

*Although I debated for a long time whether to publish such a type of letter, I decided to do so due to the extremely positive feed-back I've gotten from many individuals who had received it privately. The information had immensely inspired them and they had greatly benefited from reading it.*

*[Also see "Mishnat Rabbi Aron" vol. 3, pg 157 where Rabbi Aron Kotler, of blessed memory, points out the importance of discussing this topic and that notwithstanding the delicate nature of the topic one shouldn't refrain from bringing it up.]*

Dear.....,

You have asked me to explain the terrifying things our Sages have written in the (Babylonian) Talmud (tractate Nida, pg. 13a & b) regarding the seriousness of the sin of "ejaculating in vain"<sup>1</sup>. The "Shulchan Aruch"<sup>2</sup> ("Even HaEzer"<sup>3</sup>, Ch. 23) also writes extremely sharply concerning the seriousness of this sin. So you wanted me to explain why this sin is so grave.

You also wished to understand why our Sages have defined this sin as being tantamount to murder as you found it difficult to see the comparison.

Firstly I must say that it is clear from your phrasing that your intentions are pure and that you don't mean to question the words of our Sages. It makes no difference whether you will end up understanding or not; either way, you will continue to believe and observe their words. Rather, as is indeed proper according to the Torah-outlook, you wish to better understand, hoping that

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jewish law any form of secreting ejaculate (male cells discharged during relations), whether intentional or not, except for during intercourse, is a grave sin. One is therefore obligated to abstain from anything that might trigger such event, including pictures and thoughts which might be recalled during sleep, causing unintentional ejaculation in vain.

<sup>2</sup> Jewish code authored by Rabbi Yosef Caro of blessed memory

<sup>3</sup> The section of the "Shulchan Aruch" (out of 4) dealing with marital matters

this will inspire you to take greater care concerning this issue. I will, please Go-d, explain the words of our Sages clearly, in answer to your question, but I need to first establish that the whole following explanation is only a small part of the full picture. There are many more reasons and explanations which cannot be addressed here.

The explanation brought in Kabala<sup>4</sup> is written in the “Sha’ar HaKavonot” in the 7<sup>th</sup> essay about “Kri’at Shema SheAl HaMitta”<sup>5</sup> (standard edition, pg. 56, column 2). This book contains the teachings of the “Ar”i Za”l”<sup>6</sup> as recorded by his preeminent disciple Rabbi Chaim Vital, of blessed memory. I will quote from there, adapting slightly for clarification.

Go-d created the universe in a way that any action which a person takes on earth elicits a reaction in the upper (spiritual) spheres [as is clearly stated by our Sages in several places and as has been elaborated on in the “Nefesh HaChaim”<sup>7</sup>, essay 1 in the first few chapters]

Rabbi Chaim Vital explains that the spiritual reaction to ejaculating, amongst others, is that a soul is withdrawn from the “soul-bank”<sup>8</sup>. Just like if the ejaculation was done in the proper way this released soul enters the newly created body to produce a live person, so too when it is done through sin the withdrawn soul seeks to fuse with some type of body. However, rather than fusing into a human, it is now handed over to the evil forces and is infused with a destructive spiritual force which becomes its “body”. This is the reason why it is tantamount to murder, as the tragedy the soul goes through, by becoming part of a destructive force, is as disastrous as murder. Furthermore its essence is also

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<sup>4</sup> Jewish mystics

<sup>5</sup> The recitation of the passage of “Shema Israel” (Hear, oh Israel) [Deuteronomy chap. 6, verses 4 through 9] which is customarily recited before lying down to sleep

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Yitzchak Lurye Ashkenazi of blessed memory, one of the greatest masters in Kabala. The Hebrew acronym Ar”i Za”l stands for Adonenu (our master) Rabbi Yitzchak Zichrono LiVracha (of blessed memory)

<sup>7</sup> Kabbalistic-ethical work by Rabbi Chaim Volozhin of blessed memory

<sup>8</sup> “Otzar HaNeshamot”. All the souls of any future individual are already in existence and are stored in this “soul-bank” in anticipation of being sent over to this world.

tantamount to murder, as the soul is removed from the place it used to reside and placed in an environment which is so bitterly harsh for that soul that it cannot be described with words.<sup>9</sup>

You should further know that the holy books write that any success a person encounters in this earthly world, whether spiritual or physical, is dependent on the spiritual “influences of plenty” which are endowed upon him from above. Every person has at any time a certain amount of such influences in his “account”, depending on various criteria. Now, if a person sins and ejaculates in vain and doesn’t repent, then often the evil forces created by the soul which he released (as mentioned above) are given permission to grab away from those spiritual influences and thus the person lacks success in his endeavors. It is self explanatory that much anguish can be caused by such a lack, may Go-d save us.

Also, see in the Zohar<sup>10</sup> (Parshat VeYeshev, pg 188a & Parshat VaYechi, pg 219b<sup>11</sup>) concerning the severity of this sin. See also “Bet Yosef”<sup>12</sup> (“Even HaEzer”, Ch. 23, pg 45b of the old edition, pg 221 of the new edition and “Even HaEzer”, Ch. 25 in the “BedeK HaBayit”<sup>13</sup>, pg 46a of the old edition, pg 224 of the new edition).

Since we are now in the Shovavim<sup>14</sup>-period which, according to the tradition of our holy Rabbis, requires mainly exercising extra caution in two aspects: the above issue and the prohibition of Nida<sup>15</sup>; it would be fitting to also mention some words regarding

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<sup>9</sup> End of quotation of the “Sha’ar HaKavonot” adapted for explanation.

<sup>10</sup> Kabalistic writings by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai

<sup>11</sup> Also quoted in the Tur (new edition, ibid, pg 221, footnote 6)

<sup>12</sup> Commentary from Rabbi Yosef Caro (author of Shulchan Aruch) on the Tur (printed in the margin of the standard Tur)

<sup>13</sup> Yosef Caro’s additions to his own “Bet Yosef”

<sup>14</sup> A seven-week-period during the winter stretching from the beginning of the week we read Parshat Shemot till the end of the week we read Parshat Mishpatim. The word “Shovavim” which alludes to the verse “Shouvou Banim Shovavim” (Return, O backsliding children) [Jeremy 3, 14 & 22], calling upon people to repent, is (in Hebrew) an acronym of “**S**hemot”, “**Va**Ero”, “**B**o”, “**Be**Shalach”, “**Y**itro” and “**M**ishpatim”, which are the seven portions read on the Shabbatot of those 7 weeks.

<sup>15</sup> The Status of a woman from the day she menstruates till she goes through a purification process, during which time she is prohibited from having relations. The prohibition applies equally to the man she is having relations with.

the latter. One must know that the prohibition of Nida applies to single and married alike and that all unmarried girls are considered Nidot<sup>16</sup>.

The Chafetz Chaim<sup>17</sup> in his essay concerning the prohibition of Nida wrote the following: *“As is known to all, the prohibition of Nida isn’t just merely a negative commandment as the prohibition of eating pork and the like; rather it is a prohibition which entails Karet<sup>18</sup> for both him and her. They may, Go-d forbid, not live out their projected days. Even if their merits are very great in which case HaShem may grant them a longer life in order to give them more chance to repent, however, if they do not repent then their soul, in the world to come, will be uprooted from amongst the “living” which is akin to eternal death for the soul. Since HaShem’s presence fills the entire universe the verse “This soul will surely be uprooted from before Me” (Leviticus 22, 3) indicates that no room at all will remain for the soul that carries such a sin, not having repented. This is a most terrible verdict which is much worse than the death-penalty which is merely the termination of the temporary physical life, whilst Karet is the extinction of the soul’s eternal life. And even that is only after that they will receive their terrible punishment in Gehinom<sup>19</sup>. For they will first descend to the lowest purgatory and will be convicted to bitter misery for each time they have transgressed.”* He then continues to elaborate that this prohibition is dangerous for the children of the sinners. See there for additional harsh consequences.

The Chafetz Chaim (ibid.) also wrote: *“People should further know, that which is known to any Torah scholar, that the prohibition of Nida is considered adultery where the rule applies that one must let himself be killed, rather than to*

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<sup>16</sup> Plural of Nida. Unmarried girls are considered Nidot since we assume that she has menstruated at some time, and since they customarily don’t go through the required purification process, thus effectively retaining their Nida status.

<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen Kogan from Radin of blessed memory. He is called “Chafetz Chaim” after one of his famous works on the prohibition of slander.

<sup>18</sup> As is explained further in the text, this is a punishment which consists of the uprooting of the soul for eternity. Usually the person will not survive his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday.

<sup>19</sup> hell

*transgress<sup>20</sup>. This means that the prohibition is so great that every Jew is obligated to sacrifice his soul and be killed at the stake in order to avoid transgressing it.”* The Chofetz Chaim then continues to explain a fundamental idea. *“When the Torah commanded that one must rather be killed than to transgress the prohibition of Nida, this is far more than just a commandment to refrain from it even at the cost of your life. Rather, in addition to the actual commandment, this is also a solid piece of Heavenly advice. Since the damage caused by transgressing this prohibition is so great, it actually pays to die rather than to transgress”*

Let’s explain this as follows: If two people were to be involved in a car crash and one would be killed instantly whilst the second one would come out without scratch, if the latter would then stumble with a Nida, he would be the one with greater “injuries”, and he has lost out far more than the one who was killed.

It is imperative to make mention of the following which many people are mistakenly unaware of. Though the verdict of Karet only applies to one who actually has relations with a Nida, nevertheless, the obligation to rather be killed than transgress applies equally to any affectionate physical contact as the Chafetz Chaim points out in “Geder Olam”, essay “Chatimat HaSefer”.

Here too we can use the above example and say that if one person were to be killed in a car crash whilst another one were to be spared only to afterwards come into affectionate physical contact with a Nida; the latter is the one who was “injured” the most as the negative effect this physical contact has on one’s soul is far greater than that of death.

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<sup>20</sup> See “Torat HaYichoud”, Ch 1, comment 2 (from pg 10 through pg 13) who proofs this at length and quotes many of the earlier and later Poskim<sup>24</sup> who say so.

Also know that it is obvious and clear that the prohibition of Nida doesn't only apply during menstruation, but also afterwards. As long as she didn't immerse in a Mikva<sup>21</sup>, as required after menstruation, at the time specified in Halacha<sup>22</sup>, all the above mentioned stringencies of Nida apply. Any intelligent person should pay attention to all this and choose to avoid the path of death and walk in the path of life. Therefore, anyone who stumbled over any of the above mentioned issues should quickly repent and then he will be forgiven.

Since we have explained the prohibition of ejaculating in vain at length above, it makes sense to answer the commonly asked question: "How does one repent for this sin?" It is known that the holy Zohar writes, and is quoted in the Poskim, that it is very difficult to repent for this sin, but we must mention that the "Reishit Chochma"<sup>23</sup> in the "sanctity-essay" writes that one should, Go-d forbid, not think that it is impossible to repent for this sin. It is definitely possible to repent, though, for various reasons, it requires more investment.

It is known that the main guidelines for repentance are mentioned in the Poskim<sup>24</sup> as being: regret, verbal confession and caution for the future. It is important to know that in the "Sha'arei Teshuve" Rabeinu Yona writes that though any repentance earns atonement, nevertheless there are many levels of atonement and the level of atonement will be parallel to the level of repentance. Meaning, one can regret a little, feeling slightly uncomfortable; or one can really regret, feeling extremely bad. Obviously, the greater the regret and the bad feelings, the greater the forgiveness will be. Likewise, one can confess, plainly verbalizing his sins; or one can make a brokenhearted confession. One can make a basic decision for future caution; or one can firmly promise to refrain from sin in the future. Either way one will always attain forgiveness, but its

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<sup>21</sup> Ritual bath

<sup>22</sup> Jewish code

<sup>23</sup> Kabbalistic-ethical work by Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas

<sup>24</sup> Arbiters of Jewish law

level will depend on the level of the repenting. It is however clearly stated by Rabbi Nissim Ga'on that even if after repenting one stumbles again, nevertheless the repenting remains valid. [Even though the Ramba"m<sup>25</sup> in the laws of Teshuve<sup>26</sup> wrote: *"The One Who knows the hidden [thoughts of a person] should testify that he is sincere and won't return to this sin"* nevertheless, (without elaborating in order to avoid going to much off topic) the accepted explanation is like the above Rabeinu Yona that really every Teshuve earns atonement, but its level is dependant on the level of the Teshuve. This can be reconciled with the words of the Ramba"m, but this is a topic for a different time.]

We have further a tradition from our Rabbis, based on many proofs, that the greatest way to rectify this sin is by strengthening ones commitment to learning Torah. The reasons for this are manifold. Firstly, as mentioned above, one of the guidelines for Teshuve is caution for the future. Studying Torah is one good way to protect a person from this sin as, on a practical level, by being immersed in connecting to HaShem he distances himself from the bad. Furthermore, on a spiritual level, the tremendous spiritual light which the Torah-study brings to the Neshome is also protective. A further reason why Torah-study atones for this sin is because one of the reasons for the severity of this sin is the fact that people who stumble usually have their entire head and thoughts buried in immorality. Hence immersing in Torah, which is also done with one's entire head and thoughts, has the power to purify one's thoughts from these faults. Thirdly, because the light of the Torah has great power to cleanse the soul from flaws brought about by the grave sins caused by this sin. Furthermore, the Torah has the great power to undo the damage caused by this sin in the upper spiritual spheres.

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<sup>25</sup> Maimonides. The Hebrew acronym Ramba"m stands for **R**abbi **M**oshe **B**en **M**aymon.

<sup>26</sup> repenting

Another great way to rectify this sin, as mentioned in the above “Sha’ar HaKavanot”, is “Kri’at Shema SheAl HaMitta” as it has the power to kill the evil forces brought about by this sin and is thereby freeing the souls which were trapped in them which then merit returning to the “soul-bank”. The more concentration and zest he invests in its recitation, the more he can achieve in fixing the blemish caused by his sin.

Another great way to rectify this sin is to endeavor to learn Torah, pray and do Mitzvot as well as all service of HaShem from the depth of one’s soul, energetically and if possible with zest. The reason for this is that there are many layers in the human soul. Not every action, speech or thought of a person is the same. Some of them come from a deeper layer of the soul whilst others are more superficial. Now, it is very common that this sin or its causes are done at the deepest levels of the soul. Therefore, if one’s service of Hashem comes from those deeper levels it is very, very helpful in rectifying the blemish. And if one merits that the actual Teshuve for this very sin is done on a very deep level and with zest, it definitely has a very great impact.

Another major way to rectify this sin is taking care to “guard one’s eyes”. Besides for being a very important thing on its own it also has a major impact on this sin. I enumerated this rectification last, as “guarding one’s eyes” is the most fundamental basis to guarding one’s moral sanctity. Firstly, because the actual “guarding” of one’s eyes adds great sanctity to one’s soul and secondly, as it protects the person from many “obstacles” to morality.

“Guarding one’s eyes” is done on two levels. Firstly, one should make every possible effort to avoid being in places which are not conducive to “guarding the eyes” and secondly, if, Go-d forbid, it occurred that one happened to be in such a place, he should extend every effort to actually actively “guard” his eyes.

Likewise one should make every possible effort to avoid any contact with women and girls.

Now, since we've mentioned the great impact of Torah-study, it is fitting to elaborate on it. As this is the main "pillar" supporting the Jewish nation we will, please Go-d, point out some of what is mentioned by our Sages and the commentators on this subject.

The Chafetz Chaim wrote in "Shem Olam" (essay "Hachzakat HaTora", Ch 9): *"It is known that the actual learning of Torah is a Biblical positive commandment as it is written: "And you shall learn them (the words of the Torah) and be careful to do them." [Deuteronomy 5, 1]. The main purpose for creating men was only in order that he should toil in Torah-study, as the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin, pg 99) writes: "A person is created to toil as it is written: "The person is born to toil." [Job 5, 7] and that means to toil in Torah-study as it is written: "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth." [Joshua 1, 8]" etc."*

In "Shnot Eliyahu"<sup>27</sup> (Tractate Pe'a, Ch 1, Mishna 1) the Gr"a<sup>28</sup> writes: *"A person should see the Torah as very, very precious as every single word is a Mitzve in its own merit etc. Therefore, if one learns one page, for instance, he fulfills a few hundred Mitzvot."* His words are quoted by the Chafetz Chaim in "Shem Olam" (essay "supporting Torah", Ch 9).

Accordingly the Chafetz Chaim (ibid.) further wrote that with every single word of Torah-study an angel, intervening on his behalf, is "born".

See also the "Nefesh HaChaim" (Gate 4, Ch 11 through 34) who writes in great length about the great levels a person merits attaining by Torah-study. He mentions with lofty words how one is able to set right many upper (spiritual) spheres and how

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<sup>27</sup> Commentary on the Mishna, printed in some editions of the Mishna at the back.

<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Eliyahu from Vilnius a.k.a. the Vilne Gaon (genius). The Hebrew acronym Gr"a stands for HaGaon Rabbi Eliyahu.

one can channel the “lights from above” to his Neshama<sup>29</sup>. One can merit bringing blessings and salvation to the entire Jewish nation, and one merits that a very holy addition is added to his Neshama which very greatly upgrades its power and spiritual abilities and a tremendous heavenly assistance accompanies him in all his endeavors.

One should know that by carefully avoiding the prohibitions of ejaculating in vain and Nida he merits to channel very great “lights from above” to his soul and he brings great spiritual “influences of plenty” to the whole Jewish nation’s endeavors in all dimensions.

Our Sages write that it was in the merit of Joseph, who withstood the test and didn’t commit adultery<sup>30</sup>, that the Sea of Reeds was split. So you see that for the merit of Joseph as an individual, the whole nation was saved from death. I do not want to go in the a lengthy explanation of this idea, but the main point is that you can see the great merit of one single person who is careful in these matters and how much it does for the entire Jewish nation.

Likewise, the Talmud (tractate Yoma, pg 47a) relates how Kimchis merited that all her seven sons served as high-priests because of the great care she took concerning modesty. [The Jerusalem Talmud (tractate Yoma, Ch 1 Halacha 5, pg 5a and tractate Megila, Ch 1, Halacha 10 and tractate Horayot, Ch 3, Halacha 2) expands on this story. This is not the place to clarify how to explain the Babylonian Talmud in order to reconcile it with the Jerusalem Talmud] As you know, the high-priesthood is something which is beneficial to the entire Jewish nation. So here too we see that the care taken by individuals in these matters is able to bring great benefit to the whole of Israel.

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<sup>29</sup> Soul

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 39

Now, the truth is that with any Torah-study or Torah observance one brings great benefit to the whole Jewish nation as is clearly stated by our Sages and as the “Nefesh HaChaim” elaborates, nevertheless, it appears from the above that in matters of sanctity and modesty there is a special force which especially empowers every individual to bring very great benefit to the Jewish people. The Kabbalistic explanation for this is expansive and has been explained elsewhere in this publication in the first chapter.

The “Sha’ar Ma’amore Rashb”i<sup>31</sup> (pg 20, column 2 of old edition) writes: *“When any individual, according to his level, takes any amount of care in matters of sanctity and modesty, this will inevitably lead to bringing a great and awesome spiritual “influence of plenty” to the whole Jewish nation.”* He further adds: *“It is therefore obvious that the individual himself, who was careful in these matters, receives the lion’s share of those influences and will merit incredible levels of plenty.”* Obviously, the more one takes care, the greater the “influences of plenty”. Especially when one needs to make an effort in order to be careful as those influences grow accordingly.

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<sup>31</sup> Kabbalistic work by Rabbi Chaim Vital, of blessed memory, based on the teachings of the Ar”i Za”l. The Hebrew acronym Rashb”i stands for **R**abbi **S**himon **B**ar **Y**ochai, of blessed memory, author of the Zohar.