our Sages have stated (*Yerushalmi Shevi’is 10:3*): “If people honor someone on the assumption that he knows two tractates and he knows only one, he must inform them that he knows only one.” How much more so must he not mislead people into crediting him with greatness that he does not possess.

Know that it is incumbent upon us to perform all of our deeds exclusively for the sake of the Exalted Creator, both in public and in private; and all of our acts of Divine service must be motivated only by a desire to do His will and not the will of mankind to garner praise for his deeds and to receive honor. One must do all for the sake of the Al-mighty, Who looks into one’s heart, as it is written (*Yirmeyahu 17:10*): “I am Hashem, who searches the heart and examines the innards,” and (*Devarim 29:28*): “The hidden things are [known] to Hashem our God.” Therefore, let the proud man know that if he does not take care with wisdom and zeal to rescue himself from pride, though he may possess Torah and good deeds, he inherits Gehinnom. For the evil inclination lies in ambush for him and brings arguments and rationalizations to lead him to pride in order to drive him from the world. Therefore, one must not be slack in conquering the evil inclination every day. And this is called a “great war,” as we find in the case of one of the saintly men, who, encountering men returning from the war with great spoil, said to them: “You have returned from the small war; the great war yet awaits you.” Upon being questioned by them: “And what is the great war?” he answered: “That against the evil inclination and its battalions.” For with every other foe, after you defeat it once or twice or three times it will leave you alone; but the evil inclination does not let go of you though you may defeat it a hundred times, as our Sages have said

(*Avos* 2:4) : “And do not trust yourself until the day of your death.” For it will lie in ambush for you all of your days, hoping to catch you off guard. And if it defeats you in the slightest of the slight, in the end it will defeat you in the severest of the severe. And since pride is the root of many lowly traits, and the evil inclination, too, is an active partner in a man’s heart, and since the sole intent of the evil inclination is to falsify the truth and place the stamp of truth on falsity — teaching man to be proud and presenting him with rationalizations to this end — therefore, you must strive to outsmart it.

The first of the evil inclination’s stratagems is to harden and lift a man’s heart, making pride and other evil traits attractive to him. And this man, though certainly knowing that there is offense and transgression in his pride, will nevertheless transgress knowingly, the evil inclination so inflaming his heart with a desire for honor that he will not pay heed to the transgression. But if the man is pure in his deeds and is not wittingly proud nor does he praise him-self when he knows that it is a sin to do so, the evil inclination comes and contrives subtleties and wages a war to the death to overthrow him and ensnare him in its net. It will offer him rationalizations and theories to the effect that there is mitzvah and reward in his praising and glorifying himself. Thus will the evil inclination say: “You have already attained a high level of wisdom and saintliness, and you should ingratiate yourself with men and exert yourself to find favor in their eyes and flatter them and reveal your wisdom and righteousness to them in order to gain their love. And it will substantiate its argument with the words of the Rabbis (*Avos* 3:10): “All who find favor in the eyes of their fellowmen find favor in the eyes of God.” All these are false proofs, the theory itself being founded in pride. The truth is as the Scripture states (*Mishlei* 16:7): “When Hashem desires a man’s ways, his foes, too, make peace with him.” This is how the matter is to be understood: If a man does not praise himself before others and does not attempt to find favor in their eyes when he does his good deeds, and, in spite of this, is beloved by them, this is strong proof that the Holy One Blessed be He loves him, and has sowed love for him in the hearts of men and given him a good name on their tongues. And the truth is that many men are beloved by their fellowmen and despised by the Holy One Blessed be He, when they do not fulfill the mitzvos. For the Holy One Blessed be He loves only those who study Torah and abide by it.

Next, the evil inclination will tempt you to reveal your saintliness and good deeds before the populace with the rationalization that in doing so you may cause them to emulate your deeds. This, too, proceeds from pride. Though we do find instances of great men praising themselves (*Megillah* 28a), they did so only before their students and colleagues, so that they would follow in their ways and

emulate their deeds. This is certainly a mitzvah — to cause good deeds to be beloved by them. But even in the presence of these, one must not rejoice in his heart, saying: “This I know,” or “this I do.” But in public it is indeed forbidden to make such revelations. Even if you conduct yourself with humility and stand long in prayer and study Torah regularly, the evil inclination will tempt you to pride, saying: “Now those who see you will esteem and honor you for your goodly ways, and great benefit will result from this. Since they respect you, they will respect your reproof and chastisement!” All this is vanity! For when you do a good deed, do it for the sake of the Blessed Creator alone and your reproof will be accepted by others even if you do not think so, for the acceptance of reproof is not dependent upon your thoughts!

And if you have freed yourself of all this, the evil inclination will tempt you by saying: “Your Divine service can-not be perfect until you have completely removed yourself from pride, as by consulting your good deeds and showing the opposite of what you really feel: Pray briefly, and when you wish to study something, do it privately, so that no one knows except the Blessed Creator. And let no good trait be seen in you, but perform your Divine service in a casual manner, so that you will not make a name for yourself and you will lose your reward. And do not dictate the doing of good nor exhort against the doing of evil. And do not reveal your wisdom nor teach it to anyone besides you. And do not give any indication of your fearing Hashem, nor display any sign, such as *tefillin*, *mezuzah*, or *tzitzis*. But follow the customs of men and walk in their ways and mingle with them in eating, drinking, entertaining, luxuriating, and jesting.” All this is the working of the evil inclination to ensnare people in its net, and if one follows this course for the sake of a mitzvah, his loss is thousands of times greater than his reward. He is like one escaping from a small fire into a big one. But the right course is to pray at length with concentration, to exhort to the doing of good and against the doing of evil, and to do all of the good things, both in public and in private. And if one is honored and praised because of this, this praise will not detract from his reward, in that he was not motivated to act by it. Therefore, when you do a good deed, look into yourself to see from whom you expect reward. If from the Almighty, the deed is perfect; if from others, it is not. When you do something in public, determine whether you would do it closeted in private in the same manner that you are doing it in public. If the answer is yes, then your deed is perfect.

All that we have said on the subject of the evil inclination is but a drop in the ocean in comparison to the care that one must exercise in dealing with it, for in everything, in every act, in every trait, the evil inclination comes to destroy and to ruin. We have merely opened the door to reveal the activities of the evil inclination

for the benefit of he who is unacquainted with the beginning of its ways. And the wise man will understand and hasten to root it out of himself, and (*Iyov* 17:9): “The cleanhanded man will multiply strength.”

Pride in the quality of one’s wisdom is praiseworthy, as it is written (*Yirmeyahu* 9:23): “But let him who praises himself praise himself for this — being wise and knowing me.” And let him multiply praise to the Creator for having granted him knowledge and wisdom and goodly traits through the prayer for wisdom (*Berachos* 28b): “I give thanks to You for having cast my lot among those who sit in the house of study and not among the ‘corner-dwellers,” and as in: “How fortunate we are; how goodly is our portion, and how pleasant is our lot.” About this it is written (*II Divrei Hayamim* 17:6): “And his heart was uplifted in the ways of Hashem.” For a man should be lofty-spirited and high-hearted in matters of the World-to-Come. He should not be content with what comes his way and not say “enough” in respect to what he acquires of them. But all of his deeds in this area should constantly aspire upwards, and he should take himself to task for falling short in the service of the Blessed Creator. Such pride is no impediment to humility, but abets it and causes one to rejoice in the virtuous qualities and in the honor of one’s friends and to be solicitous of their honor.

Pride against the wicked is extremely praiseworthy: rebuking them, shaming them, not humbling oneself before them, exhorting them to the good and against evil as much as one can. Though this may seem autocratic and haughty in the eyes of the world, since it is being done for the sake of Heaven it is praiseworthy. One must not humble himself before the wicked, as Mordechai did not humble himself to Haman. And whenever he has a mitzvah to do, he must not humble himself at all before them, to forsake the good because of his subservience to them. And it requires wisdom to know when to do a mitzvah in front of wicked people, for sometimes it is better to avoid a confrontation. If someone is arrogant to them in respect to one mitzvah, he may lose a hundred as a result. Regarding this King Shelomo wrote (*Mishlei* 26:4-5): “Do not answer a fool according to his foolishness,” and “Answer a fool according to his foolishness” — they are both wicked and foolish. Therefore, the wise man must take into consideration the time and the circumstances and arrange his deeds accordingly. For there are things which he must abandon because of the wicked and things which he must under no circumstances abandon because of them and for whose sake he must stand up against them with his person and with his possessions, and not humble himself before them. All this applies to the realm of mitzvos, but in the realm of business dealings he should humble himself before them and conduct himself with them beyond the letter of the law in all things — and this is a great mitzvah.

And one who has the trait of pride must exert himself and rid himself of it, for it is a bad defect. Its potential harm is great and ever-present, and its potential benefit very slight. Therefore, one must remove himself very far from it. For pride brings one to destruction, as it is written (*Mishlei* 16:18): “Pride goes before destruction,” and it also brings him to lowliness, as it is written (*ibid.* 29:23): “A man’s pride will lower him.” We are all well aware of what happened to Pharaoh because he said (*Shemos* 5:2): “Who is Hashem that I should listen to His voice?” And to Goliath the Philistine, who said (*I Shemuel* 17:10) : “I have reviled the armies of Israel,” to Sancherev, who said (*Yeshayahu* 36:20): “Who, among the gods of all these lands, rescued their lands from my hand?” And to Nevuchadnetzar, who said (*Daniel* 3:15): “And who is the god that shall deliver you out of my hands?” — and all of the others who spoke the same way and whose end was shame and disgrace. One who possesses this trait is not rescued from sin and transgression, as Shelomo wrote (*Mishlei* 21:24): “The proud scorner is called a mocker; he acts in the fury of malice.” Since we have come this far in speaking of pride, listen to the words of the wise. One Sage said: “Who is he from whom worry will never depart? One who seeks a state that is above him.” And: “One who holds himself a knower,” that is, one who regards himself as a sage, “is considered a fool by others.” And: “Next to pride are evil deeds.” And one who is given to evil deeds is constantly beset by men’s hatred and people turn away from him. And one Sage said: “Just as pleasantness of countenance is the light of the body, so pleasantness of character traits is the light of the soul.” And he said further: “It does not bespeak stateliness of soul for the king to lord himself over other men, so how much more so for one man over another!” And: “A certain king was sitting on his throne and before him were placed three chairs, one higher than the other, for seating by rank. Three nobles came before him and seated themselves one higher than the other, whereupon the king said to them: ‘How did you dare seat yourselves thus without my permission?’ The highest one answered: ‘My family’s great pedigree sat me above my fellows.’ The second answered: ‘I went above the one below me because of my great wisdom.’ The third answered: ‘The lowliness of my soul and the constriction of my heart sat me beneath them’ — whereupon the king raised him up and exalted him above the others.” In this respect it is written (*Mishlei* 25:7): “For it is better that it be said to you: ‘Come up here,’ than that you be lowered before the Gracious One.”

When a man sees that the trait of pride is gaining ascendancy over him, he must think of things that frighten his heart: that he comes from a putrefying drop, that he will return to dust and his end will be worms and maggots, and that he will have to give an accounting to the King of kings, the Holy One Blessed be He

(*Avos* 3:1). Let him think about how many proud men have vanished from the world and have been forgotten as if they never existed — and to what avail was their vanity!

Make a fence to keep far from pride and other evil traits. He who wishes to completely root pride out of his heart cannot do this by thought alone, but in the beginning he must remove himself from haughtiness to the outermost limit. How? If a man was accustomed to wearing ostentatious, stylized garments, like those who are haughty of spirit, and he wishes to depart from this, if he simply starts wearing good clothing and styles it moderately, he will not thereby root out haughtiness from his heart. Or if he was wont to seek honor and to lord it over others in word or deed, there is no correction for him until he humbles himself, sitting lower than all others, putting on worn-out garments that shame those who wear them, and the like, until he roots out his haughtiness of heart. Similarly, if one is hot-tempered and often vents his anger, he must first come to react with complete passivity to being hit or cursed; and he must persist in this a long time, until the root of wrath has been torn out of his heart. Then he can turn back and adopt the middle course and remain with it for the rest of his days. And this regimen should be pursued with every evil trait. First one must remove him-self from it until he can remove himself no further, and remain in this position for a long time; then he must turn back and adopt the middle course. This regimen guarantees a complete cure for all evil traits. One who is inclined to serve the Blessed Creator with each trait in its most select manifestation will set this path before himself and his fellow Jew. In this regard it is written (*Tehillim* 50:23): “And to him who sets his path I will reveal the salvation of God.”