

## The Fifteenth Gate

# The Gate of Zeal

---

Zeal (זְרִיזוּת) is a great virtue that promotes Torah and mitzvot and also worldly progress. It is a trait of the righteous. By acting with zeal the righteous arrive at Divine service. Our Sages of blessed memory have said (*Pesachim* 4a): “The zealous advance themselves towards the doing of mitzvot.” This can be seen in the case of our father Avraham in the incident of the binding of Yitzchak, as it is written (*Bereshit* 22:3): “And Avraham arose early in the morning and he saddled.” Even though it was understandably difficult for him to slaughter his only son, he did the will of the Exalted Creator with zeal, rising early in the morning. One who acts with zeal demonstrates clearly that he loves his Creator, as a servant who loves his master and spurs himself to render him service and to do his will. For zeal depends upon the state of a man’s heart. When a man frees his heart of all other thoughts that reside in it and seizes upon one thought, then he will undoubtedly be zealous in its execution. This is what Avraham did. He removed from his heart the love of his son and held on to the will of his Creator, and he negated the love of his son before the love of the will of his Blessed Creator. He, therefore, was zealous in rising early, for his soul and mind were bound with great yearning and love for the Blessed Creator. It is for this reason that the Holy One Blessed be He swore to Avraham to remember for his seed the binding of Yitzchak. For there are those who do for the sake of their beloved ones things that are very difficult for them, and their hearts are reluctant to do so, but Avraham and Yitzchak both did the will of the Holy One Blessed be He wholeheartedly, for their level of love for Him was extremely great. Both of them cleaved to the Blessed One with their minds until they achieved great unity with Him, for their entire intent and thinking was to publicize the Blessed Creator’s oneness in the world and guide men straight to His love. And when they performed the service of the Exalted One and His mitzvot, their bodily forces were neutralized and their minds cleaved to the love of the Blessed Creator, the Maker of the world. Both of them, therefore, acted with zeal.

You must know that the trait of zeal is the foundation of all the traits, for one cannot constantly be learning. One must eat, drink, sleep, and attend to his other needs. Therefore, he requires zeal and alacrity to then return to his learning. And let one not think in his heart: The day is yet long and the year is long, for in this respect our teachers of blessed memory have said

(*Avot* 2:4): “Do not say, ‘When I will be free, I will learn’; maybe you will not be free” and you will not learn. One should also not say, “It is already evening; if I go to learn, I will have to stop very soon to pray.” For it is better to learn for a short while, even one thing, than to do anything else in the world (*Yerushalmi, Peah* 1:1). Concerning this it is written (*Mishlei* 28:9): “He who averts his ear from hearing Torah, his prayer, too, is an abomination.” And so it is written (*Tehillim* 119:72): “Better to me is the Torah of Your mouth than thousands of [coins of] gold and silver,” and (*ibid.* 84:11): “For one day in Your courts is better than a thousand [elsewhere].” The Holy One Blessed be He said to King David: “One day of your Torah study is better to Me than the thousand burnt offerings that your son Shelomo is destined to sacrifice to Me upon the altar” (*Makkos* 10a). Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair said: “Zeal leads to cleanliness, cleanliness to separation, separation to purity, purity to holiness, holiness to humility, humility to fear of sin, fear of sin to saintliness, saintliness to the holy spirit, the holy spirit to revival of the dead, and revival of the dead to Eliyahu the Prophet of blessed memory (*Yerushalmi Shekalim* 3:3, *Sotah* 49a, *Avodah Zarah* 20b). Come and see how great is the power of zeal that leads to these goodly traits! Therefore, one must be watchful and zealous for all the mitzvot, and run to learn early and late.

The trait of zeal is an ornament to all the other traits and it perfects all of them. And now you should remember those things which men commonly tend to be lax about. If you must see something in a book, be zealous to bring the book and also to search for what you need. And be zealous to go and ask someone who knows the subject. If a poor man comes to your house to ask for bread, do not say, “I cannot go to bring bread,” but go with zeal to bring it. If you need to wash your hands, but you have only little or unfit water, or if the vessel is not entirely ritually suitable — being split, for example — and you are very hungry, do not let your hunger cause you to demean the washing rite, but be zealous to get water and a utensil fit for washing. And one must be especially zealous not to delay evacuation, both defecation and urination, even one moment, so as not to transgress (*Vayikra* 20:25): “Do not make yourselves revolting” (*Makkos* 16b). Moreover, one who delays evacuation brings sore illnesses upon himself. And one must be watchful and zealous to keep himself clean, both his clothing and his body. He must wash the anal opening after defecation, for it is impossible to cleanse oneself properly without water. It also requires zeal for one who attends to his needs at night by his bed to arise and wash

his hands and go to a clean place to recite the Asher Yatzar benediction. If he wishes to drink water, he must arise and wash his hands, go to a clean place and wash and make the preliminary and concluding blessings over water. If he is in bed and hears the sound of thunder or sees lightning, he must get up, wash his hands, and make the blessing. He also requires zeal to rise early from his bed, shake slumber from his lids, and learn Torah. And he needs zeal to break away from his defective thoughts, such as thoughts of envy and hatred and lewd thoughts. All of these require unusually great zeal for the bending of all of one's thoughts to the Blessed Creator's will. If he experiences suffering through the loss of money, or the death of a loved one, or afflictions, he needs great zeal to strengthen his thoughts with love of the Rock of Ages — to remove the suffering from his heart and purify it to vindicate Hashem in His decrees and judgments, to accept them with love, to cleave to Torah, prayer, and good deeds, and to strengthen himself in his devotion to the Exalted God.

In sum, one must seek out any transgression to which he is habituated and hastily make fences around it to take care and to keep himself from it. He must likewise seek out any mitzvah in which he is lax, first understanding what caused this laxness. For example, the idle man must understand at the outset that idleness comes from idle activities and that one who habituates himself to idle activities neglects Torah, prayer, and all good. He must therefore be zealous to remove himself from men who are given to idle talk and not associate with them. This will be the cure for his illness. He must do likewise with respect to all defective traits. He must first locate the defective foundation and destroy it, and remove from his eyes the darkness that obscures the light of his soul. And removal from all this requires zeal, for if he will be slothful in rooting out defective traits, they will become branches in his heart, so that he will no longer be able to cut them out.

And he must be zealous to seek peace and pursue it, as it is written (*Tehillim* 34:15): "Seek peace and pursue it." And he must be zealous in seeking out knowledge of Torah and of the Blessed Creator, as it is written (*Hoshea* 6:3): "And we will know, we will run to know Hashem." And so have our Sages said (*Avot* 4:13): "Exile yourself to a place of Torah." And one must be zealous in seeking righteousness, as it is written (*Devarim* 16:20): "Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue," and (*Yeshayahu* 51:1): "Listen to me, pursuers of righteousness, seekers of Hashem." And one must be zealous to transcribe books that he must study from; or, if he

sees or hears a new interpretation, he must be zealous to write it down and not wait until he forgets it.

Rabbi Yehudah ben Tema said (*Avot* 5:20): “Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven.” See how the Sages have exhorted us to make ourselves light and strong for mitzvot! And thus did David say (*Tehillim* 119:60): “I was quick and did not delay to heed Your mitzvot.” And so did our Rabbis of blessed memory expound: “ ‘And you shall heed the matzos’ (*Shemot* 12:17) — do not read it matzos, but mitzvot. If a mitzvah comes to hand, do not allow it to go stale, but do it immediately” (*Mechilta*). And one must be extremely light, zealous, and strong to combat the wicked, to be as stouthearted as Moshe our teacher, may peace be upon him, who said (*Shemot* 32:27): “Let each man put his sword on his side,” and as Pinchas, of whom it is written (*Bemidbar* 25:7): “And Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the priest, saw and he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand.” Therefore, take great care to be extremely zealous to separate yourself from the company of the wicked, not to participate in their counsels and in their accords. Above all, one must be zealous to repent. He must make haste and not delay the process of repentance, so that he not remain wicked in Hashem’s presence for even one moment. See how the ministers of kings and princes are swift in their embassies and services. How much more zealous must one be in the service of the King of kings, the Holy One Blessed be He!

Even though zeal is extremely praiseworthy, one must be careful not to be overly hasty in his service, for one who rides too quickly is very apt to stumble, and one who runs too quickly falls. And things cannot be done correctly in haste, but only with patience. And thus have our Rabbis said (*Avot* 1:1): “Be patient in judgment.” True zeal consists of one’s heart being alert, his mind being wakeful, and his limbs being light for the performance of his labor, but not in over hastiness in any matter. All of these matters require great discretion for deciding when to be quick and when to delay.

And though the trait of zeal is an excellent one, one must not be zealous in pursuing his lusts, exerting himself for his pleasures, and pursuing evil deeds. For just as zeal with respect to Torah lifts one to a great level, zeal to commit transgressions brings one to the nethermost pit. And just as one requires zeal for Torah, he requires it for worldly affairs, to be zealous in his labors. And great success awaits those who are zealous in worldly

matters. Therefore, son of man, be zealous for both worlds, and do your work for the requirements of this world with zeal so that you will quickly free yourself for the work of Heaven.