

IGGERET (THE LETTER OF THE) HA RAMBAN

SPEAK CALMLY IN ORDER TO AVOID ANGER

Hear, my son, the instruction of your father and don't forsake the Torah of your mother (Mishlei 1:8). Get into the habit of always speaking calmly to everyone. This will prevent you from anger, a serious character flaw which causes people to sin. As our Rabbis said (Nedarim 22a): Whoever flares up in anger is subject to the discipline of Gehinnom as it says in (Koheles 12:10), "Cast out anger from your heart, and [by doing this] remove evil from your flesh." "Evil" here means Gehinnom, as we read (Mishlei 16:4): "...and the wicked are destined for the day of evil."

THROUGH HUMILITY COMES THE FEAR OF G-D

Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart. This quality is the finest of all admirable traits (see Avodah Zarah 20b), because (Mishlei 22:4), "Following humility comes the fear of G-d." Through humility you will also come to fear G-d. It will cause you to always think about (see Avos 3:1) where you came from and where you are going, and that while alive you are only like a maggot and a worm, and the same after death. It will also remind you before Whom you will be judged, the King of Glory, as it is stated (I Melachim 8:27; Mishlei 15:11), "Even the heaven and the heavens of heaven can't contain You" -- "How much less the hearts of people!" It is also written (Yirmeyahu 23:24), "Do I not fill heaven and earth? says G-d."

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT ALL THIS YOU WILL COME TO THE FEAR OF G-D

When you think about all these things, you will come to fear G-d who created you, and you will protect yourself from sinning and therefore be happy with whatever happens to you. Also, when you act humbly and modestly before everyone, and are afraid of G-d and of sin, the radiance of His glory and the spirit of the Shechina will rest upon you, and you will live the life of the World-to-Come!

WHOEVER IS PROUD REBELS AGAINST G-D

And now, my son, understand and observe that whoever feels that he is greater than others is rebelling against the Kingship of G-d, because he is adorning himself with His garments, as it is written (Tehillim 93:1), "The Lord reigns, He wears clothes of pride." Why should one feel proud? Is it because of wealth? G-d makes one poor or rich (I Shmuel 2:7). Is it because of

honor? It belongs to G-d, as we read (I Divrei Hayamim 29:12), "Wealth and honor come from You." So how could one adorn himself with G-d's honor? And one who is proud of his wisdom surely knows that G-d "takes away the speech of assured men and reasoning from the sages" (Iyov 12:20)! So we see that everyone is the same before G-d, since with His anger He lowers the proud and when He wishes He raises the low. So lower yourself and G-d will lift you up!

SPEAK GENTLY AND CONSIDER ALL MEN SUPERIOR TO YOU

Therefore, I will now explain to you how to always behave humbly. Speak gently at all times, with your head bowed, your eyes looking down to the ground and your heart focusing on G-d. Don't look at the face of the person to whom you are speaking. Consider everyone as greater than yourself. If he is wise or rich, you should give him respect. If he is poor and you are richer -- or wiser -- than he, consider yourself to be more guilty than he, and that he is more worthy than you, since when he sins it is through error, while yours is deliberate and you should know better!

REGARD YOURSELF AS ALWAYS STANDING BEFORE G-D

In all your actions, words and thoughts, always regard yourself as standing before G-d, with His Shechinah above you, for His glory fills the whole world. Speak with fear and awe, as a slave standing before his master. Act with restraint in front of everyone. When someone calls you, don't answer loudly, but gently and softly, as one who stands before his master.

BE CAREFUL TO ALWAYS STUDY TORAH

Be careful to always study Torah diligently, so you will be able to fulfill its commands. When you arise from your learning reflect carefully on what you have studied, in order to see what in it that you can be put into practice. Examine your actions every morning and evening, and in this way every one of your days will be spent in teshuvah (repentance).

CONCENTRATE ON YOUR PRAYERS

Concentrate on your prayers by removing all worldly concerns from your heart. Prepare your heart before G-d, purify your thoughts and think about what you are going to say. If you follow this in all your daily actions, you will not come to sin. This way everything you do will be proper, and your prayer will be pure, clear, clean, devout and acceptable to G-d, as it is written (Tehillim 10:17), "When their heart is directed to You, listen to them."

READ THIS LETTER ONCE A WEEK AND G-D WILL ANSWER YOU IN ALL YOU ASK

Read this letter at least once a week and neglect none of it. Fulfill it, and in so doing, walk with it forever in the ways of G-d, may He be blessed, so that you will succeed in all your ways. Thus

you will succeed and merit the World to Come which lies hidden away for the righteous. Every day that you shall read this letter, heaven shall answer your heart's desires. Amen, Sela!

IGGERET HAGRA - THE VILNA GAON'S LETTER

(Sent by the Gaon, R. Eliyahu, of blessed memory while traveling to Israel, to instruct his family in the ways of G-d).

And it is known that all this world, it is all emptiness, that every amusement is worthless, and woe to those who pursue vanity, which is worthless. And don't envy wealth, for "riches are kept by their owner to his misfortune" (Kohelet 5:12)

REFRAIN FROM BECOMING SAD

I came to ask you to refrain from becoming sad, as you promised me truthfully, and not to worry. Men leave their wives in order to travel and wander destitute for years to make money. But I, thank G-d, am traveling to the Holy Land - which everyone longs to see - Israel's Most Beloved (or: Hashem's Most Beloved, all heavenly and earthly beings desire it). And I am traveling in peace, thank G-d. You are also aware that I have left behind my children, for whom my heart yearns, and all my precious books, and I am as a stranger in a foreign land. I have left everything behind.

ALL IN THE WORLD IS VANITY

And it is known that all this world, it is all emptiness, that every amusement is worthless, and woe to those who pursue vanity, which is worthless. And don't envy wealth, for "riches are kept by their owner to his misfortune" (Kohelet 5:12); "As he came out from his mother's womb, naked will he return...exactly as he came he must depart, and what did he gain by toiling for the wind?" (Kohelet. 5: 14, 15); "Even if he should live a thousand years twice over, but find no contentment - do not all go to the same place?" (ibid 6:6); "Even if man lives many years, let him

rejoice in all of them, but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is futility” (ibid 11:8); “And of joy, what does it accomplish?” (ibid 2:2). Tomorrow you will cry for having laughed today.

DO NOT LUST AFTER IMAGINARY HONOR

Do not lust after imaginary honor, which is similar to vanity, and time is a traitor and like scales, lifts the light and lowers the heavy. The world is like one who drinks salty water: he thinks it quenches his thirst, but it only makes him thirstier (Bechar ha Pnanim). No one leaves the world with even half his cravings fulfilled (Kohelet Rabbah 1). "What profit does one have from all his labor under the sun" (Kohelet 1:3)? Remember our predecessors, all of whose love, desire and joy have disappeared (see Kohelet 9:6), but who are being judged severely for them. And of what benefit is gratification to man - whose end is dust, maggots and worms, as he is bound to die - when all his enjoyments turn to bitterness in the grave? And what is this world, whose days are full of anger and pain, and its nights where sleeping brings no rest? Neither is death a mikveh.

MAN IS JUDGED FOR EVERYTHING HE SAYS

Man will be judged for everything he says; even the slightest expression is not overlooked. Therefore I warn you to train yourself to sit alone as much as possible, because the sin of the tongue is the most severe, as our Sages said (Tosefta Pe'ah 1): “These are the things...and lashon hara is equivalent to them all.” And what need is there for me to elaborate on this most serious sin, the worst of all. “All man's labor is for his mouth” (Koheles 6:7). Our Sages said that all man's mitzvot and all his Torah are not enough to counterbalance what comes out of his mouth.

A MAN SHOULD STRIVE TO BECOME AS A MUTE

“What should be a man's occupation in this world? He should become as a mute person” (Chullin 89a). One must seal his lips as tight as two millstones. And all the punishment of Kaf ha Kela (the hollow of the sling, a punishment for the soul after death) comes from the breath of idle words and for every idle word one must be thrown from one end of the world to the other. Now this is true concerning mere permitted speech.

ONE CAN'T IMAGINE THE SUFFERING AND THE PUNISHMENT FOR EACH PIECE OF LASHON HA RA

Where forbidden speech is concerned - e.g. lashon hara, mocking, swearing, vowing, fighting and cursing - especially in the synagogue, and on Shabbat and Yom Tov - for every utterance of

this type one descends to the sheol, very very low, and it is impossible to imagine the pain and suffering one will receive for one utterance (Zohar)! No word is lost; everything is recorded. Winged beings attach themselves to everyone, recording all they say. “For a bird of the skies may carry the sound, and some winged creature may tell the matter” (Kohelet 10:20). “Let not your mouth cause your flesh to sin, and do not tell the messenger that it was an error. Why should G-d be angered by your speech and destroy the work of your hands?” (ibid 5:5).

AVOID GOING OUT TO THE MARKET PLACES

Purchase all your needs through a messenger, even if this costs two or three times as much. “Is there a limit to what G-d can provide?” (Bamidbar 11:23). G-d feeds all creatures, from the greatest to the smallest (Avodah Zara 3), and provides to each one all his needs.

HONOR THE SHABBAT

And on Shabbat and Yom Tov do not speak at all about things that are not urgent, and be brief even with what is important, for the Shabbat is very holy and our Sages barely permitted the exchange of greetings (Yerushalmi Shabbat, and Tosfot Shabbat 113). See how strict they were concerning even a single expression! Keep giving great honor to the Shabbat as when I was there. Do not cut back [on your Shabbat] expenses, since “Man's entire sustenance [for the year is fixed for him from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur,] except [the expenditure for Sabbaths and Festivals,] etc.” (Beitzah 16a). I also implore and plead with you to guide your daughters very carefully to refrain from cursing, swearing, lying and fighting. Rather, everything should be done peacefully, with love, affection and gentleness.

TEACH GOOD CONDUCT TO YOUR CHILDREN THROUGH THE STUDY OF MUSSAR

I have left behind several books on Mussar (proper conduct). See that [the children] read them constantly, especially on the Holy Shabbat, when Mussar is the only thing they should occupy themselves with. Always instruct them according to Mussar books.

HIT THEM IF IT IS NECESSARY

Don't hold back from hitting them when they curse, swear or lie. Don't have mercy for them, because parents will be punished severely for the corruption of their children, G-d forbid. And even if one constantly teaches them Mussar, but they do not follow it, Woe to the sorrow and shame in the World to Come. As it is written (Vayikra 21:9), "She defiles her father"- [in such a case] the wicked son of a righteous man is called "the wicked son of a wicked man" (Sanhedrin 52a).

TEACH THE CHILDREN TO BE CAREFUL WITH THE BLESSINGS AND THE PRAYERS

Similarly in other matters, lashon hara, gossip, their eating and drinking as well should always be preceded and followed by the appropriate blessings. They must be careful to say the blessings, Birkat Hamazon and Kriat Shema with proper kavanah (intent). Most importantly, they must not wander outside the home and must obey and respect you and my mother and all their elders. They also need to observe all that is written in the Mussar books.

PROCURE GOOD TUTORS FOR THE CHILDREN

Raise your own children as well correctly and sensitively, and pay their tutor well, for "Man's entire sustenance for the year is fixed for him from Rosh Hashanah...except TiShReY (Talmud, Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh and Yom Tov - Beitzah 16a). I have also left books for them. For Hashem's sake, guide them well and gently. Take care of their health and make sure that they always have enough to eat.

GENTLY TEACH THEM THE TORAH

First have them learn the entire Chumash, seeing to it that they know it almost by heart. The learning must be done without undue pressure, rather gently, because the studies are only fixed in man when there is tranquility. Give them coins, etc., as a reward.

CONCENTRATE ON THE SERVICE OF G-D FOR ALL ELSE IS TRIVIAL

Always focus your attention on these matters and not on others, because all else is trivial. For man can salvage nothing from his labor to take with him, except two white garments (shrouds). Also (Tehillim 49), "A man will not redeem his brother...Fear not when a man grows rich...For

when he dies, he shall carry nothing away....” Don't say, “I will leave a portion for my children” - who will tell you in the grave? The children of man are like grasses of the field, some blossom and some fade (Eruvin 54a). Each one is born under his constellation and is guided by the Highest G-d Blessed be He, they are glad when he dies and he goes into the sheol. [At his passing] Resh Lakish left his children a kav of saffron, and he applied to himself the verse (Tehillim 49:11), “...and they leave their wealth to others” (Gittin 47a).

WOE TO THOSE WHO PLAN ON LEAVING THEIR WEALTH TO THEIR CHILDREN

Woe to all who plan on leaving [wealth] to their children! The only reward from sons and daughters is through their Torah and good deeds. Their sustenance is fixed for them. It is also known that women earn merit by making their children learn Torah, etc. (Berachos 17a). And our Sages said (Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Rabba 9): “The only proper wife is one that does her husband's will.” I am indeed writing you words of the Living G-d. Therefore, I am certain that you will follow all that I have written. Nevertheless, I wish to strongly warn you not to deviate from anything that I have written.

AVOID IDLE TALK ON SHABBAT

Read this letter every week, especially on Shabbat before and during the meal, in order to prevent idle talk and, even worse, lashon hara and the like, G-d forbid. I reiterate my request that you guide your sons and daughters with words of kindness and Mussar that will find a fixed place in their heart. This is true especially if we merit to arrive in Eretz Yisrael, because there one must very much follow Hashem's ways. Therefore, train them often, since one must work hard on one's speech and character traits, and only through perseverance can we control ourselves (Shaare Teshuvah). All beginnings are hard (Mechilta Yitro). But afterwards, one is worthy of praise (Proverbs 20:14). For the wicked person knows that he is taking the wrong path, but it is hard for him to change.

CONTROL OF THE MOUTH, THE MAIN TASK

But this is man's main task, not to go after his desires, but (Psalms 32:9) “To restrain himself with a bit and bridle when he is being groomed.” **Man must deprive himself until he dies, not by fasting or asceticism, but by controlling his mouth and desires. This is teshuvah. And**

this is the whole reward of the World-to-Come, as it is written (Proverbs 6:23): “For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah is a light” - but “the way to life is the rebuke that disciplines.” And that is worth more than any amount of fasting and self-affliction! For every second that man controls his tongue, he merits some of the “hidden [by G-d for the righteous] light,” something which no angel or [other] creature can imagine (Midrash). And it is stated (Psalms 34:13,14): “Who is the man who desires life, and loves days that he may see good? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceitfully.”

CONTROLLING ONE’S MOUTH ATONES FOR SINS

This will atone for any sin and save one from the lower Sheol, as we find (Proverbs 21:23): “He who guards his mouth [from permitted eating and drinking] and tongue [from idle words] guards himself from trouble.” Also (Proverbs 18:21): “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Woe to one who gives away his life for one word! Then what advantage is there to one who has a tongue (see Kohelet 10:11)? And, “Everything has a cure except, etc.”

DON’T PRAISE ANYONE

It is most important to refrain from speaking words of praise about anyone. How much more so does this apply to speaking ill of anyone! Why must one speak about others? “The mouth that speaks strangely is a deep pit; he angers G-d and falls into it” (Proverbs 22:14).

AVOID JEALOUSY AND LASHON HARA AT ALL COSTS EVEN IF IT MEANS NOT GOING TO SYNAGOGUE

Concerning solitude, the main thing is not to go outside of home. Even your visit to the synagogue should be very short. In fact, it is better to pray at home, for it is impossible to be spared from jealousy or from hearing idle talk or lashon hara in the synagogue. And one receives punishment for this, as we find (Shabbat 33a), “Also one who hears and is silent...” This is even the more so on Shabbat and Yom Tov when they gather to talk - It is then better that you don't pray at all. Refrain also from going to the cemetery (especially women), as all impurities stick to women there and all sorrow and sin comes from this. It is also advisable that your daughter not go to the synagogue, because she'll see beautiful clothes there, become jealous and talk about it at home. This will lead to lashon hara, etc. She should rather cling to Mussar and not become jealous of anything in this world, where everything is vanity and illusions, appearing and

disappearing overnight (Yonah 4:10). “Though he grows as high as the sky, his head reaching the clouds, he perishes forever...” (Iyov 20:6,7). “For property does not last forever, or a crown for all generations” (Mishlei 27:24). And even while it exists it is worthless, loathsome and disdained by any sensible person. Woe to him who is impressed by it.

ENVY ONLY THOSE WHO FEAR HASHEM

Envy only the fear of Hashem (ibid 23:17). She should not say, "How can I earn a share in the World-to-Come? - I can't do it!" For we have learned (Berachos 17a): “One may do much or one may do little, provided he directs his heart to heaven.”

A FIFTH TO CHARITY

For the sake of Hashem, give a fifth of all earnings to charity. Do not give less, as I have already warned you, because that causes the transgression of several positive and negative mitzvot every minute! It also implies a rejection of the Holy Torah, G-d forbid.

TO MERIT THE WORLD TO COME

But the main way to merit Olam Haba is by guarding one's tongue. That is worth more than all the Torah and good deeds. This is the meaning of (Isaiah 32:9) “tranquil women” (Berachos 17a), because the mouth is the holiest of the holy.

READ MUSSAR THAT WILL LEAD TO PRACTICE

Among my books is a copy of the book of Proverbs with Yiddish translation. For the sake of Hashem, have them read it daily. It is better than any Mussar book. They should also read Kohelet a lot, because it points out the vanity of this world, and other books as well. But G-d forbid that reading should be the objective! Reading Mussar alone does not necessarily move one to act differently. Going out into the world without a good understanding of it defeats the whole purpose. It is like one who sows without having plowed; the wind and birds will carry the seeds away, because they aren't closed off and protected. So is he who merely reads Mussar like him who plants without a fence; pigs will eat and trample on everything. Some plant on stone. This is comparable to a heart of stone which cannot be penetrated unless it is struck until it breaks open.

That's why I wrote you to hit our children if they don't obey you. "Train a lad in the way he ought to go" (Proverbs 22:6). This is an important principle of education.

TEACH CHILDREN MUSSAR WHILE THEY ARE YOUNG

I also wish to appeal to my son-in-law to adhere to all the above. Read to the children as I have stated and learn for the sake of Heaven. Become well versed in it for Hashem's sake. Don't pay attention to those who say that it is unnecessary for the child, G-d forbid. To the contrary, "Train a lad, etc." It is easier to remove the skin of a nut before it hardens into a shell.

THROUGH THE STUDY OF TORAH FOR ITS OWN SAKE ONE MERITS EVERYTHING

Most importantly, it is through such study that one merits everything, as our Sages stated (Pirkei Avot 6:1): "Rabbi Meir said: Whoever studies Torah for its own sake merits many things; furthermore, the whole world is worthwhile for his sake alone". You should study Tractate Avot, especially Avot D'Rabbi Natan, and Tractate Derech Eretz, since Derech Eretz (good manners) are more important than Torah study. Honor both your mother-in-law and your children's great grandmother. Also always treat everyone with politeness and respect.

IT IS A GRAVE SIN TO CAUSE PAIN TO WIDOWS

My Dear Mother, I know that you don't need my advice, because you are very modest. Nevertheless, I wish someone would read this letter to you, for it consists of words of the Living G-d. I beg of you not to grieve over me, as you promised me, and G-d willing, if I merit to arrive at the gate of heaven in the holy city of Jerusalem, I will pray for you as I promised. And if we deserve it, we shall all be reunited, please G-d. I also ask my wife to honor my mother, as the Torah dictates, especially since she is a widow to whom it is a grave sin to cause even the slightest pain.

THE MAIN THING IS TO BRING JOY TO MAN

I also ask you, Mother, to please cause peace to reign between you, and that you should strive to bring happiness to one another. This is a great mitzvah incumbent upon everyone, as we find (Reishis Chochmah): "When man is judged, he will be asked, "Did you make your fellow a

king over you?” We see that one must gladly enhance his friend's honor. In fact, the main goal of the Torah is to bring joy to man.

MAKE PEACE FOR HASHEM'S SAKE

Even if one of you should happen to act improperly, excuse each other and live in peace for Hashem's name. I also ask of you, Mother, to supervise and guide my children with gentle words, so that they will accept them. I instruct my sons and daughters to honor her, and not to fight among themselves at all, but to settle everything peacefully. May the Master of Peace grant you, my sons, daughters, sons-in-law, brother and all Israel life and peace. Your loving Eliyahu the son of R. Shlomo Zalman ztz'l