

Haazinu

Say Pi Pi Pi and then Spit

Listen, Heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

Dvarim 32:1

The Talmud¹⁸² tells us that one who does not concentrate properly when praying should be beaten with a smith's hammer. Rashi¹⁸³ explains that this is merely a figure of speech, and that it means that we are to teach that person how to control himself. To concentrate while praying to God is no simple task, but it is something within a man's control. One can train himself to think only proper thoughts during prayer.

That being the case, it becomes challenging then to understand the words of the Arizal, taught by *Sefer Hagan*.¹⁸⁴ He writes that one who starts to have an inappropriate thought during his prayers can avoid falling prey to it by first saying “*pi pi pi*,” and then putting his tongue in between his teeth and spitting. If he does this, the improper thought will leave him and he will be free to continue his prayers in peace. At first glance, this behavior seems inexplicable and even bizarre. After all, how can such an incantation have any impact on one's concentration? Even more perplexing to the Chasam Sofer¹⁸⁵ is the fact that thoughts are products of a person's free will, as we have seen from the Talmud. That being the case, wonders the Chasam Sofer, what good can any incantation be, when one can simply choose to stop thinking about distracting things?

The Chasam Sofer therefore explains that there are two sorts of thoughts. One kind of thought is a product of the conscious, thinking mind. For thoughts that one chooses to think, there is no incantation that can have any effect at all. But there is another sort of thought. There is the kind that comes from outside of a person, and seems to just pop into his head. For that sort of thought, one can only look to God and ask Him to help the prayers go well. “Listen, Heavens, and I will speak.” Heavens, our Sages teach us,¹⁸⁶ can refer to the soul, while the body is called “earth.” A man is a mixture of the heavenly and the dust of the earth. One needs

182 Brachos 34a

183 Ad loc., s.v. *machinan*.

184 *Yom Sheni*, end, as cited in *Magen Avraham*, Orach Chaim, 98. See also *Nefesh Chaim* of R. Chaim Palagi (*beh*, 34), where he quotes this, among many other such suggestions.

185 *Chasam Sofer al Hatorah* (Haazinu, s.v. *baazinu bashomayim*)

186 Sanhedrin 91b

to tell his heavenly part, which is his soul, or his thinking mind,¹⁸⁷ to quiet itself and follow instructions. “Listen, Heavens,” he needs to tell himself, “so that I can speak in prayer.” But then, there is the other half of his being, the earthly part. “Let the earth hear *imrei pi*.”¹⁸⁸ Literally, this means “let the earth hear the words of my mouth.” However, says the Chasam Sofer, this can also be read as, “let my body hear my calls of *pi pi pi*.” The more physical parts of us, those that are more distant from reason and teaching, need to hear the words *pi pi pi*, and through that, one can pray without distraction.

But we have not yet explained the meaning of this strange phrase, *pi pi pi*. What can it possibly mean?¹⁸⁹

Our Sages¹⁹⁰ teach that there were ten things that were created on the very first Friday afternoon of the world, at the very end of the day. Among them are “*pi haaretz*,” the mouth of the earth, “*pi habe’er*” the mouth of the well, and “*pi ha’ason*” the mouth of the donkey. The earth opened its mouth to swallow Korach and his crew.¹⁹¹ The well opened its mouth and sang a song.¹⁹² The donkey of Bilaam opened her mouth and spoke. All three of these “mouths” were created on that first Friday afternoon. In his *Dvarim Nechmadim*,¹⁹³ R. Zvi Elimilech of Dinov quotes R. Zvi Hirsch of Ziditchov, that the incantation *pi pi pi* is a reference to these three mouths, or, in Hebrew, the three “*pi*’s. He then admits, “I do not know the reason behind this, but I nevertheless record this so that it will be remembered.”¹⁹⁴

“The praises of Hashem were in their throats, and the *pipiyos* sword in their hands.”¹⁹⁵ R. Yitzchak Palagi¹⁹⁶ writes that this verse is to be understood as a teaching for the Jewish people while waging war. When Yaakov approached Yitzchak disguised as his brother, Esav, to receive the blessings that were meant for Esav, his father felt the goat skins on his hands. “The

187 See R. Yonah to Brachos 15a, s.v. *harotzeh*, that the soul is located in the mind.

188 The verse, in fact, reads *imrei fi*. Spelled identical to *pi* (with only the dot inside changing, for grammatical consideration) and bearing the same meaning, I chose to transliterate the word *pi* for simplicity’s sake.

189 See *Mishnah Brurah*, 98, where he advances the explanation that the word *pi* is an acronym for Palti and Yosef, two men who were excellent in controlling their more base desires. See Sanhedrin 19b. Another explanation is advanced by *Nachalas Yaakov* (Haazinu), as recorded in *Taamei Haminbagim* (“*Inyanei Sugulos*,” 41).

190 Avos 5:6

191 Bamidbar 16:32

192 Bartenura to Avos 5:6, in explaining Bamidbar 21:17.

193 See there, where he points out these three mouths appear in three consecutive *parshiyos* of the Torah: Korach contains the story of the *pi haaretz*; Chukas, that of the *pi habe’er* and Balak, the *pi ha’ason*. See also *Ohalei Shem* (to Korach), who makes the amazing observation that the *gematria* of “*eretz, be’er, ason*” is the same as that of “Korach, Chukas, Balak.”

194 See *Ohalei Shem* (Korach) for an explanation. See also the explanation of R. Schlesinger, as quoted in Freidman’s *Yafeh Nidreshes*, “Moadei Hashana” (p. 7). See also vol. 1 of R. Avraham Schorr’s *Halekach Vihalibuv* to Avos, 5:6.

195 Tehillim 149:6

196 Quoted in his father, R. Chaim Palagi’s, *Hachaim Yoducha* to Tehillim, *ibid*.

voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Esav.”¹⁹⁷ The Midrash¹⁹⁸ sees these words as prophetic, teaching that Yaakov would father a nation who used their “voice,” the voice of reason, learning, teaching and prayer, while Esav would father descendants who would use their “hands,” waging wars, and conquering the physical world.

The Midrash continues, “When the voice is truly the voice of Yaakov, then the hands will not truly be the hands of Esav.” The hands of Esav held on tightly to the sword that Yitzchak blessed him with when he said, “You will live by the sword.” This means that the swords of the enemies of the Jewish people are no match for the power of the voice of Torah, reason, truth and wisdom, when it is applied properly. Thus, R. Yitzchak Palagi explains this verse to mean, “When the praises of God are on their lips, and the Jews are faithful to the message of the Torah, then the sword of the rest of the world will not only be useless against the Jewish people, but will, in fact, be under their control.”

A fascinating parallel is found in the work *Nefesh Hager*, a nineteenth-century work on the *Targumim* (the Aramaic translations of the Pentateuch). The author points out that in the Torah, every single time the Jewish people are described as using their sword, the term *lifi cherev* is used. This is instead of the word *bicherev*, which is used when a Gentile is holding the sword. This is a striking observation. *Lifi cherev* would be best translated as “by the sword,” and Targum Onkeles translates the words as “*lipisgam dicherev*,” which would seem to mean “by the word of the sword.”¹⁹⁹ He explains that this is because the Jew is only successful in war when his “voice” is in use in the proper fashion, in prayer, as this is what truly ensures him success in the war. “There are those who come with chariots, and there are those who come with horses, but we rely on the name of Hashem, our God.”²⁰⁰

“The sword of *pipiyos* in their hands.” The Chiddushei Harim²⁰¹ explains that *pi* is one mouth, *piyos* is two, and *pipiyos* is three. These are the three mouths of *pi pi pi* from the *Sefer Hagan* that we have been discussing. There are three places in the Torah where people did not use their mouths and voices properly. Korach spoke about Moshe in a way that he should not have. Moshe was meant to speak to the rock, but instead, he hit it, using his hands rather than his voice. Bilaam wanted to curse the Jewish people, harnessing his power of speech for evil. In all three places, there was, ultimately, a great Kiddush Hashem brought about despite the actions of these three. Korach was swallowed, leading to cries of “Moshe and his Torah are true.”²⁰² The well that Moshe was meant to speak to wound up singing its own song. Bilaam, who wanted to curse the Jewish people, had his donkey open its mouth to tell him what a fool he was being, and in the end, he was compelled against his will to bless the Jewish people with

197 Bereishis 27:22

198 Bereishis Rabbah 65:20

199 Prof. Marcus Jastrow, in his dictionary, renders this phrase, “the law of war.”

200 Tehillim 20:8

201 Quoted in *Likkutei Yehuda* (Beshalach, p. 114).

202 Sanhedrin 110a–b. See also *Ollelos Efraim* (4, p. 6, *maamar* 13) and *Kesones Pasim* (of R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonoye) to Pinchas.

the most beautiful of blessings.²⁰³

A Jew who is praying, and is beset by his physical side to such a degree that he is about to waste his powers, needs to remind himself of these three mouths. The world will achieve its potential and sing the glory of God with or without you. It is worthwhile to be a part of it willingly. When a person is having a hard time keeping his mind focused on keeping his speech meaningful, he needs to remind himself of these major episodes in the Torah. We learn from them the danger inherent in the misuse of speech. *Pi pi pi* is what the weaker parts of our psyches need to hear, to help us straighten out our paths. When we absorb this message to the point that our earthly parts hear it, we will then have no problem using our amazing spiritual powers of thought and speech to connect to God, and achieve great spiritual accomplishments.

203 See *Tzidkas Hatzaddik*, 148, where he discusses the phenomenon of words of Torah emanating from as unlikely a place as Bilaam, and other such episodes.