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# Elul



## A Nightly Ritual

*“At midnight, I arise to thank You for Your righteous edicts”*

*(Tehillim 119:62)*

David Hamelech had a regular practice of awakening at midnight to sing songs of gratitude and praise to Hashem. He used the phrase *at midnight* not *around midnight* or *close to midnight* to indicate that he arose precisely at midnight for this calling. When Hashem noticed his persistence in waking up at this exact hour every single night, He helped him by directing the north wind to blow through the strings of David’s violin, which hung above his head. The soft sounds would gently rouse him from his sleep, enabling him to extol Hashem as he desired (see *Berachot* 3b).

Throughout the generations, there have been righteous individuals who wake up at midnight to recite *Tikkun Chatzot*, a special selection of prayers established to mourn the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. How well I recall my holy father, zy”a, going to bed each night before nine o’clock, in order to have the strength to arise at midnight to pray for the redemption. Similarly, throughout the month of Elul, all Bnei Yisrael gather in their houses of prayer and yeshivot at midnight to recite the *Selichot* prayers.

What is so unique about midnight that David arose specifically then, and Jews throughout history find this hour auspicious for prayer? This is the hour when Hashem sits together with the tzaddikim and teaches them Torah (see *Zohar* I, 92b). The intensity of this study session sways the scales from judgment toward the side of mercy. Jews throughout the world have always found this time propitious for prayer, since the Attribute of Justice is overshadowed by the Attribute of Mercy. From sunset until midnight, *Tehillim* are generally not recited, since the Attribute of Justice governs at this time (see *Sha'ar Hamitzvot, Va'etchanan* 43). However, from midnight, one may recite *Tehillim*, since the Attribute of Mercy holds sway (*Ben Ish Chai, Shanah Rishonah, Pekudei* 7).

As we find ourselves in the days of mercy and forgiveness, let us examine the significance of midnight and internalize its message. Midnight is an auspicious time for prayer, since this is when one's fate can be reversed to his advantage. This knowledge should motivate us to utilize this hour appropriately.

At one of the *hilula* ceremonies in Morocco, we recited *Selichot* at midnight by the grave of Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy" a. The air was charged as everyone enthusiastically cried out the *Selichot*, amidst much weeping and shouting. The voices carried very far. When the Arab neighbors heard the loud screams coming from the direction of the cemetery, they stood by their windows in stunned silence. Even the policemen who were hired to protect us were in a state of shock. This brought to mind the *pasuk*, "And all the nations of the world will see Hashem's Name called upon you, and they will revere you" (*Devarim* 28:10).

We end each year with the prayer, "May the year and its curses end; may the year and its blessings begin." A tzaddik who spent his year in spiritual advancement certainly did not experience an "accursed year." Why, then, do we cite this prayer?

No matter how great a person is, he cannot sit back and analyze the

year retrospectively and say, “Aaah, this was a year well-spent. I did my best, and was recompensed for it.” Nobody should ever think he has reached his goal. One who believes he can climb no further is likely to quickly slide down the spiritual slope.

Rather, one should analyze the previous year with the feeling that whatever resolution he successfully kept is considered captured territory, but he is now on the next field of quest and should seek another area to conquer in his service of Hashem. His new resolution will fill him with added vigor. When one regards the past year complacently, it is considered an “accursed year,” for it fills him with imagined contentment, which can eventually lead to his downfall.

A student of Rabbi Sa’adya Gaon once saw his illustrious teacher rolling in the snow as a form of self-flagellation. The student asked him to explain why he was afflicting himself in this manner when he was known to everyone as a righteous individual. Rabbi Sa’adya Gaon replied with the following tale:

He had once spent the night at an inn. The innkeeper did not know his identity and therefore treated him like an ordinary wayfarer. The next morning, when Rabbi Sa’adya Gaon arrived at the *beit kenesset* for *Shacharit*, the Torah Sages recognized his greatness and accorded him due honor.

When the innkeeper heard that the man who had spent the night at his inn was a Torah giant, he was beside himself with shame. He hurried over to apologize for mistreating him. Had he known who his guest was, he would have shown him greater respect and offered him a much nicer room.

The next day, Rabbi Sa’adya Gaon was again visited by more Torah Sages. The innkeeper once again approached him with apologies. By the following day, all the Torah scholars in the area had heard of Rabbi Sa’adya Gaon’s arrival and came to pay him homage. Once again, the innkeeper came and begged forgiveness for his oversight. Rabbi Sa’adya

Gaon replied, "I forgave you the first time. Why do you keep coming to ask for forgiveness?"

The innkeeper replied, "Every day, I discover that you are far greater than I assumed the day before. Therefore, the apology I made then is not sufficient in comparison to my understanding of your stature today.

"Had I only known how great is the man whom I hosted, I would have gone all out to make his stay as comfortable as possible, offering him every conceivable comfort. Now that I have discovered whom I was hosting, I weep for the days of my ignorance."

"This is precisely my relationship with Hashem," Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon explained. "Every day, I succeed in discovering an additional aspect of *avodat Hashem*. In this manner, Hashem's esteem becomes ever greater in my eyes. Therefore, each evening, exactly at midnight, I afflict myself for not having properly served Hashem yesterday as I do today, after having attained further understanding of His infinite greatness" (based on *Sidduro shel Shabbat II, Drush 3 3:5*).

Every year, one must aspire to correct another aspect of his personality. Resolving to improve brings a person closer to Hashem and puts him on the proper path. When Hashem notices how determined one is to rectify his deeds, never feeling satisfied with what he attained until now, he will be granted *siyata di'Shemaya* to fulfill his life's spiritual dreams. One who truly wishes to grow in Torah and fear of Heaven will do well to utilize the hour of midnight to pray for mercy and personal salvation. This will enable the new year to be ushered in with "its blessings."

David Hamelech never experienced depression. This was because he started his day at midnight. He would arise like a lion. By the time the morning dawned, he had already spent many hours in preparation for the new day. "They (Your kindnesses) are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness" (*Eichah 3:23*). In this manner, David ascended to greater heights each day of his life.

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**In Summary**

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- ◆ David Hamelech wanted to arise each night to thank Hashem for His kindnesses. A north wind was sent to play on his violin and help him awaken in time. He chose midnight because that is the hour when the Attribute of Mercy is in control and, as such, is auspicious for prayer. This is why we have the custom to recite *Selichot* at midnight.
- ◆ Whatever one has achieved the previous year is his personal acquisition. At the outset of the new year, he is enjoined to advance further. He should be filled with regret that his awareness of Hashem's greatness was lacking during the past year, and, as such, did not serve Him as he should have. This is why we begin the new year with the statement, "May the year and its curses end; may the year and its blessings begin."

**No Frills**

*“One should always incite the good inclination to fight against the evil inclination, as it is written: Tremble and sin not. If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him study Torah, as it is written: Commune with your own heart. If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him recite the Shema... If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him remind himself of the day of death, as it is written: And be still, Selah”*

*(Berachot 5a)*

A rabbi in France asked how Torah study might prove ineffective in the battle with the *yetzer hara*, to the extent that one must rely on the

recitation of *Shema*. Moreover, even this can prove ineffectual, rendering the necessity to remember the day of death. This seems to overtly contradict another statement of *Chazal*: “I have created the *yetzer hara*; I have created Torah as its antidote” (*Kiddushin* 30b). Torah protects and shields from all harm (*Sotah* 21a). Why, then, doesn’t the Torah have enough power to help a person ward off his *yetzer hara*? *Kriyat Shema*, which is a section of the Torah, can also prove ineffective in helping a person fight this battle. The only useful weapon against this negative force might be to remember the day of death.

I would like to suggest that Torah study helps a person in his battle against the *yetzer hara* only when he learns with intense toil. However, when one studies Torah without this fervor, it is a lame type of study. It is incapable of imbuing him with the strength to stand up to his *yetzer hara* and fight it tooth and nail. The *Ba’alei Mussar* emphasize the need for self-abnegation in the quest for Torah wisdom. Only when one is prepared to completely sacrifice his desires for the sake of the Torah can he be considered exerting himself in Torah study. However, when his study is superficial, he can hardly be considered plumbing the depths of the Torah. This type of learning does not have the strength to help him ward off the *yetzer hara*.

In a similar vein, many people recite *Kriyat Shema* by rote. They fail to pay attention to the meaning of the words. The above-cited Gemara implies that if one finds it difficult to expend great amounts of energy in his Torah study, the least he can do is focus on the meaning of *Kriyat Shema*. There may be times when even this is too difficult for him. At those times, he should remember the day of death. This should shake him free of his lethargy and spur him with new strength in his constant war with the *yetzer hara*. Those who escort a deceased man on his final journey are sad and fearful over their own future demise. This spurs them to free themselves of sin.

The days of Elul are propitious for rectifying one’s misdeeds. One can do *teshuvah* at any time during the year. However, the month of Elul is

termed “the days of mercy and forgiveness” because during these days Hashem is closer than ever to those who call to Him.

Once, during Elul, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter was about to deliver a *mussar* lecture in a local *beit kenesset*. The moment he said the word “Elul,” he began trembling uncontrollably. His teeth chattered and his face turned white. He tried again, but with the same results. Finally, after the tenth time of saying “Elul,” he fell in a faint. Even his handwriting was wobbly during Elul, since he could not stop his hands from trembling during these awesome days.

What is so awe-inspiring about the word *Elul*? The names *Kislev* or *Tevet* do not evoke such strong reactions. The word *Elul* should arouse dread in the hearts of every G-d-fearing man. Elul is the only month designated for *teshuvah*. Hashem guarantees us that if we “open... an opening the size of a needle-hole,” He will “open... an opening the size of a banquet hall” (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 5:3).

The word אלול (Elul) is an acronym of the phrase “אני לדודי ודודי לי – I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine” (*Shir Hashirim* 6:3) (*Abuderaham*). This *pasuk* imbues us with a sense of dread at the approach of the Yamim Nora’im. Our battle against the *yetzer hara* is a mighty one. What may seem to be insignificant may in fact be a trap to lure one into sin. Let us cite an example. A king is adjured not to “have too many horses for himself so that he will not return the people to Egypt in order to acquire another horse...” (*Devarim* 17:16). Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Shapiro, zt”l, Rosh Yeshivah of Be’er Yaakov, asks why the *pasuk* opens with the plural “horses” and then continues with the singular “horse.” He answers that a king needs only two horses to draw his carriage. If he adds a third, he is already considered transgressing the Torah’s word.

The *yetzer hara* is a wily creature. It approaches a person in an area that seems insignificant. It knows that were it to suggest he commit a serious sin, it would be categorically repulsed. Therefore, it comes slowly but surely, steadily encouraging a person to sin, little by little. By

convincing a king to add only one extra horse to his carriage, the *yetzer hara* has gained a foothold in his heart and has the power to cause him to sin in more severe matters.

Shlomo Hamelech, the wisest of all men, allowed himself to amass money, wives, and horses (See *Melachim I*, 10:11-26; *Sanhedrin* 21b). How could such an exalted man sin so blatantly against Hashem's word? He assumed that his wisdom could override his *yetzer hara* and prevent it from influencing him negatively. Even this wise man, who knew the languages of the animal kingdom, could not withstand the power of the *yetzer hara* and fell into its trap. What can we, simple people, say for ourselves?

After Shlomo Hamelech sinned, the letter ך approached Hashem with bitter tears, "How could Shlomo transgress the prohibition of לא ירבה לו... (he shall not increase), which begins with my letter?" Hashem reassured it, "Many like Shlomo Hamelech will cease to exist, but you will exist forever."

Why did specifically the letter ך, of all the letters included in this injunction, approach Hashem? The ך is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet and as such teaches us something about the method of the *yetzer hara*. It causes a person to sin in small things. After it safely feels it has the person in its control, it causes him to stumble in more serious matters.

Rav Shach, zt"l, decried the great malady of our generation – the lack of *yirat Shamayim* as a result of too many luxuries. At first glance, having a plethora of materialism might seem as marginal and insignificant as the little letter ך. However, small grains of sand can build a mammoth mountain. Suddenly, a person finds himself submerged in materialism and nonsense. This diverts him from his true mission in this world. As his head and heart are captivated by the allure of more "stuff," they are too occupied to study Torah. He is thus at the mercy of his *yetzer hara*, lacking the protective qualities offered by the Torah.

Each of the words “אני לדודי ודודי לי – I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine” end with the letter ם. In order to truly feel the pleasure of a relationship with Hashem, one must first renounce those things that separate him from Hashem, even if they are small. An overabundance of materialism causes such a division.

The World to Come was created with the letter ם (see *Menachot* 29:2). For this reason, the Sages wished to include Shlomo Hamelech among those who are unworthy of a portion in the World to Come (see *Sanhedrin* 104b). Despite his great virtue, he was accused of damaging the letter ם by amassing horses and wives. The Sages felt this violation rendered him undeserving of a portion in the World to Come.

The four letters ם at the end of the words אני לדודי ודודי לי also allude to the four worlds through which Hashem sends down bounty to us. These worlds are the pipelines of blessing leading to our world. However, when one damages the letter ם by overindulging in materialism, he blocks up these pipelines, thus preventing Hashem’s bounty from reaching us (*Chessed L’Avraham* 2:5). This is why those who fear Hashem dread the word *Elul*. They are fully aware of the implications of this word, and the messages alluded to in its first and last letters.

Remembering the day of death is one way to prevent sin. The Yamim Nora’im carry undertones of death. On the Day of Judgment, does anyone know what his verdict will be? How many people began the new year like everyone else, yet did not merit reaching its end? It is thus fitting for us to do *teshuvah* at the opening of the new year, returning to our waiting Father.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ If one’s *yetzer hara* gains control over him, he should learn Torah. If this does not help, he should recite the *Shema*. If this does not help, he should recall the day of death. Torah is the antidote to the *yetzer hara*; how can it prove ineffective against it? Moreover, *Shema* is a portion of the Torah.

How can its recitation also prove ineffectual in warding off the *yetzer hara*?

- ◆ Often, one studies Torah only perfunctorily. This type of Torah study does not have the power to protect him from the *yetzer hara*. Similarly, reciting *Kriyat Shema* without proper intention does not save one from the *yetzer hara*. Only remembering the day of death works in such a case.
- ◆ The very word *Elul* conjured dread and fear in the hearts of our Torah giants. It is an acronym of the phrase **אני לדודי ודודי לי**. The last letters **י** symbolize luxuries which seem small and insignificant but can bring a person to sin.
- ◆ The *yetzer hara* causes one to trip up in small things. Little by little, it convinces him to sin in more serious areas.
- ◆ A king is commanded not to have too many horses. The *pasuk* begins with the plural form “horses” and ends with “horse.” This teaches that even one extra horse has the power to cause a king to stumble into sin. After Shlomo Hamelech violated this command, the letter **י** of the phrase **לא ירבה** – he shall not increase” approached Hashem with the complaint that Shlomo sinned against it. This smallest letter hints to excessive materialism, which seems small but accumulates into a massive power that can drive a wedge between us and Hashem.
- ◆ The Sages considered including Shlomo among those who are unworthy of a portion in the World to Come, since he had damaged the letter **י** with which that world was created. The word **אלול** alludes to the four worlds through which Hashem sends blessing to our world. One who sins in overindulgence blocks the pipelines of blessing.



## The Gravity of These Days

I make an annual trip to Morocco to visit the graves of my holy ancestors. In recent years, during the month of Elul, I have adopted the custom of praying at the graves of tzaddikim buried in the Ukraine, as well. Elul is the month of *teshuvah*, when Hashem is especially close to each and every one of His children. This is hinted in the very name of the month, אלול, which is an acronym of “אני לדודי ודודי לי – I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine” (*Abudraham, Seder Rosh Hashanah*).

The following analogy will help us appreciate Hashem’s closeness to us in this month of mercy and forgiveness. When one passes a pharmacy, he can smell the pungent medications from a distance. Similarly, in the month of Elul, we perceive the atmosphere of the Yamim Nora’im as we approach the Day of Judgment. Yeshayahu Hanavi (55:6) beseeches us to “search for Hashem when He is to be found; call to Him when He is near.” In Elul, one instinctively begins the process of examining his deeds, regretting any misdeeds he may have done during the previous year and resolving to improve. When Hashem observes a person doing this, He comes closer to him, thus enabling him to completely return to Him. If, however, one is so sunk in sin that he feels no interest in reestablishing his relationship with Hashem, the Yamim Nora’im will come and go without any change in his attitude.

During these days, we recite the *Selichot* prayers. Many visit the graves of great men in an attempt to arouse their merit. I am filled with tremendous joy at the opportunity I had to visit the graves of the tzaddikim buried in the Ukraine. I hope and pray that we succeed in broadening our itinerary to include more, in order to evoke the merits of these tzaddikim for the upcoming Day of Judgment. During our visit, we have no regular sleeping or eating schedules. Just as one acquires the Torah through self-sacrifice and difficulty, so, too, can one do *teshuvah* only through self-sacrifice and difficulty. (*Derech Eretz Zuta 8; Berachot 5a*). The pains we take to reach the graves of the tzaddikim serve to

increase our merit and suffuse us with faith that our prayers are accepted on High.

Throughout the year, I travel across the world and offer people advice and blessings. I hereby testify that the healing and success they merit because of my blessings should not be attributed to my credit but to that of my forefathers, and themselves for placing their faith in *talmidei chachamim*. These people sincerely strive to strengthen their service of Hashem in order to be worthy of His blessings.

Let us illustrate with the following analogy. If a cup is intact, it will hold water running into it from a faucet. However, if there is a hole in the bottom, all the water will run out. Similarly, when a person is a fitting vessel, he has the capacity to contain Hashem's blessing. However, if he lacks the vital quality of faith, he is like a bottomless cup. He can receive many blessings, but everything will seep right out.

A woman who is unfortunately beset by many problems often approaches me for my blessing. She is always contending with one challenge or another. When I examined the matter, I discovered that her behavior is sorely lacking. She thereby jeopardizes any blessing conferred upon her. I explained to her that in order for the cup to be filled, it must be complete. When she sins, she is cutting off the pipeline connecting herself with Hashem. How can she expect His blessings to reach her? My blessings will be ineffective as long as she maintains her present practices.

On a visit to Mexico, I was once approached by a woman who had given birth to a baby with a severe defect. After blessing her in the merit of my forefathers, the defect completely disappeared. The doctors stood by aghast. They could not explain this by any natural means. I, for one, am sure she merited this medical miracle due to her staunch faith in the Creator.

Another time, I came to deliver a Torah *shiur* at someone's house. Suddenly, I left the house and said I could only deliver the lecture the following week. The man stared at me in surprise, explaining that a large

crowd had gathered to hear my words. How could I disappoint them like this? In spite of his convincing arguments, I refused to deliver my speech, not knowing myself exactly what it was that bothered me.

Later that day, this man went for a trip in his boat. Suddenly, a strong wind came, threatening to capsize his boat. The man cried out to Hashem, evoking the merit of Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a. Immediately, another boat passed by and saved him and his friends from drowning.

The following week, I arrived at this man’s house to deliver the lecture. He related his adventure of the past week. I replied that I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. However, I was sure that it was the merit of planning to host a Torah *shiur* in his house that saved him from certain death. I added that he was obligated to thank Hashem for the great miracle done for him. A fitting form of gratitude would be to host a steady weekly *shiur* in his house, for he had first-hand experience in seeing how Torah protects those who study it. Today, *Baruch Hashem*, this Jew has reinforced his Torah observance tremendously. His home is a bastion of Torah study and lectures.

We have the custom to visit the graves of tzaddikim in the hope that their merits will stand by us, and all evil decrees against us will be abolished. One has no idea what will be decreed for him on Rosh Hashanah. May the new year be filled with blessing. May it be one in which we excel in Torah and *yirat Shamayim*, with joy, good health, financial security, and *nachat* from our children.



**Sincerely Yours**

Rabbi Akiva was one of the staunchest supporters of Bar Kochba, a warrior who fiercely fought the Romans during the era of the second Beit Hamikdash. Rabbi Akiva held so highly of Bar Kochba that he erroneously

considered him Mashiach, referring to him the *pasuk*, “A star will shoot forth from Yaakov” (*Bamidbar* 24:17; *ibid. Eichah Rabbah*). Rabbi Akiva so greatly esteemed Bar Kochba that he carried his weapons for him.

Eventually, Rabbi Akiva noticed that Bar Kochba was not following halachah. Rabbi Akiva no longer esteemed him. Indeed, Bar Kochba died from a snake bite. After his death, the city of Beitar was destroyed.

The holy Admor, Rabbi Yoel of Satmar, asks the following question. Rabbi Akiva was the giant of the generation. He was the Torah teacher of the generation, to whom all eyes were turned for instruction. He was certainly aware that each act of his was studied and emulated. He surely calculated every single move he made beforehand. How, then, could he have made such a blatant mistake? (*Vayoel Moshe*, III, *Shavuot* 38:50).

In a similar vein, we find that Achiya Hashiloni was approached by Yeravam ben Nevat, who asked what would happen if Bnei Yisrael would rebel against him and return the crown to the House of David. Achiya Hashiloni replied that he should write a letter ordering Bnei Yisrael under Yeravam’s jurisdiction to obey his word. Achiya Hashiloni promised to sign this letter.

Yeravam ben Nevat had the letter drawn up. It included the mandate that everyone must obey his word, even if he ordered them to serve idolatry. When Achiya Hashiloni heard about this, he was shocked. He asked Yeravam how he expected him to sign such a document. Yeravam artfully brushed aside Achiya’s misgivings, claiming that of course he did not mean that the nation should actually serve idols; it was just a form of speech, emphasizing how strongly he expected the people to obey him and not veer one iota from his word. Achiya Hashiloni was convinced and agreed to sign his name. The sorry end of the story attests to its beginning. All the kings of Yisrael from the time of Yeravam through the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash were terribly wicked idolaters. This is because they unequivocally relied on Achiya Hashiloni’s signature (see *Sanhedrin* 101b).

Even Yehu, a tremendous tzaddik who eradicated every last member of the house of the wicked Achav (see *Melachim* II 9-10), mistakenly followed Yeravam after seeing Achiya Hashiloni's signature on the letter (see *Sanhedrin* 102a). How could Achiya sign such a missive? Imagine the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy"l, signing a letter of this sort, *chas v'shalom*. We cannot even conjure up such an image! Certainly, it is unfathomable that Achiya Hashiloni, a man of exceptional virtue, would do such a thing. Obviously, Yeravam did such a good job at hoodwinking him that he did not realize the severity of his deed.

The message of Elul arouses us. "A lion has roared; who is not afraid?" (*Amos* 3:8). HaGaon Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, zt"l, Mashgiach of the Ponevezh Yeshiva, writes that Elul is a month of awakening. However, one must ensure that his awakening is not the superficial type, but rather, an inner awakening which provides the power to transform oneself. When he cites the words of the sailors to Yonah, "Son of man, why do you slumber? Arouse and call out with supplication," they should come from deep within his heart. Only then will they impact him with their potency.

The new *zman* in yeshivot and kollelim begins with the start of Elul. New beginnings naturally generate excitement. In order to guarantee true change, this excitement must come from the depths of one's heart.

When Bnei Yisrael cried out, "*Na'aseh v'nishma* – We will do and we will hear," Hashem said, "Who revealed this secret to My sons?" (*Shabbat* 88a). This type of pronouncement is fitting for the angels. Since they have no *yetzer hara*, they are not connected to externalities; their essence is to serve Hashem. By preceding "*Na'aseh*" to "*Nishma*," Bnei Yisrael demonstrated their order of priorities. They regarded the inner desire more meaningful than outward shows of service. Hashem considered this a most noble attitude.

Once, in a *beit kenesset* in Canada, I noticed an interesting thing. There was a window covered by a screen with tiny holes. Even an ant could not crawl through one of these holes. I discovered mosquitoes trapped in this

screen. They had obviously tried to fly through the window and became trapped in the tiny holes.

Insects are drawn to the light. Often, they are burnt by the heat of a light bulb. These mosquitoes must have been attracted to the lights of the *beit kenesset* and tried to fly in through the window. They then became entrapped in the screen and died.

This provided a strong lesson for me. The brilliant light of Torah naturally draws us to it. If we possess true love of Torah, we will discover that we cannot live without it. Allowing ourselves to be drawn to it like fireflies to the light, we will become captivated by its allure and will wish to never abandon it. Reish Lakish says: From where do we learn that words of Torah endure in someone who kills himself over it? From the *pasuk* (*Bamidbar* 9:14) “This is the Torah (law) when a man shall die in a tent,” referring to the tent of Torah study (*Berachot* 63b). We are adjured to dedicate our lives to Torah, to the point of self-sacrifice.

A young woman of about eighteen years approached me one day. She was in the process of taking on the observance of mitzvot in spite of her family’s taunts and derision. She asked for my guidance and blessing. I asked how she remained firm in her decision, despite her family’s scorn. She replied that she was drawn to the Torah like metal to a magnet. She could not sever herself from it, no matter how difficult it was for her.

She added that her family once purchased tickets for a pleasure trip to Thailand. When she heard about this, she wrote her parents a moving letter. “Thank you so much for your thoughtful gesture. However, I must decline this trip because it is not in consonance with my lifestyle.” Her entire family flew to Thailand and she remained alone at home. Filled with the light of Torah, she felt proud and content.

As the light of Torah pulls a person from one side, the lure of the *yetzer hara* attracts him from the other. One is constantly involved in this tug-of-war between the Torah and the *yetzer hara*. This is the essence of the war between externality and man’s inner world.

Elul teaches us to focus on the internal. Our prayers should not be habitual, but emanate from deep within our hearts. We should recite *Selichot* with concentration, understanding the meaning of the words. Only this type of prayer has a chance of arousing a person from his spiritual slumber.

After the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash in the month of Av, we experience another form of destruction. It is the danger posed by the summer vacation. I heard a hair-raising story about a man who went to a *beit kenesset* in Tunisia in order to mourn the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash with the local Jews. However, instead of accomplishing this, he became acquainted with an Arab girl. He left his wife in favor of this gentile woman. If this is not destruction, what is?

On considering Rabbi Akiva's position vis-à-vis Bar Kochba, I reached the conclusion that Rabbi Akiva regarded him as a prominent figure who fought Hashem's enemies. It is easy to err regarding who is the true Mashiach. Throughout our history, numerous men have claimed to be the redeemer. I heard that there are those in Turkey who still believe that Shabtai Tzvi was the true Mashiach. Rabbi Akiva noted Bar Kochba's external actions. He saw how tirelessly he fought the Romans and witnessed his determination to preserve the Beit Hamikdash. However, only Hashem saw that inside, Bar Kochba was altogether different. Only Hashem truly knows what transpires in man's heart (*Yirmeyahu* 17:10).

When Rabbi Akiva saw that Bar Kochba demanded that his men chop off their thumbs as an expression of their loyalty to him, he finally understood that this man was not as sincere as he seemed. Was there ever an instance of a person cutting off his finger to serve Hashem? Hashem does not want us to mutilate our bodies. On the contrary, we are instructed to "guard your souls very well" (*Devarim* 4:15). We must be in good health in order to observe and study the Torah properly. G-d forbid that we should maim or inflict pain on our bodies. How could Bar Kochba demand something abhorrent to Hashem? From that time on, the Sages, including Rabbi Akiva, realized that Bar Kochba's battles were merely

outward shows of strength, meant to raise his esteem in the eyes of the public. Unfortunately, he lacked inner content.

How careful one must be to serve Hashem sincerely! Hashem wants a person's heart, his inner essence (*Sanhedrin* 106b). He wants us not only to do acts of virtue, but to infuse those acts with sincerity and pure motives.

The mission of Mashiach is to bring the world to an awareness of the Creator (*Rambam, Melachim* 11:4). Although we, as observant Jews, are well aware of Hashem's Presence, only with Mashiach's arrival will we reach the pinnacle of understanding Hashem.

Yeravam ben Nevat was originally a great *talmid chacham*. He revealed many Torah insights (*Sanhedrin* 103b). He zealously castigated Shlomo Hamelech for building a home for his wife, the daughter of Pharaoh, before building a house for Hashem. He demanded to know why Shlomo blocked off the roads to those who wished to ascend to Yerushalayim. Shlomo's own father, David Hamelech, had opened all the gates for the pilgrims to reach the Beit Hamikdash and acquire the sanctity available there (*ibid.* 101b). When Hashem observed Yeravam ben Nevat's zeal for His honor, He instructed Achiya Hashiloni to anoint Yeravam as king over the Ten Tribes (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 24).

Originally, Yeravam had sincere motives. However, as soon as he began ruling in the capacity of king, he became tainted with arrogance. He was so concerned for his personal honor that he even promoted idolatry in order to preserve it. Achiya Hashiloni agreed to sign Yeravam's letter because he believed in his sincerity. Sadly, by the time this letter was written, Yeravam had become corrupt.

Why didn't Hashem warn Achiya that Yeravam was a charlatan? Then Achiya would not have been led astray by him. Perhaps one reason why Hashem allowed Yeravam to lead the nation into sin was in order to teach us a timeless lesson. One must always connect to his essence. As soon as he is influenced by external factors, he is liable to make fatal mistakes.

When a person disconnects from his inner world, he begins associating with outside forces. This is a very dangerous road to travel.

On a trip to Canada, I visited a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer. She was hovering between life and death. When I entered the room, her blood pressure shot up. The doctors rushed in and attempted to stabilize it. I took this scene as a lesson for life. If I, a mere mortal, who is here today and gone tomorrow, could effect such excitement that this woman almost expired when she saw me, how will we stand before the King of kings, Master of the universe?!

When we moved to a new apartment, my wife, may she live long, asked the contractor to first remove the old paint before applying a new layer. But he ignored her request and painted a new layer over the old. My wife noticed a spot where the old paint clearly showed through the new. Very often, we do a superficial form of *teshuvah*. We fail to first cleanse ourselves properly of all previous sins. This is like painting a fresh coat of paint over an old one. As soon as some of the new paint begins peeling, one clearly sees the old paint. One who fails to purge himself from all vestiges of sin, merely donning the mantle of righteousness, will find that in a moment of weakness, all of his former misdeeds will surface. He will be left without internal or external virtue.



## The Field of Service Is in the Heart

Rabbi Yehudah Attia, zt"l, says that one's sins encrust him in a layer of spiritual dirt and filth (*Minchat Yehudah*). If he does not do *teshuvah* before his death, he remains enveloped in this filth as he ascends heavenward.

In order to merit standing in Hashem's Presence, one must become purified of this dirt. Angels of Justice are appointed to peel away the

layers of *kelippah* which have clung to him. They shake his body in the grave. Purging the dead person of the grime and scum of sin causes him untold anguish. The thicker the layer of grime around the *neshamah*, the deeper is the pain and suffering which the person must endure.

One who is wise will do *teshuvah* while yet in this world. He surely wishes to avoid ascending to the Heavenly Court entrenched in sin. *Chazal* instruct us to “repent one day before you die” (*Avot* 2:10). Since nobody knows when his last day will be, we should do *teshuvah* every day (see *Shabbat* 153a).

A thin layer of dust is easily removed. However, a thick layer is not divested so easily. Even after much toil, a stain might remain. So is the case regarding *teshuvah*. If one hurries to rectify his transgression immediately, he will find it relatively easy to cleanse himself of sin. However, if he arouses himself to do *teshuvah* only before the great Day of Judgment, he will find it extremely difficult. Who is to say that even after much hard work, a slight stain will not remain?

Hashem has bestowed upon us myriad spiritual opportunities. Are we aware of them? If one’s *neshamah* does not take pleasure in the sanctity of Shabbat, a sample of the World to Come, he must take stock of his deeds. Perhaps his *neshamah* is encrusted in muck and mire, which block out the luminosity of Shabbat. Hashem tells us, “I have a good gift in My treasury which is called ‘Shabbat’” (*Shabbat* 10b). Hashem Himself testifies to the wonderful qualities of Shabbat; we should appreciate them.

In order to appreciate the sweetness of Torah and mitzvot, one must first purge himself of any taint of sin. Otherwise, his sins will separate him from the mitzvot. What a shame! He will lose out both for having sin on his hands, as well as for lacking the merit of mitzvot.

Let us illustrate with the following analogy. A minister is called to serve the king. Certainly, he will clean himself before appearing in the king’s presence. Would anyone have the audacity to face the king with dirty clothes and a foul smell? Before donning the robes of a nobleman, he must

clean his body well. What good are fine garments if the body emits a terrible stench?

Before standing in Hashem's Presence, we must ensure that our *neshamah* is pristine. Observing mitzvot while one is still encrusted in sin is far from ideal, since sins repel mitzvot. *Teshuvah* is the way to expunge our souls from all residue of sin. It atones for all wrongdoings and enables the *neshamah* to attract mitzvot and lovingly preserve them.

A man once approached me at a large function and sorrowfully related that he had fallen into serious financial difficulties. After hearing his tale of woe, I turned to a wealthy philanthropist and asked him to offer this man a generous donation. The philanthropist did not disappoint. With a wide pocket and an even wider heart, he wrote out a sizeable check. The pauper was plastered with filth. As soon as he took the check in his hand, it became dirty and was hardly recognizable. When he arrived at the bank, they refused to honor it; they could not take a check in such a state.

The man approached me again. I empathized with his problem, but there was little I could do to help him. The philanthropist had already returned to the States and I had no way of reaching him. I wondered why this man had not bothered to take the small step of washing his hands before taking the check.

We are often like that pauper. We forfeit spiritual pleasures, allowing our sins to obscure our rightful joy in doing mitzvot.

In Elul, Hashem is easy to approach, like a king who goes out to the fields to see his countrymen. Generally, one must make an appointment in advance in order to merit an audience with the king. Not everybody is worthy of such an audience. However, in Elul, everyone can see the king. Hashem is closer than ever to us at this time (*Tanya*). "Hashem is close to those who call to Him, to those who call to Him in truth" (*Tehillim* 145:18).

When a king comes to visit a city, all the townsmen turn out for a festive day in his honor. Why do we not celebrate our close connection with

Hashem in Elul? The greatest level one can attain is feeling Hashem within his heart. Coronating Hashem in the fields cannot compare with crowning Him in our hearts. We do not have any specific festival days in Elul because the ultimate way to crown Hashem is by bringing Him into our hearts. When one succeeds in doing so, he is imbued with tremendous joy.

“I have set Hashem before me always” (ibid. 16:9). *Chazal* adjure us to “know before Whom you are standing – before the King of kings, Hakadosh Baruch Hu” (see *Berachot* 28b). We can use the power of imagery to concretize this in our minds. Whenever I feel strong yearning for my father, zy”a, and wish to remember him, I think how he would behave in one situation or another. By thinking of him, my longing dissipates.

We, too, can use guided imagery in order to feel Hashem. Since He has no physical properties, we can connect to Him by increasing our Torah study and mitzvot, which are the expression of his holy Names.

Everyone can attest to whether or not Hashem resides within him. Is he a fitting repository for the *Shechinah*? Does he pray with the awareness that he is standing before Hashem, or is his body in the *beit kenesset* while his mind is miles away?

Sins create a barrier between a person and the Creator, preventing his prayers from rising heavenward. He must do *teshuvah* so that his prayers are not, *chalilah*, uttered in vain. If one feels he is standing in Hashem’s Presence, he is more likely to succeed (*Noam Elimelech, Vayishlach*).

The wicked do not repent even as they stand at the entrance of Gehinnom (*Eirubin* 19a). How can they observe the terrible punishments and remain indifferent? Are they so attached to sin that they never want to repent?

As long as one is in this world, he has the choice to do good or bad. Even if he falls, he has the ability to raise himself by rectifying his deeds. However, the World to Come is the place of remuneration. Once there, it

is already too late to make amends. The only thing one can do is accept the punishment, which will refine him of the dross of sin. As the wicked stand before Gehinnom, they are deprived of the privilege of *teshuvah*. They must face the consequences of the choices they made while in this world.

Let us be wise enough to do *teshuvah* while we still have the chance to atone for our sins. Let us not wait for the time when the only recourse is punishment.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Man's sins encrust him in a layer of spiritual dirt, which prevents him from standing before the Heavenly Court. Angels of Destruction are appointed to remove this dirt by shaking him and banging him, a very painful process (*Minchat Yehudah*).
- ◆ One should try to do *teshuvah* every day, for nobody knows when he will die.
- ◆ Hashem has granted us many wonderful gifts. However, we often forfeit the pleasure gained by doing mitzvot, since we are engulfed in the filth of sin. The way to remove this dirt is by doing *teshuvah*.
- ◆ In Elul, Hashem is like a king who leaves his palace for the fields in order to spend time with his subjects (*Tanya*). We do not have a specific day to celebrate this, for the ultimate place to crown Hashem is not in the fields but in our hearts.
- ◆ The proven method of building a relationship with Hashem is through learning Torah and keeping mitzvot. This enables us to truly feel that "I have set Hashem before me always."



## Personal Bodyguards

***“Judges and officers shall you place in all your cities which Hashem, your G-d, gives you, for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment”***

*(Devarim 16:18)*

*Parashat Shoftim* is read at the beginning of Elul. What is the connection between this *parashah* and the month of mercy and forgiveness?

“אני לדודי ודודי לי – I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine” (*Shir Hashirim* 6:3). Hashem chose us as His nation, and we chose Him as our King. The initials of this phrase spell the word אלול (Elul). This is a clear mandate to spend the days of Elul in preparation for the upcoming Yamim Nora’im. These days are auspicious for coming closer to the Creator, as suggested by the words, “I am my Beloved’s.” When Hashem sees how strongly one is striving to build a relationship with Him, He will reflect that yearning by coming close to him, as suggested by the words, “and my Beloved is mine.” One is dealt measure for measure (*Sotah* 8:2). The closer a person comes to Hashem, the closer Hashem comes to him (*Abudraham, Seder Rosh Hashanah*).

Before driving a car, one must rev up the engine. So, too, in order to stand before Hashem on the Day of Judgment free of sin, we must energize ourselves during the days specified for *teshuvah*. These are the days of Elul.

A person is filled with awe and dread when standing before a human judge. One who hears his verdict via telephone cannot be compared with one who hears it directly from the judge himself. Since Hashem has no body and cannot be perceived by humans, it is difficult for us to conjure the image of Him passing judgment on us. Moreover, we do not hear the verdict. We are thus obligated to imagine His Presence during these forty days of *teshuvah*, when He is in our midst.

During Elul, Hashem is compared to a king who has left his palace to meet his people in the fields. Only through extensive preparation during Elul can one feel Hashem's Presence with his human senses.

When one is called to court but fails to appear on the designated day, he is demonstrating contempt toward the entire court system. The judges then add a penalty to the original punishment. Perhaps the man deserved a three-year prison sentence for his offense. Since he failed to appear in court, his sentence is increased to five years. Conversely, if one appears in court contrite and confesses to his offenses, he is likely to receive a lighter sentence.

When Hashem calls us to judgment on Rosh Hashanah, we are adjured to appear before Him. G-d forbid that we shirk our duty by focusing on anything not connected with the solemnity of the day. This would be a form of mockery toward Heaven and would empower the forces of prosecution. In contrast, when one stands humbly before Hashem, in subservience and repentance, he is guaranteed Hashem's compassion, which is sure to sway the scales in his favor.

In order to stand in judgment clear of sin, it is imperative to work on oneself during Elul. A child cannot run before learning how to walk. One cannot drive a car before taking driving lessons. Likewise, one cannot stand before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah without preparing himself in Elul.

Many congregations have the custom of blowing the shofar throughout Elul (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 45; *Tur, Orach Chaim* 581). But on Rosh Hashanah, there is a special mitzvah to blow the shofar (*Bamidbar* 29:1). There are various explanations concerning this. One is that by blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, we confuse the Satan (see above-mentioned *Tur*). The Satan is bent on indicting Bnei Yisrael as Hashem is about to inscribe them in the Book of Life. He knows that during the days of mercy and forgiveness, Bnei Yisrael are especially close with Hashem. Finding fault with Bnei Yisrael will drive a wedge between them and Hashem. The Satan exerts himself excessively during these days to find some flaw with

them, as he watches them move away from him in favor of a relationship with Hashem.

During the rest of the year, the Satan has us in his pocket, so to speak. He rests assured that we are his. However, during the days of mercy and forgiveness, he begins feeling threatened. We are aroused by the yearnings expressed by the sentiment, “I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine.” Then the Satan becomes alarmed. He looks for all ways and means of severing our connection with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. The shofar’s call successfully arouses us to come toward Hashem, while scaring away the Satan.

In the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer of Rabbi Amnon, recited on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we say that “angels tremble.” The angels are not judged on this day; why do they tremble? There are Angels of Mercy and Angels of Destruction. On the Day of Judgment, we pass before Hashem like sheep before a shepherd (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a). He wishes to inscribe us for a good, peaceful year. At this time, a quarrel erupts between the Angels of Mercy and the Angels of Destruction, each trying to tilt the scales in favor of their position. The phrase, “Angels tremble” alludes to this war in heaven. Each group hurries to bring its arguments before Hashem, in the hope that they will triumph.

From another angle, angels know that their existence depends on Bnei Yisrael and their Torah study, in line with the *navi’s* words, “If not for My covenant (of Bnei Yisrael learning Torah) day and night, I would not have established the laws of the heavens and earth” (*Yirmeyahu* 33:25). The very first *pasuk* in the Torah attests to the significance of Bnei Yisrael and the Torah which they study. “בראשית ברא אלוקים – In the beginning of G-d’s creating” (*Bereishit* 1:1) can be read to mean the following: “For the sake of *reishit* (*beginning* or *first*), Hashem created.” For the sake of Bnei Yisrael and the Torah, each called *reishit*, Hashem created the world (*Rashi* *ibid.*). On the Day of Judgment, the angels are deeply concerned. Will Bnei Yisrael merit a good new year? The existence of the angels themselves depends on Bnei Yisrael’s verdict.

*Parashat Shoftim*, which is read during Elul, opens with the command to appoint judges and officers in each city. A city cannot function without law and order. It is only logical to have judges and officers to ensure that the laws are upheld. The command to appoint them seems as superfluous as commanding a person to eat and drink. His very life depends on doing so. Why then did the Torah give a special command to appoint judges?

There is a deeper meaning to this injunction than merely setting up a judicial system. Shlomo Hamelech describes man as a miniature city. The Torah commands every individual to appoint watchmen over himself. These watchmen will prevent him from sinning. The *yetzer hara*, man's number one enemy, constantly looks for ways to wend itself into his heart. One must establish guards to protect himself from this wily creature, which wishes to ensnare him (*Teivat Gomeh, Shoftim 4*).

When we are asleep, the *yetzer hara* lies down beside us, attempting to inject our minds with inappropriate thoughts. "You are asleep, but he is awake" (*Chovot Halevavot 5:5*). Even when we pray, the *yetzer hara* is right there, trying mightily to distract us with improper thoughts. There is a not-so-funny joke that says if you forgot something, hurry to pray. Certainly, while you are praying, your mind will drift off, and you will remember what it was you forgot.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that as we recite the words of prayer, our minds are miles away. This is such a shame. When a person is not focused on his prayers, failing to feel that he is standing before the King of kings, Hakadosh Baruch Hu, the *yetzer hara* takes advantage of the situation in order to confuse him and insert foreign thoughts into his mind. It is essential that we establish protective shields over our body and mind to be safe from the machinations of the *yetzer hara*.

"When you approach a city to wage war against it, you shall call out to it for peace" (*Devarim 20:10*). Before one can succeed in "approaching a city to wage war against it," a reference to doing battle with the *yetzer hara*, he must first "call out to it for peace." The word שלום (peace) is

similar to the word שלם (whole, complete). One must attain inner perfection. How? By “calling out to it.” When one “calls out” in Torah, he is shielded from sin by the Torah’s protective qualities (see *Sotah* 21a). The Torah builds a fortified wall around a person. Judges and officers preside in this refuge, in the form of the mitzvot, which prevent the *yetzer hara* from entering his domain.

On the Day of Judgment, Hashem Himself does *teshuvah* (*Chachmat Hamatzpun*). How can we say such a thing about Hashem, Who is perfect? At times, Hashem visits the iniquity of parents upon their children, even though the children are free of sin. At this time of year, He asks forgiveness from the children for refraining from penalizing the parents directly for their offenses, thus causing the children to suffer. Similarly, Hashem avoids striking an offender because he is so far removed from Him that he will never understand why he is being chastised. Hashem prefers saving the punishment for the World of Truth, where everything is crystal clear.

Additionally, Hashem sees fit to punish such sinners by affecting that which is most precious to them, their children. Observing their children undergoing such great suffering will hopefully awaken them to return to Him in *teshuvah*. Moreover, punishing the children atones for the sins of the parents. On the Day of Judgment, Hashem asks forgiveness from the children, who bore the sins of their parents and were punished in their stead. This is what is meant by the statement that Hashem “visits the sin of fathers upon children” (*Shemot* 20:5).

The last letters of the words of the phrase, “אני לדודי ודודי לי – I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine” are numerically equivalent to forty, alluding to the forty days which Moshe spent on High receiving the Torah from Hashem. This is also an allusion to the forty *se’ah* of water with which a *mikveh* is filled. The only way to come close to Hashem and fend off the *yetzer hara* is by immersing oneself in the life-giving waters of the Torah, which purify a person.

The number forty also hints to the forty days in which a fetus is formed (see *Bechorot* 21b). Only after forty days is an embryo considered viable (*Yevamot* 69b). This is why after the forty-day process beginning with Rosh Chodesh Elul and ending with Yom Kippur, one is considered reborn. However, one who does not take to heart the clarion call of Elul to mend his ways is considered lifeless. He may walk and talk, but he is not really living. “The wicked are considered dead even in their lifetime” (see *Berachot* 18b).

“Blow the shofar at the moon’s renewal, at the time selected for our festive day” (*Tehillim* 81:4). The word שופר (shofar) is similar to שיפור (improvement). It is not enough to announce that one wishes to do *teshuvah*; he must do something concrete to improve his character. When a person’s hands are coated with mud, he cannot merely rinse them off with water. He must rub them hard with strong soap in order to remove the dirt. Similarly, one who is encrusted with sin cannot suffice with an oral resolution of self-improvement. He must utilize the four-step *teshuvah* process of regret, confession, abandoning the sin, and resolution for the future to purge his soul of all taint of sin. This will enable him to make a lasting change in his life. When he improves himself through hearing the message of the shofar, he will experience the end of the *pasuk*, and truly celebrate Rosh Hashanah as a “festive day.” He earns the joy of having purified himself before the King of the universe.



## The Matter Depends on Me

Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya visited every harlot in the world. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea, who charged an entire purse of *dinarim* for her hire, he took the money and crossed seven rivers to reach her. As he was with her, she blew forth

breath and said, “Just as this blown breath will not return to its source, so will Elazar ben Durdaya never be received in repentance.”

He thereupon went and sat between hills and mountains and exclaimed, “Hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me!”

They replied, “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of mercy ourselves, for it is said, ‘For the mountains shall depart and the hills shall be removed.’”

So he exclaimed, “Heaven and earth, plead for mercy for me!”

They, too, replied, “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, ‘For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment.’”

He then exclaimed, “Sun and moon, plead for mercy for me!”

But they also replied, “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, ‘Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed.’”

He exclaimed, “Stars and constellations, plead for mercy for me!”

They said, “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, ‘And all the hosts of heaven shall mold away.’”

He finally said, “The matter then depends upon me alone!”

He placed his head between his knees and wept aloud until his soul departed. Then a Heavenly Voice was heard proclaiming, “Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is destined for the life of the World to Come!” (*Avodah Zarah* 17a).

Upon hearing this, Rabbeinu Hakadosh wept and said, “One may acquire eternal life in one moment.”

How powerful is *teshuvah*! Elazar ben Durdaya was a tremendous transgressor, constantly sinning in immorality, one of the three cardinal sins. He was so overcome with lust for sin that he willingly crossed seven

rivers and paid an astronomical sum in order to fulfill his desires. Yet in a brief moment, he was aroused to do *teshuvah* due to this woman's rebuke. Facing stark reality, he searched for ways to atone for his evil deeds. He left no stone unturned in his determination to do *teshuvah*. Hashem took note of this and granted him assistance. His *teshuvah* was accepted, to the extent that he was allotted a portion in the World to Come and even earned the title "Rabbi." This is because he teaches us the power of *teshuvah*.

When Elazar ben Durdaya realized that nothing could help him, he said, "The matter depends upon me." The word דבר (matter) is an allusion to the *yetzer hara*, called a בעל דבר (opponent), for it convinces a person to sin. Realizing that this force was within him, Elazar ben Durdaya understood that it was up to him to do *teshuvah*. No power in the world could do the job for him.

A hungry man cannot sate his hunger by asking a friend to eat for him. A sick man cannot be cured if his friend takes medicine on his behalf. Similarly, one cannot purge himself of sin by outside forces. The work is his. The one who messed up must make repairs.

When Hashem sees that a person wishes to repent, He gives him the *siyata di'Shemaya* to actualize his wishes. He adjures us to "open for Me an opening the size of a needle hole and I will open for you an opening the size of a banquet hall" (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 5:3). Elul is the month characterized by the maxim, "I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine." When one demonstrates his desire to be Hashem's beloved, he merits becoming beloved by Hashem.

Frequently, people ask me to pray that they merit a good new year, offering a sum for charity in exchange for my heartfelt blessing. I reply that although charity increases one's merits, it does not exempt one from the obligation of doing *teshuvah*. *Tzedakah* is only one-third of the *teshuvah* process. As we recite in the *UnetanaH Tokaf* prayer of *Musaf* on Rosh Hashanah, "*Teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah* override the harsh decree."

One who gives generously to charity but at the same time is involved in sin is similar to a person who immerses in a *mikveh* while holding an insect, which confers impurity (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei* 961). In order to be worthy of blessing, one must make himself into a fitting vessel. The most expensive vintage wine will seep out of a cracked goblet. A broken cup simply cannot hold any liquid. Similarly, a person who continues to sin is like a vessel with a hole in it. No matter how many blessings are poured into him, he does not have the capacity to contain them.

“The matter depends on me” should be the mantra of everyone who wants to be a fitting repository for Hashem’s blessing. The obligation to improve rests solely upon him. Only by girding himself with strength and arousing himself to do complete *teshuvah* will he merit being inscribed for a good life.

A person becomes habituated to his lifestyle and might find it very difficult to change. Listening to Torah *shiurim*, fixing set times for Torah study, and connecting with tzaddikim are tools that can arouse within him the drive to do *teshuvah*. These acts, which take him out of his ordinary daily routine, may be just the thing to set him straight. Both by making an inner personal accounting and by utilizing outside sources of help, he will set himself on the path to *teshuvah*.

Whatever Hashem created in His world, He created for Himself (*Avot* 6:12). All Creation attests to a Creator. Elul is the alarm clock ringing in his ear that the time has come to do *teshuvah*. If not now, when? The sands of his personal hourglass are always trickling downward...

On one of my visits to Canada, a man approached me and said that he had been learning *Daf HaYomi* on a steady basis for the past seven years. He had recently merited finishing the entire *Shas*. He asked my advice: Should he begin the *Daf HaYomi* cycle anew or perhaps study Gemara in depth?

At first, I did not know what to answer him. Each form of study has its advantages. However, knowing this man’s background as a *ba’al teshuvah*, I knew that he was not used to studying Gemara in depth. If he were to

take this upon himself, he would quickly find it too difficult. He might even despair of understanding anything at all. I therefore advised him to undertake another cycle of studying the *Daf HaYomi*, which has a specified daily structure of study. After feeling more secure in his Torah study and fortifying himself spiritually, he could add a session of in depth Gemara study.

The obligation to study and improve oneself lies with the person himself. It is up to him to blaze his own trail up his personal mountain toward Hashem. Let us not forget that one who comes to purify himself is guaranteed Heavenly assistance.



## Elul - Gems



### A Second Chance

Elul is the month of mercy and forgiveness. It is the month gifted to us in preparation for the Day of Judgment, Rosh Hashanah. The name חודש אלול (the month of Elul) hints to the word חדש (new). This is the month when one can renew himself in order to stand before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah, when all people pass before Him like sheep. One showers and shaves before meeting with a human king, preparing what he will say and how he will say it. How much more should we prepare appropriately before our meeting with the Creator! We want Hashem to be pleased with us, not to cast us away in shame. This month has the transformational powers to make a person feel reborn, deserving of standing before Hashem, rejoicing in the knowledge that He is satisfied with him.



## True Life

The initials of the phrase אני לדודי ודודי לי (I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine) spell אלול. This word is numerically equivalent to the word חיים (life), according to the rule of *kollel*. We ask Hashem to inscribe us for life. However, there is one stipulation to His being our Beloved: that we act the part of Hashem's beloved. We must take the first step of studying Torah, which is called life (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 5:8). In merit of studying the Torah of life, we will attain life.



# Rosh Hashanah



## Drawn to the Light

Hashem created the world on the twenty-fifth of Elul (*Vayikra Rabbah* 29:1). He created man, crown of Creation, on Rosh Hashanah (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 782). Regarding the Rosh Hashanah prayers, Hashem tells us, “Recite before Me [verses of] kingship so that you may proclaim Me King over you” (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a). Man’s entire purpose is to crown the Creator as King over himself. Before man was created, Hashem ruled without a nation. After man’s creation, Hashem had subjects to rule. The stature of a king is enhanced by the number of his subjects (see *Rabbeinu Bachya* 22:2).

Every year, a coronation ceremony is held for the king of Morocco. For one month beforehand, the townspeople hustle and bustle in preparation for this celebration. The streets are cleaned, posters and special lights are hung. When the great day arrives, the people are ready to greet their beloved king.

L’havdil, Rosh Hashanah is the day of coronating the King of kings. Since Adam was created on Rosh Hashanah and his mission was to crown Hashem upon himself, this is the day most fitting for this celebration. In order to crown Hashem fittingly, it is appropriate to spend the entire previous month in preparation for this great event. We begin with Rosh Chodesh Elul, the first day of the month of mercy and forgiveness, when

Hashem is closest to His people. The *Ba'al HaTanya* compares Hashem to a king who leaves the opulence of his palace for the fields in order to visit with His people.

The way to prepare for this exalted day is by improving our character traits and purifying ourselves of all sin. The more effort we expend in purging ourselves of any vestige of sin, the more fit we will be to stand before our King on the great Day of Judgment. Can we imagine someone standing before a human king with tattered, filthy clothes? Neglecting to cleanse oneself of his sins before Rosh Hashanah arouses Heavenly indictment upon him. He is like a man who appears before the king in dirty clothing. Such a person will be cast into prison for disgracing the king.

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel; your small children, your women, and your proselyte who is in the midst of your camp, from the one who hews your wood to the one who draws your water” (*Devarim* 29:9-10). “You are standing today” alludes to Rosh Hashanah, about which we say, “Today is the beginning of the world” (*Zohar* II, 32b). It is the day when Bnei Yisrael stand before Hashem in judgment and crown Him upon themselves. The *pasuk* in *Devarim* lists ten categories within Am Yisrael, from the most elite to the simplest of people (*Tanya, Likutei Torah, Nitzavim*). On Rosh Hashanah, all gather together before Hashem, for “in a multitude of people is the king’s glory” (*Mishlei* 14:28).

In truth, what determines whether one crowns Hashem fittingly and thereby emerges with a positive judgment is not his standing among his countrymen. Rather, it is his ability to humble himself before His Majesty. Even a simple water-carrier has the opportunity to prepare himself properly for Rosh Hashanah: by spending Elul in *teshuvah*. Then, he can approach Rosh Hashanah with his head held high. He is the one of royal stature in Hashem’s eyes.

The two days of Rosh Hashanah are called *yoma arichta* – one long day (*Beit Yosef, Orach Chaim* 515). Originally, Hashem intended to create the world as one long day, with limitless light. However, following Adam's sin, darkness descended upon the world. Hashem then stored away this light. He made time frames of days, separated from one another by night.

Adam was created on Rosh Hashanah. It is called *yoma arichta* in remembrance of Hashem's original plan. Due to Adam's sin, Hashem hides the light of each day as night descends. We exist in merit of the lights of the original *yoma arichta*, which shone brightly before Adam's sin. When we crown Hashem as our King on Rosh Hashanah, the *yoma arichta*, we evoke the merit of the six days of Creation, which reflect one endless light. The lights encompassed in the *yoma arichta* protect us from judgment and allow us to exist. We should make extensive preparations for Rosh Hashanah, so that the *yoma arichta* is able to influence us with its life-giving light.

Every night, our *neshamot* ascend to heaven to be judged for the deeds we did that day (*Zohar* III, 120b). Since we are left without the *neshamah* when we sleep and get it back the next day, we arise every morning with thanks to Hashem on our lips. According to strict justice, we are unworthy of having our *neshamot* returned to us. It is only due to Hashem's mercy that this occurs. Thus, every night is considered a Day of Judgment. And just as the lights of Creation are revealed to us on Rosh Hashanah, the *yoma arichta*, so does each day contain an element of this revelation. Isn't it fitting, then, to wake up from our slumber and prepare ourselves to be fitting receptacles for these wonderful lights which uphold the entire world?

“ואתחנן אל ה' בעת ההיא לאמר” (*Devarim* 3:23). Moshe prayed profusely for the merit to enter Eretz Yisrael. The word ואתחנן (I supplicated) is numerically equivalent to 515, the number of prayers which Moshe prayed to Hashem in order to be granted entry into Eretz Yisrael (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim* 940). There is a special angel appointed over prayer. Its task is to bring all the prayers from earth to heaven, where Hashem resides (*Arizal, Likutei Torah*,

*Va'etchanan*). The distance from the heavens to the Throne of Glory is five hundred years. This is why a specific angel is needed to rush prayers to Hashem.

Regarding these angels, the *navi* says, “Their legs were a straight leg” (*Yechezkel* 1:7). The word *ישרה* (straight) is numerically equivalent to 515. This corresponds to the five hundred years’ distance between heaven and earth, plus the *gematria* of the Name *יה-י*, which the angels use to bring our prayers before Hashem. Hashem created the world with the Name *יה-י* (*Menachot* 29b), as the *navi* states, “In G-d (*יה-י*), Hashem is the strength of the worlds” (*Yeshayahu* 26:4).

Moshe Rabbeinu prayed 515 prayers in the hope that the angels would rush them to Hashem with the Name *יה-י*. Despite the five hundred years’ distance between heaven and earth, he felt his prayers could accomplish their goal and Hashem would be appeased.

However, despite all of Moshe’s pleadings, Hashem told him, “It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter” (*Devarim* 3:26). Such an answer would cast anyone into despair. Moshe Rabbeinu spent so much time in prayer, yet he was turned down. Moshe told the nation that “Hashem became angry at me because of you” (*ibid.*), meaning, “He refused to accept my prayers for your benefit. It is to teach you the following. There might be a *tzaddik* who does *teshuvah* before the Day of Judgment, praying effusively to be inscribed in the Book of Life. Nonetheless, Hashem may see fit not to accept his entreaties, but will put him to death that year. Do not let this make you feel dejected or depressed! Do not think, ‘Is this the reward one gets for expending so much energy in prayer?’”

Hashem may take a *tzaddik* out of this world as atonement for the nation, even though he deserved to live many more years. The *tzaddik* does not die due to his sins. On the contrary, because he was so perfect, Hashem chose him as a fitting sacrifice on the altar of the nation.

When the Angel Michael sees the Attribute of Justice spreading its wings over Am Yisrael, he hurries to bring an offering in the form of a

tzaddik's *neshamah* (*Menachot* 110a). This is in order to save the world from indictment, even though the cup of iniquity is overflowing.

“You are standing today... the heads of your tribes, your elders... from the one who hews your wood to the one who draws your water” (*Devarim* 29:9-10). At times, Hashem might visit justice upon the heads of the nation for the sins of the wicked. This shows just how great the tzaddikim are, for they were chosen to atone for the generation. We find that Torah giants such as the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh, the Arizal, and the Rema were taken to the Heavenly Court in the prime of life. In their relatively short lives, they managed to accomplish more than others who lived much longer.

It is not the quantity of years that determines the success of one's life but the quality of those years. One who crowns Hashem upon himself and hurries to heed His word will merit eternal life in the World of Truth, basking in the glory of the *Shechinah*, regardless of how long his physical life was.

The lights of Hashem's holy Name are aroused on Rosh Hashanah. These are the lights with which the world was created. The way to connect to these lights is through Torah study. The Torah is a concentration of His Names, as it says, “He looked into the Torah and created the world” (*Zohar* II, 161a).



## The Shofar's Call

The Torah does not call the first day of the year “Rosh Hashanah” or “the Day of Judgment.” Rather, it is called “a day of shofar-sounding” (*Bamidbar* 29:1). This indicates that blowing the shofar is an essential part of this day. Many halachot have been ruled regarding the shofar. Hearing

the shofar is a publicly-observed mitzvah, accompanied by awe and trembling.

Why are we commanded to hear the shofar blowing on Rosh Hashanah and what secrets does it contain? Certainly, taking into account all the many halachot surrounding it, this is a very important mitzvah. One opinion is that the shofar is sounded in order to confuse the Satan. However, Hashem could confuse him through our prayers. Why is the shofar used for this purpose?

Another opinion is that the shofar, made of a ram's horn, is meant to remind Hashem of Avraham's ram which substituted as a sacrifice for Yitzchak at the *Akeidah* (see *Rosh Hashanah* 16a). This is also difficult to understand, as Hashem "remembers all that was forgotten" (*Musaf* Rosh Hashanah). Certainly, Hashem remembers the merit of Avraham Avinu. He does not need our shofar-blowing to remind Him. Also, why do we recite a blessing before blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, while we blow it throughout Elul without a blessing?

Since Hashem created Adam on Rosh Hashanah, He has an especially close connection with us on this day, when we coronate Him as our King. When the nations crown a new king, they sound trumpets to announce his coronation. Similarly, we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, the day when we coronate Hashem.

In contrast, we blow the shofar in Elul in preparation for Rosh Hashanah. Therefore, we blow it then without a blessing. Only on Rosh Hashanah, the great coronation day, do we recite a blessing beforehand. Hashem does not need a reminder of our existence or of the *Akeidah*. He knows everything. It is we who need to be jolted awake to the existence of Hashem with the blowing of the shofar, as we coronate Him as our King. By blowing specifically a ram's horn, we evoke memories of Avraham Avinu's self-sacrifice in serving Hashem with every fiber of his being.

Upon Adam's creation on Rosh Hashanah, Hashem told him, "Remember that if your deeds are worthy, the entire world was created to serve you. However, if your deeds are unworthy, remember that a

measly fly preceded you” (see *Sanhedrin* 38a). Adam was the crown of Creation and illuminated the entire world. With his sin, he lost his luster.

Adam Harishon sinned on Rosh Hashanah, the sixth day of Creation (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 29:1). Hashem contained His anger throughout Shabbat and did not punish him fully until Motza’ei Shabbat (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 12:6). This is why we celebrate Rosh Hashanah for two days. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Hashem judges all of mankind, and on the second day, when Adam received his judgment, He judges Am Yisrael (see *Talelei Orot, Moadim* 96). Although Adam sinned, Hashem did not immediately put him to death. So, too, we ask Him to judge us with compassion.

After Adam sinned, Hashem called out to him, “Where are you?” (*Bereishit* 3:9). When Adam heard Hashem’s voice, he immediately became frightened and was aroused to do *teshuvah*. The shofar echoes with the call, “Where are you? Where do you stand? Arise and call to your G-d and return to Him in perfect repentance, just like Adam Harishon returned to Hashem and was stirred to sing, ‘A psalm, a song for the Shabbat day. It is good to thank Hashem’” (*Tehillim* 92:1-2). Whoever ignores the call of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah has not fulfilled his obligation of the day.

If we did *teshuvah* immediately after sinning at any given time during the year, as we should, why does Hashem judge us on Rosh Hashanah? We seemingly do not deserve punishment. The answer is that Rosh Hashanah is the day when the quality of our *teshuvah* is judged. Did we do *teshuvah* properly or half-heartedly? Imagine the indictment against a person who never bothered doing *teshuvah* at all, allowing even the days of mercy and forgiveness to pass him by without taking note of them.

The word איכה (Where are you) is reminiscent of the *pasuk*, “איכה ישבה – בודד – Alas, she sits in solitude” (*Eichah* 1:1), referring to the destruction of Yerushalayim. The word ישבה (sits) is similar to the word תשובה (*teshuvah*). The shofar resounds with the clarion call, “Where are you?”

How do you sit complacently, without doing *teshuvah*? You have the obligation to re-connect with the Creator, and not sit in solitude!”



## New Beginnings

We are not aware of the exact moment when one year ends and the next begins. Therefore, we ask Hashem, “May the year and its curses end; may the year and its blessings begin.” If we are still within the previous year, may it and its curses come to an end. If we are at the beginning of the new year, may it and its blessings begin.

There is a concept of *tosefet Shabbat*. This means that out of our love for Shabbat, we bring it in earlier than the specified time and observe it even later than the prescribed time (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 393:2). Each person adds a specific amount of time according to his custom.

As Rosh Hashanah approaches, we do not know if the previous year has already passed, or if there are still harsh judgments awaiting us. Therefore, we ask Hashem to deal kindly with us and hurry in the new year with all its blessings, similar to one bringing in Shabbat early. This will nullify any remaining harsh decrees designated for the past year.

When one fulfills Hashem’s wishes, He hurries to bring him blessing. As a result, curses are removed from him. For instance, it might have been decreed that a person will have children only in another three years. However, through fulfilling Hashem’s will, he merits having a child within that year. The abundance of goodness which Hashem showers upon those who do His will has the power to annul all harsh decrees.

On Rosh Hashanah, we read about *Akeidat Yitzchak* (see *Megillah* 31:1). We mention the merit of Avraham Avinu, who “awoke early and saddled

his donkey” (*Bereishit* 22:3). Hashem had not designated a specific time for the *Akeidah*. Why, then, did Avraham awaken early to offer his son on the altar? He could have delayed this act and thus have had more time to spend with his son.

“The zealous are early to do mitzvot” (*Pesachim* 4a). Those who are filled with zeal for Hashem’s honor long to fulfill His word. Avraham saddled his donkey on his own, even though he had countless servants who did his bidding. His love of Hashem interrupted the correct order of things (*Rashi, Bereishit* 22:3).

By mentioning the merit of our Avot, particularly how Avraham hurried to do Hashem’s will, we ask Hashem to fulfill our desires. We beseech Him to usher in the new year with its blessings, even if the old year has not officially ended. The quicker and more enthusiastically one does mitzvot, the more blessings he can expect from Hashem. These blessings, too, come quickly, preempting harsh decrees.

“When you have the opportunity to do a mitzvah, do not let it become spoiled” (*Mechilta, Bo* 9). One should not delay doing mitzvot. Any form of procrastination is considered letting the mitzvah become spoiled. Although he intends to do it later, it will lack the quality of zest, the agent that prevents spoiling.

Bilaam Harasha wanted to share with Balak his plot of harming the Jews. He arose early in the morning and saddled his own donkey without waiting for his lackeys to do it for him. His hatred toward Bnei Yisrael ran so deep that it interrupted the correct order of things. Hashem told him, “Evil one! Avraham already preceded you by arising early and saddling his own donkey!” (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 22:21).

Since Avraham preceded Bilaam with his zeal, Hashem transformed Bilaam’s curses into blessings. We ask Hashem that in the merit of Avraham, who preempted Bilaam and hurried to do His will, He should hurry to bring us a new year filled with blessing. All the curses which may have been decreed upon us previously should be converted to blessing.

Bilaam Harasha was the embodiment of the Satan, who continues to prosecute against us. We mention the *Akeidah* on Rosh Hashanah for two reasons. One is to evoke the merit of Avraham Avinu, who hurried to do Hashem's bidding. The second is to nullify the indictment of the Satan. Although Bilaam's early start in his quest of cursing Am Yisrael did not have its intended effect, it shows how strongly the Satan prosecutes and how urgent it is to stand up to him in order to emerge innocent in judgment. The Satan is well aware that on Rosh Hashanah all mankind is judged. He thus tries various methods of disturbing us in our service of Hashem. This is why we ask Hashem to end the previous year with its curses and start the coming year with its potential for blessing. This thwarts the Satan's attempts at damaging us in these last few moments at the year's end.

The phrase "תחל שנה – May the year begin," is similar to "*Bereishit* – In the beginning." As the new year opens, we ask Hashem to bring us a year that is similar to the beginning of Creation. We ask to merit the original purity of man before he sinned, when the world was pristine and full of endless bounty and blessing.



## The Sound of the Shofar

The Yamim Nora'im were given to us by Hashem as a period of introspection. Did our deeds throughout the year bring Hashem pleasure? One must be aware of his sins before he can begin confessing them. Only after he acknowledges that he has erred can he repent and resolve never to repeat his iniquity and accept positive resolutions upon himself. The first and foremost element of *teshuvah* is being aware of one's sins. The initials of the words כיפור השנה, ראש השנה (*Rosh Hashanah, Kippur*) spell the word הכר (recognize). These days are designated for gaining self-awareness. We are meant to acknowledge what we have done and see

what needs improvement. Examining each action, weighing its virtues against its vices, will enable us to properly assess it and subsequently rectify whatever is necessary.

The shofar beckons to us to improve our deeds. In fact the word שופר (shofar) and שיפור (improvement) are very similar. By improving ourselves, we will merit Hashem's mercy. At *Matan Torah*, the sound of the shofar became increasingly stronger (see *Shemot* 19:19). What is the connection between blowing the shofar and *Matan Torah*? Hashem is well aware of the shofar's powers of arousing a person to *teshuvah*. He wanted the shofar to be blown at *Matan Torah* so that any impression left on Bnei Yisrael from Egypt would be fully erased. They would thus be fitting to receive the Torah and crown Hashem upon themselves in a state of purity and sanctity.

Rabbi Avraham Hamalach, zy"א, writes that when the shofar is blown, one should feel deep shame for his misdeeds. This is alluded in the *pasuk*, "בחצוצרות וקול שופר הריעו" – With trumpets and the shofar sound, call out" (*Tehillim* 98:6). The initials of this phrase spell the word בושה (shame). When one is filled with shame at the time of the shofar blowing, he will certainly acknowledge his misdeeds and correct them. He will surely resolve to never repeat them.

As Rosh Hashanah approaches, the angels ask Hashem, "When is Rosh Hashanah?" Similarly, before Yom Kippur, they ask, "When is Yom Kippur?" The angels on High surely know when these holidays will occur. Why do they ask? (*Midrash Pliah*). Moreover, the *sefer Betzel Hakodesh* asks why the form of the shofar blasts is unclear to us. The mitzvah to blow the shofar is Torah-mandated. Why, then, does the Gemara ask about the types of blasts we blow on Rosh Hashanah?

The earlier Sages infer the mitzvah to blow one hundred shofar blasts from Sisera's mother, who wept one hundred times over her son. Our blasts counterbalance her weeping (see *Sefer Ha'aruch, Erev* 1). Why do we learn this halachah from the mother of such an evil man? This seems to be validating the powers of the *kelippah* and thereby fortifying them.

Animals act on instinct. They behave according to their nature and do not think before doing anything. They have no mission other than to survive. Conversely, man possesses intellect and wisdom. He can choose and make decisions. It is imperative that he distance himself from evil and do good. With his unlimited powers, he can build worlds of goodness or, *chalilah*, destroy them (see *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4).

A leopard is naturally bold and cruel. It does not have the ability to change its nature and become docile. It was born vicious, and vicious it will die, leaving behind offspring to perpetuate its legacy of brutality. Man, however, has the power of free choice. He can choose between good and bad. Through his intelligence and the spirit of G-dliness within him, he can overcome his negative qualities.

On the Yamim Nora'im, Hashem endows man with the opportunity to transform himself into a new person. This is the time to make his spiritual side dominate over his animalistic instincts. One does this with the power of *teshuvah*. When the Satan notices Am Yisrael making preparations for the Yamim Nora'im, he seeks ways to impede their progress in their service of Hashem. He knows that when Yom Kippur comes, he will be cast aside, unable to prosecute. However, he never gives up hope, trying his luck time and again.

Blowing the shofar confuses the Satan, causing him to loosen his hold on Am Yisrael. The lack of clarity regarding the shofar blasts, as well as the fact that we learn how many sounds to blow from Sisera's mother, both contribute to our attempt to confuse the Satan. He mistakenly assumes that we are perplexed about the number of shofar blasts to blow, and also that we adhere to the *kelippah*. But the Satan does not succeed in his diabolical plans. The shofar-blowing itself, which the Satan thinks he can use to harm Am Yisrael, rather confers Divine blessing upon them, when they take to heart its message to improve. The angels' query of the timing of Rosh Hashanah is also a ploy to confuse the Satan and prevent his indictment against us.

The word תרועה (blast) is a combination of the words תורה, ע' (Torah, seventy), a reference to the Torah, which can be interpreted in seventy ways. Only through man's resolution to study Torah and produce new interpretations can he correct his deeds and merit protection from the Satan's prosecution.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are filled with dread. We know that our lives are hanging in the balance. Nonetheless, we are adjured, even then, to serve Hashem with joy. It is difficult to serve Him with joy when we are gripped by fear. We must know that this fear is a form of descent for the purpose of ascent. Let us not, *chalilah*, fall into despair, but return to Hashem in perfect *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is not meant to depress a person, but to bring him closer to the Creator, thereby infusing him with tremendous joy. With this attitude, we will conclude these days of awe in joy and relief.

"Elokim has ascended with the blast, Hashem, with the sound of the shofar" (*Tehillim* 47:6). When one approaches Hashem on Rosh Hashanah, he is accompanied by the myriad sins he did during the past year. He is therefore confronted by Elokim, representing the Attribute of Justice (*Bereishit Rabbah* 35:3). However, as soon as he does *teshuvah*, he converts the forces of judgment to mercy, represented by the Name Hashem (*Tanchuma, Tazria* 9).

Let us illustrate with the following analogy. A king sends his tax-collector to a certain city. The citizens of that city have not only failed to pay their taxes, but they stole from the king's treasury. The king asks his minister to demand his dues.

When the townspeople hear about the minister's arrival, they hurry to greet him warmly. They prepare a banquet in his honor and drink a toast to his good health. The minister is pleasantly surprised by this and perceives it as a demonstration of their deep reverence for their king. The minister therefore reduces the amount of their debt by one-third.

When he comes into the city center, he finds tables set festively with all sorts of delicacies, all in his honor. He then decides to reduce the debt by another third.

When he further notices how much the townspeople love their king, he foregoes the entire debt. However, from now on, he stipulates that they must make sure to pay their taxes on time.

This story shows how Hashem pardons His children when they do *teshuvah*. Why does Hashem forgive us in increments, instead of all at once? Why do we need forty days of mercy and forgiveness, beginning on Rosh Chodesh Elul and ending on Yom Kippur? There are many instances of those who have earned a portion in *Olam Haba* in a brief moment. Examples are Yosef Meshita (*Bereishit Rabbah* 65:22), Yakum Ish Tzrorot (*ibid.*), and Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya (*Avodah Zarah* 17a). Why, then, do we, as a nation, need so many days in order to do *teshuvah*?

The Torah was given to Am Yisrael as a unit, not to individuals. These particular individuals had the ability to do *teshuvah* in a short moment, through making tremendous efforts. However, the nation as a whole needs to undergo the *teshuvah* process, which consists of a number of stages. For this reason, Hashem gifted us with forty days of *teshuvah*. A *ba'al teshuvah* is compared to a newborn (*Vayikra Rabbah* 30:3). A fetus takes forty days to be formed (*Bechorot* 21b). Thus, as a nation, we need forty days to make restitution for our sins. Then we will be considered new people, pure and free of sin.



## The Royalties of Rosh Hashanah

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, zy"ta, relates that in his youth, when they would announce the new month of Elul, the entire congregation would burst out in tears. Once, during Elul, he himself ascended the pulpit to deliver an address. As soon as he said the word "Elul," he fainted on the spot. He was filled with dread at the upcoming Day of Judgment.

The *Megaleh Amukot* would burst into uncontrollable crying when he reached the section of “the holy King” in the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer. He explained his tears in the following way: When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai met Vespasian, he called out, “Peace unto you, the king.” Vespasian said Rabban Yochanan deserved to be put to death for calling him the king when he was not. And if, indeed, he was the king, why had Rabbi Yochanan come to honor him only now? (*Gittin* 56a).

In this vein, the *Megaleh Amukot* regretted all the times he had not acknowledged Hashem’s kingship. Why only today did he feel fear and excitement when standing before Hashem?

At first glance, Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot seem diametrically opposed. Rosh Hashanah is the day when we stand in fear of judgment, while Sukkot is the time of our rejoicing. However, these ideas do not contradict each other. On the contrary, in order to truly experience the wonderful ecstasy of Sukkot, which cannot be compared with any other joy, one must first undergo the fear and dread of the Days of Judgment. Fear brings a person to do complete *teshuvah*. When one accomplishes this, he becomes ever closer to Hashem, as He forgives him for his sins. This is the joy we feel on Sukkot.

Rosh Hashanah is a day of concealment, as we blow the shofar “at the time when the moon is hidden for our festive day” (*Tehillim* 81:4). It is a day of fear, as David Hamelech said, “My flesh shuddered from dread” (*ibid.* 119:120). In contrast, Sukkot is a time of immense joy. At the Simchat Beit Hasho’evah, the people gained *ruach hakodesh*, due to the palpable joy in the air (*Bereishit Rabbah* 70:8).

Although the Day of Judgment is fraught with fear, we often do not perceive this fear, since Hashem’s judgment is hidden from us. The reason for this is to stave off the powers of impurity, which desire to tilt the scales against us. Unfortunately, we often do not feel the appropriate level of fear. This lack of fear is liable to lull us into a deep slumber, preventing us from doing *teshuvah* as we should.

Every Jew should be aware of the depth of justice on this day. One's joy on Sukkot will be commensurate with the fear he felt on Rosh Hashanah. Just as the judgment on Rosh Hashanah is concealed, so is Hashem's majesty on Sukkot revealed.

There was a certain tzaddik who would weep upon entering his sukkah. "Who am I to enter the sukkah, which is in the Shadow of Hashem and contains the Seven Ushpizin within it?"

On Rosh Hashanah we blow one hundred sounds to offset the one hundred cries of Sisera's mother. What is the connection? Sisera's mother wept in anguish over her son's death at the hands of Bnei Yisrael. Her cries began arousing Heavenly indictment upon them. Did they really deserve to have the mighty Sisera fall into their hands? Perhaps their deeds did not warrant such an open miracle.

Similarly, when Bnei Yisrael stood at the banks of the Yam Suf with the Egyptians in hot pursuit, the waters originally refused to part for them. Egypt's angel on High claimed that the Jews worshipped idols just like the Egyptians, and thus were undeserving of a miracle (*Zohar II*, 170b). Moreover, Michah stood among Bnei Yisrael, carrying a graven image (see *Sanhedrin* 103b). Finally, Hashem Himself interceded and commanded the waters to split (see *Shemot Rabbah* 21:6). He reminded them of the condition they had made during the six days of Creation, to part for Bnei Yisrael at the designated time (ibid; *Bereishit Rabbah* 5:5). The waters finally agreed to part.

We blow the shofar in order to nullify the powers of judgment and the prosecution aroused by the cries of Sisera's mother. We ask Hashem that just as all the negative forces were silenced when Sisera died, so, too, at this time of judgment, He should silence the voice of prosecution and inscribe His children for life and peace.

The one hundred sounds of the shofar convey to us a timeless message. On Rosh Hashanah, the day of תרועה (shofar blowing), we should resolve to connect to the Torah, which is interpreted in seventy ways – תורה ע'. The way to succeed in connecting to the Torah is by studying and

reviewing one's Torah lessons one hundred and one times. The last time teaches that there is no end to Torah study. One must always delve deeper and deeper into its layers of meaning. What he understood the hundredth time he opened a *sefer* cannot be compared with what he will glean on the one hundred and first time. The more one delves into the Torah, the more he will unearth.

All "firsts" contain an element of sanctity. The firstborn son must be redeemed, the firstborn sheep must be redeemed, and the first of the fruits must be brought to the Kohen. The first day of Creation was the day when Hashem's glory was revealed in this world. There are those who say that Hashem created everything on the first day and merely reinforced each creation on the subsequent days. This shows how significant the first day of Creation was. Why, then, do we not accord it more honor than the other days of the week?

The sixth day of Creation was more important to Hashem than the first, because Adam was created on it. Man's mission is to crown Hashem over himself. This applies every day of the year, but especially on Rosh Hashanah, the day of man's creation. One who coronates Hashem on Rosh Hashanah in fear and awe merits wearing the crown of joy on Sukkot.



## Reverberations

When Hashem gave Bnei Yisrael the Torah, a shofar sounded throughout the world. We read that "on the third day, when it was morning, there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on the mountain, and the sound of the shofar was very strong, and the entire people that was in the camp shuddered... The sound of the shofar became continually much stronger; Moshe would speak and G-d would respond to him with a voice" (*Shemot* 19:16, 19).

At *Matan Torah*, the entire world was enveloped in silence. No animal or human made a sound (see *Shemot Rabbah* 29:9). On hearing Hashem announce, “I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt” (*Shemot* 20:2), Bnei Yisrael fainted. The angels revived them. When Hashem saw that His children could not withstand the force of His voice, He commanded Moshe to continue stating the rest of the commandments.

At *Matan Torah*, “the entire nation in the camp shuddered” (ibid. 19:16). Hashem could have given Bnei Yisrael the Torah when they were in a state of ecstasy. Why did He choose to do so while they were in a state of trepidation, trembling in fear of the shofar and the thunder and lightning? When a couple marries, the groom does not cast fear over his bride, threatening her to marry him, or else... Why, then, did Hashem make the match between Am Yisrael and the Torah, our bride, in an atmosphere of fear?

This was in order to teach us the concept of fear of Hashem, which is essential for observing His mitzvot. Until now, Am Yisrael were under Egyptian sovereignty. They were accustomed to fearing policemen and taskmasters. Hashem redeemed them, enabling them to exchange their fear of the Egyptians with fear of Hashem. Such fear causes a person to connect to His Maker. If a manager of a large corporation wants his employees to obey him, he must cast a measure of fear over them. This motivates them to fulfill his bidding. When the boss acts like “one of the guys,” his workers will not think twice about disregarding his orders.

The shofar produces a terrifying sound. I once heard that a gentile who lived near a *beit kenesset* did not go to work on Rosh Hashanah but stayed home all day. When asked why, he replied that when he would hear the Jews blowing the ram’s horn in the synagogue, he would feel as if his heart was breaking and was overcome by the urge to cry. He enjoyed this, experiencing an internal cleansing. If a gentile testifies to the power of the shofar, shouldn’t we, believers, sons of believers, be shaken by its call?

The shofar at Sinai stirred Bnei Yisrael to accept upon themselves the yoke of Heaven. Receiving the Torah in a state of fear encouraged the

people to make sure to guard it under all circumstances. With the giving of the Torah, Hashem was transmitting the following message. For the twenty-six generations before the giving of the Torah, man was not sustained through the merit of the Torah, but only through Hashem's love (*Pesachim* 118a). But from now on, Am Yisrael was responsible for the world's existence. Every single day, one is adjured to say, "For my sake, the world was created" (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu*). This statement contains the tremendous responsibility of shouldering the burden of the world's continuation, through studying Torah and keeping mitzvot.

We are beset by suffering and adversity on all sides. This is Hashem's way of avenging the insult to the Torah. Bnei Yisrael have abandoned His Torah and turned to various forms of materialistic pleasures. The challenges we face are meant to awaken us to *teshuvah*. The Yamim Nora'im are especially conducive for this, because "Hashem is close to those who call to Him, to those who call to Him in truth" (*Tehillim* 145:18). Notwithstanding the wonderful potential for penitence during the Yamim Nora'im, one is able to do *teshuvah* at any given time. This is in line with Chazal's exhortation to "repent one day before your death" (*Avot* 2:10). Since nobody knows when he will die, he should constantly be in a state of *teshuvah* (*Shabbat* 153a).

"When you go out to war against your enemies, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captives" (*Devarim* 21:10). The *Ba'alei Mussar* (*Alshich*, *Devarim* 20:19) explain that this *pasuk* refers to the battle against the *yetzer hara*. One must wage a constant war with this force, his bitterest enemy. When Hashem sees that one is determined to vanquish this enemy, He grants him *siyata di'Shemaya* to succeed. Man is a mere mortal; he certainly does not possess the power to overcome this mammoth force. But Hashem tells us: "I created the *yetzer hara*; I created Torah as its antidote" (*Kiddushin* 30b). Hashem empowered us with the Torah, the counterforce of the *yetzer hara*.

David Hamelech said, "Guard my soul, for I am virtuous" (*Tehillim* 86:2). David was asking for Divine help in outwitting the *yetzer hara*, for he

wished to remain virtuous. The Torah tells us to place “judges and officers... in all your cities” (*Devarim* 16:18). This is an injunction to place guards upon all the parts of one’s body in order to protect them from the *yetzer hara* (see *Teivat Gomeh, Shoftim* 4). “The eye sees and the heart desires” (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 15:39). If one is careful to guard his eyes from seeing inappropriate sights and block his ears from listening to forbidden speech, he will merit protecting the sanctity of his body and will be spared the ploys of the *yetzer hara*.

On one of my trips to Los Angeles, we were all seated on the plane, but the plane did not move. Various technicians boarded in order to discover the source of the problem. They were all perplexed, as everything looked fine. After a number of hours, the source of the problem was discovered. A small mouse was found in one of the plane’s engines, rendering it unfit for travel. After removing the mouse, the plane was able to take off.

Hashem sends various messages in order to teach us lessons. Man can be compared to an airplane. As far as his potential, the sky’s the limit. A sin, though, is like a mouse, nestling inside him and preventing him from functioning properly. Only after doing complete *teshuvah* and eradicating all impressions of sin can one function optimally and connect to Hashem.

There are two types of *teshuvah* – *teshuvah* out of fear, and *teshuvah* out of love (see *Yoma* 86a and b). Most people do *teshuvah* out of fear of punishment. Hashem commands us to blow the shofar, which makes our hearts tremble in fear of judgment. A minority of people do *teshuvah* out of love of Hashem, taking pleasure in doing His will. Doing *teshuvah* from love is the highest level of *teshuvah*. One who serves Hashem with love will not look for excuses in order to exempt himself from certain mitzvot.

Such a person spends all his days analyzing his actions and thinking of ways to improve. He does not need the shofar’s call in order to do *teshuvah*. His sole desire is to bring satisfaction to his Maker. Conversely, one who does *teshuvah* out of fear is frightened into doing Hashem’s bidding. Such a person needs a very loud alarm clock to wake him up.

How can one remember Hashem on a steady basis, not only on the Yamim Nora'im, when he hears the shofar? *Chazal* offer the following advice: One who wishes to vanquish the *yetzer hara* should examine his deeds and go to learn Torah. If this is ineffective, he should recite *Kriyat Shema*. If this does not help, he should remind himself of the day of death (*Berachot* 5a).

At a funeral, everyone cries as they escort the deceased to his final resting place. It seems as if they will all perish from heartache. However, within a short while, everything is forgotten and it is business as usual. How can we explain this paradox?

This is the power of forgetting, which enables a person to detach himself from emotion-laden experiences and brings him back to daily routine. During the Yamim Nora'im, everyone is overcome with the desire to better their ways. They undertake various resolutions in order to secure a good judgment. How painful it is to see that after only a few days the impression of these exalted days dissipates. One goes back to his iniquitous ways like a dog that returns to its vomit. All of his resolutions vanish into thin air.

In order to preserve the impact of the Yamim Nora'im, we must draw their inspiration into our daily lives. We do this by remembering the sound of the shofar on a daily basis. Of course, actual hearing cannot be compared to imagined hearing, but the very act of remembering the fearful sounds of the shofar can help a person correct his actions and preserve his pure state throughout the year.

The *Ba'alei Mussar* offer the following analogy. A person was chosen to serve as king for a five-year period. This man did not know the language of the people. However, they pressed him to be king, and he agreed. He was well aware that his days as king were numbered. He therefore decided to spend his time gathering as much wealth as he could. When the five-year term would end, he would return home a rich man.

During the Yamim Nora'im, we are closely connected to Hashem, King of the universe. If we are wise, we will take advantage of these days and

allow their effect to spill over onto the rest of the year. After these days have passed, we will remain with the spiritual wealth we amassed. We will thus be considered living a life of elevation not only during these special days, but during the entire year.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did Hashem give Bnei Yisrael the Torah in an atmosphere of fear? The Torah is our bride. A groom does not frighten his bride into marrying him.
- ◆ Hashem wanted to bequeath to us the concept of fear of Heaven. Until now, Bnei Yisrael were accustomed to fearing the Egyptians. Now, by accepting the Torah, they would learn to fear Hashem.
- ◆ The sound of the shofar straightens out man's heart. The shofar was sounded at *Matan Torah* in order to cause Bnei Yisrael to accept upon themselves fear of Heaven. Another purpose was to inform them that until now, the world was governed by the Attribute of Mercy. It is only through the power of the Torah that the world endures. Receiving the Torah in a state of fear encouraged the people to make sure to guard it under all circumstances.
- ◆ “When you go out to war against your enemies.” This is the war with the *yetzer hara*. Man is constantly struggling against this mighty enemy. It is his job to conquer it. The command, “Judges and officers you shall place in all your cities” adjures us to place guards over the various parts of our bodies in order to steer clear of sin. In the way man wishes to go, he is led.
- ◆ There are two types of *teshuvah* – out of love and out of fear. It is preferable to do *teshuvah* out of love. One who repents out of love always looks for ways to bring pleasure to Hashem. One who repents out of fear, on the other hand, is stirred to repent only when he is shocked into it, as on the Yamim Nora'im.
- ◆ One who wishes to constantly connect to Hashem must fight the force of forgetfulness. He should maintain, throughout the entire year, the

moments of elevation which he attained on the Yamim Nora'im. He can accomplish this by remembering the sound of the shofar and its qualities.



## The Monthly Cycle of Teshuvah

*“A land that Hashem, your G-d, seeks out; the eyes of Hashem, your G-d, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the year’s end”*

*(Devarim 11:12)*

When is the beginning of the year? Is it Tishrei, when we start the new year, or Nisan, the first of the months?

When Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, they were submerged in the forty-nine levels of defilement (*Zohar*, beginning of *Parashat Yitro*). In His infinite kindness, Hashem endowed them with the mitzvah of sanctifying the new month. This mitzvah enabled them to become purified of their defilement. The first month that Bnei Yisrael did complete *teshuvah* and came closer to Hashem was Nisan. In memory of this momentous occasion, many have the custom to fast every Erev Rosh Chodesh. Moreover, during the days of the Beit Hamikdash, a special sin-offering was brought on Rosh Chodesh.

Thus Nisan is the first of the months because of the element of *teshuvah* inherent in it. It was the month that imbued Bnei Yisrael with renewal, since this was the first time the new moon, signifying the new month, was blessed. Nisan thus invested Bnei Yisrael with the power to do *teshuvah* at the beginning of every month. This applies particularly to Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, which is considered the first day of the new year, since Adam Harishon was created on this day (see *Yalkut*

*Shimoni, Bamidbar 782*). According to this, it is appropriate that Nisan has the appellation of “the first of the months.” It is also the month when, just before leaving Egypt, Bnei Yisrael demonstrated tremendous self-sacrifice to do Hashem’s will.

Nisan, as the “first of the months,” symbolizes renewal, as implied by the word חודש (month), which has the same root as חדש (new). Rosh Hashanah, as the “beginning of the year,” represents change, as implied by the word שנה (year), which is closely related to the word שנוי (change) (*Ra’avad*). Rosh Hashanah is the time of inner change. Until now, one may have been pulled toward materialism. The Yamim Nora’im present us with the opportunity to make essential changes and sanctify ourselves before approaching Hashem. It is not sufficient to change one’s actions; he must examine his inner workings and see if he is need of a complete transformation.

If one violates the law, he is taken to task. The more serious the violation, the more qualified are the lawyers he needs to advocate for him. Such is the case as the Day of Judgment approaches. We need spokesmen who will loyally defend us before Hashem. This is the basis of the custom to visit the graves of tzaddikim. Tzaddikim, who are bound with Hashem, have the ability to speak on our behalf so that we merit a good life.

Moreover, when one goes to visit the graves of tzaddikim, he remembers that everybody will eventually meet his end. While the body remains buried underground, the *neshamah* returns to its source on High, called to account for all its deeds. Tzaddikim are considered living even after death (see *Berachot 18a*), for their lips continue uttering words of the living Torah (see *Yevamot 97a*). Visiting the graves of tzaddikim arouses a person to his purpose in this world. The stark contrast of the two choices before him is blatant: Will his life continue on High, where he will bask in the glory of the *Shechinah*, like the tzaddikim, or will his life end with death, like the animals of the wild, which die and are completely forgotten?

How well I remember my father, zy”a, always telling me, “If you wish to merit good life, success, health, and financial security, you must mold yourself into a fitting vessel for blessing. Otherwise, all blessing will simply seep out.” A thirsty man must obtain a glass to fill with water. If he does not have a glass, how can he drink? If one wishes to win the state lottery, he must first purchase a ticket. If we want to merit Hashem’s limitless blessings, we must first make changes within ourselves. When Hashem sees how intent we are on becoming “my Beloved’s,” He will come close to us and fulfill the end of this avowal, “And my Beloved is mine.”

A wealthy businessman related that he wakes up every morning at four a.m. for the *Selichot* prayers. I told him, “May you be strong and blessed.” However, I added that since he awakens every day at this hour, it is not considered especially early for him. He must wake up even earlier for *Selichot* in order for it to effect a change in him.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, zy”a, father of the *Mussar* movement, asks the following. Why, in previous generations, was the fear of the Days of Judgment palpable in the air, whereas nowadays, we go about our business as usual without any noticeable dread? I came to the conclusion that in order to make real life changes, one must prepare properly for the Yamim Nora’im. The problem is that preceding the Days of Judgment we are in the midst of *bein hazmanim*, days of downtime and vacation. We are simply unavailable to make any real life changes. In order to enter Rosh Hashanah truly changed, we must detach ourselves from “vacation mode.” We should visit the graves of tzaddikim and evoke their merit in honor of the upcoming Days of Judgment.

Moshe told Pharaoh, “The G-d of the *Ivrim* sent me” (*Shemot* 5:3). Avraham Avinu was called, “Avraham the *Ivri*” (*Bereishit* 14:13). The French speak French; the Spanish speak Spanish. However, the Jews do not speak Jewish, but *Ivrit* (Hebrew). What is the root of the name *Ivrim*, which describes the Jewish nation?

One idea is that the word עברי is similar to the word עֶבֶר (past). The Jewish nation exists in merit of its illustrious past. Bnei Yisrael received the Torah at Sinai and transmit it from one generation to the next. Since every generation is diminished in stature, we must constantly seek connection with the previous generations, which were worlds beyond us.

In all our prayers, we mention the merit of the Avot, calling Hashem, “The G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak, and the G-d of Yaakov.” Our Avot passed on thousands of years ago. How can we arouse their merit? By connecting with them. We are like a plant. The stronger our connection with previous generations, who are our roots, the more firm and healthy we will grow.

The Torah constantly reminds us of our slavery in Egypt. We mention this point often in our prayers. Generally, slaves wish to forget their sorrowful past. Why, then, do we keep bringing it up? It is because the future of our nation depends on its past. Hashem redeemed us from Egyptian bondage to become His servants. Only by realizing how bitter our lot of bondage was in Egypt can we fully appreciate Hashem’s salvation and become indentured to His service.

There is a custom on Rosh Hashanah to eat the head of a sheep or fish. We recite the prayer, “May we be like the head and not like the tail” (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 583:2). Others, including my father, had the custom of placing an entire fish on the Rosh Hashanah table. This depicts our history. We began as the tail, enslaved in Egypt. Hashem, in His kindness, extracted us and elevated us to the status of the head. By analyzing our past tribulations as the tail, when we were a downtrodden and depressed nation, we will arouse ourselves to our position of pride in becoming Hashem’s chosen people, head of all the nations.

When Adam Harishon was created, his heel was so luminous that it shone stronger than the sun (*Tanchuma, Acharei Mot* 2). If this was the power of his heel, we cannot fathom how great his head was. Unfortunately, due to his sin, Hashem removed this radiance. While before the sin, Adam was like the head, the crown of Creation who evoked

fear in all the animals, after the sin, he was like the tail, cowering in fright from the animal kingdom.

On Rosh Hashanah, the day of Adam's creation (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 782*), we ask Hashem to raise us to the level of the head, as Adam was before his sin, when he ruled over the animals. As long as man upholds Hashem's word, he is the crown of Creation. All creatures revere him and hasten to execute his will. However, when man acts inappropriately, he loses his status and is filled with fear of the animals, which were created on a lower level than he (see *Shabbat 151b*).

Eretz Yisrael is "a land that Hashem, your G-d, seeks out... from the beginning of the year until the year's end" (Devarim 11:12). The word רשית (beginning), normally spelled ראשית, is written here without a letter (אלף) 'א. When describing Hashem, the אלוף (Master) of the world, there is no need to include this letter. When one analyzes the points mentioned here, he will humbly serve the One Who created the world and manages it every moment.



## Blessings Fulfilled

***“Speak to the Children of Israel, saying: In the seventh month, on the first of the month, there shall be a rest day for you, a remembrance with shofar blasts, a holy assembly”***

*(Vayikra 23:23-24)*

The blowing of the shofar is an integral part of Rosh Hashanah and is an obligation. Since this is such a significant matter, many halachot revolve around it. Who is required to hear the shofar? How many sounds must one hear in order to fulfill his obligation? What is the halachah

regarding Rosh Hashanah that falls on Shabbat? What are the intentions one should have while blowing the shofar?

The shofar blowing is divided into three sections: *Malchuyot* (Kingship), *Zichronot* (Remembrances), and *Shofarot* (Shofars). We are told that “on a day of your gladness... you shall sound the trumpets... and they shall be for a remembrance for you before your G-d; I am Hashem, your G-d” (*Bamidbar* 10:10). Rashi elucidates: This *pasuk* teaches us to recite the sections of prayer regarding Kingship, Remembrances, and Shofars. The words, “You shall sound” refer to Shofars; the words, “For a remembrance” refer to Remembrances; and the words, “I am Hashem, your G-d,” refer to Kingship.

On Rosh Hashanah, we crown Hashem upon ourselves by blowing the shofar, similar to the nations of the world who blow trumpets when they coronate their kings. Hashem is our King all year long; why do we have a mitzvah to blow the shofar only on Rosh Hashanah?

Although we are obligated to coronate Hashem every day of the year, we are too involved in our mundane activities to really feel Hashem’s Presence on an ordinary weekday. When Rosh Hashanah arrives, Hashem is closer to us than ever, leaving His palace, as it were, to be with His subjects. It is much easier for us to feel His Presence. Moreover, the days of mercy and forgiveness are auspicious for doing *teshuvah* and obtaining forgiveness. Arousing oneself to *teshuvah* during these days increases his awareness of Hashem. In his heart, he realizes that Hashem is the King and Master of the entire world.

Hashem was, is, and will always be. It would seem appropriate to blow the shofar to announce His Kingship every single day of the year. However, we are humans with limited capabilities. We are unable to feel the strength of Hashem’s rulership on any random day. When Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Remembrance, arrives, we remember Who is our king. The shofar’s blasts imbue us with the ability to recognize our Creator.

Hashem created the world with ten utterances (*Avot* 5:1). This is alluded to in *parashat Bereishit*, where we read about Creation. We find the term, “And Hashem said” mentioned nine times. With the additional word, “*Bereishit*,” which is also a form of speech, the total is ten (see *Rosh Hashanah* 32a). Hashem can do anything; He certainly can create the world with one utterance. Why did He choose to do it in ten?

These ten utterances correspond to the ten *sefirot*, the channels through which blessing comes to our world. The ten *sefirot* are essentially ten levels of holiness, each more sanctified than the previous. The more one sanctifies himself, the more bounty he merits receiving, corresponding to the level of *sefirah* that he attained. It is through this *sefirah* that he connects with the Creator. Sadly, when one sins, he obstructs the pipelines of blessing both for himself and for the entire world.

Hashem began creating the world on the twenty-fifth of Elul. On Rosh Hashanah, He created man (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 29:1). He brought before him all the creatures which were created through the ten utterances. Hashem then told Adam, “The entire world was created for your pleasure. However, in order to enjoy this world, I have one condition. You must obey one mitzvah – not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.” Hashem added that as long as he obeyed this command, Adam could draw down boundless blessing by means of the ten *sefirot*. But the moment he would sin, he would block the path of abundance from reaching this world.

Each *sefirah* contains ten *igulim*. Altogether, there are one hundred of these mystical circles. The one hundred sounds of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah correspond to these one hundred *igulim*. They were damaged with Adam’s sin, on Rosh Hashanah. We try to rectify this sin with our shofar blasts.

Adam’s sin was a form of rebellion against Hashem, Who was coronated King on Rosh Hashanah. Before Adam came on the scene, there was nobody to serve Hashem. Adam gave names to all living creatures based on their inner qualities (see *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:3). Similarly, Adam was

the first to call Hashem, “*Adon*” (Master). He instinctively understood that Hashem manages the entire world. When he sinned, he was defying Hashem’s kingship. One reason why we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is to reinstate Hashem as our Master and merit closeness with Him.

Due to Adam’s sin, the powers of purity were captured by the *kelippah* of the *yetzer hara*. When Bnei Yisrael gather in their *batei kenesset*, blowing the shofar in *teshuvah*, they diminish the power of impurity and extricate the *nitzotzot shel kedushah* which have been entrapped. On Rosh Hashanah, a war is taking place between the forces of impurity, which try to prevent us from crowning Hashem upon ourselves, and the forces of holiness, as depicted by the shofar. These forces of holiness are meant to awaken us to improve and reconnect to Hashem, our King. When we succeed in sequestering the crown of *kedushah* from the hands of defilement, returning it rightfully to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, we give Him tremendous *nachat*.

A person must hear one hundred shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah. Each sound rectifies the damage done to the one hundred *igulim* of the ten *sefirot*. We do not know how many *igulim* were impaired. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to hear all one hundred sounds.

Everyone assembles in the *beit kenesset* to coronate Hashem on Rosh Hashanah, for “in a multitude of people is the king’s glory” (*Mishlei* 14:28). Just as a trumpet is sounded to call the people to hear the king’s message, so the shofar calls to us to gather and coronate Hashem in true unity.

On Rosh Hashanah, the shofar is sounded to crown Hashem upon ourselves. During the rest of the year, we accomplish this through the recitation of *Kriyat Shema*, when we affirm our belief in one G-d and appoint Him as our King. Another method we employ is donning tefillin, which bind us to our Creator. The tefillin contain within them passages from *Kriyat Shema*. The moments spent laying tefillin and reciting *Kriyat Shema* are moments of sanctity, like the moments of sounding the shofar. They are designated for crowning Hashem and unifying Am Yisrael.

We have the power to crown Hashem upon ourselves by inviting Him into our homes. Hashem created man and woman on Rosh Hashanah. He placed the letter ׳ into the name אִישׁ (man), and the letter ׳ה into the name אִשָּׁה (woman). When husband and wife live peacefully together, these two letters, which comprise Hashem’s Name ה־י, are combined, and the *Shechinah* comes down to reside among them. But if there is dissention among them, *chalilah*, Hashem removes His Name, leaving them with nothing but twice the letters אִשׁ (fire). They are consumed by the fire of their friction (*Sotah* 17a).

Furthermore, the World to Come was created with the letter ׳, while this world was created with the letter ׳ה. When a couple unites in love, unity, peace, and understanding, these two letters unite. They have the power to unite worlds, thereby increasing our awareness of Hashem’s majesty.

When Hashem originally created the world, He created it with an All-encompassing Light, which we cannot fathom. It shone from one end of the world to the other. After Adam sinned, Hashem hid this light from our world and preserved it for the tzaddikim in the World to Come (see *Shemot Rabbah* 35:1). When husband and wife unite and Hashem rests His *Shechinah* upon them, they restore to this world some of the original light which exists in the Upper Worlds.

Similarly, when one does *teshuvah* and accepts Hashem as his King, he brings the light of the World to Come closer to this world. He opens up the pipelines of blessing for all forms of bounty.

*Parashat Ki Tavo* is read close to Rosh Hashanah. This *parashah* opens with the mitzvah of *bikurim*, which was in effect during the time of the Beit Hamikdash. “It will be when you enter the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it, and dwell in it, that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose, to make His Name rest there.”

*Bikurim* represent the tremendous bounty which existed in Eretz Yisrael as long as Bnei Yisrael heeded Hashem's voice. When we crown Him as our King, obeying Him, studying His Torah, and doing His mitzvot, the earth produces succulent, Grade A fruits. Bnei Yisrael bring the first of these fruits to the Beit Hamikdash as *bikurim*. By doing His will, we rectify the ten *sefirot* of blessing, which were damaged with Adam's sin. In this manner, we open the channels of goodness, allowing blessing and bounty to flow upon us and the Land.



## Teshuvah – Damage Control

In the Rosh Hashanah prayers, we recite, “Today is the beginning of the world; today He will cause all creatures to stand in judgment.” Adam Harishon, crown of Creation, a world unto himself, was created on this exalted day. Unfortunately, he sinned on this day, as well (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 782*). Although, according to the letter of the law, Adam should have been put to death, Hashem dealt kindly with him and allowed him to live. In order that we should always remember this incident, Hashem enacted Rosh Hashanah as a yearly Day of Judgment for all future generations. All creatures of the world stand before Hashem in order to give a reckoning of their deeds. Based on their actions, they are judged for life and blessing or, *chalilah*, suffering and adversity.

After Kayin killed his brother, Hevel, Adam met him and asked, “How was your judgment?” Kayin replied that he made amends with Hashem, after bemoaning that his “sin is too great to bear” (*Bereishit 4:13*). When Adam saw the great power of *teshuvah*, he also did *teshuvah*, composing the psalm, “A psalm, a song for the Shabbat day” (*Tehillim 92:1*). Why was Adam inspired by Kayin to do *teshuvah*? Why didn't he feel an inner stirring of his own to return to Hashem? Moreover, when Hashem rebuked him for violating His word and eating of the forbidden fruit, Adam

did not immediately confess. Instead, he blamed his wife, Chava, for causing him to sin. Instead of showing gratitude to Hashem for the gift of a wife, he ungratefully said, “The woman whom You gave me, she gave me of the tree...” (*Bereishit* 3:12).

This is truly astounding. Adam, the handiwork of Hashem Himself, greater than the angels, did not discover the concept of *teshuvah* on his own, and even blamed his wife for his sin instead of taking responsibility for it himself. Adam was endowed with immense wisdom. This is how he was able to name each animal, according to its essence (see *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:3). If he was so intelligent, why didn’t he think of doing *teshuvah* on his own, instead of having to learn this from Kayin?

“Seek Hashem when He is to be found; call to Him when He is near” (*Yeshayahu* 55:6). This *pasuk* refers to the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (see *Rosh Hashanah* 18a). Since Adam Harishon sinned on Rosh Hashanah, he should have applied this *pasuk* to himself and immediately done *teshuvah*. He had such a close connection with Hashem, speaking to Him and hearing His voice directly. Why didn’t he take advantage of these wonderful days to return to Hashem?

“Kayin left the presence of Hashem.” Rashi expounds, “He left with meekness, as if he were fooling Hashem.” Kayin did not do genuine *teshuvah*, but remained wicked. How, then, could he claim to his father that he had made amends with Hashem? And how could Adam learn to do real *teshuvah* from such a sorry example?

Hashem was fully aware that Kayin did not do perfect *teshuvah*. Nevertheless, He forgave him. This led me to think about how we do *teshuvah*. When we go to the *beit kenesset* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we introspect and confess our sins. Not long afterward, we’re back to square one. Isn’t this a form of fooling Hashem? Aren’t we like someone who immerses in a *mikveh* while grasping an insect, which confers impurity? Every time we admit to our sins yet repeat them, we are like a dog that returns to its vomit.

Had Hashem judged Kayin like one who fools Him, we would receive similar treatment when we confess our sins on the Yamim Nora'im. We would deserve especially harsh judgment. Hashem judged Kayin leniently, based on his words of remorse, in order to enable Bnei Yisrael, throughout the generations, to merit His mercy in judgment. Hashem guaranteed Adam that just as his decree was lightened, although he was undeserving, so would his progeny be judged with mercy and kindness (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 782*).

The distance between this world and the World to Come, and the distance between truth and falsehood is a hair's breadth. Kayin merited hearing Hashem's voice directly. He spoke to Him and even did *teshuvah*. However, he "left the Presence of Hashem." This shows us the power of the *yetzer hara*, which needs only a split second to convert a person from a *tzaddik* into a *rasha*. I would like to add that Kayin did genuine *teshuvah*, but immediately afterward, he attempted to fool Hashem. From the status of a real *ba'al teshuvah*, who earned a sign of protection on his forehead, Kayin descended to the level of one who tries to fool Hashem.

In order to prevent our decline, in even a brief moment, from the status of *ba'al teshuvah*, to that of a sinner, we must always consider our sins, as David said so eloquently, "My sin is always before me" (*Tehillim 51:5*). We should not forget that we sinned even after we have done *teshuvah*. The *yetzer hara* is determined to incite us and will not give up easily. Remembering that one previously sinned will fill him with the strength needed to fight his enemy. He will stand up to it like a fortified wall, preventing it from creeping in between the cracks.

After Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, he was overcome with shame. When Hashem asked him, "Where are you?" he realized how much damage he had caused. He understood that he and his wife deserved a severe punishment for disobeying Hashem's word. Perhaps Adam was so overcome with grief that he fell into despair. This despair caused him to act ungratefully toward Hashem for gifting him his wife. Hashem dealt kindly with Adam and Chava, and did not put them to death, but punished

them. They assumed that their punishment atoned for their sin. The thought of doing *teshuvah* never entered their minds.

When Adam considered Kayin's sin of killing Hevel, and with him the destruction of all Hevel's future generations, he was sure Kayin would be put to death on the spot. Instead, he watched him walking about, full of joy. Adam Harishon took this as a personal message. "If *teshuvah* is so powerful, Hashem will surely accept my *teshuvah*."

"Consider three things and you will not come to sin: Know from where you are coming, to where you are going, and before Whom you will give an accounting. From where do you come? From a putrid drop" (*Avot* 3:1). Adam lacked the element of "From where do you come," for he was the handiwork of Hashem Himself. Since he could not contemplate from where he came, he could not arouse himself to do *teshuvah* on his own.

Kayin, on the other hand, a human being like everyone else, could look to his past and allow it to guide him to do *teshuvah*. This led him to see the severity of his misdeeds and confess them. However, he failed to constantly remember the sin of his past. The *yetzer hara* took advantage of this and convinced him to act as if he was fooling Hashem. Nonetheless, Hashem forewent His honor and forgave Kayin.

Kayin taught Adam that *teshuvah* is a supernatural force which rescinds harsh decrees and replaces Hashem's anger with appeasement. None of us could withstand the strict hand of justice were it not mitigated with compassion.

Hashem knows what a tremendous force the *yetzer hara* is. Even if one did *teshuvah*, who is to say he will not fall into sin again? If Hashem were to judge us for our future iniquities, we would all be in a sorry state. He therefore judges us according to our situation on the Days of Judgment. Furthermore, one who comes to purify himself receives help from Heaven (*Yoma* 38b), and in the way one wishes to go, he is led (*Makkot* 10b).

A fascinating example of this is the story of Yeravam ben Nevat. By erecting idols in Dan and Beit El, he sinned and caused many others to

sin. Nevertheless, Hashem made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Yeravam was invited to walk together with Hashem Himself and the great tzaddik, David ben Yishai, in Gan Eden. This was a golden opportunity to do *teshuvah*. However, instead of jumping at the prospect, Yeravam conceitedly asked, "Who will be first?" Hashem gave Yeravam the chance to do *teshuvah* even though he knew this would be his response.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu awaits our *teshuvah*. He offers an opening of *teshuvah* even to the greatest gangsters. He gives everyone an equal opportunity to return to Him, even when He knows that the person will not take Him up on His offer, or that his *teshuvah* will be short-lived.



## Torah – Our Crowning Glory

Inherent in the term ראש השנה (Rosh Hashanah) are the ideas of *head* and *change*. The word ראש means *head*, and שנה means *year*, but can also refer to שנוי (change). This is the time of year to make changes in our mindset. Rosh Hashanah is the day designated for crowning Hashem upon us, unconditionally and without personal interests. How does a Jew crown Hashem upon himself? Through learning Torah and observing mitzvot. The Torah is Hashem's crown of glory. By studying it and observing its mitzvot, we place this crown upon Him, as it were. This is in line with Hashem's instruction, "Recite [*pesukim* regarding] Kingship before Me so that you may proclaim Me King over you" (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 782*).

Whenever one learns Torah, he is crowning Hashem over himself. It is forbidden to involve oneself in extraneous matters at this time. Doing so is considered rebelling against Hashem's Kingship, which warrants the death penalty. This is why Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai teaches (*Avot 3:7*) that whoever is studying Torah and halts his review in order to admire nature deserves to be put to death.

On Rosh Hashanah, it is our obligation to ensure that our *teshuvah* is real, like Adam's, and not superficial, like Kayin's, who acted as though he was fooling Hashem.

Before giving Bnei Yisrael the Torah, Hashem offered it to the nations. They each asked what is written in it. When they heard its prohibitions, they flatly refused to accept it. Finally, Bnei Yisrael were offered the Torah, proclaiming, "*Na'aseh v'nishma!*" Surely Hashem knew that the gentiles would not be interested in the Torah. Why, then, did He offer it to them in the first place?

By first offering the Torah to the gentiles, its value rose in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael. By observing how the gentiles rudely rejected it, Bnei Yisrael felt responsible for it. Had Hashem not offered the Torah to the gentiles, they might have later claimed that had Hashem given them the choice, they certainly would have accepted it with open arms. Had this been the case, Bnei Yisrael would not have felt the same bond with the Torah. In order to keep the Torah in all its minutiae, one must feel that the Torah is his. Since Hashem gave us the Torah after first offering it to the nations, Bnei Yisrael feel that the Torah is their inheritance alone. They are willing to go to any lengths to fulfill its mandates, even sacrificing their lives for it, if necessary.

On Rosh Hashanah, one who is deeply connected with the Torah all year round is able to crown Hashem with the crown of Torah, comprised of Hashem's Names (see *Zohar, Shemot* 124a). Torah is the means by which we coronate Hashem as our King.



## A Noble Dedication

On Rosh Hashanah, we read the *haftarah* about Channah, who waited many years until she had a child. She vowed that if she had a child, she would dedicate him to Hashem. Her prayers were answered and she had a son, whom she named שמואל (Shmuel). This name is derived from the phrase שמו א-ל (he is sanctified for G-d).

From the day he was weaned, Channah placed him in the Mishkan so that his ears would hear words of Torah and his entire being would be suffused with sanctity. He grew to become the great Shmuel Hanavi, who was equal to both Moshe and Aharon (*Tehillim* 99:6). His mother's self-sacrifice set him on the path of greatness. Although Channah waited and prayed for many long years to be granted a child, when she was finally blessed, she dedicated him to Hashem.

In contrast, we find that Elisha ben Avuyah was a great Sage who became an apostate. He fell so greatly that he is not called by his true name, but *Acher* (Other One) (see *Chagigah* 15a). At his *brit milah*, Elisha's father dedicated him to Torah study (*Yerushalmi, Chagigah* 1:1, 9:2). How, then, could Elisha have fallen so low? How did he spiral downward while Shmuel ascended to the heights?

Their backgrounds may seem similar, but were, in essence, quite different. Channah's sole interest was to bring glory to Hashem. She devoted herself completely to her son's spiritual development. She never sought personal benefits such as honor and prestige. Conversely, Elisha's father dedicated his son to Torah study not out of love for Torah, but for the honor that is accorded *talmidei chachamim*. At Elisha's *brit* celebration, his father noticed that a fire surrounded the Sages there. He was enflamed with the glory offered to Torah scholars and wanted that for his son. Since Elisha's initiation into Torah study was flawed, he did not merit the protection the Torah offers and became corrupted.

We read this *haftarah* on Rosh Hashanah to publicize the following message. In order to be a true servant of Hashem, one must devote

himself completely to Hashem and His Torah. One's sole goal should be to fulfill Hashem's word. He should never use his Torah knowledge to bring himself glory or knock down others. May we merit standing before Hashem on the Day of Judgment with clean hands and hearts purely devoted to Him.

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### **In Summary**

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- ◆ Channah vowed that if she had a child, she would dedicate him to Hashem and His Torah. She called her son Shmuel, reflecting his life mission.
- ◆ Elisha ben Avuyah was also dedicated to Torah study. However, he became corrupted. What was the intrinsic difference between his beginning and that of Shmuel?
- ◆ Channah's objective was to bring glory to Hashem, whereas Elisha's father had interests of honor and glory for his son.
- ◆ We read this *haftarah* on Rosh Hashanah in order to transmit the message that one can become a servant of Hashem only through negating oneself for His sake.



## Rosh Hashanah – Gems



### Headed in the Right Direction

We place various foods on the Rosh Hashanah table, each one symbolizing a form of success for the upcoming year. Many have the custom to place the head of a lamb or a fish on the table and even taste of it, while reciting the prayer, “May it be Your will... that we be like a head and not like a tail.” Many add, “Please remember for our sake the *Akeidah* and the ram of Yitzchak Avinu, son of Avraham Avinu.” Why is it not enough to say this prayer without bringing the food to the table and eating of it?

The head of the animal has tremendous symbolism. The power of seeing something is much more effective than merely talking about it. This is why we place the symbolic foods on the holiday table.

Man is singular, among all the creatures, in his ability to think. This gives him the power to talk. Animals have heads, but they cannot talk, because they lack intelligence.

The word שנה (year) is closely related to the word שנוי (change) (*Ra'avad* 3:5). One must spend his years in the process of changing himself for the better. The *Pele Yo'etz* (*Rosh Hashanah; Tekiat Shofar*) says that if one does not strive to mend his ways, the shofar blown on Rosh Hashanah will sound to him like any musical instrument, having no

relevance to him personally. It will certainly not pull him to do *teshuvah*. If one does not put thought into improving himself, he is testifying that there is no real difference between himself and the animal kingdom. The animals might even be on a higher level, since they, at least, apply their energy to fulfilling their purpose. He, however, neglects his G-d-given blessings and does not bother to seek ways of improving.

Seeing the head of the lamb or fish with one's own eyes arouses him to the blinding truth: He must awaken from his slumber and consider his mission in this world. This thought should encourage him to make changes and rectify past misdeeds.



# Asseret Yemei Teshuvah



## The Lunar Cycle of Growth and Decline

The days leading up to Rosh Hashanah are called days of mercy and forgiveness. The Asseret Yemei Teshuvah between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are days designated for cleansing oneself from the sins that he accumulated during the previous year. When someone washes his clothes, he puts his dirty laundry into the washing machine. Of course, without detergent, his clothing will not come out very clean. The stronger the stains, the stronger the cleaning agent must be. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are Days of Judgment upon which our verdict for the upcoming year is sealed. In order to increase our merits on these decisive days, we must purge ourselves of all sin so that we can proudly stand before Hashem with a fresh, clean *neshamah*.

Just as detergent must be used so that the washing machine can do a perfect job, so must we do *teshuvah* all the days leading up to the Days of Judgment so that we can enter them with a pure *neshamah*, enabling us to merit a good new year. How great is Hashem's kindness that He gifted us with an entire month of repentance and forgiveness, during Elul. However, if one failed to utilize these days maximally, he is offered another chance, in the form of the Asseret Yemei Teshuvah. These days can be compared to very strong cleaning agents, which are able to remove the toughest spiritual stains easily and thoroughly.

Similarly, Yom Kippur can be compared to a giant washing machine. However well it cleans, it will do an even better job with the aid of cleaning agents, an allusion to *teshuvah*. “For on this day, He shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you; from all your sins before Hashem shall you be cleansed” (*Vayikra* 16:30).

We have the custom to dress in white on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This reminds us that our souls must be pure of all sin. We cleanse our souls by doing complete *teshuvah*. This includes making resolutions for the future, which will prevent us from finding ourselves covered in the dirt of sin all over again.

Shlomo Hamelech built the first Beit Hamikdash (*Melachim* I, 6). It was inaugurated on Yom Kippur (see *Moed Katan* 9a). Shlomo Hamelech ruled that on this occasion, Bnei Yisrael could eat on Yom Kippur. He thereby annulled the most stringent fast day of the year. Moreover, a Heavenly Voice emerged, stating that whoever celebrated the inauguration of the Beit Hamikdash by eating on Yom Kippur would receive a portion in the World to Come (*ibid.*). The punishment for eating on Yom Kippur is *karet* (see *Vayikra* 23:29). How can we understand that Am Yisrael ate and drank on the day they were commanded to afflict their souls with fasting?

Bnei Yisrael are compared to the moon. Unlike the sun, which is always seen as the same size and rises and sets predictably, the moon constantly changes. At times, it is seen in its fullness and at times it is nearly invisible. It increases in size until it is a full orb. Then it begins to decrease until it is nothing more than a silvery sliver (*Zohar* III, 12a).

Bnei Yisrael, too, never remain on the same level. There are eras in which they stand majestically, reveling in the sound of Torah which reverberates through the *batei midrash*. At other times, the forces of impurity gain control. All sorts of edicts threaten our purity. During the years of the Holocaust, many Rabbanim, Admorim, Torah judges, and yeshiva students were cut down in their prime. It seemed that the Jewish nation sustained a fatal blow from which they would never recover. However, Hashem is All-merciful. He opened the gates of salvation for our

weary nation. There was a resurgence of Torah study in Eretz Yisrael and in the United States. Today, thousands upon thousands spend their days and nights in the *beit midrash*. When it seems that the moon has completely disappeared, it shines forth in its full glory once again.

I often speak before audiences of completely secular Jews, who are detached from Torah and mitzvot. Time and again, I witness people whose outer appearance seems to be completely secular showing interest in Judaism and asking how to reconnect to Hashem.

It is appropriate that the first mitzvah given to Am Yisrael, who are compared to the moon, was to sanctify the new moon (*Shemot* 12:2). This mitzvah was given while they were still in exile in Egypt, imprisoned in the forty-ninth level of defilement (*Zohar Chadash*, beginning of *parashat Yitro*). The light of their *neshamot* dimmed to the point of nearly becoming extinguished. Hashem gave them the mitzvah of sanctifying the new month, through which their *neshamot* would regain their former luster, as Hashem's light shone upon them. "The nations of the land will see that Hashem's Name is called upon you and they will revere you" (*Devarim* 28:10). The light of the Torah is reflected in observant Jews. This light infuses the gentiles with fear, and they do not dare harm our people.

The days of Shlomo Hamelech were compared to the full moon. The *Shechinah*, referred to as the "moon," was in its full glory, since Am Yisrael were perfect in their service of Hashem (*Zohar* I, 243a). Knowledge of Hashem was widespread. The people were so wealthy that they had no room in their homes to store their riches and left them outside in the streets. Since they were all righteous and G-d-fearing, nobody touched anything that did not belong to him (see *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 1:10).

When Shlomo Hamelech inaugurated the Beit Hamikdash, he observed how virtuous Bnei Yisrael were and thus allowed them to eat on Yom Kippur. They simply had no sins for which to atone. Another purpose of a fast is that it draws down the *Shechinah*. This, too, was unnecessary, since the *Shechinah* already rested among the people. Hashem agreed

with Shlomo's decision and sent a Heavenly Voice to authorize Shlomo's word.

As stated above, Shlomo's dynasty was like the moon in its full glory. Sadly, with the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, the *Shechinah* began to diminish. Since then, the moon's cycle of constant increase and decrease provides us with a measure of comfort. Throughout history, we have suffered at the hands of our enemies. Although they inflict us with pain and persecution, they will never be able to completely destroy us. We are guaranteed that the Jewish nation will live eternally.

Hashem created the world on the twenty-fifth of Elul (*Vayikra Rabbah* 29:1). Man, the crown of Creation, was created on Rosh Hashanah, the first of Tishrei (ibid.). Every Shabbat and Jewish festival is fixed according to the lunar calendar (*Sukkah* 29a). With Adam's creation on Rosh Hashanah, Rosh Chodesh Tishrei, Hashem was sending him a powerful message. Bnei Yisrael and the moon are intrinsically connected. The moon operates in accordance with Bnei Yisrael's actions. When they do Hashem's will, the *Shechinah*, represented by the moon, shines upon them in its full glory, just as it did in the days of Shlomo Hamelech, when it constantly shone in its full state.

The halachah states that one should bless the new moon on Motza'ei Yom Kippur. Why not before Yom Kippur? After undergoing the cleansing process of Yom Kippur, we understand that Hashem wants us to shine like the full moon. He expects us to maintain our *teshuvah* and keep up a connection with Him. We should not, *chalilah*, revert back to our mundane lifestyles, for then the light of the moon is likely to be dimmed.

On Motza'ei Yom Kippur, we pray that we always merit being like the full moon, as glorious as in the days of Shlomo Hamelech, when Hashem shone His *Shechinah* upon us. On Yom Kippur, we recite the *pasuk*, "If your sins will be scarlet, they will turn white as snow" (*Yeshayahu* 1:18). Hashem wants to cleanse us so that we are pure as snow, glowing like the moon. Yom Kippur cleanses us most effectively when accompanied by *teshuvah* and *Selichot*. These acts of virtue serve as a prewash, preparing

us to absorb the cleansing properties of Yom Kippur. The more we invest in improving ourselves, the greater our chances are to successfully utilize the powers inherent in Yom Kippur.



## Crowning Our King in a Princely Manner

The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the Asseret Yemei Teshuvah, due to the surge of *teshuvah* in the air, in anticipation of the great day of holiness on the horizon (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra* 651). We eagerly await Hashem accepting our *teshuvah* and pardoning our sins. This will enable us to emerge innocent in judgment. Somebody once asked why Rosh Hashanah is considered one of the Asseret Yemei Teshuvah; it is not a day designated for confession. The essence of Rosh Hashanah is to crown Hashem as our King. The rest of the Asseret Yemei Teshuvah, including Yom Kippur, are designated for repentance and forgiveness. Moreover, it is considered a joyous festival (*Bamidbar* 10:10). It would seem that *Shemoneh Yemei Teshuvah* (the Eight Days of Teshuvah) would be a more fitting name for these exalted days.

Perhaps the following analogy will make my message more palatable. When a woman prepares a meal for her hungry brood, she invests a lot of time and energy into it. However, at the end of the day, the children thank her for the tasty dishes, but not for the work that went into making them. It doesn't occur to them to express gratitude for her great efforts. How short-sighted people are! They notice only the outcome, without bothering to analyze all the hard work which brought about the desired results.

Conversely, tzaddikim, who have polished their noble characters to a high sheen, are able to discern all the details involved in bringing

something to its fruition. The Gaon, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, zt"l, once passed by a river and recited the blessing, "Blessed be the One Who made a miracle for me in this place." He explained that as a young girl, the Vilna Gaon's mother nearly drowned in this river and was miraculously saved.

His disciples did not see the connection between this woman and their Rosh Hayeshiva. He said that had this woman not been saved as a young child, the Vilna Gaon would never have been born. Then, he himself would not have learned Torah from him and reached the heights that he did. This is why Rabbi Chaim felt an inner urge to thank Hashem for this young girl's salvation.

We are adjured to blow the shofar "בכסה ליום חגנו" – At the appointed time for our festive day" (*Tehillim* 81:4). The word כסה can also mean hidden. On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem judges His people while covering the eyes of the Satan, so that he should not interfere with our judgment. Although we are judged on Rosh Hashanah, it is a judgment of justice clothed in mercy. Rosh Hashanah is not a day of confession, and even the *Tachanun* prayer is not recited on it. Bnei Yisrael observe how Hashem keeps the Satan at bay and are drawn to repent and return to His loving embrace. This is why Rosh Hashanah is considered one of the Asseret Yemei Teshuvah. One who has finely tuned his sense of discernment will see beyond externals. He will analyze what brought about the results that confront him. Bnei Yisrael, most observant of all nations, realize that on Rosh Hashanah, Hashem blinds the Satan to their iniquities. Consequently, they follow Him in repentance and love.

The word שמונה (eight) is closely associated with the word נשמה (*neshamah*). The eight days of *teshuvah* between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are designated as days of perfecting one's soul and bringing it closer to his Maker. But he should not forget that Rosh Hashanah is also a "work day," despite the joyous atmosphere of this festival. The joy is just a ploy to confuse the Satan. Although we do not recite the *Viduy* confession on it, it is a day of *teshuvah* just like the ensuing days. If one utilizes this day appropriately, he is offered another eight days,

corresponding to his *neshamah*, to do *teshuvah*. This is his last chance to do *teshuvah* before his verdict will be sealed.

There are two types of sightless people (*Mesillat Yesharim* 2). One is a person who is physically blind, and the other is a person who can see but sees everything distorted. Regrettably, many people blind themselves. When Rosh Hashanah arrives, they have their priorities skewed. Instead of focusing on the purpose of the day and utilizing it accordingly, they pay undue attention to their menu. They exempt themselves from serious soul-searching by making a considerable contribution to the coffers of the *beit kenesset*.

Certainly, the holiday should be honored with tasty dishes. Of course, *tzedakah* is a central mitzvah in the life of a Jew. I do not want to make light of these things. However, one must realize that these are merely accoutrements to the objective of the day. The main point is to make an accounting of our actions and do *teshuvah*. We surely do not want to be considered among those who shut their eyes to reality.

Let us illustrate with the following example. Someone was caught committing a serious crime and is called to court for a hearing. Instead of arriving with his head bent in fear of his verdict, this man walks in all dapper and proud, a cigar dangling from his mouth. The onlookers are convinced that the judge will be livid at such a sight. He will throw the book at the man, without even giving him a chance to defend himself.

As Rosh Hashanah approaches, what do we say for ourselves? Beforehand, we might be so busy buying new clothes and trying new recipes that we forget to do *teshuvah* and ask for forgiveness. Who knows how much we jeopardize by adopting a *laissez faire* attitude toward spirituality? Although it is meritorious to awaken one's fellow man to do *teshuvah*, each person will be required to give an accounting for his own deeds.

When I was in the Ukraine in Elul 2006, we conducted prayers on a flight bound for Kiev. One of the participants sat down next to me and said, "Honored Rav, you should know that I owe you my life."

When he saw the blank look on my face, he explained that when he was engaged to be married, he and his fiancée had approached me for my blessing. They mentioned that until the wedding, they were planning to live under the same roof, since they did not have sufficient funds to rent two separate living quarters.

Upon hearing this, I hurriedly explained that the Torah forbids engaged couples who are not yet married from living in the same house, for this can likely cause them to sin (see *Ketubot* 13b). I told them they must try their best to find separate apartments, and Hashem would surely help. At first, they tried arguing with me. The woman, in particular, who had never met me before, could not understand why I was so adamant about this. However, when she saw I would not veer one iota, she agreed.

They made every attempt to find two affordable apartments, but came up empty-handed. Seeing their determination, Heaven ordained they have a heart-to-heart talk with the landlord of two separate apartments. They told him that although they had hardly any money, they were determined to uphold the ruling of the Rav. The man was greatly impressed by their steadfastness and instead of demanding the going rate of \$6,000 a month, agreed to rent them two apartments for the grand total of \$500. This couple merited *siyata di'Shemaya*, above and beyond the natural order, because they made herculean attempts to uphold Torah law.

I was very moved by this story and told the young man that the credit does not go to me, but to him and his new wife. They sacrificed greatly in order to observe Hashem's mitzvah. I could have talked till I was blue in the face but had they refused to listen, they would never have navigated this matter successfully. Ultimately, a person's actions depend on himself. He is the one who colors the hues of his life in the shades he chooses. This story drove home the fact that one who comes to purify himself is aided from Above (see *Shabbat* 104a). We would do well to internalize this thought during these days of mercy and forgiveness, days auspicious for *teshuvah* and atonement.

The Rosh Hashanah prayers are replete with the word “King.” Each time we utter this word, we deepen our commitment to connect with Hashem, to Whom we did not accord sufficient honor and regard as our King. Instead of attributing our successes to Him, we ascribed them to our own talents and abilities. As we repeat the word “King” throughout Rosh Hashanah, we try to diminish the damage accrued to His kingship during the rest of the year. This, combined with the fact that the Satan is absent on Rosh Hashanah, will help us emerge innocent in judgment.

“Then all the trees of the forest will sing with joy – before Hashem, for He will have come... to judge the earth” (*Tehillim* 96:12-13). What is so joyous about Hashem’s judgment of the earth that warrants the trees singing? We can explain this passage based on what we said above. On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem chases away the Satan and judges Am Yisrael secretly. We are able to emerge innocent in judgment because the Satan is absent. For this reason, the land and the trees are happy. They are fully aware that had Hashem not removed the Satan from among them, Am Yisrael would be in serious trouble. As is known, Hashem first casts His fury on wood and stones (see *Eichah Rabbah* 4:14). Thus, the natural elements would be the first to suffer. However, Hashem mercifully judges Bnei Yisrael out of the Satan’s line of vision. They are acquitted, and the entire world can enjoy luscious, pleasant produce.

Rosh Hashanah is the day of joyously coronating Hashem as our King. This is why it is so propitious for *teshuvah*. There is no comparing *teshuvah* out of fear to *teshuvah* out of love for Hashem. One who merits returning to Hashem on Rosh Hashanah, taking advantage of the opportunity to come close to Him at this time, will certainly merit returning to Him wholeheartedly.

### ———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Why is Rosh Hashanah included in the Asseret Yemei Teshuvah if it is not a day designated for the confession of sins?
- ◆ Rosh Hashanah is a day of forgiveness just like the other days of

repentance. Hashem does not allow the Satan to prosecute on this day. Bnei Yisrael are fully aware of this and take advantage of the opportunity to repent.

- ◆ Whoever has not managed to do *teshuvah* on Rosh Hashanah still has eight days left. He should make full use of this last chance to rectify his wrongdoings.
- ◆ We mention the word “King” countless times in the Rosh Hashanah prayers. This is a form of restitution for all those times that we did not properly crown Hashem upon ourselves and took the credit for our successes.
- ◆ The natural elements rejoice on Rosh Hashanah. They take note of our *teshuvah* and understand that in our merit, they will continue to exist.



## Shabbat and Teshuvah – Two Strands of the Same String

The Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called Shabbat Shuvah (see *Maharal, Gevurot Hashem* 39). All of the ten days of repentance, beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur, are designated for *teshuvah*. Why does Shabbat have the distinction of this unique name?

Shabbat is a day of peace. As one gazes at the candles glowing in their silver candelabra, he takes pause to reflect on his inner self. Shabbat Shuvah, in particular, is a gift from Hashem. It can prove more effective than even Rosh Hashanah itself. Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, when all creatures are gripped with fright. In contrast, Shabbat is a time of calm and inner tranquility. On Shabbat Shuvah, one can analyze his actions and make proper restitution in time for Yom Kippur.

When the first Shabbat of Creation descended, it came before Hashem with a grievance: “Each of the days of Creation has a partner. The first day has the second day, the third day has the fourth day, and so on. Why, then, did You not give me a partner?”

To which Hashem replied, “Am Yisrael will be your partner.” This is the most worthy partner for the Shabbat Queen (*Ben Ish Chai; Abarbanel*). The partnership between Shabbat and Am Yisrael is most clearly demonstrated when we observe Shabbat appropriately. Specifically Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat of awakening to return to Hashem, is most auspicious for proving that we are a worthy groom of this noble bride.

When Avraham was about to slaughter Yitzchak at the *Akeidah*, an angel cried out, “Do not stretch your hand to the lad and do not do a thing to him” (*Bereishit 22:12*). This was the voice of an angel calling to him from Heaven. However, regarding Hagar, we find that an angel appeared to her directly. The Midrash says that Hagar did not become alarmed when an angel confronted her, since she was accustomed to seeing angels in the house of Avraham (*Bereishit Rabbah 45:7*). How can we understand that Hagar merited meeting an angel face-to-face while Avraham himself, who devoted his entire life for Hashem’s sake, only merited an angel calling to him from on High, at the *Akeidah*?

At the time of the *Akeidah*, Hashem stood at Avraham’s side. All the angels were simply too frightened to appear before Avraham in Hashem’s presence (*Meshech Chochmah, Bereishit 21:14*). If Hashem was already on the scene, as it were, why wasn’t He the one to tell Avraham to refrain from slaughtering Yitzchak?

When Avraham went to do the *Akeidah*, he sanctified himself to the extent that he became more angel than man. He was considered dwelling on High with Hashem and His holy entourage. His thoughts were so exalted that he was like a ladder whose legs are planted on the ground while its top is in the heavens. For this reason, the angel spoke to him from on High and had no need to descend to earth to give him the

message. Hagar, however, was on a much lower level. The angel, therefore, met her on her own turf.

Hashem arranged that an angel should be the one to tell Avraham not to maim his son, instead of doing so Himself. Angels often provide prosecuting evidence against people. Watching Avraham's self-sacrifice in offering his son to Hashem would transform the prosecuting angels into merciful ones. The merit of Avraham's devotion would stand by his children for all generations. Every Rosh Hashanah, we read again about his steadfastness to his Maker.

When one does *teshuvah* on Shabbat Shuvah, he inherits a measure of Avraham's greatness. Shabbat is a sample of the World to Come (see *Berachot* 57b). Thus, a Jew who utilizes this Shabbat properly merits a taste of the World to Come. He is connected to the Upper Worlds in the same way as Avraham Avinu, who was considered living on High with Hashem and His angels.

Concerning Creation, we read, "These are the creations of the heaven and the earth when they were created" (*Bereishit* 2:4). The word **בהבראם** (when they were created) contains the same letters as the name **אברהם** (Avraham). This implies that heaven and earth became sanctified in the merit of Avraham Avinu. On Shabbat Shuvah, it is our obligation to connect the Upper Worlds with the Lower Worlds, raising the mundane to the level of the sanctified.

Moreover, when one spends Shabbat Shuvah in *teshuvah*, he connects the World to Come, created with the letter ׀, to this world, created with the letter ׀ה (see *Menachot* 29b). In this manner, he brings completion to the Holy Name יה-י. The Upper and Lower Worlds come together every Shabbat. On Shabbat Shuvah, this connection is most discernible.

The word **שבת** (Shabbat) is related to the word **ישיבה** (sitting) and **שביתה** (resting). The word **תשובה** (*teshuvah*) has a similar root. This fact points to a very strong connection between Shabbat and *teshuvah*. These two lofty concepts are intertwined and interdependent.

Whoever increases his food intake on the ninth of Tishrei is considered as if he fasted on both the ninth and the tenth of Tishrei (*Berachot* 8b). How can eating be equated with fasting? When one eats a lot of food before a fast, it is more difficult to fast, since he is hungrier than normal. By eating more than usual on the ninth of Tishrei, one is hungrier on the tenth. Thus, one's affliction on Yom Kippur is all the greater.

In a similar vein, one who does *teshuvah* on Shabbat Shuvah, before Yom Kippur, elevates this day to the status of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. The sanctity with which one has imbued himself on Shabbat Shuvah enables him to enter Yom Kippur meritoriously. When this is the case, Yom Kippur, the *Shabbat Shabbaton* (Shabbat of complete rest), gains sanctity from Shabbat Shuvah, thus adding sanctity to its intrinsic *kedushah*.



## Asseret Yemei Teshuvah – Gems



### Days of Change

Why are there ten days of *teshuvah* as opposed to five or seven?

During these ten days, beginning with Rosh Hashanah and concluding with Yom Kippur, one does *teshuvah* and comes closer to Hashem. These days reach their climax with Yom Kippur, when the very sanctity of the day provides atonement.

In order to be worthy of receiving the blessings of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, one must invest himself with holiness, like the day when the Ten Commandments were given at Sinai. Our nation attained the status of angels when Hashem pronounced, “I am Hashem” (*Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Zuta* 4). Thus, the Ten Days of Repentance correspond to the Ten Commandments.

Why doesn’t Hashem pardon us immediately on Rosh Hashanah, when we coronate Him as our King, rather than wait until Yom Kippur? Furthermore, were He to forgive us already on Rosh Hashanah, we would crown Him in a state of purity.

The thought that we crowned Him upon ourselves in a state of sin should fill us with sorrow and dread. This dread spurs us to do *teshuvah*

during the Asseret Yemei Teshuvah. When we finally arrive at Yom Kippur, we are sparkling clean and sin-free.



## The Process of Rectification

Hashem gifts Am Yisrael, His Chosen Nation, with the Ten Days of Teshuvah, designated for repentance and atonement. As mentioned above, these days correspond to the Ten Commandments. When Bnei Yisrael stood at Sinai, they were given only the Ten Commandments. Only afterward did Moshe methodically delineate all of the mitzvot.

With the sin of the Golden Calf, Am Yisrael violated the command, “You shall not recognize a foreign god in My presence” (*Shemot* 20:3). The very existence of the Golden Calf opposed Hashem’s exclusivity. This sin dragged others along with it. The men seized their wives’ jewelry to fashion the Calf. And many hotheads even killed those who stood in their way.

They transgressed the commandment “Do not covet,” and most likely violated the mitzvah of honoring one’s parents. In short, the formation of the Calf damaged each of the Ten Commandments, the foundation of our nation. Hashem lovingly granted us ten days beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur to be designated for introspection and *teshuvah* for all violations of His commandments.

Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement. On Yom Kippur, after Bnei Yisrael had done *teshuvah*, Moshe descended from Har Sinai with the second set of *luchot* (see *Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Zuta* 4). This is a message for all generations. We, too, must spend this day disconnected from all forms of sin. We must accept upon ourselves the Ten Commandments, the basis

of the entire Torah. This will result in complete rectification for the sin of the Golden Calf.



## Eating for a Higher Purpose

Whoever eats on the ninth of Tishrei is considered to have fasted on the ninth and on the tenth (*Berachot* 8b). This is difficult to understand. One who eats on the ninth should earn reward for this, and one who fasts on the tenth should earn reward for that. *Chazal's* statement implies that these two mitzvot are interdependent. What is their inherent connection?

When one fasts, he receives reward. He is not used to fasting and it is therefore a form of self-affliction. However, eating is most natural, and even enjoyable. We would eat even without thought of reward. Why, then, are we promised reward for eating on the ninth of Tishrei? When one eats on this day, he demonstrates his faith in gaining reward for this eating. He therefore increases his food intake. It is for this demonstration of faith that one receives reward.

This is the difference between the Jew and the gentile. The gentile operates according to his logic. He cannot understand how eating and fasting can be considered similar forms of serving Hashem. The Jew, in contrast, faithfully fulfills Hashem's every command. If he is told to fast, he fasts. If he is told to eat, he eats. This is why one who eats on the ninth of Tishrei receives reward for fasting on the ninth and the tenth of Tishrei. He is rewarded for his faith, which is reflected in all his actions.



## Be Book-smart – Do Teshuvah

On Rosh Hashanah “the books of the living and the books of the deceased are open before You” (*Arachin* 10b). We can understand why the books of the living are open. This is the day that the living are judged for the upcoming year. But why are the books of the deceased open?

There is a profound message here for all of us. Even those who have already passed on are judged on Rosh Hashanah. The tzaddikim of old are already enjoying the eternal life of Gan Eden. For what are they being judged? All of one’s actions have consequences, for better or for worse. Thus, even the deeds of those who have died have far-reaching repercussions. The dead are judged every year for the consequences of their actions in this world. Are they positive or negative? Positive consequences result in additional reward, and negative ones result in the opposite.

Since the great men of our nation are judged anew each year, how wonderful it is to study their Torah teachings. Moshe Rabbeinu, our quintessential Torah teacher “commanded us the Torah” (*Devarim* 33:4). Let us demonstrate our gratitude by increasing our Torah study and thereby increasing his merit.

We know that tzaddikim are called living even after they die, while *reshaim* are called dead even as they live (*Berachot* 18b). Thus, the “books of the living” are the accounts of the tzaddikim, even those who have already passed on, and the “books of the dead” are the accounts of the *reshaim*, even those who still live. On this day, everyone’s accounts are analyzed, and all are inscribed for life or death.

*Reshaim* are called dead even as they walk and talk. Torah is “a tree of life to those who grasp it” (*Mishlei* 3:18). A *talmid chacham* who learns Torah is considered alive. But a *rasha* is disconnected from the “tree of life.” He is considered dead during his life; surely this is the case after his death.

The books of the living, meaning the tzaddikim, and the books of the dead, meaning the *reshaim*, are opened simultaneously and compared. A tzaddik might be shown that he did a mitzvah sluggishly, while a *rasha* did it with zeal and joy. What shame the tzaddik will experience then! The magnitude of justice on High does not refer only to punishment, but also to this deep, profound shame.

The Gra expounds on this topic. In heaven, there is no actual fire that scalds the sinner. When one arrives on High, he is confronted with his own sins. He will be consumed by deep, burning shame. If a person puts his hand into his friend's pocket to take something and another friend walks by just then, catching him in the act, he will be filled with great embarrassment. He has been caught red-handed and red-faced. In the World of Truth, one will see his sins and experience such humiliation that no further penalty is necessary.



## **Redefine, Reconnect, and Return**

The Shabbat preceding Yom Kippur is called Shabbat Shuvah. Shabbat has tremendous potential. The entire week is blessed in the merit of Shabbat. Hashem wants each Shabbat of our lives to be considered a Shabbat Shuvah. The word שבת (Shabbat) itself is hinted in the word תשובה (*teshuvah*). It is foolish to wait until Yom Kippur to do *teshuvah*. Shabbat is the ideal day to repair any damage one caused during the previous week. Who knows if he will live until Yom Kippur?

This is one reason why we mention Shabbat every day in the Song of the Day (after *Shacharit*). We say, "Today is the first day until Shabbat; today is the second day until Shabbat..." Remembering Shabbat every day reminds us to do *teshuvah*, for Shabbat and *teshuvah* are interconnected.

Consequently, Hashem hastens the process of forgiveness, spreading it throughout the days of the week. However, on Shabbat, this forgiveness is complete and finalized, due to the day's unequalled power of pardon. Shabbat Shuvah, the first Shabbat of the year, influences all the following Shabbatot. They gain blessing in its merit. It is this blessing that helps one do *teshuvah*.

The initials of the phrase שבת שובה (Shabbat Shuvah) are numerically equivalent to the word קשר (connection) and שקר (falsehood). When one does *teshuvah*, he renews his connection with Hashem. Otherwise, he is connected to falsehood and the impurity of the *kelippah*.

Shabbat Shuvah enables us to prepare properly for the upcoming Yom Kippur. This Shabbat provides one with a greater level of wisdom, which comes through the additional *neshamah* that he gains on this Shabbat. Fortunate is the one who awakens in time to experience every Shabbat of his life in a state of *teshuvah*. These Shabbatot will advocate for him on his great Day of Judgment.

One can successfully do *teshuvah* only by resolving to learn Torah and improve himself in honor of the upcoming year. As the *navi* says, "Take words with you and return to Hashem" (*Hoshea* 14:3). Through Torah and *teshuvah*, the *yetzer hara* becomes weakened. This is hinted in the words שובה, תורה, (Torah, *Shuvah*), whose initials spell תש (weak).

The initials of the phrase "קחו עמכם דברים ושובו" – Take words with you and return," are numerically equivalent to the word עקדה (*Akeidah*), according to the rule of *kollel*. Similarly, their last letters are numerically equivalent to the word אמן (Amen) as well as the word אילן (tree), according to the rule of *kollel*. One must strengthen his faith in Hashem by remaining firmly attached to the roots of our holy nation. He must vanquish his *yetzer hara* and refrain from doing anything that might anger his Creator.



## Fearful Tidings

The day after Rosh Hashanah is designated as a fast day in commemoration of the death of Gedalyah ben Achikam. Many tzaddikim, throughout history, died *al kiddush Hashem*. Some examples are Uriah Hanavi (*Yirmeyahu* 26:20-23) and Yeshayahu Hanavi, who was killed by his very own grandson, Menashe. No fasts have been established in their memory. Why, then, do we have a fast commemorating Gedalyah's death?

I would like to suggest that the timing is what makes it so significant. Coming on the heels of Rosh Hashanah, this fast teaches us an important lesson. The days of Rosh Hashanah leave us with a lasting impression. One who has properly prepared himself and done *teshuvah* knows exactly where he stands. Maran Harav Shach, zt"l, adds that the fear of Rosh Hashanah is due not only to the outcome. The very act of standing before Hashem in judgment is enough to send shivers up our spines and leave us with a deep, lasting impression.

On the Day of Judgment, all mankind pass before Hashem like sheep. He scrutinizes each person individually (see *Rosh Hashanah* 18a). Everyone's aspiration, as he passes by, is to give Hashem pleasure. We all undertake to do *teshuvah*, enabling us to "look good" in Hashem's eyes. We are said to pass before Hashem as "Bnei Maron." The word Maron – מרון (alluding to passing before Hashem like sheep) can be transformed to spell רמון (pomegranate). A pomegranate contains many seeds, referring to the many mitzvot we do (*Malbim, Shir Hashirim* 4:13). When one passes before Hashem, he should possess the merit of the 613 mitzvot. It is only in the merit of the mitzvot that one emerges innocent in judgment.

One leaves the exalted days of Rosh Hashanah on a high. He is committed to a sin-free life. *Chazal* enacted a fast immediately following Rosh Hashanah to teach us that there are those who are capable of sinning immediately after Rosh Hashanah, even to the extent of committing murder (*Yirmeyahu* 41:1-3). This is because they squandered

the days of Elul instead of spending them in *teshuvah*. If one is intent on focusing on the upcoming Day of Judgment and all that it entails, his fear will impact him so strongly that he will desist from sinning even after these days have passed.

I once spent Rosh Hashanah in New York. A strong gust of wind snapped a tree in half. I pondered the matter. Why didn't more trees break? Had more trees, indeed, broken when the congregants were leaving the *batei kenesset*, there would have been tragic results. This tree, however, fell when everyone was still inside. It taught me that Hashem manages the world and decides how many trees will fall, and when. Since He wishes to awaken us on the Day of Judgment, the falling of one tree was enough.

A Jew had the temerity to murder another Jew on the day after Rosh Hashanah. We fast on this day to impress upon ourselves that whoever has not yet managed to do complete *teshuvah* should hasten to do so.



# Yom Kippur



## At Your Service

*“For on this day, He shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you, from all your sins before Hashem shall you be cleansed”*

*(Vayikra 16:30)*

On Rosh Hashanah, all creatures stand before Hashem in judgment (see *Rosh Hashanah* 18a). Nobody knows what his verdict will be. In His infinite kindness, Hashem gifted us Elul, the month of mercy and forgiveness. This month is designated for rectifying our wrongdoings and coming closer to Hashem. In this manner, we are more likely to emerge innocent from judgment on Rosh Hashanah. Yom Kippur is the day when one’s verdict is sealed. If he failed to do complete *teshuvah* before Rosh Hashanah, Hashem offers him a second chance in the form of the Ten Days of Repentance, which begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur. Hashem is filled with compassion for His people and wants to grant them life. Therefore, He gives them further opportunity to improve their deeds and repent their sins. Then, when they usher in Yom Kippur, they welcome a day sealed with Hashem’s stamp of approval for life.

The very essence of Yom Kippur atones, even if one did not do *teshuvah* (*Shevuot*). This is extremely difficult to comprehend. Does it mean to say

that an avowed *rasha*, who defiantly refused to repent, is pardoned for his sins? This would likely weaken the resolve of tzaddikim, who spend all their lives in *teshuvah* and introspection. What is the point of investing so much energy into soul-searching when Hashem forgives everyone on Yom Kippur anyway? Moreover, if Yom Kippur is such a powerhouse of pardon, why do we bother reciting the *Selichot* prayers? What is the point of confusing the Satan with our shofar blasts so that he should desist from prosecuting against us, if Hashem already decided to forgive us for our sins, whether or not we did *teshuvah*?

Let us preface our answer with the following idea. The *haftarah* of Rosh Hashanah relates the fascinating narrative of Shmuel Hanavi's birth. We read how his mother, Channah, ceaselessly pleaded with Hashem for a child. Elkanah had two wives, Peninah and Channah. Peninah had children, while Channah had none. Peninah would vex Channah greatly about this, in order to induce her to pray for children. Finally, a Heavenly Voice called out that a tzaddik named Shmuel would be born. He would be as great as both Moshe and Aharon and would enlighten the nation with his Torah wisdom (*Midrash Shmuel* 3). All the women who gave birth at that time called their sons Shmuel, in the hope that theirs would be this wonderful child. Channah went up to the Mishkan and prayed for a child. She vowed that if she had a son, she would sanctify him to Hashem's service. Hashem accepted her prayers and she merited giving birth to Shmuel Hanavi, who was known far and wide for his virtue.

Certainly, that generation boasted many women of valor who deserved to give birth to such a righteous son. Why was Channah the one chosen for this treasure? Furthermore, why do we read this account on Rosh Hashanah? Is there a connection between the Day of Judgment and Channah's pleadings to merit a child?

Channah inserted a powerful statement into her prayers. She said, "May Hashem judge to the ends of the earth; may He give power to His king and raise the pride of His anointed one" (*Shmuel* I, 2:10). Channah was saying that Hashem judges everyone, even those who are simple and humble as the earth. We read this passage on Rosh Hashanah in order to internalize

the understanding that Hashem judges each and every person on this day, whether he is rich and famous, or simple and ordinary. “May He give power to His king” means that one who studies Torah, called “power” (*Shemot Rabbah* 27:4), is considered a king (see *Gittin* 62a). In the merit of Torah study, the redemption is hastened, as the pride of His anointed one will be raised.

Channah was not more virtuous than the other women of her time. But her vow to dedicate her child to Hashem’s service was unique. It demonstrated her keen perception. She was well aware that children belong to Hashem, Who entrusts us with their care in this world. For this reason, she promised to sanctify her son to a life of Torah and fear of Heaven from his early childhood. Channah understood something that many people have difficulty acknowledging. They assume that they are in charge. Everything is theirs for the taking, and they are in full control.

Rosh Hashanah is the time for reflection. Hashem alone is the Master of the world. We come here for a short, allotted amount of time, in which we are meant to fulfill our mission. Just as Channah fully realized that her son, Shmuel, was only “lent” to her for a specific amount of time and she had no authorization over him, so should we understand that we are here only temporarily, in order to fulfill a specific purpose. When Hashem judges us on Rosh Hashanah, He examines us to see whether or not we are achieving this mission.

If parents wish to raise successful soldiers for Hashem’s army, they would do well to educate them in the way of the Torah. They should remember that their children are given to them for a short while. If one is not his own master, certainly he is not master over his children. Let us take a lesson from our patriarch, Avraham, about whom Hashem said, “For I know him that he will command his children and his household after him that they will guard the way of Hashem to do charity and justice” (*Bereishit* 18:19). Rashi explains that Hashem was eminently pleased with Avraham for educating his children to be loyal to Him.

Channah was singular among the women of her times in that she alone vowed to dedicate her child to Hashem's service. The others also desired righteous sons, but none matched Channah's fervor and determination.

Moshe Rabbeinu enacted Yom Kippur as the Day of Atonement. After Bnei Yisrael sinned with the Golden Calf, Moshe broke the *luchot*. Then he ascended to heaven to attain forgiveness and the second set of *luchot*. Bnei Yisrael spent the days between Rosh Chodesh Elul and Yom Kippur blowing trumpets and doing *teshuvah*. Moshe pleaded with Hashem to pardon His people. Finally, on Yom Kippur, Hashem said, "I have forgiven, according to your word" (see *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 45). This pronouncement of forgiveness reverberates throughout the generations and is echoed in the verse, "For on this day, He shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you, from all your sins before Hashem, shall you be cleansed" (*Vayikra* 16:30). Let us analyze the power of both Am Yisrael's *teshuvah* and Moshe's prayers, in which merit Yom Kippur was established as a day of *teshuvah* for all generations.

Yom Kippur can be compared to a bathtub filled with warm water. One who enters will emerge cleaner, whether or not he applied soap or scrubbed off the dirt. Likewise, the holiness of Yom Kippur is so intense that even the most avowed *rasha* comes out cleaner than before (see *Yoma* 85b).

It would be a terrible shame to let the opportunity for cleansing ourselves of spiritual impurities go to waste. Let us not exempt ourselves by merely going through the motions of the Yom Kippur services, but scrub ourselves clean by purging ourselves from all forms of sin. In this manner, we will emerge fresh and pure, with the sweet scent of success still lingering on us. If one takes the initiative to do complete *teshuvah*, he can achieve tremendous things. Tzaddikim do not rely on the fact that the essence of Yom Kippur atones. They make every effort to purify themselves, knowing that doing *teshuvah* on this day is extremely powerful.

Every year, I visit the graves of the tzaddikim in the Ukraine. Before one of my annual trips, I reserved a room in a lodging-house and specifically requested that they thoroughly clean it before my arrival. I did not want to find the place filled with spiders, as I am especially sensitive to them.

I arrived with my assistants about an hour before Shabbat, and lo and behold! Spiders of all shapes and sizes were crawling under the beds. I raised a hue and cry, demanding to know how this could happen, after I especially asked that they rid the room of spiders. The staff was deeply chagrined. They said that they had, indeed, cleaned the room very well, and could not fathom how these spiders got there. I knew the answer, and I told it to them. Although they cleaned the room, they did a superficial job, wiping down the walls and cleaning the corners. But, they failed to bend down and check under the beds.

After returning to Paris, this event returned to my mind. How often do we consider ourselves sin-free, absolved of the obligation to do *teshuvah*? However, as soon as we stand before Hashem on Yom Kippur, we are suddenly seized with fear. Perhaps we did not do complete *teshuvah* for such-and-such sin? Suddenly, all the “skeletons in the closets,” or spiders under the bed begin creeping into our mind. We clearly see how far we have to go in order to purify ourselves appropriately. We often do a superficial cleaning, without examining the inner crevices of our hearts and minds. Perhaps we have overlooked an act or thought of sin.

One of the curses which Moshe Rabbeinu mentions is that “your life will hang in the balance, and you will be frightened night and day, and you will not be sure of your life” (*Devarim* 29:66). Moshe was telling Bnei Yisrael that if they refrained from going in Hashem’s ways, their lives would be full of doubt and lack inner peace. They would constantly be consumed with fear of death. The Ba’al Shem Tov states that if one wishes to live successfully, he should constantly bear in mind that he is far from perfect and has a long way to go in his service of Hashem. Yom Kippur is the ideal day to return to Hashem and work on improving one’s character.

Tzaddikim take Yom Kippur very seriously. They do not take solace in the knowledge that the essence of the day atones. They are not satisfied with the fact that Hashem says, “I have forgiven as you have asked.” They always look to do the best type of *teshuvah* possible and consider themselves far from perfect. The power of the prayers and repentance on Yom Kippur is so intense that its magnetic force pulls the *reshaim* to improve, as well.



## The Soul Shines Forth

Yom Kippur is the exalted day when Bnei Yisrael sanctify themselves. For this reason, the Satan, or the *yetzer hara*, is denied permission to disturb them on this day. The *yetzer hara* has a very specific job in this world. It hinders us in our service of Hashem by distracting us with the pull of materialism and physical pleasures, which, in turn, draw us into sin. Our job in this world is to elevate the physical, created with the letter ך, and connect it to the Next World, the world of spirituality, which was created with the letter ם (see *Menachot* 29b). The *neshamah*, which is a portion of G-dliness, pulls a person upward and enables him to elevate the lower worlds to the levels of the sanctity of the Upper Worlds. However, the *yetzer hara* constantly seeks ways of drawing a person downward, to his lower self, thereby preventing him from accomplishing his purpose.

Hashem never gives a person a challenge which is too great for him. He therefore designated one day a year that is free from the Satan’s influence. This is Yom Kippur, the day Am Yisrael is sanctified to the level of the angels on High. On Yom Kippur, we must abstain from five types of physical pleasures – eating and drinking, washing, anointing oneself, wearing leather shoes, and having marital relations (*Yoma* 73b). What is the reason for these forms of abstention?

One reason is to confuse the Satan into thinking we are actually angels. He will then leave us alone and not sidetrack us from the path of virtue. This is also why we wear white on Yom Kippur (see *Darchei Moshe, Orach Chaim* 611:5) and recite aloud “Blessed be the glory of His Kingdom forever,” just like the angels (see *Devarim Rabbah* 2:36).

When Adam was first created, Hashem placed him in Gan Eden. He was surrounded by such radiance that the angels mistook him for a deity (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 8:10). As long as Adam did not sin, the Satan existed as a separate entity. However, as soon as Adam and Chava ate of the forbidden fruit, they ingested the power of the Satan, as well. He entered their beings and became a force within them.

The *gematria* of the word נחש (Snake) is the same as that of the word שטן (Satan), according to the rule of *kollel*. The Snake that cunningly convinced Chava to eat the forbidden fruit is another guise of the Satan, or *yetzer hara*. Hashem allowed Adam and Chava to eat of every tree in the garden, aside from this one. They lacked nothing. But the Snake/Satan was terribly upset by their immense sanctity. Moreover, he envied their perfect union. He tried every trick to lower their level of loftiness by seducing them with a plethora of physical pleasure. This was expressed in the forbidden fruit.

This was the first instance of the war between the *yetzer hara* and man. The *yetzer hara* makes every attempt to pull mankind toward earthliness. It presents him with all forms of pleasures. Anything to prevent him from fulfilling his purpose in this world, which is to sanctify the mundane. When Adam and Chava transgressed the word of Hashem, the Satan’s sovereignty was introduced into man.

On Yom Kippur, Hashem pardoned Bnei Yisrael for the sin of the Golden Calf. The Satan was prevented from prosecuting on this day. Since we try to come close to Hashem on Yom Kippur and sanctify ourselves, we abstain from five forms of physical pleasure which are usually permitted. Perhaps we indulged in them inappropriately during the

course of the year. On the exalted day of Yom Kippur, when we resemble angels, it is fitting for us to abstain from them.

When man and wife are together, they perform a great mitzvah. However, at times, their intentions are not sanctified. By refraining from marital relations on Yom Kippur, one atones for this. Similarly, one who recites a blessing before and after eating is accomplishing something outstanding. He elevates his food to a spiritual level. However, eating is often accompanied by physical indulgence, which lessens the value of the mitzvah. Fasting on Yom Kippur is our way of rectifying any damage one did by eating inappropriately. The injunction to “be holy for holy am I” (*Vayikra* 19:2) begets the instruction to “sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you.” Moreover, we are told to be a holy nation. By abstaining from things which are intrinsically permitted, we increase our level of sanctity and come closer to Hashem.

A *nazir* was especially holy (*Bamidbar* 6:5) because he abstained from those things which are usually permitted. By reducing his attachment to physicality, he increased his spiritual side (See *Ta’anit* 11a). The more one refrains from occupying himself with physical acts, even those which are permitted, since they might contain a trace of lust or hedonism, the more connected he becomes to the Upper Worlds.

“For on this day, He shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you, from all your sins before Hashem shall you be cleansed” (*Vayikra* 16:30). The essence of Yom Kippur atones for sins between man and his Maker, even if he has not done complete *teshuvah* for them (see *Yoma* 85b). We earn Hashem’s atonement by abstaining from various forms of pleasures which may separate us from Him. Instead of involving ourselves in these activities, we occupy ourselves with Him Alone. Material things, even when permissible, may draw a person away from Hashem. This is because involvement with these interests gives the *yetzer hara* entry into his heart. Conversely, when one immerses himself in Torah and mitzvot, completely spiritual pursuits, he effectively removes the cloak of the *yetzer hara* from himself. As Hashem tells us, “I created the *yetzer hara*; I created the Torah as its antidote” (*Kiddushin* 30b).

David Hamelech proclaimed, “As for me, closeness to Hashem is my good” (*Tehillim* 73:28). David Hamelech never sought physical pleasures, because he found joy only in closeness to Hashem. In another *pasuk*, he adjures us to “take pleasure in Hashem, and He will give you all the desires of your heart” (*ibid.* 37:4). If one merits taking true pleasure in Hashem, he will feel as satisfied as if all his desires have been met.

With each prayer on Yom Kippur, we ascend another level in our quest for closeness with Hashem. With the opening prayer of *Kol Nidrei*, we rectify our *nefesh* from the sins connected to materialistic pleasures. With the *Shacharit* prayer, we correct our *ruach*. With *Musaf*, we correct our *neshamah*. When we reach *Ne'ilah*, we are at the apex of the day. The *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshamah* all reach perfection. We are thus capable of connecting to Hashem without any barriers. Through sanctifying the *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshamah*, we have the ability to rectify the six *sefirot* of Yom Kippur, upon which the entire world rests. They are: *chessed*, *gevurah*, *netzach*, *hod*, *yesod*, and *binah*.

Ten miracles took place in the Beit Hamikdash (*Avot* 5:5). One was that no seminal emission occurred to the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur. Would we suspect the Kohen Gadol of such a thing in this sacred place on this sacred day? Why was there a need for a miracle to prevent this? The greater the person, the stronger is his *yetzer hara* (*Sukkah* 52a). Since the Kohen Gadol had sanctified himself so greatly in honor of Yom Kippur, there was a danger that he might stumble in sin. Therefore, he needed this supernatural form of protection. Hashem offers this protection to all of us by removing the Satan's influence on this day.



## Buoyantly Navigating the Sea of Life

In an attempt to escape Hashem's prophecy of rebuke to the people of Nineveh, Yonah boarded a boat headed for Tarshish. Suddenly, a great storm broke out and the boat was in danger of capsizing. There were representatives of all seventy languages on the boat, each with his own idol (*Midrash*, quoting Rabbi Chananya). This is learned from the fact that the sailors were deathly afraid and instructed everyone to call to his god and prostrate himself before it. Everyone obeyed, but nothing helped. Instead of doing his part, Yonah went to sleep. The captain of the boat confronted him with contempt. "We are stranded here, between life and death, and you choose to sleep?! Get up and call to your G-d. Perhaps He will do a miracle for us as He did for you at the Yam Suf." Yonah then spoke up. "I will not deceive you. It is because of me that this storm has occurred. Throw me overboard and the storm will subside" (*Otzar Hamidrashim, Yonah* p. 218).

We have much to learn from Yonah's story (the Rav of Brisk, zt"l, *Yamim Nora'im*). Yonah took full responsibility for the storm and did not blame it on the idolaters who shared the boat with him. He knew full well that he was responsible for this disaster. Hashem nearly sank the boat in the middle of the sea in punishment for his refusal to go to Nineveh. He was meant to convince the Ninevites to repent their evil ways, or their city would be overturned. This carries a great message to us, specifically during the Yamim Nora'im, days of arousal and repentance. How deeply one must delve into his deeds! Perhaps his or the community's problems are a result of his wrongdoings. "Praiseworthy is the nation that knows the shofar's cry" (*Tehillim* 89:16). Praiseworthy is the nation that knows how to admit their sins, and connect the dots between their sins and their punishment.

If one is beset by suffering, he should examine his deeds. If he does not find anything wrong, he should attribute his suffering to negligence in Torah study (*Berachot* 5a). Nothing is arbitrary. Whatever comes a

person's way is meant to awaken him to examine his deeds and discover what needs repair.

All too often, instead of taking responsibility for our misdeeds, which caused the difficulty we now face, we cast an accusing finger at others. If a particular person did an injustice to us or caused us a monetary loss, we have two ways of looking at the matter. We can acknowledge that everything comes from Hashem and the person who hurt us is merely His agent to wake us up to do *teshuvah*, or we can forcefully blind ourselves to the truth and fling our fury at the one who harmed us, ignoring the fact that he was merely a pawn in Hashem's hand.

When we become enraged at one who causes us harm instead of admitting that our sins are at fault, we are like a dog that bites the stick that hit it and forgets that there is a person wielding the stick.

Our problem is that we attribute our challenges to all sorts of outside factors. Every occurrence has a wonderful explanation. But we take ourselves out of the picture. The accusing finger is always pointed outward. The Ramchal teaches that there are two types of blind people. One is a person who is blind from birth. With all the best intentions, he can never see. The other is one who is capable of seeing but purposely blinds himself. When a truly blind man stands at the seashore, he is in grave danger, because he cannot discern the shoreline. In contrast, one who purposely blinds himself sees what is before him but chooses to ignore it and continues confidently toward the edge of the cliff (see *Mesillat Yesharim* 2).

How often do we act like the man who blinds his own vision! We disregard reality and ignore Hashem's messages. Instead of admitting that Hashem has brought suffering upon us due to our sins, we prefer to blame others. Anyone, except for ourselves. The irony is that with this approach we are increasing our punishment. When Hashem sees our lackadaisical attitude, He sends us harsher difficulties. Perhaps these will open our eyes to the truth and bring us back to Him in *teshuvah*.

It is no simple matter to admit our sins and repent them. The Rambam explains the steps involved in the *teshuvah* process in detail (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 1, 2, 4). Hashem bestowed upon us the days of mercy and forgiveness as days auspicious for *teshuvah*, in which He is closer to us than ever. This is because introspection and repentance demand analysis and understanding. It is not enough to merely regret one's sins and confess them. One must categorically resolve never to repeat them (ibid. 2:2). When one makes such a resolution, he turns over a fresh, new leaf, clear of all markings.

We are often aroused to do *teshuvah* in the wake of a trouble or difficulty. However, with time, the problem is ironed out. We forget how much we suffered, and we also forget our arousal to do *teshuvah*. We are back to square one, steeped in sin like a dog that goes back to its vomit (see *Mishlei* 26:11). When Hashem sees a person repeating his old sins, He hastens to strike him in a stronger way than before. Perhaps this time, he will take to heart the message that an integral part of *teshuvah* is the resolution never to repeat the sin.

When one is honest enough to admit that his troubles are due to his misdeeds, this awareness is like a red light, alerting him to steer clear of sin. If Hashem struck him for his sins, how can he dare repeat them? Hashem will surely strike him again, *chas v'shalom* (see *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 2:2).

On a trip to Morocco, a Muslim approached me and asked how many fasts the Jews observe during the course of the year. I began listing them: the fast of Gedalyah, Yom Kippur, the Tenth of Tevet... The man raised his eyebrows in wonder. He said Arabs are on a much higher level than Jews, because they fast an entire month in atonement for their sins. His words struck a chord in my heart. It is essential for us to do complete *teshuvah* and increase our service of Hashem, so that our enemies do not, *chalilah*, gain a stronghold over us.

In a similar vein, we read about Nevuchadnezzar's praise of Hashem. He was stirred to sing to Hashem, until the Angel Gavriel struck him on

the mouth in order to silence him (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Yechezkel 376*). Hashem had been so pleased with Nevuchadnezzar's praises that these songs of an evil gentile nearly surpassed those of David Hamelech, the sweet singer of Israel. When Gavriel saw this, he took immediate action, hitting Nevuchadnezzar to get him to stop.

David Hamelech was the fourth leg of Hashem's *Merkavah (Shelah)*. How could Nevuchadnezzar's songs be preferable to his? Certainly, Hashem prefers the prayers and praises of His beloved people. However, when they sin, He is angered and hides His face from them. Then, the Attribute of Justice holds sway and indictment is leveled against Bnei Yisrael. There is a danger that Hashem would choose even the prayers of the gentiles over theirs.

It is imperative to cleave to Hashem at all times. If, *chalilah*, we stumbled into sin, we must hurry to make amends so that the Attribute of Justice does not step in. In order to do proper *teshuvah*, one must acknowledge that he is responsible for his suffering. He should not look for outside causes. Only after taking responsibility for his problems and coming to the realization that Hashem is giving him a wake-up call, can one do real *teshuvah*, as delineated by the Rambam.

When Moshe was in heaven, receiving the Torah, the angels wished to consume him with the vapor of their mouths. They demanded to know what a mortal was doing among them. Moshe pleaded with Hashem for mercy. Hashem instructed him to grasp the Heavenly Throne. Moshe then replied to the angels, "I have come to receive the Torah for Bnei Yisrael. They are mortals and as such are beset by the *yetzer hara*. They need the Torah to guide them on the road of life. You angels do not possess a *yetzer hara* and act only according to Hashem's word. You do not need the Torah and its commandments" (*Shabbat 88b, 89a*).

Surely the angels knew that the Torah was not meant for them, but for people, who are plagued with envy, lust, and the pursuit of honor. Only people need the Torah's guidelines to keep them in line. Why, then, did

the angels oppose Moshe and try to prevent him from bringing the Torah to Bnei Yisrael?

This question bothered me a lot. On a trip to the Ukraine, I met a native Jew who clarified the matter for me. When I arrived in the Ukraine, representatives of the community approached me and related that many Jewish couples live together without proper Jewish marriages. The reason for this is that if they were to be properly married, the women would have to immerse in a *mikveh*. Since they have no *mikveh*, they live together in sin. They reason that if they were to sin after being married, it would be worse.

When I heard this, I set them straight. I told them that a *mikveh* is essential for maintaining family purity. It was crucial to organize a collection to fund the building of a *mikveh*. The estimated cost stood at \$100,000. *Baruch Hashem*, in one fund-raising evening, \$80,000 was raised. A *mikveh* was built.

Perhaps the angels were afraid that Bnei Yisrael would not succeed in observing all the mitzvot. It would be preferable for them to sin unintentionally, without having the Torah spelling out to them what is right and wrong, than intentionally, knowing full well what the law demands. Hashem ordered Moshe to grasp the Heavenly Throne and offer this rejoinder: Although Bnei Yisrael might knowingly sin and disregard the Torah, Hashem is ready and willing, at any time, to accept their *teshuvah*. There is a specific mitzvah to “return to Hashem, your G-d” (*Devarim* 30:2). Even if one has sinned in the most severe offenses, he always has the ability and the opportunity to do *teshuvah* (see *Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 22).

Trials and tribulations are meant to wake us up to return to Hashem. Due to the law of mutual responsibility, we may, at times, have to bear the burden of our fellow man’s sin (see *Shavuot* 39a). Challenges are a gift from Hashem. Shlomo Hamelech said, “He whom Hashem loves, He rebukes” (*Mishlei* 3:12). Hashem longs for the repentance of the sinner. When we reiterate to ourselves that “it is because of me that this trouble

has come,” we will find it easier to do *teshuvah*. We will constantly be in a state of repentance. May Hashem, Who called a halt in the creation of His world, call a halt to our suffering.



## The Sanctuary of the Soul

What is *teshuvah*? It is the decision of the sinner to leave his sin and resolve never to repeat it, as the *navi* says, “Let the wicked man abandon his way...” (*Yeshayahu* 55:7). He will thus regret his sinful past, “for after I returned, I regretted” (*Yirmeyahu* 31:18). Hashem Himself attests that this man will not return to this sin ever again, as the *navi* says, “We will no longer say ‘O, our god’ to our handiwork” (*Hoshea* 14:4). It is essential to confess orally and state one’s resolutions (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2).

When one does *teshuvah*, he should feel like a new person. For instance, if one was called Reuven beforehand, he is transformed after the *teshuvah* process, and could be called Shimon. Four things have the power to alter one’s future (*Rambam*, quoting *Rosh Hashanah* 16b). One of these is changing his name. This is not the same type of name-changing as is done for a sick person, but indicates the transformation one undergoes through the *teshuvah* process. As long as he clung to sin, he was spiritually unwell and in grave danger. After doing *teshuvah*, he is cured of this illness and becomes a new man.

One who does *teshuvah* is like a newborn (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:3). *Teshuvah* is a tremendous gift from Hashem, which saves us from becoming detached from Him. Aside from becoming a new person, the *ba'al teshuvah* has the added advantage of being like a newborn. The virtue of a newborn is that he is not held accountable for sin, since he is incapable of sinning. Hashem calls to us, “Return, O wayward sons” (*Yirmeyahu* 3:22). One makes his way back to his Creator by transforming himself into a newborn, perfect and pure of sin.

People spend fortunes to purchase a seat of honor in the *beit kenesset* for Yom Kippur. They would do better to consider where they will sit in *Olam Haba* after 120 years. Although they willingly part with huge sums of money for a once-a-year seat of honor, they fail to invest in acquiring a good seat in the World of Truth. The Satan convinces a person to invest in temporary honor, while divesting him of the opportunity to invest in the seat he will occupy eternally.

The *yetzer hara* burdens people with various worries and concerns, stealing their time from the important things in life. Shabbat, a sample of the World to Come (*Berachot* 57b), is the ideal time to reflect upon our purpose in this world. Yom Kippur, too, contains an element of the World to Come (*Vayikra* 16:30). Yom Kippur is so sanctified that the *kelippah* cannot tolerate it and flees to the wilderness on this day. This enables us to stand before Hashem and purify ourselves. The very essence of Yom Kippur atones. Since the *kelippah* is absent, one can feel a sample of the World to Come, when one will enjoy eternal rest. Yom Kippur is a most propitious day for preparing one's seat for the World to Come.

“Blessed are you when you come and blessed are you when you depart” (*Devarim* 28:6). One is blessed upon entering the *beit kenesset* on Yom Kippur and when he leaves afterward. The very fact that he has come to pray is a source of blessing. This is why he earns blessing for himself on the way out, as well. The *beit kenesset* is a miniature Sanctuary. Upon entering a *beit kenesset*, it is as if one is entering the Beit Hamikdash and observing the Kohen Gadol doing the Avodah. Just like the Kohen Gadol's clothing would atone for the nation, so do our prayers atone for sin (see *Zevachim* 88b). For this reason, praying in the *beit kenesset* with a minyan on Yom Kippur is extremely effective.

Every person has the potential to be like the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur. He can completely correct his thoughts and deeds on this sanctified day. Concentrating intently on one's prayers, in purity and sanctity, can bring a person as close to Hashem as the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, when he stood in the innermost chamber of the Beit Hamikdash.

The atmosphere in this world is polluted with defilement, which is extremely difficult to shake off. Hashem gave us the wonderful gift of the Torah, which allows us to breathe fresh air, pure of all contamination. Unfortunately, we are stricken with the sin of neglecting Torah study. This is why we are confronted with inappropriate thoughts. *Baruch Hashem*, we have the gifts of Shabbat and Yom Kippur, tastes of the World to Come, which drive away all foreign ideas that have pervaded our minds.

Teshuvah was also granted us as a gift. When one sins, Hashem refrains from punishing a person immediately. Instead, He accuses the Satan, while judging the offender favorably. Hashem thereby gives the offender a period of grace, in which he can arouse himself to make a personal accounting of his deeds and do *teshuvah*. In the times of the Beit Hamikdash, when one wished to do *teshuvah*, he offered a sacrifice and slaughtered it. It was as if he slaughtered the *yetzer hara*, which persuaded him to sin.

Since the *yetzer hara* does not want a person to repent, it convinces him to maintain his sin. Hashem then comes to his aid: “It shall be when you go out to war with your enemy” (*Devarim* 21:10). This refers to the battle with the *yetzer hara* (*Alshich, Devarim* 20:19). “And you shall capture their captives” (*Devarim* 21:10) means that one will merit gaining *siyata di'Shemaya* to completely vanquish his *yetzer hara*. Moreover, by wholeheartedly doing *teshuvah*, Hashem will transform one’s sins into merits. In this manner, he will receive some of his reward while yet in this world.

The Torah was given in the wilderness as opposed to a populated city. This teaches us that one has the ability to build himself up from nothing and become righteous. Bnei Yisrael attained the level of the Generation of Wisdom precisely in the wilderness (*Vayikra Rabbah* 9:1). Before they received the Torah, they were “like a fool who does not know and a simpleton who cannot understand this” (*Tehillim* 92:7). They were bare of Torah and mitzvot (*Tanchuma, Shemot* 12). Nevertheless, they raised themselves to the level of the Generation of Wisdom.

I recently took a trip to Poland with Jews from Argentina. We visited Auschwitz. I was deeply shaken by the horrific sights. Who can remain calm in the face of such atrocity? As I looked through various pictures, one question haunted me: “Why did this befall us?” Suddenly, I noticed a gentile tour guide. I asked him how many Jews had been incarcerated here. He said that when the ovens weren’t working, more than 100,000 Jews filled the bunkhouses. I asked how many watchmen stood sentry. He said a couple of hundred. I looked at him in shock and asked myself how it could be that none of the Jews thought of conducting an uprising, considering how they greatly outnumbered the guards. They were slated for death in any event; what did they have to lose by rebelling? The answer to all my questions is that there is no logical answer. The more we ask, the more questions we will have. This can lead to doubts in our faith. Of one thing, however, there is no doubt. Were it not for our sins, we would never have experienced such a tragedy.

My visit to the camps taught me that we pay a price for our status as the Chosen Nation. Whether or not one admits it, he cannot hide from this truth. Once a Jew, always a Jew. When we forget about Hashem and desire to live like the gentiles, He has no recourse but to strike us. Then we remember Him very well. The days of the Holocaust were dark days when Hashem hid Himself from us, but we can glean some messages from them.

Certainly, there will be those who find these lines difficult to read, but this message is the unvarnished truth. After Hashem chose us as His nation, He gave us His Torah, and we crowned Him as our King. He is our King forever, unconditionally. When a Jew rebels against Hashem due to his difficulties, he is like a criminal who was caught and placed in handcuffs, but instead of showing signs of remorse, runs away, handcuffs and all. When he will be caught again, his punishment will be many times greater than originally intended. He may even be sentenced to death. When we sin against Hashem because of our suffering, we are like that foolish man.

Conversely, when Bnei Yisrael involve themselves in Torah and mitzvot, rushing to do *teshuvah* for any misdeed, the prosecuting angels

cannot harm them. Yaakov Avinu was so filled with Torah and fear of Heaven that Eisav's angel could not destroy him. We have inherited this gene of resilience. Let us put it to good use by embracing Yaakov's lifestyle.



## Joyous Tidings

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said, "There were no greater days of joy for Israel than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur. The daughters of Yerushalayim would go out on those days wearing white garments that they borrowed from each other, in order not to shame those who could not afford their own. They would dance in the fields and convince the young men that they were the most worthy for marriage" (*Yerushalmi, Ta'anit* 4:8).

Yom Kippur and the fifteenth of Av are auspicious days of joy and are therefore dubbed "Yamim Tovim." There was so much joy in the air that *Chazal* say they were the happiest days of the year. The girls of Yerushalayim would gather together, rich and poor alike, all dressed in borrowed clothing. Since Jewish girls have especial charm, they attracted the attention of the young men. This is how Jewish homes were established.

We can understand how the fifteenth of Av became known as a joyous festival. However, regarding Yom Kippur, this is difficult to comprehend. Yom Kippur is a day of judgment. Everyone is gripped with fear as his fate is being sealed. If people are fearful before facing a court case with a human judge, how can we be joyful on Yom Kippur, when we stand before Hashem in judgment? We hear of so many tragedies, illnesses, and other forms of suffering. These were all decided on the previous Yom Kippur, when man stood in judgment before his Creator. How can we compare Yom Kippur to the fifteenth of Av?

“So says Hashem: The fast of the fourth [month], the fast of the fifth [month], the fast of the seventh [month], and the fast of the tenth [month] will be for the House of Yehudah for joy and for happiness and for happy festivals. [Only] love truth and peace” (*Zechariah* 8:19). In the future, when Hashem redeems us from our suffering and builds the Beit Hamikdash, the four fasts revolving around its destruction: the fast of Gedalyah, the Tenth of Tevet, the Seventeenth of Tammuz, and Tishah b’Av, will be transformed into festive days. Why isn’t the fast of Yom Kippur mentioned?

The main feature of Yom Kippur is forgiveness. As we know, the *yetzer hara* is the force that causes us to sin. When Mashiach arrives, the *yetzer hara* will be slaughtered. The Satan will be powerless to divert us from the path of truth. We will no longer have a need to offer the sin-offerings, for we will no longer feel drawn to sin. Yom Kippur will therefore serve a different purpose. This is all the more reason to include it in the list of days which will be converted to days of joy. Why did the *navi* omit it?

The omission of Yom Kippur from this list of fast days points to the fact that Yom Kippur is not a fast of sorrow and mourning, like the others. On the contrary, it is a day of great joy. How is this? Hashem is our merciful, loving Father. Of course, He wants to decree life for us. Even if a person is confronted by challenges, he believes they come from Hashem, Who knows what is best for him. Everything that happens to him is for his benefit, whether or not he can see this with his limited vision. “Whatever Hashem does is for the good” (*Berachot* 60b). This being the case, Yom Kippur, the day when one’s fate is sealed, is a joyous day, comparable to the fifteenth of Av, when many matches were made.

Even if one refrained from doing *teshuvah*, Yom Kippur has the power to sweeten his judgment. This is because great measures of mercy are aroused upon Am Yisrael on this day (see *Tola’at Yaakov*, *Sitrei Yom Hakippurim*). This is another reason why Yom Kippur is considered a joyous, festive day. Even one who did not fully utilize the powers of the day to do *teshuvah* is forgiven on this day, as we read, “For on this day,

He shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you, from all your sins before Hashem shall you be cleansed” (*Vayikra* 16:30).

“Go eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a glad heart, for G-d has already approved your deeds” (*Kohelet* 9:7). On Motza’ei Yom Kippur, a Heavenly Voice announces, “Go and eat in joy, for Hashem has forgiven you for your misdeeds.” Yom Kippur is a joyous day. One feels that Hashem is forgiving him for his sins and is pleased with him. He fully believes that Hashem is sealing him for a good, peaceful life. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter says that we should rejoice if we would merit experiencing Yom Kippur only once in seventy years. Certainly, we would anticipate it eagerly (*Me’orei She’arim* of HaGraz Gurewitz, 194).

Yom Kippur atones for sins between man and Hashem. But it atones for sins between man and his fellow only after one appeases his friend. Hashem is ready to pardon sins done against Him, but He does not pardon sins committed against another man until one obtains his forgiveness. The Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred (see *Yoma* 9b). People were not concerned with the honor of others. The fasts listed by the *navi*, which will eventually be converted to festivals, are all connected to the *churban*. Yom Kippur is in a different category. It is a day of forgiveness.

From Rosh Chodesh Elul, when we begin reciting *Selichot*, until Yom Kippur, there are thirty-nine days. This is the *gematria* of the word טל (dew). In the future, Hashem will revive us with the “dew of life” (*Shabbat* 88b). This dew symbolizes the thirty-nine days of *teshuvah* between Rosh Chodesh Elul and Yom Kippur. These days offer one the merit of revival at the resurrection of the dead. After the resurrection of the dead, this world will resemble the World to Come (see *Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Zuta* 20). Whoever observes Shabbat experiences a sample of the World to Come, and is considered observing the entire Torah (*Shemot Rabbah* 25:12). Only someone who experiences *Olam Haba* in this world will merit earning life in the World to Come.

The Admor of Lelov says that the dew which comes down each night and will eventually revive the dead in the future is a spiritual entity rich with *nitzotzot shel kedushah*. Only one who observed the mitzvot and was stringent in matters between both man and Hashem, and man and his fellow will be resurrected by this dew. In order to enable us to merit this wonderful blessing, Hashem gifted us the thirty-nine days of *teshuvah* for mercy and forgiveness. These days climax with Yom Kippur, a day of joy and festivity, for its essence provides atonement. Who would be foolish enough to waste the golden opportunity of doing complete *teshuvah* and attaining forgiveness during these auspicious days, when the dew of life is available to all?



## Yom Kippur – Gems



### Showered with Blessing

*“May it be Your will, Hashem, that this year be full of heavy rains and hot. When the world needs rain, do not heed the prayers of travelers who ask that it not rain. Let Your nation, the House of Israel, never be in need of one another or any other nation. Let no woman miscarry and may the trees produce fruits. May there not depart a ruler from the House of Yehudah”*

*(Yoma 53b)*

In the Yom Kippur prayers, we mention the Avodah of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur. As the nation stood nervously outside, praying for his welfare, the Kohen Gadol entered the Kodosh Hakodashim. But his supplication seems to be most mundane. On the holiest day of the year, in the holiest place in the world, the holiest man in the nation prayed for physical sustenance. Why didn't he ask for forgiveness? Wasn't this once-a-year opportunity the perfect time to ask Hashem to pardon the nation?

The Kohen Gadol purposely did not mention sins in order not to arouse the Attribute of Justice and its accompanying prosecutions. By fasting,

Am Yisrael demonstrated their desire to return to Hashem. By praying for seemingly materialistic matters, the Kohen Gadol proved that he expected mercy and salvation for his nation. Perhaps the pleas for physical sustenance were themselves a form of arousing mercy for Am Yisrael. He was implying that they sinned not out of spite but due to financial pressure and challenges, which disturbed their service of Hashem. If He were to bless them with Heavenly bounty, Bnei Yisrael would surely serve Him to perfection.



## United in Prayer

At the outset of Yom Kippur, we announce that we pray as a complete congregation, including those who have transgressed. But perhaps Hashem abhors the prayers of the transgressors, since they have sinned. How can we boldly claim that we are permitted to pray alongside them?

In truth, we are the transgressors. Only Hashem knows what is going on in a person's heart. We do not know who is a transgressor and who is not. We only know how short we fall and how much improvement is demanded of us.



# Sukkot



## Occasion to Rejoice

***“You shall make the festival of Sukkot for a seven-day period, when you gather in from your threshing floor and from your wine cellar. You shall rejoice on your festival – you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, the Levite, the proselyte, the orphan, and the widow who are in your midst”***

*(Devarim 16:13-14)*

Sukkot is called the “time of our rejoicing” (Sukkot prayers). This is because it comes on the heels of the Yamim Nora'im, when Hashem is especially close to those who call to Him in truth. Our request during the Days of Awe is that just as we are “my Beloved’s,” we ask Hashem to shine His light upon us, so that “my Beloved is mine” (*Shir Hashirim* 6:3).

The Days of Awe are actually days of mercy, when Hashem moves from the Seat of Justice to the Seat of Mercy (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 29:3). This is in line with the *pasuk*, “For the hand is on the seat of G-d (י-ה)” (*Shemot* 17:16). According to the rule of *kollel*, the numerical value of the term כִּי טַ (for the hand) is equal to the *gematria* of the word אָדָם (man). Through

our prayers during these days, man tries to convince Hashem to move from the Seat of Justice to the Seat of Mercy. From here, Hashem fights our battles against our prosecutors, such as Amalek. He removes them from His Presence so that they cannot tilt the scales against us. When Hashem sees how determined we are to become one with Him in perfect *teshuvah*, He accedes to our request. If we are deserving, we will be inscribed and sealed for life.

Our renewed relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu begins on Rosh Chodesh Elul. It gains momentum on Rosh Hashanah and reaches its peak on Yom Kippur. This day is so sanctified that Bnei Yisrael become united with Hashem on it. They are extremely elevated, dressed in white, and loudly proclaim, “Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever.” They literally reach the level of the angels on High (*Devarim Rabbah* 2:35).

Bnei Yisrael are so exalted on Yom Kippur, when the essence of the day itself atones, that they resemble Adam Harishon before his sin, when this world was similar to the World to Come.

On the Yamim Nora'im, we gather the strands of *teshuvah* that we wove during the previous month of mercy and forgiveness and twist them into a thick rope of love binding us to Hashem. Hashem is so pleased with our repentance that He returns our love with a gesture of His own, gifting us the festival of Sukkot, the “Shadow of Faith” (see *Zohar* III, 103a). “Hashem is your shadow on your right” (*Tehillim* 121:5). The light that shone upon us on the Yamim Nora'im and connected us to Hashem continues to accompany us on Sukkot, when Hashem's *Shechinah* is like a marriage canopy spread over us.

When one leaves his permanent house and enters the temporary dwelling of the sukkah, he unites with Hashem's holy Names through the Seven Ushpizin. He also connects to the lights of the *sefirot*, which are contained within the worlds of אבי"ע. The *s'chach*, made of bamboo or tree branches, covers the sukkah and is considered holy like an אילן קדוש (sacred tree). The word אילן (tree) has the *gematria* of ninety-one, just like the word סוכה (sukkah). The two Holy Names of י-ה-ו-ה and א-ד-נ-י also have

this *gematria*, when combined. The word סבך (*s'chach*) has the *gematria* of one hundred, corresponding to the ten *sefirot*, which are each comprised of ten *igulim*, beginning with *keter* and ending with *malchut*. On Yom Kippur, we are like angels. On Sukkot, we are accompanied by Hashem's spirit, and He becomes our shadow. He infuses us with the holiness of His Names יה-ו-ה and א-דני. On Sukkot, one is capable of attaining such great heights from the sanctity of the ten *sefirot* that he can discern the All-encompassing Light beyond.

Sukkot is termed the "time of our rejoicing," for there is no greater joy than basking in the Shadow of Hashem. The joy of Sukkot reaches its peak with the celebration of the Simchat Beit Hasho'evah, when Bnei Yisrael attained *ruach hakodesh* (*Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 741*). They were in such a state of utter joy that the Divine spirit was drawn upon them. The more immersed one is in the joy of sanctity, the greater spiritual heights he can reach. Eventually, he reaches the climax, which is the level of prophecy and Divine inspiration (see *Shabbat 30b*).

One who expends great effort in coming closer to Hashem on the Yamim Nora'im is returned that love by being invited by Hashem into His palace. There, He takes him under His shade and connects him to His Holy Names, allowing him to bask in the protection offered by the influence of the *sefirot*. This effects a great change in the person. The close bonds forged between us and Hashem at this time cause our parting at the culmination of the festival to be difficult for Him. Thus, Hashem asks us to remain with Him for one more day – Shemini Atzeret (see *Rashi, Bamidbar 29:36*).

*Chazal* enacted that we rejoice with the Torah on Simchat Torah, which takes place on Shemini Atzeret in Eretz Yisrael. This is expressed by singing and dancing with the Torah (see *Maharik 9*). Am Yisrael have spent the past weeks in building and reinforcing their relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Feasting and merriment fall short of conveying the depth of this relationship. Only rejoicing with the Torah can demonstrate the deep connection they share with Hashem. This is reinforced by Torah

study and mitzvah observance, as the Zohar (II, 90b) states, “Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Israel, and the Torah are one.”

Simchat Torah has a piercing message: One cannot maintain a strong connection to Hashem without including the Torah, which binds him to his Maker. If one excludes the Torah from his relationship with Hashem, the elevation achieved on the Yamim Nora'im will dissipate, and even the joy of the festival will be forgotten. Only the Torah has the power to sustain a person. During the season of the Yamim Nora'im, one's *teshuvah* brings him close to Hashem, as we are instructed, “Return, Israel, unto Hashem, your G-d” (*Hoshea* 14:2). When one merits returning to Hashem wholeheartedly, Hashem comes toward him, as well. However, this is only on condition that he maintains this connection even after the Days of Judgment and Sukkot, when Hashem returns to His Throne on High.

Simchat Torah comes at the end of this festive season to indicate that Hashem is now on His way back to the Upper Spheres. Nevertheless, we must remain connected to Him throughout the year. On Simchat Torah, all Jewish communities have the custom to dance with the Sifrei Torah. Through the joy generated on this day, we can draw the sanctity of Hashem's shadow upon ourselves always. What a shame it would be, when Hashem returns to His place on High, to forfeit the greatness we have achieved. Dancing with the Torah demonstrates our desire to continue clinging to Him, through the joy of Torah, all year long.

On the Yamim Nora'im, Hashem connects to us through mercy and kindness, for we are deficient in Torah and mitzvot. He trusts that at least we will do *teshuvah*. After having attained such great measures of spirituality during these days, basking in His *Shechinah*, Hashem asks us to remain with Him one last day, continuing our connection with Him through Torah study.

These days are called “the time of our rejoicing,” as it says, “And you shall rejoice on your festival... and you shall be especially joyous” (*Devarim* 16:14-15). The initials of the phrase אך שמחה (especially joyous) spell the word אש (fire). This is a reference to the fire of Torah. Our

connection to the Torah is our greatest joy. We feel such ecstasy in our union with the Torah that all materialism falls to the wayside. Our sole interest revolves around the Torah. The last letters of the phrase אך שמח spell the word כח (strength). One should resolve to serve Hashem with all his strength and resources. The word שא, combined with the word כח, spell the word אשכח (I will forget). One may never allow himself to forget the purpose of Sukkot. Let it not be a holiday of feasting alone. The purpose of this festival is to gain greater understanding of the Torah and to internalize its message so that it remains with us throughout the year.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Elul and the ensuing Yamim Nora'im are days of closeness with Hashem. During this time, "I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine." Since Hashem is especially close to us then, He wishes to extend this time frame to include the festival of Sukkot, when we take protection under the shadow of the *Shechinah*.
- ◆ The *s'chach* is called אילן קדוש. The *gematria* of the words אילן and סוכה equal ninety-one. This is also the combined *gematria* of the Names י-ה-ו-ה and א-דני. The word סכך is numerically equivalent to one hundred, an allusion to the ten *igulim* contained within each of the ten *sefirot*, beginning with *keter* and concluding with *malchut*.
- ◆ Sukkot is called the "time of our rejoicing" due to the great joy one experiences when he basks in the protection of Hashem's shadow. One gains increased levels of joy throughout Sukkot, until he reaches the climax of joy with the onset of Simchat Torah.
- ◆ Simchat Torah is called Atzeret because this is the day Hashem has asked us to add to the festival, as it is difficult for Him to part from us.
- ◆ Simchat Torah concludes the festival season. This indicates that our main connection with Hashem is through the Torah. If we wish to maintain our level of *teshuvah*, it is essential that we cleave to the Torah.
- ◆ The initials of the term אך שמח (only happy) spell the word שא, an allusion to the fire of the Torah. The last letters spell the word כח,

teaching a person to serve Hashem with all his might. A combination of both these words produces the word אשכח. One should not forget the essence of these exalted days, when we can gain closeness to Hashem and reinforce our connection to His Torah.



## A Sanctuary Above and Beyond

*“Now Hashem has fulfilled His word that He spoke, for I have risen in place of my father, David, and I sit on the throne of Israel as Hashem spoke, and I have built the Temple for the Name of Hashem, G-d of Israel”*

*(Melachim I, 8:20)*

Shlomo Hamelech concluded the construction of the Beit Hamikdash on Sukkot. He conducted an inauguration ceremony, praising Hashem for allowing him to see this great day. At the dedication of the Beit Hamikdash, Shlomo Hamelech gathered all Am Yisrael and told them, “See how upright are Hashem’s words. He told my father, David, that his son, Shlomo, would build the Beit Hamikdash. His words came true to their last detail. As the Beit Hamikdash is being inaugurated, I sit on the throne of Israel.”

Why did Shlomo call the royal throne the “throne of Israel” instead of the “throne of royalty”? What is the meaning of the term “throne of Israel”?

There is only one “throne of royalty,” and it belongs to Hashem. The words, “Hashem reigns; Hashem has reigned; Hashem will reign forever” (*Bamidbar 6:27*) teach us that Hashem alone rules this world. In the

*Shema*, we affirm, “Hear, O, Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One” (*Devarim* 6:4). Hashem is one and only one, and there is none other than Him. With the statement, “I sit on the throne of Israel,” Shlomo Hamelech indicated that Hashem is the only Sovereign in this world. There is none other to compete with Him.

By telling the nation that he sat on the throne of Israel, Shlomo Hamelech pointed to the mutual feelings of brotherliness among the people. He felt no sense of superiority as king over the nation, as he considered himself one of the people. He would not sit on the throne forever, and his actions would determine whether or not he deserved to sit on the throne at all. This is in line with the phrase, “Your deeds will bring you close, and your deeds will distance you” (*Eiduyot* 5:7). His stable kingdom serves as proof that harmony rested upon the nation.

The fact that Shlomo Hamelech concluded the construction of the Beit Hamikdash on Sukkot carries a timeless message: Our lives in this world are like the temporary sukkah wherein all Jews are equal. Pauper and magnate alike abandon their homes to dwell in the sukkah. The sukkah has only one Landlord – the King of kings, Who surrounded Am Yisrael with seven Clouds of Glory when they wandered through the wilderness (*Sukkah* 11b). The sukkah commemorates these Clouds of Glory and welcomes in the Seven Ushpizin, together with all Am Yisrael, however simple they may be. The sukkah indicates that Am Yisrael is one cohesive unit. Nobody may lord over others. Even the Ushpizin sit together with us in unity.

Only a king from the House of David was permitted to sit in the Beit Hamikdash (*Yoma* 69b). Everyone else had to stand, including the kings of the House of Israel (from the Ten Tribes). This is difficult to understand. We previously mentioned that Hashem is the only King Who may sit on the royal throne. How, then, could a king of the Davidic dynasty be permitted to sit in the Beit Hamikdash? The kings of David descended from יהודה (Yehudah), who contained the Name יהוה within his own. Since the Davidic kings represented Hashem’s kingdom in this world, they were permitted to sit in the Beit Hamikdash.

Based on this, Shlomo Hamelech was entitled to sit in the Beit Hamikdash. Why, then, did he say that he sat on the “throne of Israel” and not the “throne of royalty”? He wanted to teach the nation that the day of inaugurating the Beit Hamikdash was a day entirely devoted to Hashem. On this day, Hashem’s kingdom alone should be discerned in the Beit Hamikdash. However, if Hashem would later allow him to sit on the throne of the House of David, he would do so, but only with explicit permission from Him.

The seven Ushpizin inspire us through the generations. Beginning with Avraham, father of our nation, through David Hamelech, the quintessential king who fathered the Davidic dynasty, these are our models. When we will merit the ultimate redemption, Hashem will send Mashiach, also of the Davidic dynasty. Then there will be a world-wide festival of עצרת (Atzeret, halting), as all wars will end.

The festival of Shemini Atzeret falls on the eighth day of Sukkot. The number eight represents a level above the laws of nature. The letters of the word שמנה (eight) can be transposed to spell the word נשמה (soul), which lives forever. The World to Come, which is the eighth world, symbolizes the eternity of the *neshamah*. Both Shemini Atzeret and the Jewish soul are beyond nature and endure eternally.

### **In Summary**

- ◆ Shlomo Hamelech said that he sat on the “throne of Israel.” Why didn’t he say he was sitting on the “throne of royalty”?
- ◆ The “throne of royalty” belongs only to Hashem. Shlomo Hamelech wished to impart the lesson that there is only one King in this world, and nothing exists aside from Him. The phrase “throne of Israel” hints to mutual responsibility among Am Yisrael. Shlomo Hamelech felt no superiority when he was appointed king of the nation. He knew that his kingdom was not granted to him unconditionally but depended on his behavior.

- ◆ Shlomo Hamelech completed the construction of the Beit Hamikdash on Sukkot. Just as everyone is adjured to sit in the sukkah, regardless of his financial status, so did he rule Am Yisrael feeling united with the people.
- ◆ Only kings of the Davidic dynasty were permitted to sit in the Beit Hamikdash, since Hashem's Name is included in theirs. Everyone else, including the kings of Israel, was compelled to stand. Why, then, did Shlomo Hamelech refrain from sitting in the Beit Hamikdash? He wanted to teach Am Yisrael that royalty belongs to Hashem. Only with explicit Divine permission, would he sit.
- ◆ Shemini Atzeret hints to the number eight, which denotes a level above the laws of nature. The words *שמנה* and *נשמה* have the same letters. Both Shemini Atzeret and the Jewish soul are beyond nature and endure eternally.



## Clear Observance of Obscure Commandments

Examining the mitzvot connected to Sukkot raises several questions. What is the connection between the Four Species and the sukkah, which commemorates the Clouds of Glory? Why are we commanded to take the Four Species specifically on Sukkot, as opposed to any other holiday? Moreover, why are we adjured to begin building a sukkah immediately after Yom Kippur? What is so special about this mitzvah?

I would like to suggest the following. On Yom Kippur, we are enveloped in the Clouds of Glory. It is an exalted day, when Hashem is especially close to us. When this day draws to a close, the *Shechinah* ascends on High. There is a danger that without the unique *siyata di'Shemaya* provided by Hashem, one might feel at a loss in this world of frivolities and *chas v'shalom*, slip into a downward spiritual spiral. For this reason,

Hashem commanded that we involve ourselves in building the sukkah immediately after Yom Kippur departs. The sukkah memorializes the Clouds of Glory and protects us from alien winds so that we are able to maintain our elevated status.

As one leaves his stable home immediately after Yom Kippur in order to build his flimsy sukkah, he is filled with the feeling that he, too, is here only on a temporary basis. This thought will save him from sin, extending the “Elul mentality” to his sukkah preparations. The initials of the words סוכות, כפורים (Kippurim, Sukkot) spell the word כס (chair). During these days, one prepares himself to be a fitting place for the *Shechinah* to dwell. On Yom Kippur, Hashem envelops us in a spiritual light. It is up to us to draw this light further, so that it includes Sukkot, as well as the rest of the year. Whoever wishes to purify himself receives Divine assistance (*Yoma* 38b).

On Yom Kippur, a person is sanctified to the extent that he is able to connect to the *Merkavah* of Hashem, which is carried on four “legs.” These are the three Avot and David Hamelech. On Motza’ei Yom Kippur, one experiences a spiritual weakening. By getting involved in building the sukkah, he indicates his desire to be part of Hashem’s *Merkavah*. He, too, wishes to help complete His Throne, of which the sukkah is an integral part. There are four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, corresponding to the four “legs” of the *Merkavah*. These days are rich with opportunity to connect to the *Merkavah*.

Regarding the Four Species, the *pasuk* says, “And you shall take for yourselves on the first day...” (*Vayikra* 23:40). This is the first day of the reckoning of sins. On Yom Kippur, all Jews express their desire to be united with Hashem. During the following days until Sukkot, one still feels a tinge of Yom Kippur lingering in the air, which prevents him from sinning. He is too preoccupied with building his sukkah and finding the perfect *etrog* to even contemplate sinning.

On “the first day” of Sukkot, one finally has a chance to catch his breath and relax after his hard work. He is filled with unbridled joy, but there is

a danger that he might unfortunately sin. Therefore, we are instructed to take the Four Species. These allude to various parts of the body, with which we can connect to Hashem. By taking these Four Species, we show that we, too, wish to be part of Hashem's *Merkavah* by serving Him with every fiber of our being. This is why we take them specifically on Sukkot. This festival provides the unique opportunity for us to feel that "this is my G-d and I will glorify Him," since we ensure to purchase beautiful Species and also beautify our sukkot (see *Shemot* 15:2; *Shabbat* 133b). These acts are evidence of our desire to glorify our mitzvot, thereby bringing glory to Hashem.

Shlomo Hamelech was the wisest of all men (*Melachim* I, 5:11). Nevertheless, he found the *pasuk* regarding the Four Species puzzling. Why were these four items chosen, as opposed to any other fruits?

We are commanded to take the *etrog*, *lulav*, *hadasim*, and *aravot*, without explanation. We take them loyally without knowing the reasoning behind them. Delving deeper into the matter, we might say the following. Yom Kippur is the day designated for *teshuvah*. We raise ourselves up from the status of man to that of angel. The Satan cannot make peace with this and seeks ways to cause us to sin. An easy way for the Satan to make a person stumble is in a commandment that is incomprehensible. This was the case with Elisha ben Avuyah, who began his downward decline after witnessing someone climb a ladder to perform the mitzvah of *shiluach haken*. Instead of earning long life, as the Torah promises for this mitzvah, the man fell to his death. Elisha's faith was so shaken by this incident that he abandoned Torah altogether (*Kiddushin* 39b).

After Yom Kippur, Hashem gave us the mitzvah of taking the Four Species without explaining its significance. He wants us to fight the *yetzer hara* on its terms. The Satan confronts us with things that we do not understand, causing us to sin through lack of faith. By taking the Four Species, without understanding the reason behind this mitzvah, we joyfully and faithfully correct any failing we have in this area.

In the future, Hashem will grant reward to all those who kept His mitzvot (*Avodah Zarah* 2a; 3a). The nations of the world will also come to receive their reward. However, Hashem will rebuff them, since they did not accept the Torah with its mitzvot. Nevertheless, He will allow them one chance to prove themselves, offering them the mitzvah of sukkah. Why specifically this mitzvah? Moreover, in the future, all festivals will be nullified, except for Chanukah and Purim. If Sukkot will be annulled, why will the gentiles be commanded to observe this festival?

The *gematria* of the word סוכה (sukkah) is ninety-one, the same as the combined *gematrias* of י-ה-ו-ה and א-ד-נ-י. The initials of the term ענני כבוד (Clouds of Glory), adding one for the rule of *kollel*, is also ninety-one. The last letters are ם and ך, which have the *gematria* of fourteen, the same as דוד (David), alluding to Mashiach. In the future, Hashem will be One and His Name will be One. At that time, He will command the gentiles to build a sukkah in order to see whether or not they can discern His Names hidden therein. Hashem's Names contain a spiritual fire, which gentiles cannot perceive. This is why Hashem will take the sun out of its sheath, causing the gentiles to escape their sukkot in disgust.

Hashem will allow only those who recognize His Name hidden within the sukkah's walls to endure. Their mission will be to establish the "fallen sukkah of David." When Am Yisrael will proudly march into Yerushalayim with the coming of Mashiach, everyone will clearly see Hashem's authority. In reward for this, they will receive blessed rains. Those who refuse to gather in Yerushalayim, such as the Egyptians, will be struck by a plague (*Zechariah* 14:18).

Why is Sukkot celebrated during Tishrei instead of Nisan, when Bnei Yisrael left Egypt and were surrounded by the Clouds of Glory? Pesach is the festival of faith, for this is when Bnei Yisrael entered into a covenant with Hashem to become His Chosen People. Pesach contains the message of faith. After Pesach, we celebrate Shavuot, when Am Yisrael received the Torah. Only a combination of faith and Torah enables one to bask in the Clouds of Glory. Everything is done in stages, each festival bringing its specific message.

In the future, when Hashem will bring back His captive children, everyone will testify that He is One in the world and His kingdom reigns forever. The gentiles will experience burning shame for refusing to accept the Torah. They will never merit enjoying the future spiritual rains, which refer to Torah and the Clouds of Glory.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ What is the connection between the sukkah and the Four Species? Why didn't Hashem command us to take Four Species on Pesach? And why are we adjured to begin building the sukkah immediately after Yom Kippur?
- ◆ After Yom Kippur, one is liable to feel a spiritual setback. Occupying oneself with building the sukkah, in commemoration of the Clouds of Glory, will enable him to extend the Yom Kippur experience to the following days. Building a temporary hut drives home the fact that one is in this world for only a brief time. This encourages him to maintain his *teshuvah*.
- ◆ The initials of the words סוכות, כפורים, spell the word כס (chair). During the days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, one connects to the Heavenly Throne, drawing spiritual abundance upon himself for the entire year. There are four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, alluding to the four "legs" of the *Merkavah*, which are the three Avot and David Hamelech. One connects himself to them as he builds his sukkah.
- ◆ We take Four Species on Sukkot as opposed to any other festival because they signify the unity of Am Yisrael, as they correspond to various parts of the body. When one takes them, he affirms his desire to live in harmony with his fellow Jew and dedicate both his physical and spiritual organs to the fulfillment of Hashem's will. Thus, he continues on the path he began on Yom Kippur.
- ◆ Why are we instructed to take specifically these species? It is a Torah mandate which we cannot understand. The Satan makes us slip up by confronting us with things we do not understand, undermining our faith.

This was the case with Elisha ben Avuyah, who saw someone fall to his death while performing the mitzvah of *shiluach haken*. In contrast, we demonstrate how joyful we are to perform the mitzvah of taking the Four Species, even though we do not understand it.

- ◆ Hashem will test the gentiles with the mitzvah of sukkah. Why precisely this mitzvah? The word סוכה is numerically equivalent to ninety-one, as are the Names י-ה-ו-ה and א-ד-נ-י, when combined. The initials of the phrase ענני כבוד, adding one for the rule of *kollel*, also equal ninety-one. Will the gentiles perceive Hashem's Name in the sukkah or not? Their disdain of the sukkah shows that they cannot.



## Simple Structures – Eternal Estates

Hoshana Rabbah is the seventh day of Sukkot, included in the “time of our rejoicing.” On Sukkot, we are commanded to rejoice, but Hoshana Rabbah is a serious day. We stay awake all night, increase our Torah study, and wish each other a “good note,” similar to wishing each other a good new year. We are struck by the contrast between the joyful atmosphere of Sukkot and the solemnity of Hoshana Rabbah.

First, let us analyze the essence of Sukkot. Why do we build a sukkah and dwell in it for seven days? One opinion says this is to commemorate the sukkot that Bnei Yisrael built in the wilderness, while another says it commemorates the seven Clouds of Glory in which Hakadosh Baruch Hu surrounded Bnei Yisrael in the wilderness. These special clouds protected them from the elements of nature as well as from their enemies.

The deeds of the forefathers are a sign for their children (*Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* 9). We are commanded to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah to evoke the merit of Avraham, who was ready to surrender his son for Hashem's sake, and the merit of Yitzchak, who was ready to sacrifice his

life for Hashem. Many of our customs were established for all generations to memorialize the deeds or events that happened to our Avot. Thus, when we build sukkot, these booths connect us with the events of the past and arouse the merits of our forebears.

The transition from a permanent house to a temporary dwelling drives home the point that one is merely a sojourner in this transient world. Eventually, he will enter a world that is all good. Since this world serves only as the corridor to the great Banquet Hall (*Avot* 4:16), we would do well to contemplate why we are here. A tourist visits various countries with only his backpack or a small piece of luggage. He suffices with the bare minimum. Similarly, we should feel that we are merely visiting this world. One suitcase worth of materialism should be enough for us. What is the purpose of pursuing the physical, which we will ultimately leave behind? Sukkot is the festival when rich and poor alike abandon their homes and enter their flimsy huts. So, too, will everybody, rich and poor alike, eventually give an accounting of his life after 120 years in this world.

Sukkot comes after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Days of Judgment, because it, too, contains the elements of *teshuvah* and reconnection to Hashem. However, there is one major distinction between the Yamim Nora'im and Sukkot. While the Yamim Nora'im are days when we do *teshuvah* out of fear, Sukkot is a festival of coming close to Hashem in *teshuvah* out of love and joy.

Departing from one's comfortable, secure home and entering a rickety hut open to the elements, arouses within him awareness of his true purpose in this world. He is stirred to occupy himself with Torah and is afraid to waste his time on frivolities which will not grant him everlasting benefit.

Now we might understand the connection between Sukkot and Hoshana Rabbah. Sukkot is included in the days of *teshuvah*, which conclude with Hoshana Rabbah, when we increase our Torah study and even remain awake all night long in order to gain merit for the sealing of the judgment. It is most fitting to make a personal accounting on the night of Hoshana

Rabbah and see if we are upholding the resolutions we made during the days of mercy and forgiveness. Perhaps we fell into our old ways and nothing is left of our resolve. The night of Hoshana Rabbah is an opportune time to see where we are holding. Are we ascending the Mountain of Hashem or are we sliding downward?

How well I remember my grandmother, of blessed memory, going out onto her balcony on the eve of Hoshana Rabbah. She would look up toward the sky and exclaim, “Tonight, the gates of heaven are open!” How deep was the simple faith of the Moroccan women of old! With their simplicity, they appreciated the essence of the day better than anyone else. Their behavior was enough to bring a person to do *teshuvah*.

“You shall dwell in booths for a seven-day period; every native in Israel shall dwell in booths” (*Vayikra* 23:42). What is meant by “every native in Israel”? And why does the *pasuk* repeat its message? The “seven-day period” hints to the seventy years of a person’s life in this world, as David Hamelech says, “The days of our years among them are seventy years” (*Tehillim* 90:10). In contrast, “every native in Israel shall dwell in booths” refers to our eternal dwelling in *Olam Haba*. One who truly believes he is here only temporarily will merit permanently sitting in a sukkah of the Clouds of Glory in the World to Come.

There is no such thing as true citizenship in this world of transience. One who considers himself a permanent settler here, viewing this world as the ultimate and investing all his efforts in increasing his holdings here, may lose his right to the World to Come. Conversely, one who lives here with the feeling that his time is limited and he must not waste even a moment from Torah and mitzvot will earn himself a fine portion of eternity.

The way to earn a permanent place in *Olam Haba* is by constantly reiterating to ourselves that this world is merely a way station on the journey to our destination, the World to Come. Let us illustrate with the following analogy: A family is going to visit friends across the country. On the way, they stop off for rest and refreshment. They camp out in their

car or in tents. These provide temporary shelters until they reach their end point. If they become involved in sprucing up their tents by decorating them with all sorts of fixtures, they will never reach their destination, and are liable to fall to the ravages of the road.

Hashem bequeathed us the days of mercy and forgiveness, followed by Sukkot. This time period ends with Hoshana Rabbah. These days provide us with road signs, guiding us in the right direction. They remind us of what our job is in this world, so that we might merit places of honor in the World to Come.

Throughout Sukkot and Hoshana Rabbah, Hashem sees that we consider this world transient and that our sole interest is serving Him properly. He then grants us Shemini Atzeret, which alludes to the connection between Hashem, Bnei Yisrael, and the Torah. On this day, Hashem tells us, “Your departure is difficult for Me; remain with Me another day” (*Rashi, Bamidbar 29:35*). After we have offered sacrifices throughout Sukkot on behalf of all the nations, we add a day which is completely sanctified only for Hashem and Bnei Yisrael. This is the day of Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah, depicting our joy in the Torah, which is paramount to us.



## Hoshana Rabbah

Hoshana Rabbah comes at the end of Sukkot and indicates the sealing of the judgment of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, we gain atonement by afflicting ourselves through fasting. On Hoshana Rabbah, we afflict ourselves by depriving our bodies of sleep. This, too, provides atonement. Since we were completely occupied with prayer on Yom Kippur, we spend Hoshana Rabbah in Torah study and prayer, in order to earn complete atonement for our sins.

During Elul 2001, the United States experienced the horrific terror attack on the World Trade Center, the icon of the American economy. In the *haftarah* of Shabbat Chol Hamoed Sukkot, we read about the war of Gog and Magog (*Yechezkel* 38-39). The *gematria* of the word מגוג (Magog) is fifty-two, corresponding to the fifty American states, plus two for “United States.” This terror attack heralded the war of Gog and Magog. Terrorism has changed the face of the world, gripping everyone with fear and insecurity.

Every person idolizes someone or something. The pauper idolizes the wealthy man, while the wealthy man idolizes the dollar. Of course, the only One worth idolizing is Hashem Himself, Creator of heaven and earth. Many of our Torah Sages were fantastically wealthy, but they kept things in perspective. They knew that money is not an end in itself but merely a means toward an end. Before his death, the wealthy Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi lifted his ten fingers heavenward, attesting that he had never taken even a finger’s worth of pleasure from this world (*Ketubot* 104a). Many others could have become extremely rich, but they chose to invest their energies in Torah.

### ***Planning for the Future***

After the war of Gog and Magog has already begun and Mashiach is nearly at our door, we should analyze why we await Mashiach’s arrival and what will be after he comes. Many of our children have no idea what Mashiach is all about, and they certainly do not anticipate his arrival. This is because they were brought up without an understanding of the redemption. When we were little, we fully believed in the coming of Mashiach, imbibing this belief with our mother’s milk. Just as we knew that we have ten fingers, we knew that Mashiach could arrive any day. Regrettably, due to a lack of love for Torah and mitzvot, many of our youth have grown up without this belief.

*Baruch Hashem*, many of us have good marriages, healthy children, and stable finances. What do we lack, then, that will be provided with Mashiach’s arrival? It is the abundance of spiritual blessing that will be

available then. Imagine living in a world with Avraham Avinu and Moshe Rabbeinu. The more one refines himself beforehand, the greater spirituality he will be able to receive then. There will be tremendous blessing in materialism, as well. However, we anticipate Mashiach's arrival in order to take pleasure in the Divine light that will shine throughout the world. We will bask in the pure pleasure of Torah study, which we will study with ardor and gusto. The Torah will enable us to cleave to Hashem without the disturbance of the *yetzer hara*.

Only Torah and mitzvot escort a person out of this world. When one bids this world good-bye, he will leave all his possessions behind. Regarding the portions brought to the Kohen, the *pasuk* says, "A man's holies shall be his" (*Bamidbar* 5:10). The Chafetz Chaim says that this is a reference to the fact that only man's spiritual acquisitions remain with him. Thus, it is paramount to invest one's resources into Torah and mitzvot.

The Chafetz Chaim offers an analogy to illustrate this point. A man was unsuccessful in business. He finally decided to leave his family and travel to a distant country. Perhaps there, his fortune would shine. Indeed, that was what happened. Many years passed as he gained more and more wealth. Finally, he decided the time had come to return home. Since he could not carry all his wealth with him, he began to consider how to invest it.

He remembered that his hometown lacked fresh milk. He invested all his money in milk. He would sell it back home and earn even more wealth, as well as enrich his townspeople. A friend asked, "Won't you buy some gifts for your wife and children, whom you have not seen for so long?" The man agreed, and purchased expensive jewelry for his family.

After a year of traveling, the man arrived home. The entire town turned out to greet him. To their utter chagrin, all he had with him was spoiled milk. They began shouting at him for his utter foolishness. His family demanded to know if this was why he had left them for so long. He then

remembered the jewelry he had bought them, and presented it to his family. This appeased them somewhat.

A person descends to this world. All the gold and silver will not stand by him after his death, for “upon his death he will not take anything” (*Tehillim* 49:18). Only the jewels of Torah and mitzvot that he accumulated in this world will stand by him in *Olam Haba*. Only his merits will bring him to elevated levels in the World of Eternity.

If one were to present his wife with expensive jewelry, she would be filled with pleasure. What kind of pleasure does jewelry offer, expensive as it may be? It cannot satisfy one’s hunger. Rather, it gives a feeling of satisfaction that goes beyond the physical. This gives us an inkling of the metaphysical pleasures of the future world.

Before his death, “Moshe went and spoke these things to all of Israel” (*Devarim* 31:1). Moshe was standing among Bnei Yisrael and speaking to them. What, then, is the meaning of the phrase, “Moshe went?” The next *pasuk* tells us that “Moshe told them, ‘I am one hundred and twenty years old today. I cannot go and come.’” He was telling them that he was on his final journey, from which one cannot go and come. He was informing them that his days were over. However, they could still correct themselves and earn merit through keeping Torah and mitzvot. They could still make the most of their time in this world.

### ***Unsuccessfully Shadowing Our Faith***

Sukkot is called the Shadow of Faith (*Zohar* III, 103a). What does this mean to us? Let us explain with the following analogy. When a man enters a perfume shop, even if he buys nothing at all, when he leaves the store, some of the scents will linger on him. Sukkot is replete with faith, as we are enveloped in the Shade of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. The seven Ushpizin, too, are found in the sukkah of every Jew (*ibid.* 103b). Although we cannot see them, we are affected by them and thus infused with great doses of faith.

In the future, when Hashem offers reward to Am Yisrael, the nations will claim that they, too, deserve reward. They will claim that whatever they accomplished in this world was only on behalf of Bnei Yisrael. Hashem will rebuff them and their fallacious claims. Then they will try another tactic. “You forced Bnei Yisrael to accept the Torah. Had You forced it upon us, we surely would have accepted it.” Hashem will offer them the mitzvah of sukkah. If they fulfill it, they will receive reward. They will immediately go and build sukkot and sit in them. Then Hashem will remove the sun from its sheath in order to test if they will remain loyal despite the brutal heat. But they will fail this test and kick their sukkot in disdain (*Avodah Zarah* 2a).

This Gemara is very difficult to understand. In the future, Hashem’s kingdom will be revealed throughout the world. Even the greatest tzaddikim are afraid of the future judgment. How, then, will the gentiles have the temerity to kick their sukkot in scorn? This is their last chance to earn great reward; can’t they display just a bit more will power?

By kicking the sukkah, the gentiles merely demonstrate what their true desires were throughout the generations. They were never interested in gaining Torah or mitzvot. They wanted to live life on their own terms. By kicking the sukkah, they will indicate that nothing they ever did was for the sake of serving Hashem. Since in the future, the pure, undiluted truth will be apparent to all, their true intentions will be revealed.

### ***Revitalizing and Refreshing***

Throughout Sukkot, Bnei Yisrael came to the Beit Hamikdash and poured water over the Altar (*Sukkah* 48a, b). The Maharal explains the reason for this. During the year, sacrifices were offered with wine. On Sukkot, water was used, as the *navi* says, “You shall draw water in joy from the wells of salvation” (*Yeshayahu* 12:3). This was the celebration of the Simchat Beit Hasho’evah, which took place in the Beit Hamikdash. Until today, we commemorate it with spirited dancing and music.

This was the schedule during Sukkot: In the morning, Bnei Yisrael brought the *tamid*-offering, they prayed *Shacharit*, and then they brought the *Musaf* sacrifice. Then they would head to the *beit midrash* to learn Torah. Afterward, they refreshed themselves with food and rest. Throughout the night, they would dance and rejoice. *Chazal* say that the thing that remained most strongly etched in their minds was the learning in the *beit midrash*. Even in the days of the Beit Hamikdash, when spirituality was in the air, the epitome of sanctity was in the *beit midrash*, with the study of Torah. Although we do not have the Beit Hamikdash, we can acquire the blessings contained in Torah study.

On the second day of Creation, Hashem separated the waters. The upper waters were brought to heaven, thus earning the name שמים (lit. sky), which is an acronym for the term שם מים (there is the water) (*Rashi, Bereishit* 1:8). The other waters remained on earth. These waters began weeping, as they felt inferior. Hashem consoled them by saying that during the days of the Beit Hamikdash, Bnei Yisrael would draw from them and use them in the libation of the Altar (*Rabbeinu Bachya, Vayikra* 2:13).

During the days of the Beit Hamikdash, the waters received comfort. However, nowadays, the waters' sole comfort is Torah study. "Water refers to Torah" (*Bava Kama* 17a). Salty water increases one's thirst. So, too, the more one studies Torah, the greater is his thirst for more.

### ***The Law of Return***

We have not yet merited the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash. However, through toiling in Torah, one can become as great as the angels. Through sheer willpower, many people have merited enjoying the sweetness of Torah. Many have transformed themselves into Torah giants.

Let me illustrate this point with an incident that happened when I was in France. A woman approached me and said that her daughter had been

missing for the past sixteen years. She had no idea where she was, or even if she was alive.

I advised her to bring me a picture of her daughter. When I would next go to Morocco, for the *hilula* celebration of Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a, I would place this picture on his grave and ask him to help the woman locate her daughter. I did as I had promised.

Six weeks later, the woman returned, all smiles. Her daughter had come home. She related to her mother that for the past month, she had heard voices saying, “Go back to your mother.” When she could take it no longer, she decided to return. How powerful is the merit of the tzaddikim who occupy themselves with Torah study!

### ***Who Knows Four?***

The Four Species represent four parts of the body. The *etrog* represents the heart, the *lulav* represents the spine, the *hadass* represents the eyes, and the *aravah* represents the lips. What does this teach us and why do we take these four species specifically on Sukkot?

During the Yamim Nora'im, we pray for a good new year and confess the sins we did during the past year. Taking the Four Species on Sukkot reminds us that we must guard all parts of our body against sin.

On the night of Hoshana Rabbah, when David Hamelech leads the Ushpizin, we do complete *teshuvah*. We afflict ourselves by depriving our bodies of sleep, reminiscent of the afflictions of Yom Kippur. On Hoshana Rabbah, we do *teshuvah* out of love and increase our Torah study so that Hashem's compassion will be aroused upon us and He will see fit to redeem us. Then, David Hamelech will come and raise the cup of blessing.

### **In Summary**

- ◆ Hoshana Rabbah is the day when our judgment is sealed. We remain awake on this night, as a form of affliction, reminiscent of the afflictions of Yom Kippur.

- ◆ The *haftarah* describing the war of Gog and Magog is read on Sukkot. The *navi* describes the War of Gog and Magog. The *gematria* of מגוג (Magog) is fifty-two, a reference to the states of America.
- ◆ We all await the arrival of Mashiach, not because we desire financial security, but due to the intense spiritual bounty that will be available then. This is our true pleasure.
- ◆ The Chafetz Chaim reminds us that in the World to Come, one will be left with only Torah and mitzvot. None of his materialistic gains will remain with him.
- ◆ “And Moshe went.” Moshe wished to teach Am Yisrael the following, “I am leaving this world. I will no longer be able to observe the Torah and mitzvot. However, you, who still live, should utilize your time here to live a life of Torah and mitzvot.”
- ◆ Sukkot is called “the Shadow of Faith.” As one spends time in the sukkah, he absorbs faith and fear of Heaven from the atmosphere of the sukkah and the Ushpizin who visit us there.
- ◆ At the Simchat Beit Hasho’evah during Sukkot, water was poured on the Altar. During Creation, when Hashem separated the upper and lower waters, the lower waters were inconsolable. Hashem promised that on Sukkot, they would be poured over the Altar. Nowadays, when we no longer possess the Beit Hamikdash, we substitute Torah study for the libation, since Torah is compared to water.
- ◆ The Four Species hint to the heart, spine, mouth, and eyes. We take these species specifically on Sukkot, as they remind us to guard all parts of the body from sin, as we resolved to do on the Yamim Noraim.



## The Yearly Cycle – An Upward Spiral

Three kings and four ordinary men do not have a share in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin* 90a). The three kings are Yeravam, Achav, and Menashe. Rabbi Yehudah disputes this opinion, saying that Menashe will receive a share in the World to Come, as it says, “He prayed to Him... and He returned him to... his kingship” (*Divrei Hayamim* II, 33:13). Others say that although Menashe was reinstated as king, he did not earn a portion in the World to Come.

Rav Ashi was teaching his disciples the Mishnah regarding Menashe. Their session came to a close and he said, “Tomorrow, we will discuss our friend.” Rashi explains that he was indicating that these kings possessed the same level of wisdom that he did. Moreover, they didn’t even deserve a share in the World to Come. Surely, they could not be considered more honorable than mere friends.

That night, Menashe appeared to Rav Ashi in a dream. “How dare you call us your friends? Do you really believe you are on our level? You wouldn’t even be able to answer a simple question that I pose to you! What temerity you have, calling us your friends.”

Menashe then tested Rav Ashi with the following question. Since Bnei Yisrael never do anything without meaning, such as washing the right hand first, tying the left shoe first, etc., where does one cut the bread after reciting the blessing over it? Rav Ashi replied that he did not know. Menashe then explained that one cuts the bread where it is baked the most thoroughly.

Rav Ashi was confounded. “If you are so scholarly, how could you have worshipped idols?”

“Had you lived in my generation, you would have lifted the hem of your garment in your haste to serve idols.” In the days of Menashe, the *yetzer hara* for idolatry was exceedingly powerful.

The next day, Rav Ashi said, “Let us learn the words of our Rabbis.” He had learned well the lesson from Menashe.

Let us study this incident. Why did Menashe choose to ask a question regarding cutting bread? Did he lack questions? And was his response so fantastic to warrant him being called “Rabbi” because of it?

In order to fully appreciate this episode, let us turn to another Gemara. The Sages wished to add Shlomo Hamelech to the list of kings who do not have a share in the World to Come. Shlomo Hamelech had transgressed various Torah prohibitions, such as not to have too many wives, too much money, and too many horses. Although he repented these sins, the Sages thought that he did not deserve a portion in the World to Come. This was because, due to his greatness, he should have known better.

David Hamelech approached the Sages and begged them to allow Shlomo, his son, to enter *Olam Haba*. But they paid him no heed. A Heavenly Voice proclaimed that Shlomo had to his credit the merit of building the Beit Hamikdash before even building his own home. This, too, was ignored. Finally, a Heavenly Voice declared, “Must [Hashem] have your [consent] to punish, that you can reject it?” (*Iyov* 34:33). This meant, “The matter depends on Me and you have no right to make a decision.” Then the Sages retracted their opinion and allowed Shlomo to enjoy his place in *Olam Haba*.

This Gemara is quite puzzling. Shlomo Hamelech had numerous merits. Apart from building the Beit Hamikdash, he authored *Mishlei* and *Kohelet*, two colossal *sifrei Mussar*. Moreover, he composed *Shir Hashirim*, considered to be the Holy of Holies (*Yadayim* 3:5). Certainly, together with banishing Shlomo from the World to Come, the Sages intended to ban his *sefarim*, which offer so much Torah wisdom to the entire world. The Sages truly believed that Shlomo deserved this punishment for his sins, his extraordinary writings notwithstanding.

What was David’s claim to keep Shlomo in the World to Come? If the Sages had not considered Shlomo’s vast accomplishments, how would David’s arbitration help? Why, indeed, were the Sages so adamant about

removing Shlomo from the World to Come? And if they were so sure that they were right, how did the Heavenly Voice change their verdict? They surely knew that “it (the Torah) is not in heaven” (*Bava Metzia* 59b). The Torah Sages are the ones who judge man in this world. Why, then, did they give credence to this Heavenly Voice?

We will gain insight into this matter by explaining the meaning of Shemini Atzeret. On the one hand, it is a festival unto itself. This is denoted by the fact that the sacrifices offered on this day differ from those offered on the other days of Sukkot (*Sukkot* 48a). On the other hand, it is *Shemini*, the “eighth” day, seemingly indicating that it is connected to the previous seven days of Sukkot.

Let us return to Shlomo Hamelech to understand the name Shemini Atzeret. We learn the custom of celebrating the culmination of the study of a tractate from Shlomo Hamelech, who “brought up elevation-offerings and offered peace-offerings, and he made a feast for all of his servants” (*Melachim* I, 3:15). He made this feast in honor of a dream he had. The dream involved Hashem asking him which gift he would like. Did he want wisdom, wealth, or victory in battle? (*ibid.* vs. 5-14). Shlomo asked for “an understanding heart, to judge Your people” (*ibid.* vs. 9). Hashem was extremely pleased that Shlomo chose wisdom over the other gifts, and told him, “Behold, I have acted according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, such that there has never been anyone like you before, nor will anyone like you ever arise” (*ibid.* vs. 12).

As soon as Shlomo awoke, he heard a bird chirping and he understood what it was saying (*Yalkut Shimoni, Melachim* I, 175). He was filled with tremendous joy and made a great feast. If Shlomo made a feast at the commencement of his era of wisdom, why did our Sages learn from him the custom to prepare a festive meal at the conclusion of a tractate? My teacher, Harav Kaufman, shlita, says, in the name of the Admor of Kotzk, zy”a, the following: The concept of conclusion does not apply to *avodat Hashem*. A Torah-Jew is always on the ascent. As soon as he finishes studying one tractate, he immediately begins another one, on a higher level. Shlomo Hamelech teaches that one should make a festive meal at

the conclusion of a section of the Talmud as an expression of his joy at the prospect of beginning another section. Every end heralds a new beginning.

We rejoice on Shemini Atzeret, which is also Simchat Torah, because, immediately after concluding the entire Torah, we roll back the scroll to the words, “In the beginning...” (*Bereishit* 1:1). We take pleasure in our ability to learn Torah and in the inspiration it gives us.

In matters of spirituality, there is no end. Each culmination points to a new beginning. Shemini Atzeret is the day designated for drawing the blessings of the Yamim Nora'im upon us for the coming year. The name Atzeret (lit. lingering/stop) is based on Hashem's plea toward His people to “linger with Me another day.” This can be compared to a king who invited his sons to visit with him for a few days. When the time came to leave, he took them aside and said, “My sons, please stay with me another day, for it is difficult for me to part from you” (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 29:35).

But what does another day accomplish if, after this additional day, the father will again be filled with longing for his son? Although the spiritual abundance available during the Days of Awe seems to have ceased at the conclusion of the festival season, on Shemini Atzeret, Hashem tells us to remain with Him another day. We should fill ourselves with the spiritual energy to last us the entire year. Such an elevated period has now reached its conclusion. We experienced Elul and *Selichot*; the royalty of Rosh Hashanah; the Asseret Yemei Teshuvah, when Hashem was in the fields; and Yom Kippur, when we felt so close to Him.

These were followed by Sukkot, when we basked in the Shadow of Faith, binding our Four Species while opening our arms wide to receive Heavenly blessing. How can we make the sudden transition to ordinary, mundane life? For this reason, Hashem says, “Linger with Me another day. I will prepare for you a festival which brings culmination as well as renewal. It is a holiday of rejoicing with the Torah. As you begin the cycle again, you will draw upon yourselves a profusion of sanctity to last you for the whole year.”

Now we might understand the incident with Menashe and Rav Ashi. We asked what was so significant about the question of cutting the bread, which Menashe had posed to Rav Ashi. What impressed Rav Ashi so much with Menashe's answer as to call him "Our Rabbi"?

Menashe eventually did *teshuvah* for his misdeeds, and Hashem reinstated him as king. Menashe is responsible for the world of *ba'alei teshuvah* (*Midrash Kohen, Mizrach Gan Eden* 9). The Sages had wished to banish Menashe from Gan Eden and place him in Gehinnom. But Menashe countered, "You wish to put me in Gehinnom for the twenty-two years I served idolatry. But here is where you are mistaken. You must not look at the middle of my life, but at the end, when I did *teshuvah*." The Gemara relates at length how Menashe was captured by the king of Assyria. As he was suffering terribly, he called out to Hashem for salvation and was miraculously saved (*Sanhedrin* 101b). Menashe's beginning was also good, as he stemmed from both Yeshayahu Hanavi and Chizkiyahu Hamelech. His happy ending was in the merit of his good beginning.

Menashe hinted to this in his query and response regarding bread. Bread is baked the best at its ends, which begin baking earlier, rather than in the middle. In his great wisdom, Rav Ashi took the hint and accepted Menashe's claim. The next day, he called him "Our Rabbi" for teaching him this great principle.

The name מְנַשֶּׁה (Menashe) contains the same letters as the word שְׁמִנָּה (eight). This hints to the eighth day of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret. On this day, immediately after finishing the reading of the Torah, we begin anew, connecting the beginning to the end. This is Menashe's message also.

This was also David Hamelech's claim in Shlomo's favor. He asked the Sages not to judge Shlomo by his actions mid-life, but to study his beginning, which was pure, and his end, which was spent in *teshuvah*. After Hashem proved David right, the Sages agreed with him.

This is the advantage of a tzaddik who is the son of a tzaddik over a tzaddik who is the son of a *rasha*. The former can trace his end to his righteous beginning. Since he started off with virtuous ancestors, he will

always possess their merit. However, the latter does not have his father's merits to protect him.

After concluding the reading of the Torah on Simchat Torah, we begin anew with *Bereishit*. Spiritual matters never end. The end of one phase is the beginning of another.

Adam Harishon was created on Rosh Hashanah. On this day, he sinned and was acquitted (*Vayikra Rabbah* 29:1). So, too, we are deemed innocent on Rosh Hashanah and enter Sukkot in a state of joy. Thus, Simchat Torah is a fitting time to read about Adam and Creation. This will lead us to introspect and try to gain inspiration in our constant battle with the *yetzer hara*.

Why do we read only about Creation and stop there? Creation contains such a significant message, it is worthy of a Torah reading on its own. Perhaps we can say the following. When Hashem wished to make man, He sought counsel with the angels (*Sanhedrin* 39b). This is learned from the words, "Let us make man in our image." Those who wish to deny Hashem's oneness might say that the words "let us" imply that there are, *chas v'shalom*, more than one deity.

However, Hashem allowed this to be written due to its important lesson. Good character dictates that the greater one takes counsel with the lesser one. Whoever wishes to err and claim that there is another god might use this *pasuk* as leverage. But man is naturally a believer. Studying nature inculcates him with firm faith in the Creator.

This is hinted in Hashem's statement to the angels, before Adam's creation, "ויאמר) אלוקים נעשה אדם בצלמנו" – Hashem (said), 'Let us make man in our image.'" The last letters are ו, מ, ה, מ, which are numerically equivalent to ninety-one, the combined *gematria* of the Names י-ה-ו-ה and א-ד-נ-י. This is also the *gematria* of the word אילן (tree) of the phrase אילן קדוש (sacred tree), an allusion to the holy *sefirot*, as well as the secrets of Hashem's Names.

We read the first section of *parashat Bereishit* on Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah in order to continue drawing upon ourselves the abundance of *kedushah* that we attained on the previous days. Through learning Torah, which is comprised of Hashem's Names, and specifically by studying this very deep *parashah*, we will bring upon ourselves all the blessings that He bestowed upon us during the festival season.

The Torah is the vehicle through which Heavenly blessings rain upon us. Through the power of the Torah, we will combat the *yetzer hara*. Both the Torah and Am Yisrael are called *reishit* (beginning), for neither has an end. Every end is merely a step upward toward a new beginning. By combining our completion of the Torah with the reading of *Bereishit*, may we merit Hashem's kindnesses and the arrival of our ultimate redemption, speedily in our day, Amen.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Gemara debates whether or not Menashe has a share in the World to Come. Rav Ashi called him, "Our friend." Menashe came to him in a dream and demanded to know why he felt they were on the same level. He tested him with a question regarding where one slices the bread after reciting the blessing. Menashe teaches that the bread should be cut at the end, where it is baked the best, and not in the middle. What was he alluding to?
- ◆ The Sages wished to banish Shlomo Hamelech from Gan Eden. After David's pleading and Hashem's affirmation of his claim, they desisted. Why?
- ◆ If Shemini Atzeret is a festival unto itself, as the Gemara says, why is it called by this name, which implies that it is the eighth day of Sukkot? Shlomo Hamelech taught us to make a celebratory feast when completing a tractate of the Gemara. Shlomo made a feast to celebrate his initiation as a "man of wisdom." How do we learn from this to celebrate the culmination of one's study rather than the beginning? The Kotzker Rebbi says that in matters of spirituality, one never stops. He always begins

again, with renewed energies. The joy of completing a tractate with a *siyum* is due to the rejuvenation of starting afresh with another portion of Torah.

- ◆ *Chazal* learned the idea of celebrating the completion of a tractate with a *siyum* from the celebration Shlomo made when he was granted wisdom. The joy of Shemini Atzeret is not merely an expression of our happiness at completing the Torah, but also for the fact that we are granted the opportunity and the strength to start all over again. After the period of the Yamim Nora'im, when we received so much spiritual bounty and became so close to Hashem, He gifted us this holiday of rejoicing with the Torah, which we just now completed reading and are beginning anew. Shemini Atzeret is a festival unto itself. However, since it has the potential to bring the bounty of the Yamim Nora'im and Sukkot upon us for the entire year, it is called *Shemini*, or the eighth, as it is the continuation of the festival of Sukkot that preceded it.
- ◆ Menashe taught Rav Ashi that just as we cut the bread at the end of the loaf, where it is baked the best, a person should be judged by his beginning and end. If a person repented at the end of his life, which began virtuously, he is to be judged kindly, regardless of mistakes he made in the interim.
- ◆ David claimed that Shlomo's life began in virtue and ended in sanctity, as he did *teshuvah* for his few sins, and even suffered the travails of exile in order to attain atonement.
- ◆ *Parashat Bereishit* is read in part on Shemini Atzeret to teach us the monumental lesson that we should always connect the end of one stage to the beginning of the next.
- ◆ On Simchat Torah, we read *parashat Bereishit* only until the end of the Creation. Since Hashem's Names are hinted at in the creation of man, reading this *parashah* enables us to receive the influence of Hashem's

kindness, which we attained on the Yamim Nora'im and will enjoy throughout the coming year.



## Worldly Matters

Hashem created the world on the twenty-fifth of Elul, and Adam was created on Rosh Hashanah (*Vayikra Rabbah* 29:1). We begin reading *parashat Bereishit* only on Simchat Torah, at the end of Tishrei. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to read this *parashah* on the Shabbat closest to the date that the events described in it actually took place? Alternatively, we could read *parashat Bereishit* on Rosh Hashanah, the day of Adam's creation. The entire world was created for his sake, for him to utilize in his service of Hashem.

Hashem brought Adam into a finished world in order to accord him honor. Before a guest arrives, we clean the house and prepare a festive meal. Only after everything is ready do we invite him inside. Since Hashem regarded Adam as His honored guest in this world, He prepared every other aspect of Creation beforehand. A guest is flattered by the honor conferred upon him, but he knows it is all due to his status as a guest. Otherwise, he himself would have been asked to roll up his sleeves and get to work.

Hashem welcomed Adam into a finished world and explained that he was a visitor here for a limited time. Afterward, he would have to bid farewell and return to the World of Truth. Just as a guest behaves with decorum toward his host, wishing to fulfill his wishes, so must we conduct ourselves in this world according to Hashem's command. This is the purpose for which we came into this world.

Hashem created Adam on Rosh Hashanah and placed him in Gan Eden. He warned him not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Unfortunately,

Adam failed this test and partook of the forbidden fruit. Hashem banished him from Gan Eden. In commemoration of this, we, Adam's progeny, celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in introspection and *teshuvah*. We analyze our attitude. Do we truly feel we are merely guests in this world and comply with the Landlord's regulations? Or do we consider ourselves masters in this world and act as we wish?

After Yom Kippur, we celebrate Sukkot, when we leave our permanent homes and enter temporary dwellings (*Sukkah 2a*). This, too, imparts the message that life here is fleeting, transient as a drifting cloud. If one allows his *yetzer hara* to get the better of him, it is because he has not internalized the understanding that he is merely a sojourner in this world.

Sukkot is observed for seven days, hinting to the lifespan of man: "The days of our years among them are seventy years" (*Tehillim 90:10*). At times, Hashem confers longer life on a person. If all of life is a gift, certainly any additional years above seventy are a double and triple gift. One who is granted more years of life should be filled with praise and songs of thanks to the Creator for the extended visit he has been offered in His world. He expresses his gratitude by loyally observing the mitzvot.

After Sukkot, which depicts our transience in this world, we celebrate Simchat Torah, which arouses us to our true purpose – learning Torah and keeping mitzvot. Hashem observes His beloved children on Simchat Torah accepting the yoke of Torah. He is greatly satisfied and declares, "It was worthwhile for Me to create the world for those who uphold it through their Torah study."

This is why we begin reading *parashat Bereishit* on Simchat Torah, as opposed to the twenty-fifth of Elul, when the world was actually created, or on Rosh Hashanah, when Adam was created. Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment. As such, prosecution is leveled against us on this day. In order to avert judgment against us for our misdeeds, we postpone the reading of *parashat Bereishit* until Simchat Torah. By then, we have already done *teshuvah* and reached the awareness that we are merely sojourners in this world. We have earned the right to read the beginning

of *parashat Bereishit*, describing the creation of man, which will be read in completion on the following Shabbat.

The Torah opens with the words, “בראשית ברא – In the beginning of [Hashem’s] creating.” The word ברא (creating) is numerically equivalent to the word גר (sojourner). We are merely sojourners in Hashem’s world. It is therefore incumbent upon us to prepare properly for our transition to the World of Truth and Eternity, where we will receive reward and punishment for our deeds in this world.

As we leave our homes to dwell in sukkot, we indicate that we know our place in this temporary world. Actions speak louder than words. Dwelling in a sukkah for a seven-day period has the desired effect of teaching us that nothing in this world is permanent. Then, when Simchat Torah arrives, our hearts are open to accepting the Torah, in merit of which we live.

As we take the Four Species, which refer to the heart, spine, eyes, and mouth, we demonstrate our desire to serve Hashem not only in word, but in deed. We wish to dedicate ourselves totally to His service.

Sukkot ends with Hoshana Rabbah, the day when our judgment is finalized. We recite special prayers (called *Tikkun*) and remain awake all night, learning Torah. We have the custom to take five *aravot*, corresponding to the letter ׀ with which this world was created, and strike them on the floor. We are not satisfied with saying that we want to keep the mitzvot, but we do actions to show that we mean what we say. Beating the *aravot* on the floor hits home the truth that “dust you are and to dust shall you return” (*Bereishit* 3:19). We are not here forever. From the time of our birth, the sands of our life flow downward through the hourglass. The time has come to stop talking and start doing.

Hoshana Rabbah is like the last flight announcement before take-off. Whoever is ready can board the plane. But one who procrastinates will miss his flight. Rosh Hashanah is the first call; Yom Kippur is the second call; Hoshana Rabbah is the last and final call. Whoever misses this last opportunity to do *teshuvah* will not be properly prepared for Simchat

Torah. Hashem will not consider him worthy for the world to have been created in his honor, and he will not deserve true life.

Simchat Torah follows Hoshana Rabbah. On this day, we internalize the message that Hashem created the world for us to learn Torah and thereby ensure the world's existence. If, *chalilah*, one does not absorb this message, Hashem tells him, "The lowly mosquito preceded you" (*Sanhedrin* 38a). All of Creation, including the smallest insect, was created before man. This indicts him when he is remiss in his duties.



## Food for Thought

***“Hashem is G-d, He illuminated for us; bind the festival offering with cords until the corners of the Altar”***

*(Tehillim 118:27)*

The day following any festival is called Isru Chag – “the binding of the festival,” based upon the above-mentioned *pasuk*. The impression of the festival still lingers on this day. When we come to the end of a festival, we must draw the special sanctity of that festival upon ourselves for the rest of the year.

When one experiences an open miracle, he is filled with gratitude toward Hashem. Whenever he passes the place where the miracle occurred, he proclaims, “Blessed is He Who performed for me a miracle in this place” (*Berachot* 54a). What is the purpose of this blessing? It is to arouse within him faith and love of Hashem, Who mercifully spared him from tragedy. Although many years may have passed since the event, one vividly recalls the details of the incident whenever he passes the location of the miracle and recites this blessing. He re-experiences the original

excitement of salvation. His heart overflows with faith and love of Hashem.

A woman diagnosed with a very serious illness approached me for advice in order to be cured. I advised her to accept upon herself the basic mitzvot, in the hope that the light within them would draw her to the path of Torah Judaism. She took my words to heart and undertook to vigilantly observe the laws of family purity, Shabbat, and kashrut.

A while later, I met her again. She related that she was completely cured. When I asked if she had kept the mitzvot I had recommended, she replied in the affirmative. However, once she was healthy again, she dropped these mitzvot.

Some people are stirred to connect to Hashem only when they are in trouble. After the trouble passes, they return to their old ways. They quickly forget all the good that Hashem did for them. This woman had resolutely undertaken to observe these mitzvot. Nevertheless, as soon as they did their job, so to speak, she abandoned them. She conveniently ignored the fact that Hashem was the One Who had taken pity on her and cured her.

Often during the season of the festivals, we feel stirrings of longing for Hashem. Then the festivals come to an end, and with them, the stirrings we experienced. Isru Chag provides the remedy for this. It is the day following the festival, a time of arousal to draw the sanctity and elevation of the festival upon ourselves for the future. We should not let the festival part without leaving us with food for thought. Rather, let us part from the festival with a sweet taste in our mouths, taking with us provisions for the long journey ahead.



## Sukkot – Gems



### All Heated Up

When Hashem will reward Bnei Yisrael for their sacrifice in observing the Torah and mitzvot, the gentiles will come forth with a grievance. Had they, too, been gifted the Torah, they would also have observed it and merited reward (*Avodah Zarah* 2a). Before giving us the Torah, Hashem offered it to all the nations. Each in turn refused it. What, then, will be the nations' grievance? It will rest in the fact that Hashem compelled Am Yisrael to accept the Torah by placing the mountain over their heads like an inverted barrel. The gentiles, in contrast, were never forced to accept the Torah.

Hashem will hear their complaint and offer them one mitzvah. If they observe it, they will earn eternal reward, just like the Jews. This mitzvah is sukkah. When the gentiles enter their sukkot, Hashem will remove the sun from its sheath. The brutal heat will send them hopping into their cool homes. But not before kicking their sukkot in disgust.

The halachah clearly states that if one suffers from sitting in his sukkah, either due to the heat or the cold, he is permitted to seek shelter in his house (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 640:4). Why, then, will the gentiles be held accountable for leaving their sukkot when the weather gets hot?

Let us step back in time to the days of the Avot. After undergoing *brit milah*, Avraham Avinu was in terrible pain (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 28).

Hashem removed the sun from its sheath, making the weather unbearably hot. This was in order to afford him the opportunity to rest up and not have to exert himself by welcoming guests. However, Avraham's love for this mitzvah outweighed his pains. He suffered more from a lack of guests than from his physical condition. Despite his weakness, he remained vigilant at his doorway, scanning the roads for wayfarers. Hashem took pity on him and sent three angels in the guise of men in order to mitigate Avraham's distress (*Rashi, Bereishit 18:1*).

Avraham wished to observe the mitzvah of welcoming guests instead of rightfully resting up from his ordeal. In each of his ten tests, Avraham unquestioningly fulfilled Hashem's will. He bequeathed to us this gene of self-sacrifice for mitzvot. Only we, the Jewish nation, have the ability to surrender our very lives for a Higher cause.

By instructing the gentiles to build a sukkah and dwell in it, Hashem tests the extent of their self-sacrifice. Will they be capable of sitting in the sukkah despite the oppressive heat, or will they escape at the first sign of discomfort? The gentiles do not possess the gene of self-sacrifice and thus lack the ability to fulfill mitzvot that come with difficulty.

The mitzvah of sukkah is a most appropriate litmus test of the gentiles' standing. Through it, Hashem will prove to them, most clearly, that even if they had been forced into accepting the Torah, they would never have successfully observed it. They thus have no valid claim in stating that they, too, should have been forced into accepting the Torah. If the mitzvah of sukkah will be so difficult to keep, they certainly would never have managed to fulfill more challenging mitzvot, some of which even demand sacrificing one's life for Hashem's sake (*Sanhedrin 74a*).



# Chanukah



## Fighting Fire with Fire

The purpose of Chanukah is to light our inner spiritual light through contemplating the Chanukah lights (*Bnei Yissachar, Ma'amarei Kislev* 4:59). The inspiration produced by our inner light is not confined to the days of Chanukah. We are obligated to ignite the light of Torah and faith within ourselves long after Chanukah has passed and its lights have dimmed. This is similar to the influence of *brit milah*. It is done on the eighth day of the baby's life, but it continues to accompany him throughout his life. It serves as a constant reminder that he is part of the Jewish nation and he must maintain his purity and sanctity.

The Chanukah lights were established to ignite the flame of faith in our hearts. We must always keep this flame burning, constantly fueling it until it grows stronger and ascends of its own accord.

The Maharal compares the Greek Empire to a leopard. Just as the leopard is bold and unabashed, the Greeks exemplified impudence. They were not ashamed of anything they did.

Am Yisrael also possess brazenness. We are even called the "stiff-necked nation." What is the difference between Greek boldness and Jewish stubbornness? Am Yisrael's obstinacy is called "stubbornness for holiness." They are intractable only as far as mitzvot between man and

Hashem are concerned. However, as soon as one's conduct affects his fellow man, Jews are commanded to be amenable and flexible, "exceedingly humble of spirit" (*Avot* 4:4). *Chazal* did not suffice with the injunction to be humble, but specified that we must be "exceedingly humble." Humility is crucial to the *ben Torah* because "good conduct precedes Torah" (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 1).

Conversely, *Chazal* condemn conceit, which they call "the source of all sin" (see *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:27). One must work very hard to uproot this negative trait. While one is exhorted to conduct himself with humbleness regarding interpersonal relationships, in matters of Torah and mitzvot, he must stand staunch and proud. The *navi* praises Yehoshafat for being a king whose "heart was elevated in the ways of Hashem" (*Divrei Hayamim* II, 17:6). When scoffers mock our adherence to Torah law, we must combat their ridicule with steadfastness and determination to do Hashem's will.

The Greeks took note of this unique nation that stands stubbornly for its principles. They made attempts to break their pride in Torah and replace it with the pursuit of physicality. They saw that Bnei Yisrael already possessed the trait of boldness; it would be easy to exploit this quality for their own purposes. They found another aspect they had in common with Am Yisrael – their tremendous wisdom. The Greeks, boasting many philosophers, believed their wisdom would draw Am Yisrael away from the Torah and into their camp.

However, Jewish wisdom is worlds apart from Greek ideology. Am Yisrael's wisdom is based on fear of Heaven, Torah, and faith. We do not act according to our personal knowledge, but by the dictates of the Torah, which is Hashem's wisdom. The Torah guides our every action. The Greeks, in contrast, do not possess Divine wisdom. Each does as he pleases. When it is convenient, he behaves with intellect. Otherwise, he does not.

One of the greatest Greek philosophers was once caught ripping off a limb of a rabbit and devouring it. His disciples watched, aghast. "Is it

befitting for a wise man like yourself to behave like this?” To which he calmly replied, “When I eat, I am not so-and-so the philosopher.” This is extremely telling. Cultural norms and worldly wisdom do not become part of a person’s essence. Even when gentiles pride themselves on their knowledge, it is merely an external trapping, which never becomes an integral part of themselves, and can thus be removed on a whim. This is unlike the Jewish people, whose Torah wisdom becomes deeply ingrained in their *neshamah* and dictates their every move.

The war with the Greeks began not as a bloody battle, but as a clash of cultures. It was a collision between the external wisdom of Greece versus the eternal wisdom of the Torah. For this reason, when the Greeks entered the Beit Hamikdash, they immediately extinguished the Menorah and defiled the oil. The Torah, symbolized by the Menorah, is what makes Am Yisrael superior to all the other nations. The Greeks were intellectuals, but their wisdom could not compare with that of Am Yisrael. This is because the Torah is not merely a body of knowledge, but Hashem’s word.

When a Jew refrains from theft or murder, he does so not because this is what society dictates, but because this is Hashem’s command. A Jew does not live by the credos of his mind and heart, but follows the laws of the Torah, whether or not he understands them. If one desists from stealing because it is unethical, he may likely rationalize that it is fine to take from the rich to give to the poor. He will justify this by claiming it is unfair for the rich to waste so much wealth on superfluities, while the pauper has no food to feed his starving family. However, when one refuses to steal because this is what the Torah mandates, he will never transgress this command, no matter what.

The absolute faith that the Jews displayed in their Creator and His Torah was a novelty to the Greeks. They had never witnessed such steadfastness to one’s principles. But this stuck a thorn in their sides. They could not tolerate that the culture of Am Yisrael would supersede their own. The Greeks could not fathom how Am Yisrael could uphold the Torah even when its laws were Greek to them, and even when these laws

contradicted logic. Therefore, they sought every means to sever the Jews from the Torah. They approached the Jews with the following argument: “Everyone says you’re so smart. If so, how can you blindly fulfill the Torah’s mitzvot without even weighing the sides first? You don’t even see your G-d. Is this your definition of an intelligent nation?!”

The difference between the Greeks and Bnei Yisrael can be summarized as follows. The Greeks believed in what they could see and understand with their physical senses. Conversely, Bnei Yisrael have solid faith precisely because they cannot see their Creator, since He is beyond the physical. They fulfill His word unquestioningly, even without comprehending it.

When the Greeks saw they could not successfully subdue the adults, they cunningly approached the young Jewish children and began arousing questions of faith in their tender hearts. They asked all sorts of questions, to which the children had no answers. Slowly but surely, doubt began to seep into their consciousness. The Greeks were not interested in mass murder or destroying the Beit Hamikdash. Their crusade was that of defilement versus purity. They fought against the wisdom of Torah and the pride of *kedushah* which the Jews represented. This is why they defiled the Menorah and the oil, which represented the Torah (*Bava Batra* 25b; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:9). Greece is referred to as “darkness,” while the oil is symbolic of the *neshamah*. The Greeks’ agenda was to extinguish the Jewish light by severing it from its source – the Torah.

“She fears not snow for her household, for all her household is clothed in scarlet wool” (*Mishlei* 31:21). The word שָׁנִים (scarlet wool) can also be read to mean שְׁנֵים (pairs), referring to pairs of mitzvot that connect us to Hashem. The following are examples of “pairs of mitzvot”: *brit milah* and having children, tzitzit and tefillin, mezuzah and Chanukah lights (*Zohar* I, 238b). It is understandable that through *brit milah* and having children, one connects himself with Hashem. Likewise, tzitzit and tefillin arouse fear of Heaven in one’s heart by reminding him of Hashem’s Presence. But what is the connection between mezuzah and the Chanukah lights?

The Greeks were bent on extinguishing Am Yisrael's sanctity. Toward this end, they forbade them from performing *brit milah* and they prohibited the women from immersing in a *mikveh*. They also extinguished the light of the Menorah, the symbol of purity.

When the Greeks first entered Eretz Yisrael with their diabolical plot, they ordered the Jews to write on their oxen's horns that they have no portion with the G-d of Israel (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 2:4). They specifically chose horns, because they protrude from the head where the mind is situated. The Greeks wished to infiltrate the Jewish mind with darkness and defilement. The initials of the words *מזוזה* (*mezuzah*) and *חנוכה* (*Chanukah*) spell the word *מח* (*mind*). The way to fight the blackness of Greece is by devoting one's mind completely to Hashem. Chanukah lights are lit only once a year, while *mezuzah* is a constant mitzvah. However, long after the Chanukah lights die out, their message remains glowing in our hearts, throughout the year.

Looking at the *mezuzah* on one's doorpost should remind him of the Chanukah lights, which must always burn in his heart. We light Chanukah candles opposite the *mezuzah*, because these two crucial mitzvot are interconnected. Even after the last of the latkes are eaten and the *sevivonim* are stored away, Hashem stands sentry at our doorposts, "never sleeping nor slumbering, the Guardian of Israel" (*Tehillim* 121:4).



## Seeing the Light

The Gemara (*Shabbat* 21b) asks: "For which miracle did *Chazal* enact the festival of Chanukah?" The Chanukah story is replete with miracles. The victory of the few, weak Jews against the mighty Greek army was certainly miraculous. The fact that the Jews found a small cruse which contained enough oil for eight days was also a great miracle.

The Chashmonaim saw fit to establish Chanukah not for the victory in battle, but for the miracle of the pure olive oil. This is spelled out in the Gemara (ibid.): “When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil. When the Chashmonaim defeated the Greeks, they searched for pure oil, but found only one flask which still had the seal of the Kohen Gadol. It contained enough oil for one night. Miraculously, the lights burned for eight days straight. The following year, *Chazal* instituted these days for song and praise.”

This is difficult to understand. As we mention in the *Al Hanissim* prayers, the war against the Greeks was replete with miracles. A few weak men overpowered a mighty militia. Why, then, was the Chanukah miracle enacted for the miracle of the pure olive oil as opposed to the miraculous victory in battle?

The Chashmonaim were well aware of the numerous miracles involved in Am Yisrael’s victory over the Greeks. However, they were looking for a miracle that would sustain Am Yisrael for generations to come. After delving into the meanings of all the miracles, they realized that the victory in battle would eventually fall short of the mark. Although Bnei Yisrael gained victory over their enemies, had they remained distant from the Torah and embraced Greek culture, their victory would have been short-lived. Although their bodies would have been spared, their souls would have been lost. Such a victory is meaningless to the Jew.

The Chashmonaim realized that Hashem performed miracles on the battlefield to enable Bnei Yisrael to abandon Greek culture in favor of a Torah lifestyle. The oil (שמן) represents the soul (נשמה), sustained by the Torah. The main feature of the Chanukah story is that the spirit vanquished the culture of hedonism. This is why the Chashmonaim decided to raise the banner of the miracle with the oil.

All the miracles that took place at that time are represented by the oil. Bnei Yisrael gained victory over the Greeks only because Hashem knew that they would sanctify their souls above and apart from the corrupt culture of Greece. Moreover, Bnei Yisrael merited victory due to the

Torah that the Chashmonaim determinedly studied, to the point of self-sacrifice. The Torah protected Bnei Yisrael from assimilating into Greek society. This is a message for all generations. Only the Torah protects man's *neshamah*, keeping it as pure as the one flask of oil, protected from the contaminating hands of the Greeks. As long as one studies Torah and protects the purity of his soul, no country or culture can harm him.

When we light the Chanukah candles, we are reminded of the miracle of the oil that took place so many years ago. The first miracle was that the Chashmonaim found pure oil. The second miracle was that such a small amount of oil, which was enough for just one day, burned for another seven days. The miracle of the oil greased the shields of Am Yisrael as they battled the Greeks. They successfully overpowered them and threw off the yoke of their culture of defilement. Hashem allows us to achieve physical victory for the benefit of our spiritual growth.

When a Jew does a good deed, he can bring pleasure to his friend and light up his *neshamah*. With his single candle, he can light many others, for "a candle for one is a candle for one hundred" (see *Shabbat* 122a). When the Chashmonaim came home, battle-weary from fighting the Greeks, they did not rest up from their hard work. Instead, they rushed off to the Beit Hamikdash in search of pure olive oil with which to light the Menorah, the symbol of the Torah. The Chashmonaim were devastated to find the Beit Hamikdash defiled. Amidst the rampant impurity, they could easily have despaired of ever finding a flask of pure olive oil which was still closed with the seal of the Kohen Gadol. Nevertheless, they did not give up, but devoted themselves single-mindedly to finding at least one container of pure oil. According to halachah, they were allowed to use impure oil, since the entire nation was impure. But they wished to do the mitzvah to perfection, and continued their quest until they met with success (see *Zevachim* 16b).

By dedicating themselves to this cause, the Chashmonaim accomplished something tremendous. They ignited a light in the hearts of Bnei Yisrael. They aroused them to the significance of a life of Torah and

mitzvot, as symbolized by the golden Menorah. In reward for their devotion, Hashem allowed them to find a flask of oil still containing the Kohen Gadol's seal, which lasted for eight days. Just as the Chashmonaim sacrificed their lives to light the Menorah, so must we dedicate ourselves to Torah study, even as darkness covers the land and defilement surrounds us.

My teacher, Rabbi Chaim Shmuel Lopian, zt"l, once told me that whenever he suffered from any ache or pain, he would immerse himself in learning Gemara. Occupying himself with the sweetness of Torah would reduce his pains. This is what the Chashmonaim taught us by their desire to purify the Beit Hamikdash immediately after the war and find pure olive oil to light the Menorah, the symbol of Torah. They showed us that Torah is paramount and has the power to remove one's mind from his troubles.

A man from Montreal named Gad Bitton told me that he was once on a business trip to Germany. Wherever he went, he was given royal treatment. When he entered one of Germany's skyscrapers, he was escorted by a bodyguard of mammoth proportions and a frightening face. During their walk, which took about three hours, the man suddenly confided that he was an assimilated Jew. He explained that when he had noticed how well the Jew with the *kippah* was treated by the Germans, he suddenly understood that this is a unique and eternal nation. The Germans tried to annihilate the Jewish people, but the wheel turned and here the Germans were honoring a Jew, and even appointing a bodyguard to protect him. The man was so overwhelmed that he made a complete turnabout in his lifestyle and committed himself to a life of Torah and mitzvot.

This story shows how an ordinary Jew can ignite the hidden spark in the soul of a fellow Jew, distant as he may be. Gad Bitton did not do anything extraordinary. His mere appearance as a Torah-true Jew and the honor he elicited from the Germans shook up the security man to the extent that he changed his lifestyle from one extreme to the other. He returned to the nation which he had never fully abandoned.

It struck me that the Torah records the stories concerning our Avot in fine detail, while many halachot, such as the thirty-nine forbidden forms of labor on Shabbat, are only hinted at in the *pesukim* (see *Shabbat* 49b). After delving into the inner meanings of these *pesukim*, Chazal extrapolate what is permitted and forbidden regarding Shabbat. Why is it that the Torah is lengthy concerning the lives of our forefathers and pithy concerning many Torah-mandated mitzvot?

The deeds of the forefathers are signposts for the children (*Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* 9). A story about our Avot has the power to ignite a spark of faith in our hearts and bring us to the road leading toward Hashem. Hashem created man with 613 limbs, upon which are etched the 613 mitzvot. In contrast, good character must be acquired, since “all is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven” (*Berachot* 33b). When we read how our forefathers were meticulous regarding the honor of Hashem and His creatures, it arouses within us the yearning to correct our deeds and improve our relationships. We are adjured to ask, “When will my deeds reach those of my forefathers?” (*Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 25). “Good character precedes Torah” (ibid. 1). Torah study cannot endure without good character. Before involving oneself in mitzvot, he would do well to improve his character traits.

The light of the Menorah ignites the flame of faith and draws us to emulate the deeds of our forefathers, who contained both Torah and good character. This is why they merited fathering our nation. Their deeds serve as guideposts for their progeny, teaching them how to navigate this world while maintaining their purity of soul. “Blessed are you upon your entry and blessed are you upon your departure” (*Devarim* 28:6). We are adjured to return our souls as pristine as we received them.

Chanukah is an auspicious time for improving one’s character and reconnecting to Torah. Mitzvot cleanse our *neshamah*, for “a candle of Hashem is the soul of man” (*Mishlei* 20:27). We add one light to the menorah each night of Chanukah and do not derive any physical pleasure from these lights. In this merit, we banish the darkness which seizes our hearts and minds. Thoughts of *teshuvah* are aroused in our hearts, just as

the lights of the Menorah of long ago cleansed the hearts of Bnei Yisrael and reunited them with Hashem. Let Chanukah not pass us by like ordinary days. Rather, let us successfully utilize this time to derive its maximum benefits.



## Festival Foods Sustain the Soul

We light the Chanukah candles according to the ruling of Beit Hillel, adding a candle each night. On the eighth night, we light all eight lights (see *Shabbat* 21:2). This is to remind us of Hashem's miracles and the fact that He released us from darkness to light at this time. In that case, why do we not light candles every night of the year, to commemorate Hashem's miracles that are with us each day?

Our Sages, fathers of our nation, educate us like children. A little boy is taught what he may and what he may not do. As he matures and becomes more intelligent, he is expected to put into practice the education he received at home. He understands on his own what is and what is not proper to do. Certainly, parents do not tell their adult son how to behave. "Educate the child according to his way; even after he matures, he will not veer from it" (*Mishlei* 22:6). A baby is fed by his mother. At first, he nurses and eats only liquids. Then he goes on to pureed foods. After his teeth come in, he can chew solids and is spoon-fed. However, no mother would feed her twenty-year old son, who can already eat on his own.

*Chazal* enacted eight days of lighting Chanukah candles. This can be compared to the time a mother spoon-feeds her little one. After these days have passed, we are expected to draw the sanctity of the Chanukah lights upon ourselves even without the aid of the actual lights. A Jew might not always find himself in spiritually supportive surroundings. It is up to him to fortify himself. One is commanded to serve Hashem at all

times and in every situation, whether he is among Torah-observant Jews or among gentiles who ridicule anything holy. In order for one's child to have the ability to serve Hashem in any situation, he must instill within him pure Torah education in his youth. This will infuse him with the energy to uphold the Torah in his later years. In this way, he will successfully fulfill Hashem's will even when times are difficult, both spiritually and materialistically.

Once, when I was visiting a Jewish community abroad, I was asked to pay a visit to the sickbed of a seriously ill man. I was asked to pray for him and offer him words of encouragement. The day I went to see him was Tishah b'Av, a day of fasting and lamentation. One of my escorts asked if it is appropriate to offer blessing and prayer on behalf of a sick man on such a day. I replied that even today, Hashem is our merciful Father Who anticipates our prayers.

Every holiday is meant to strengthen us spiritually and supply us with enough fuel to keep us going for the entire year. We must make sure to focus not only on the festivities of the day, but also, and more importantly, on its spiritual aspects. Chanukah is the time to discern between light and darkness, between the defilement of the nations and the purity of Am Yisrael. Certainly, we should enjoy our deep-fried donuts and potato latkes, which remind us of the miracle of the oil. But these are only supplements to the festival. The main feature of the holiday is that the Torah triumphed over the defilement of Greece. At the beginning of time, there was only "darkness upon the surface of the deep" (*Bereishit* 1:2). *Chazal* say that "darkness" refers to Greece, who darkened the eyes of Israel in the attempt to make them forget Hashem's Torah (*Bereishit Rabbah* 2:4).

On Chanukah, we have the custom to eat dairy products. We do this also on Shavuot, as indicated by the *pasuk*, "Honey and milk under your tongue" (*Shir Hashirim* 4:11). However, one should not overindulge in this practice, emphasizing the gastronomic aspect of Shavuot while forgetting it is the beginning of the new year of Torah. According to the efforts one makes in preparation for receiving the Torah anew on Shavuot, Hashem

decides how much pleasure he will have in Torah study throughout the year. We cannot fathom the sanctity of this festival, which empowers us for the entire year.

Only by focusing on the spiritual aspect of any given festival can one draw its sanctity upon himself even after the festival is over. Although he has finished consuming the particular holiday foods and the candles are dimmed, the impact of the festival burns brightly in his heart and accompanies him throughout the year.



## Schooled in Self-discipline

The story of Channah and her seven sons is one of the most wonderful, telling tales of the Jews during those times. It depicts the strength of spirit of the Jews who lived in the dark days of Greece. They were ready to lay their lives on the line in order to heed Hashem's word. Let us relate the story in short:

Channah had seven sons, who were called by the king to prostrate themselves before his idol. The eldest staunchly refused to bow and was put to death. The next sons were called, in order of age, to bow to the idol, but each one, steadfast in his faith, refused the king's order. They were answerable only to the King on High and would not transgress His word. Each son was put to death. When it was the turn of the youngest son, the king tried to convince him with all sorts of bribes to bow before the idol. Despite his tender age, this boy, too, remained true to his faith and willingly sacrificed his life for his faith, like his older brothers before him. He would not serve idolatry, one of the three cardinal sins (see *Sanhedrin* 74a).

Before her youngest son was put to death, his mother, Channah, approached him with the following missive: "When you ascend to Heaven,

please tell our father, Avraham, that he taught us well the meaning of sacrificing our lives for Hashem's sake. However, my portion is greater than his. He was prepared to sacrifice the life of his one son, while I sacrificed seven sons for Hashem's Name." When Channah finished speaking, she went up to the rooftop and jumped down in order to spare herself from being violated by the Greeks.

Why did Channah feel it would be more effective for her to transmit this message to Avraham through her young son, rather than convey it herself? She knew her end was near and she would soon face the Heavenly Tribunal. Why didn't she see fit to tell Avraham Avinu herself that she had surrendered seven sons for Hashem's honor?

Let us answer with a tale from the Midrash (*Tanchuma, Toldot 5*). Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya was walking through the marketplace with Hadrian Caesar. Suddenly, the Caesar noticed a Jew surrounded by gentiles, yet he remained unharmed. He turned to Rabbi Yehoshua, "I saw a lone lamb among seventy wolves which are seeking prey, yet the lamb was not touched by even one wolf." Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "The lamb was not harmed because it had a loyal Shepherd watching over it."

"Hashem is my shepherd; I shall not want" (*Tehillim 23:1*). When do Am Yisrael merit Hashem's protection? When they go in the way of Torah and mitzvot. When a herd of sheep goes out to pasture, they are faced by numerous dangers. They make sure to maintain eye contact with their shepherd, because they know this is the only way they can survive. Bnei Yisrael exist in this world in a state of constant danger. We are always at the mercy of the *yetzer hara* and the gentile nations. The only way to exist is by observing the Torah and mitzvot, which increase our merit and provide us with protection (see *Sotah 21a*). "The voice is the voice of Yaakov and the hands are the hands of Eisav" (*Bereishit 27:22*). As long as the voice of Yaakov is heard in the *batei midrash*, the hands of Eisav are helpless against him. However, when Yaakov's voice dies down, Eisav has the upper hand and gains control over him (*Bereishit Rabbah 65:20*).

The Torah protects us only when we keep apart from the gentiles. It is a fallacy to believe that becoming close to the gentiles and copying their ways will encourage them to love us and consider us one of their own. On the contrary, reality has proven, time and again, that a Jew will remain a Jew. He can make every attempt to mimic the gentile culture, but his Jewishness will always be apparent. Try as he might, he will never be accepted by them, for “it is a law of nature that Eisav hates Yaakov” (*Sifri, Beha’alotcha* 11).

Thousands of Jews were assimilated into German society before the Holocaust. When the wicked tyrant was given power, these Jews were slated for the gas chambers, alongside the millions of others who had staunchly kept their faith, may Hashem avenge their blood.

When Hashem sees that we are enamored of the free style of the gentiles, He gives us a wake-up call to return to Him. At first, this comes in the form of small, nearly indiscernible strikes. However, when we fail to “get the hint,” these blows become stronger and more painful, impossible to be ignored. Why must we wait for Hashem to hit us to the point of bleeding? Why have we abandoned our loving Shepherd and scattered in all directions? Haven’t we pulled the rope as tight as it can go before it snaps?

Chanukah is called by this name – חנוכה, because it is similar to חנוך – education. We must discipline ourselves to be able to serve as a role model for our children. Channah imparted to us the message that it is never too early to educate children. Parents must guide their young ones on the proper path from infancy, before it is too late, when they will bemoan their sorry fate. Channah’s sons willingly gave up their lives for Hashem’s Name due to the education they absorbed from infancy. They were imbued with love of Hashem, with their mother’s milk, to the point that they gladly sacrificed their lives for His sake. Even the youngest of them did not waver in his stand against idolatry and died *al kiddush Hashem*.

Let us return to our question as to why Channah gave the message to Avraham Avinu through her youngest child and did not wait a few minutes until she herself would expire and could deliver it directly. *Chazal* teach us, “Do not believe in yourself until the day you die” (*Avot* 2:4). As long as a person lives, his *yetzer hara* lives within him and does its best to make him sin. Although Channah admirably raised her seven sons to devote their lives to Hashem and she herself was ready to die for His Name, as long as she was still alive, she was afraid she might not be able to withstand the challenge of the Greeks. She therefore hurried to transmit her message to Avraham through her child. If she would not pass the test, her youngest child, who had already proven himself, would safely convey her message.

Education never ends. While disciplining his children, one must constantly discipline himself, as well. When parents display self-discipline, they provide an example for their children, who will emulate their ways.



## Slow and Steady Service of Hashem

We light the Chanukah candles to publicize the miracle of our salvation during the days of the Greek exile. In all Jewish communities, eight candles are lit, to commemorate the miracle of the oil. Instead of burning for only one day, the lights in the Menorah burned for eight days straight. The Beit Yosef asks an incisive question: Why do we celebrate Chanukah for eight days when there was naturally enough oil for one day? The miracle took place only on the subsequent seven nights.

We might ask why there is a need to publicize the miracle of the oil altogether. Those who believe that Hashem is the One Who saved us from persecution do not need convincing. And the gentiles and non-believers

will certainly deny Hashem's hand in our lives, regardless of how many candles we light. For whom, then, are we lighting these candles?

One more question. The Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash was comprised of one central stem with three branches on either side. There were seven in all. If we light Chanukah candles to commemorate the miracle of the Menorah, why don't we light a menorah of seven branches, rather than eight?

The eighth light is the one that spreads the light of the miracle. The Greeks tried to extinguish the light of Torah. Little by little, they introduced their doctrine into Jewish consciousness. Eventually, Am Yisrael became blind to the brilliance of the Torah. We might say that the very name of Greece hints to their diabolical agenda. The name יון (Greece) begins with the smallest of letters, the ן. Initially, the Greeks caused Am Yisrael to stumble in insignificant areas. When they saw how successful they were, they went on to bigger and more serious matters, hinted by the letter ך. Eventually, Am Yisrael fell further and further into sin, until they reached the nadir, depicted by the letter ך, whose *gematria* is fifty, an allusion to the fiftieth level of impurity.

After Am Yisrael merited salvation from the Greeks, they restored their faith by purifying the Mikdash and lighting the Menorah with the remaining pure olive oil. *Chazal* wished to inform all generations that this salvation was in merit of the few who stood staunchly by their faith, heeding the Chashmonaim's cry of, "Whoever is for Hashem, follow me."

This cry resounds through the generations, banishing the darkness and enlightening our eyes with the Torah. Although the Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash contained seven branches and the miracle occurred for only seven days, we light eight lights to publicize the miracle. The letters of the word שמנה (eight) can be transposed to spell נשמה (soul). The word שמנה also alludes to שמן (oil). Through the miracle of the pure olive oil, the Chashmonaim successfully directed the hearts of the nation to their Heavenly Father.

As stated above, we do not publicly light the Chanukah candles in order to attract the gentiles or uninterested Jews. These little lights will not excite them. The lights are lit to arouse the hearts of believing Jews. Besides for reminding us of the wonderful miracle that occurred with the flask of pure oil, the lights remind us to probe into the background of this miracle. It was the Chashmonaim's single-minded devotion to Hashem and His Torah which stood by the nation and enabled this miracle to occur.

Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai differ regarding how to light the Chanukah menorah. Beit Hillel says we increase in matters of spirituality, and we should therefore add another light each night of Chanukah. Beit Shammai rules that we start with eight lights and subtract one light each subsequent night of Chanukah (see *Shabbat* 21b).

We follow the ruling of Beit Hillel, due to its deep meaning. In all areas of serving Hashem, one should always add to his previous service. Eventually, the light will burst forth in its full glory. The act of adding only one light each night and not a few, teaches us to act wisely. One should advance in his service of Hashem in small increments, gradually and with great care. Jumping to the top in one spurt is liable to land a person on the ground with a thud. This may lead him to become depressed and thereby lose whatever he had gained until then.

Although the miracle in the Mikdash occurred for only seven days, the eighth candle which we light depicts the Jewish soul, which always stretches upward, like a flame. It is through the message of the eighth light that we are spurred to rise ever higher in spiritual matters.

In the future, all the festivals will be annulled, except for Chanukah and Purim. Pesach is the time of our redemption from Egypt, when we became Hashem's Chosen People. On Shavuot, we received the Torah as one united entity. Why are Chanukah and Purim singled out as holidays which will endure eternally?

Bnei Yisrael were redeemed from Egypt and later received the Torah as a gift. In Egypt, they had been submerged in the forty-ninth level of

defilement. Only one step separated them from the fiftieth level. They were not worthy of salvation in their own merit. It was only through Hashem's kindness that Bnei Yisrael were redeemed from Egypt.

In contrast, the salvation of Am Yisrael both in the days of Purim and the days of Chanukah came in the merit of the people. Through their own efforts in serving Hashem, they merited victory over their enemies. Certainly, without Hashem's help, they would not have triumphed. But their Torah study and closeness to Hashem increased their merits and tilted the scales in their favor.

The days of Chanukah are days of preparation for the arrival of Mashiach (*Bnei Yissachar*). By banishing the darkness of Greece, the Torah Sages brought the entire nation to an awareness of Hashem. Moreover, the Chashmonaim hastened the coming of Mashiach. The world will exist for six thousand years. The seven thousandth year will be dedicated as a Shabbat for Hashem. The eight thousandth year, alluding to the *neshamah*, will be when Hashem renews His world, the days of *Olam Haba*. We light the eighth candle in order to merit life in the World to Come, which will be renewed for Am Yisrael in the eight thousandth year.

“And Yaakov was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the rise of dawn” (*Bereishit* 32:25). Rashi says that Yaakov returned for small jugs that he had left behind. I would like to suggest that these were jugs of oil with which Yaakov intended to anoint the *matzeivah* that he wanted to establish in commemoration of all the miracles Hashem had done for him. The words שמן (oil) and נשמה (soul) contain the same letters. Each Jew is like a flask of pure olive oil. Even if someone seems too far gone to return to Hashem, Yaakov teaches us otherwise. Every Jewish soul is as pure as the olive oil found by the Chashmonaim. One must therefore do all in his power to discover it and return it to its source, even at the risk of danger. The Chashmonaim certainly did not imagine they would find a pure flask of olive oil, sealed with the Kohen Gadol's seal. But Hashem observed their self-sacrifice and performed a miracle for them, the

consequences of which we enjoy to this very day and in merit of which we will greet Mashiach.

**In Summary**

- ◆ The *Beit Yosef* asks why we are adjured to light eight candles when the Chanukah miracle occurred for only seven days, as there was enough oil to last for the first day. Moreover, why do we celebrate Chanukah by publicizing the miracle? Believing Jews do not need this to bring them close to Hashem, and non-believers will not be influenced to believe in merit of these lights.
- ◆ Why do we light a menorah of eight branches when the Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash had only seven?
- ◆ The eighth light publicizes the miracle of the Chashmonaim removing the cloak of darkness from Am Yisrael and bringing them closer to Hashem. The word שמנה has the same letters as נשמה and שמן. By dedicating themselves to finding one flask of pure oil, the Chashmonaim brought back the hearts of Am Yisrael to their Heavenly Father.
- ◆ We light the candles according to the ruling of Beit Hillel, which states that we ascend in matters of spirituality. In serving Hashem, we make gradual changes, little by little. Eventually, we will see great light.
- ◆ All festivals will be annulled in the future, except for Chanukah and Purim. On Pesach, we were redeemed due to Hashem's kindness. The other festivals also commemorate the undeserved kindness we received from Hashem. On Chanukah and Purim, however, Bnei Yisrael merited salvation due to their efforts, for they had made transformations within themselves. This point earns these festivals eternal commemoration.
- ◆ Yaakov returned for some small jugs which he had forgotten. These were flasks of oil. The *neshamah* of every Jew can be compared to pure olive oil and must be preserved at all costs.



## Pure Progeny – Precious Preservers

We recite the *Al Hanissim* prayer throughout the days of Chanukah. This is a prayer of praise to Hashem for the wonderful miracles He did for us at that time. The main feature of Chanukah is the fact that the Jews found a flask of pure olive oil which burned for eight days straight. We light the Chanukah candles in commemoration of this miracle. However, when we read *Al Hanissim*, we see that there is hardly any mention about the miracle of the oil.

Instead, we find this prayer replete with details of the miraculous battles: The mighty fell into the hands of the weak; the many into the hands of the few; the impure into the hands of the pure; the wicked into the hands of the righteous; and the sinners into the hands of those who occupy themselves with Torah. This seems to imply that the major aspect of the Chanukah miracle was the victory in battle. However, the fact that we light Chanukah candles for eight days seems to imply that the miracle of the oil is the main facet of this holiday.

This contradiction is exacerbated by the Gemara which asks, “Why do we celebrate Chanukah? The main part of the miracle is that, amidst the defilement, the Chashmonaim found a flask of pure olive oil that was still sealed with the Kohen Gadol’s seal. This provided eight days’ worth of oil.” This Gemara completely ignores the miracle of the war and focuses solely on the flask of olive oil, in complete contrast to *Al Hanissim*, which does the exact opposite. Which miracle is the main one of Chanukah – the victory in battle, or the fact that the oil burned for eight days?

I would like to preface my answer with another question. If a *talmid chacham* who authored numerous *sefarim* were to suddenly leave the fold of Torah Judaism, *chas v’shalom*, would one be allowed to study the *sefarim* he wrote while he was yet connected to sanctity? It is self-understood that this is prohibited, for it is considered lending a seal of approval to ways which must be shunned. Since studying a person’s works brings him merit, it is forbidden to learn Torah from one who

abandoned his Jewish roots. We do not want to give him authorization or significance.

Such a person did not abandon the mitzvot all at once. First, he was plagued by various thoughts and pangs of conscience. When he was writing his holy works, he seemed like a true, G-d-fearing Jew. However, we cannot be one hundred per cent sure of this. Perhaps he harbored doubts in his faith. He may have been simultaneously straddling the worlds of the believer and the non-believer. When we study his works, we increase the powers of defilement which are interwoven in his words. Just as a newborn gains sustenance from his mother by nursing, the forces of impurity suckle from the power of *kedushah* and gain greater power (*Sha'ar Hakavanot, Purim 1; Olat Tamid, Sha'ar Hakorbanot*).

There is a concept that “the son brings merit to the father” (*Sanhedrin 104a*). A son who walks in the ways of Torah and possesses fear of Heaven elevates his father’s *neshamah*. This idea is illustrated by the life of Yochanan Kohen Gadol (see *Berachot 29a*). Toward the end of his life, he defected from the path of Torah. However, his soul was elevated in the merit of his descendants, the Chashmonaim, who risked their lives for Hashem’s Name. With utter self-sacrifice, they fought the powers of evil and defilement. They ignited the flame of faith in the hearts of the Jewish nation. In the merit of his descendants, Yochanan Kohen Gadol was saved from eternal doom.

Another striking example of this maxim is the case of Elisha ben Avuyah (*Chagigah 15b*). Originally, Elisha was righteous, but later on in life, he became an apostate. Although he ended his life on a negative note, we still learn his Torah teachings (*ibid; Moed Katan 20a*). This is due to his devoted disciple, Rabbi Meir, a tremendous tzaddik, who elevated the soul of his teacher. Just as a son can bring merit to his departed father, so can a disciple bring merit to his teacher, since one who teaches Torah to another is considered his spiritual father. Rabbi Meir left no stone unturned in his determination to bring his mentor’s soul into Gan Eden (see *Chagigah 15b*). We are allowed to learn Elisha’s words for they were purified by Rabbi Meir.

Yochanan Kohen Gadol merited mention in *Al Hanissim* through the merit of his descendants, who were all virtuous and thereby succeeded in elevating his soul. However, since he himself strayed from the Torah, the miracle of the oil is not emphasized in *Al Hanissim*. This is in order not to arouse indictment against him. In the Gemara that mentions the Chanukah miracles (*Shabbat* 21b), however, the miracle of the oil is clearly discussed, since the name of Yochanan Kohen Gadol is omitted there. There is no risk of arousing the Attribute of Justice.

*Al Hanissim* is recited during the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer, when one is standing before his Creator in silent communion. This is a critical time, when one's merits are being weighed against his faults. If the side of demerit is heavier, it prevents his prayers from being accepted. Thus, when we mention the merit of the Chashmonaim, who sacrificed their lives for Hashem's sake, we wish to arouse merit by which our prayers can safely ascend heavenward. In order that our prayers should not be prevented from rising to Hashem, we do not mention the miracle of the oil, which was sealed by Yochanan Kohen Gadol, who did not remain righteous all his life.

However, we do mention his name: "In the days of Mattityahu, son of Yochanan, Kohen Gadol..." This is as we said above. Yochanan Kohen Gadol is mentioned in *Al Hanissim* in merit of his descendants, whose steadfastness to Hashem stood him in good stead and elevated his *neshamah*, even reinstating his position as Kohen Gadol. This is in contrast to the *Al Hanissim* prayer of Purim, in which the names of Mordechai and Esther's parents are not mentioned at all. The concept of "the children giving merit to the parents" (*Sanhedrin* 104a) is not necessary in the case of Mordechai and Esther.

Rabbi Akiva once met a man gathering wood and loading it onto his back instead of into a wagon. He asked the man why he was doing this. To which the man replied, "I have already been called up to the Heavenly Tribunal. They sent me back down to this world to gather trees and be burnt together with them." He added that he had been a great sinner during his lifetime and this was his punishment. Not only did he not leave

behind a righteous child who would have been able to elevate his soul, but his son was even more wicked than himself, thus adding to his own penalty.

Rabbi Akiva was filled with compassion for this poor soul. He asked for the name of his son and went to meet with him. He convinced the son to repent in order to lighten his father's burden. Additionally, he took the son under his wing. He taught him Torah and was not satisfied until he saw him going in the proper path.

After some time, Rabbi Akiva again met the wood-gatherer. However, this time, the man was wearing a huge smile. He told Rabbi Akiva, "You should know that in your merit, I have stopped suffering in Gehinnom, and my soul has been elevated." Rabbi Akiva continued educating this man's son until he brought him to complete *teshuvah*. Heaven showed him that the father's soul entered Gan Eden, reaching a place where tzaddikim sit. This is a perfect example of "the son brings merit to the father."

Yochanan Kohen Gadol has merit not only due to his righteous descendants, but also since all Bnei Yisrael returned to their Heavenly Father by heeding the call of the Chashmonaim, "Whoever is for Hashem, follow me!" As is known, שמן (oil) hints to the נשמה (*neshamah*). Thus, the Chanukah lights have the ability to raise the *neshamah* of Yochanan Kohen Gadol, in merit of his descendants, who brought Am Yisrael spiritually and physically from darkness to great light.

Yochanan Kohen Gadol's soul continues rising with each kindling of the Chanukah lights. All the blessings we recite, all the halachot that we learn, and all the lessons that we take from these candles redound to the credit of the Chashmonaim and to Yochanan Kohen Gadol. His seal remained fastened on the flask of pure olive oil, used by his progeny who preserved the pure tradition of Torah.



## The Soul of the Matter

Surprisingly, the Greeks did not wish to destroy the Beit Hamikdash. Their aim was to defile the pure olive oil, thereby preventing the kindling of the Menorah. If they wanted to stop Am Yisrael from observing Torah and mitzvot, what better way than by razing the Beit Hamikdash to the ground? What was their agenda? The fact that the Greeks forbade Bnei Yisrael from keeping Shabbat, *brit milah*, and family purity, fundamental principles of our faith, proves that their intention was to sever them from their heritage. They wished to woo Bnei Yisrael over to Greek culture.

The oil used to light the Menorah hints to the *neshamah*, as both שמן (oil) and נשמה (soul) contain the same letters. Just as oil will never mix with water no matter how much one stirs it, so does the Jewish *neshamah* remain apart from the nations of the world. In spite of untold suffering throughout the generations, Bnei Yisrael have always maintained their identity and loyalty to Hashem. From His side, we are assured eternal existence, as it says, “The Eternal One of Israel will not lie” (*Shmuel I*, 15:29).

Mighty world empires have disappeared from the face of the earth. In contrast, for thousands of years, Am Yisrael, the smallest of nations, has succeeded in preserving its identity. In spite of pogroms and persecution, exiles and extermination, Am Yisrael proudly bears its Jewish heritage as it treads on the graves of its enemies.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya was once walking through the streets of Rome with Hadrian Caesar. As they walked, they suddenly noticed a lone Jew walking among tens of blood-thirsty Romans. The Caesar turned to Rabbi Yehoshua in wonder and said, “How can one little sheep survive among seventy wolves of prey which wish to destroy it, and walk on as though it were in the most placid pastures?” Rabbi Yehoshua said that indeed, this is nothing short of a miracle. It can be explained only by saying that Hashem is watching over Am Yisrael. Only due to the Divine

supervision which Am Yisrael merits on a daily basis can it survive in spite of daily dangers (*Tanchuma, Toldot 5*).

Throughout the millennia, all nations have intermarried. Thus, Germans are not of pure German ancestry. The same goes for the Italians, the French, and the Spanish. The United States, which is the greatest world power, is comprised of a conglomeration of various nationalities and cultures. Conversely, Am Yisrael has staunchly upheld its distinction as a separate nation by upholding the Torah that prohibits intermarriage and intermingling with any other nation. This is how the Jews have successfully preserved their uniqueness for thousands of years. It is due to Hashem's constant supervision that they have tenaciously clung to their heritage amidst the corrupt societies of the world.

Let us return to our original question. Why did the Greeks suffice with defiling the oil rather than destroy the Temple? If their agenda was to win Bnei Yisrael to their lifestyle, wouldn't destroying the Beit Hamikdash be the best way to accomplish this? The Greeks, in contrast to Haman, were not interested in physically annihilating Bnei Yisrael. Rather, their agenda was to steal their souls. Since the Greeks wished to damage the *neshamah* of Bnei Yisrael, they tried to prevent them from lighting the Menorah with pure oil, which hints to the *neshamah*. This would sever the nation from their spiritual source.

However, the Greeks overlooked one crucial element. Oil always floats to the top. Despite their excessive efforts to defile the oil, one flask remained sealed and pure. Through this lone flask, Bnei Yisrael merited salvation and were able to once again light the Menorah and connect to their source.

The Beit Hamikdash was the home of the *Shechinah*. Before the construction of its forerunner, the Mishkan, Hashem said, "They shall make for Me a Sanctuary so that I may dwell in their midst" (*Shemot 25:8*). *Chazal* explain that Hashem desires to rest His *Shechinah* within each person. Thus, each of us is considered a miniature Mikdash. The Greeks were not concerned with destroying the physical aspect of the Beit

Hamikdash, but its spiritual content. Their plan was to defile, not to destroy. The Sanctuary could stand, as long as it stood on their terms, divested of all sanctity. Similarly, the Greeks did not want to eliminate Bnei Yisrael, but to strip them of their sanctity.

Man's body is earthbound and physical. In contrast, his *neshamah* is spiritual and G-dly. By cleaving to Hashem, one can sanctify his body and refine it, thereby transforming it into a spiritual entity. The Chashmonaim were well aware that the body is a vessel for the soul. They therefore occupied themselves with purging the Beit Hamikdash of all forms of defilement. Then they would once again be able to kindle the Menorah with pure olive oil. In this manner, they would connect to their *neshamot*, which would elevate their physical side.

Hashem noted the determination and tremendous efforts of the Chashmonaim and repaid it by providing them with a flask of pure olive oil which had escaped the eyes of the Greeks. This little flask provided the salvation of our nation. "In the way in which man wishes to go, he is led." It is up to us to prove that we want to go on the right path. Once we demonstrate our determination, we will be helped by Heaven to overcome all obstacles and be spared all peril.

I was once on a flight bound for England, in order to visit my sons studying there in yeshiva. It was early morning and my trusted escort, Chananya Shushan, handed me a meat sandwich for breakfast. Although I generally eat a dairy meal for breakfast, this was the only kosher food available.

We landed in England and went to the home of an acquaintance, who offered us coffee with milk. I completely forgot about the meat sandwich and stretched out my hand to pour some milk into my coffee. Suddenly, my son, Refael asked me a question. I put back the pitcher of milk and responded to his question.

In the meantime, Rabbi Chananya entered the room and reminded me that I had eaten meat not long before. I am certain that Heaven ordained for my son to ask me the question when he did in order to spare me from

eating dairy soon after meat. When we demonstrate our determination to preserve the purity of our soul, Hashem sends us special *siyata di'Shemaya* to protect us from sinning.

Why did the Greeks find it so urgent to sully the souls of Bnei Yisrael? Why were they so intent on integrating them into Greek culture? Hashem planted this obsession in their hearts in order to awaken Bnei Yisrael (*Bach, Orach Chaim* 670:4). Most of the nation was going through the motions of serving Hashem. But they were doing this lethargically and lifelessly. When Bnei Yisrael serve Hashem in this way, He sends harsh decrees to bring His nation back to Him. Hashem implanted in the hearts of the Greeks the desire to destroy the Jewish *neshamah*. Through the unbearable Greek edicts, Bnei Yisrael were aroused to do *teshuvah*.

How painful it is that we wait for Hashem to strike us before returning to him! If only we would cleave to Him of our own volition, thus proving our desire to keep our *neshamot* pure, we would be spared much anguish.

“Yaakov wished to live in peace. Immediately, the ordeal with Yosef sprang upon him” (*Rashi, Bereishit* 37:2). Hashem does not want people to “take it easy.” Yaakov’s ordeal teaches us a timeless message. This world is the world of doing, for “man was born to labor” (*Iyov* 5:6). Only after 120 years of working on oneself will he rest in peace, basking in the glory of the *Shechinah*.

At the time of the Greeks, Am Yisrael wanted to live the good life. However, this often leads to letting down one’s guard. The Chanukah candles sear into our consciousness the message that we are obligated to serve Hashem with every fiber of our being. We certainly do not want Hashem to remind us of this with difficulties.

This does not mean that one may never rest. It means that one must know when he may relax and when he must toil. Hashem, who knows man’s nature, is aware of our need to rest every so often. He therefore gifted us Shabbat, a day of relaxation and rejuvenation (*Midrash Tehillim* 92).

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**In Summary**


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- ◆ If their intention was to sever Am Yisrael's connection with Hashem, why did the Greeks suffice with contaminating the oil rather than destroying the Beit Hamikdash?
- ◆ The oil refers to the *neshamah*, as they contain the same letters (שמן, נשמה). Just as oil floats to the top, never mingling with other liquids, so is Am Yisrael separate from the other nations. Although mighty world empires have vanished with the sands of time, Am Yisrael is alive and eternal, for "the Eternal One of Israel does not lie."
- ◆ The Greeks wished to damage the *neshamah* of Am Yisrael, not their bodies. This is in contrast to Haman, who sought to physically destroy Am Yisrael. The Greeks defiled the oil, which hints to the *neshamah*. They did not need to destroy the Beit Hamikdash, as long as it was stripped of its holiness.
- ◆ Although man's body is physical, by cleaving to Hashem, one sanctifies it and transforms it into a spiritual entity. "The way in which man wishes to go, he is led."
- ◆ Why did Hashem send the Greeks, who desired to contaminate the Jewish souls, against Am Yisrael? When Am Yisrael are remiss in their service of Hashem, He brings them back to Him through harsh decrees. This was the condition of the Jews during the days of the Greeks. The Greeks were merely pawns in Hashem's hands, which He used to win back His beloved children.
- ◆ The Chanukah lights arouse us to renew our service of Hashem, obviating the need for us to suffer difficulties in order to remember our obligations.



## Luminous Lights – Shimmering Souls

“Whoever is meticulous in kindling the lights merits sons who are *talmidei chachamim*” (*Shabbat* 23b). Why is this promise made regarding Chanukah lights, rather than the mitzvot of any other festival? *Chazal* could have guaranteed that anyone who builds a sukkah, takes the Four Species, or observes Pesach will be blessed with virtuous children. What is the connection between kindling the Chanukah lights and having righteous children?

The word חנוכה (Chanukah) is closely related to the word חנוך (education). We kindle one light on the first night of Chanukah and add a light each subsequent night. On the eighth night, we kindle all the lights. The Chanukah lights allude to the *neshamot* of our children. The word שמונה (eight, referring to the eight lights of Chanukah) is similar to the word נשמה (soul). Steady work is demanded in order to refine the *neshamah*. When a father constantly and consistently educates his children, Hashem helps him raise children he can be proud of.

We do not light all the candles at once, but add one each successive night. Children are educated in a similar fashion. We cannot expect them to acquire all Jewish values at once. Child-rearing demands extreme patience and adherence to one’s goal. The aphorism that one may believe someone who says he tried and succeeded can be applied to child-rearing.

One might claim that his children are too rambunctious to raise properly. He should just take a look at the animals of the jungle. With specific techniques, even they can be trained, often in ways diametrically opposed to their natures. This should teach us a great lesson. If animals of the wild can overcome their natural instincts, certainly our young children, who may sometimes act like wild animals but contain a *neshamah* from on High, can absorb the education invested in them and bring much *nachat* to everyone.

In contrast to trained animals, which demand direct supervision so that they do not veer from the rules, an educated child will absorb his parents' discipline and behave accordingly even after leaving their home. The good character traits he acquired as a young child leave an everlasting impression on him.

Parents and educators who educate and supervise their young charges can be compared to the *shamash*. Although the *shamash* stands apart from the other Chanukah lights, it is an intrinsic part of the Chanukah menorah. Parents command respect from their children. Yet they must be connected to their children and understand their needs in order to be able to impart sound Torah education to them.

A young child can be compared to a tender sapling. In order for the sapling to grow straight, it is supported by a stick. After it has gained strength, the support can be removed, in the hope that the tree will grow straight of its own accord. A young child must be guided on the right path with a pure Torah education. When a child absorbs healthy Jewish habits, in the spirit of our forefathers, it is safe to assume he will continue advancing in this direction even after he leaves his parents' home.

Chanukah is the holiday of education. Needless to say, if one wishes to educate his children, he himself must be disciplined. A cup of water can overflow only when it is full. *Chazal* say that the best form of teaching is to be a good role model. "Practice what you preach" is a Torah tenet. When a child sees his parents behaving respectably, he aspires to emulate them. In this manner, without any words, the father has instilled true values into his child.

In the days of the Greeks, the adults of our nation were staunch in their faith. It was therefore extremely difficult for the Greeks to win them over to their camps. What did the Greeks do? They focused on the children, whose malleable minds were vulnerable to their suggestions. After the Greeks successfully coaxed the children to adopt their ideology, it was not long before the parents followed suit. Eventually, many abandoned the heritage of their fathers and embraced Greek culture.

The first thing the Chashmonaim did after gaining victory over the Greeks was to kindle the Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash. The Menorah symbolizes educating children in Torah and fear of Heaven. Hashem saw their dedication to this cause and made a marvelous miracle for them. Instead of providing enough light for only one day, the oil sufficed for eight days. The number eight represents the level above the laws of nature (*Maharal, Gevurot Hashem* 47) and hints to the pure *neshamah*, which must be nurtured properly from one's earliest years.

When the Chashmonaim entered the Beit Hamikdash, they found it in a state of defilement. They needed to purify and rededicate the Mizbe'ach. The inauguration of the Mizbe'ach is called חנוכת המזבח, a term similar to חנוך (education). Just as the Mizbe'ach was rededicated so that the Kohanim could continue the nation's service of Hashem on it, so, too, a parent dedicates his child to serve Hashem throughout his life. Moreover, the Mizbe'ach hints to another important facet of child education, since it symbolizes self-sacrifice to a pure Torah lifestyle.

It is thus most fitting to arouse ourselves during the days of Chanukah to the important matter of child education. With grace and pleasantness, we should try to influence the receptive young hearts of our children to embrace the ways of the Torah. This will ensure that good character and Torah values become part and parcel of their very beings.

When Eliyahu Hanavi wished to prove to Am Yisrael the veracity of the Creator in opposition to the idolatry of the Ba'al, he built an altar of twelve stones (*Melachim* I 18:31-32). Each stone was designated for one of the Twelve Tribes. He built this altar slowly and deliberately, one stone at a time. This teaches us a monumental message regarding child education. A child does not become educated all at once, but in increments, lesson after lesson. Only with persistence and patience will one see the results of his hard work. By paying attention to the smallest details, he will reap the dividends of his investments.

Every Jew, even one distant from a Torah lifestyle, has a small menorah burning in his *neshamah* that comes from under the Heavenly Throne. An

angel of Hashem taught Torah to the fetus in its mother's womb. Even a wayward soul received this gift. A spiritual candle burned above his head. And although as soon as he is born, an angel strikes him on the mouth and he forgets all he learned, this candle continues to burn in his heart. Who knows when it will burst into a full flame and bring him back to his Father in Heaven?

An amazing story which was publicized after the Holocaust caused quite a stir among the public. During the war years, many European Jews chose to hide their children in Christian monasteries. They hoped the war would end quickly and, immediately afterward, they would return for their children. These innocent Jews never fathomed the end that awaited them. Instead of being reunited with their precious children, they died grisly deaths.

After the war, a delegation of Jews was sent to rescue these Jewish children from the monasteries. They wanted to save these pure Jewish souls, who had been submerged in impurity these past years and hardly knew they were Jews. The members of the delegation wondered how they could identify the Jewish children. They finally came up with a plan. They would recite the *Shema Yisrael* prayer. Whoever recognized these eternal words would prove his Jewish identity. The delegation went from one monastery to another, calling out, "*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad.*" Groups of young Jewish children swarmed to them, crying, "Tatte! Mamme!" There is no doubt that the pure Jewish education these children received with their mothers' milk was absorbed into their very being. Although they may have forgotten that they were Jews during the war years, their souls never forgot. The words of *Shema* awakened within them their ties to the Jewish nation.

Researchers have discovered an interesting thing. The salmon is born in one part of the sea and immediately makes its way to the far ends of the sea, kilometers away from where it originated. Later on in life, it swims back to where it came from. So many Jews have lived completely severed from the Jewish people. Toward old age, the Jewish spark is

rekindled and they feel a strong desire to return to the memories of their youth and rejoin the nation they have rejected all these years.

I read an interesting story in the *sefer Orchot Chasidecha*. A man went to the wedding of his friend's daughter. He noticed how successful and educated his friend's family was. He turned to his friend and asked, "Tell me, please. The two of us married at about the same time and underwent similar life situations. What is the secret of your family's success?"

The friend gave an astounding answer. He said that when he had participated at the wedding of the child of his mentor, he observed the entire family posing for a picture. He approached his mentor after the wedding and asked for a copy of the picture. He studied the photograph for a long time. It was a picture of a successful family. The thought struck him that it is not enough to merely smile at the photographer. Beauty and pleasantness must be reflected in daily living. How does one attain this? By educating his children to have good character and positive qualities, from a very young age. "From the time I reached this understanding, I attempted to apply it to my life. I have invested tremendous amounts of energy into my family's education, with great *siyata di'Shemaya*. What you see are the results."

"These lights are holy and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them but to look at them" (*Tur, Orach Chaim* 676). Why are we forbidden to use the Chanukah lights for our personal benefit? As mentioned above, these lights refer to our children's education. Hashem has entrusted our children into our care to educate them in the way of our Avot. These *neshamot* are holy and pure, as we recite in the Morning Blessings, "The *neshamah* that You placed within me is pure. You created it; You fashioned it." Our children's *neshamot* belong to Hashem; we may not take personal benefit from them. Rather, we must vigilantly guard them, offering them the best education possible, so that they ascend the path that goes up to Hashem.

A man once asked me to convince his daughter to learn at an Ivy League college. His daughter had refused to attend this prestigious university,

claiming she would be the only Jew there. Needless to say, I did not agree to the father's request. On the contrary, I did my best to convince him of the dangers involved. Unfortunately, my words fell on deaf ears. The man compelled his daughter to attend this institution. After some time, he came to me, weeping bitter tears. His daughter became friendly with a gentile young man, whom she was planning to marry. This father had abused his paternal powers. Instead of raising his daughter in the spirit of our ancestors, he caused her to deviate from the path of virtue.

Since our children's *neshamot* are sacred, we must take all measures to educate our children properly. We must fill ourselves with pure faith, which will then overflow onto our progeny.



## Chanukah and Purim – Festivals Forever

In the future, all the festivals will be annulled, besides Chanukah and Purim (*Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei 544*). In Egypt, the gentiles tried to encourage assimilation, but were unsuccessful. Likewise, the Greeks tried to Hellenize our nation, but their plan was frustrated. They wished to “make them (Bnei Yisrael) forget Your Torah and compel them to stray from the mandates of Your will. You, in Your great mercy, stood by them in the time of their distress. You took up their fight; judged their claim, and avenged their wrong. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton into the hands of those who involve themselves with Your Torah.”

How are Chanukah and Purim different from all the other festivals, warranting the distinction that they will last eternally?

The Egyptians attempted to make Bnei Yisrael intermarry. In the merit of maintaining their distinct mode of dress, names, and language, and

remaining united in Egypt, Bnei Yisrael were spared the scourge of intermarriage (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 24). When one guards himself against his *yetzer hara*, Hashem protects him from all harm.

We are still left with the question: What is so unique about Chanukah and Purim? Let us go back in time to the beginning of our sojourn in Egypt. At the *Brit bein Habetarim*, Hashem told Avraham that his children would be exiled for four hundred years (*Bereishit* 15:13). *Chazal* say that if Yaakov would not have willingly descended to Egypt, he would have been brought there in iron chains (*Shabbat* 89b). Why was it imperative for Yaakov to descend to Egypt in fulfillment of this decree? Yosef's sale and Pharaoh's dreams were all enacted in order to bring Yaakov and his family down to Egypt. Yaakov wished to dwell in tranquility, but the ordeal with Yosef sprang upon him (*Rashi, Bereishit* 37b). Was the quest for quiet so terrible that it warranted such severe repercussions?

Nowadays, we have the lights of *Matan Torah* to enable us understand the Torah's wisdom. A yeshiva student better understands the subject he is learning when it is explained to him, since his mentor brings the *sugya* to light. At Har Sinai, we received the Torah and the *siyata di'Shemaya* to understand it. The Avot, in contrast, studied Torah without this special Divine help, as they lived before the Torah was given. They had to exert themselves to a much greater degree to understand the meaning of the Torah's words and to develop their character traits.

It is astounding to contemplate how the Avot lived successfully, specifically in Egypt, which was full of immorality (*Vayikra Rabbah* 23:7). They served Hashem through their own untiring efforts, lacking the *siyata di'Shemaya* that would fill the world at *Matan Torah*. Yosef Hatzaddik was so handsome that women who gazed at him while doing their work would become so distracted that they cut their fingers (*Tanchuma, Vayeishev* 5). How did Yosef withstand the great temptations of Egypt? Our forefathers had unimaginable strength and sanctity, which helped them pass their tests.

“ואת יהודה שלח לפניו אל יוסף להורות לפניו” – And he sent Yehudah before him to prepare before him” (*Bereishit* 46:28). The word להורות (to prepare – lit. to teach, indicate) is similar to אורות (lights). Yaakov sent Yehudah before the rest of the family in order to establish a House of Prayer and Study. This sanctuary would light up the darkness of Egypt. Yaakov and the rest of his family would live in a place where they could maintain their high spiritual standards even amid the decadent surroundings.

Yaakov’s mission was to rectify the damage of Adam’s sin. Before this sin, the world was encompassed in spiritual radiance. Adam’s heel alone shone stronger than the sun (*Tanchuma, Acharei Mot* 2). Unfortunately, because of the sin, the entire world was spoiled and these brilliant lights were dimmed.

Yaakov, who represented the Attribute of Torah, emerged from the corruption of Lavan’s house perfect in body, wealth, and Torah (*Shabbat* 32b). He was the one capable of rectifying the damage of Adam’s sin. Only he could descend to Egypt in order to prepare it for Am Yisrael. If not for Yaakov’s preparing the groundwork in Egypt, Am Yisrael would have assimilated into the host society. This is why Yaakov made sure to teach Yosef all of his Torah knowledge before Yosef was taken to Egypt (*Rashi, Bereishit* 37:3). Yosef was all of seventeen years old when he was sold as a slave. Seventeen is the *gematria* of the word טוב (good), a reference to Torah: “For a good teaching I have given you; do not forsake My Torah” (*Mishlei* 4:2).

“It was not you who sent me here, but Hashem” (*Bereishit* 45:8). Yosef revealed to his brothers that Hashem had preordained that he come to Egypt first, in order to pave the way for Am Yisrael and enable them to live successfully there. The Tribes descended afterward, easing the way for Bnei Yisrael to later maintain their identity in this defiled land.

As long as the Tribes lived, Bnei Yisrael were free men. The Tribes were immersed in Torah study and thus brought the light of Torah to the nation, protecting them from bondage. Yaakov sent Yehudah ahead to

banish the darkness of Egypt and kindle the light of Torah in this spiritual black hole.

Avraham and Sarah took with them from their birthplace “the souls that they made in Charan” (*Bereishit* 12:5). During the days of Avraham and Sarah, the lights of the Torah had not yet descended to this world. They thus had to invest tremendous efforts into “making souls,” bringing people back to Hashem. We have no idea of the difficulties our Avot faced when they learned Torah without the special *siyata di'Shemaya* we enjoy today, after the Torah was given. Creating light and banishing darkness demanded untold internal strength. Only Yaakov, who possessed unimaginable inner strength, was fit to descend to the defilement of Egypt and pave the way for Bnei Yisrael’s survival there. Bnei Yisrael understood that the Torah was their key to success in Egypt. Despite the tremendous spiritual threat in this land reeking with immorality, they persevered. Indeed, they fell to the forty-ninth level of defilement. However, were it not for Yaakov and the Tribes, who planted Torah there before them, there would have been no remnant of our nation whatsoever.

We have merited receiving the light of Torah. Therefore, if we refrain from Torah study, we are held accountable. One who is commanded and acts is greater than one who is not commanded and acts (*Bava Kama* 87a). When there is no command, the *yetzer hara* is not so strong. But when there is a command, the *yetzer hara* is up in arms, doing everything in its power to prevent the person from fulfilling it.

In light of this, perhaps we can say that Chanukah and Purim will be celebrated eternally, while the other festivals will be annulled, for the following reason. The Exodus from Egypt will pale in comparison to the future redemption. Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are celebrated in the merit of our forefathers, who drew the light of sanctity upon our nation. But they had not received the Torah and were thus not commanded to observe the mitzvot. In contrast, Chanukah and Purim occurred after *Matan Torah*, when we were commanded to keep the mitzvot. We have a strong *yetzer hara* to contend with. Nevertheless, we fight this battle,

preserving the purity of Torah at all costs. We firmly adhere to the ways of our forefathers, despite the challenges placed in our path. This will be remembered for all time.

It seems appropriate to relate the following story of Divine intervention. A number of years ago, I wished to book a flight to Eretz Yisrael. However, no direct flight was available, due to the gentile holiday season. I was forced to take a flight with a stopover in Greece. I was quite shaken at the thought of standing on the soil of the evil Antiochus. We arrived in Greece at Minchah time. I found myself a quiet corner in which to commune with my Creator. As I stepped back to end the silent prayer, I discovered hordes of Greeks surrounding me, staring at me in wonder. Even high-ranking priests were watching me with their mouths agape. I sheepishly said, "I was only praying." They replied, "Good, good."

The plane took off for the second part of the journey. Looking out the window, I saw the earth and the sea. I studied this picture of beauty, and thought, "How great are Your works, Hashem." I, David Pinto, prayed Minchah in Greece. Had it been the days of Antiochus, I would surely have been decapitated. Nobody would have had the temerity to show approval of my actions. Antiochus is long dead, and here I was, a Jew with a long beard and *payot*, praying Minchah in his land.

The steward came by and said, "Rabbi Pinto, we have kosher food for you." I pretended to be surprised. They brought me a tray with *mehadrin* food. I reiterated my statement of shock. They did not know what I wanted. I asked if they were Greek, to which they replied in the affirmative.

I then explained, "Many centuries ago, your forefathers invaded Eretz Yisrael, with Antiochus at their head. They forbade Shabbat, kashrut, *brit milah*, and family purity. Here you are, descendants of this culture, bringing me *kosher l'mehadrin* food. If Antiochus were here today, he would kill you on the spot. This is a blatant manifestation of the eternity of the Jewish nation. As much as our enemies try to destroy us, we will continue to exist, for we possess the Torah."

It was clear they did not understand what I was saying. But I was not saying it for them; I was saying it for myself. I gained tremendous spiritual satisfaction by observing that our nation is alive in the merit of the Torah, which has illuminated our path for thousands of years. The Greeks of yore are long gone. However, their culture continues to contaminate the atmosphere. How fortunate are the yeshiva students, who remain blissfully unaware of the filth of the outside world!

Although gentiles boldly transgress the laws of their faith, they will never speak ill of their own religion. It is only our nation that has anti-religious Jews who brazenly speak against Torah Judaism. This is a remnant of the days of Greece, when Jews informed on their fellow Jews who kept Shabbat. Intermarriage was at an all-time high, and there was danger of the Jewish flame being entirely snuffed out. Hashem, in His infinite mercy, came to our rescue.

Our greatest threat today is not from outside enemies, but from our own nation. There are Jews who attack Torah scholars, wishing to force everyone to integrate into the surrounding society of hedonism. The danger is manifold, as it comes from within as well as without. When Hashem will send us the ultimate redemption, we will better appreciate the great miracle done in those days, at this time.

*Parashat Vayishlach* contains two opposing world views, that of Yaakov and that of Eisav. Yaakov built *sukkot* (booths). The word סוכה (booth) is numerically equivalent to Hashem's Names י-ה-ו-ה and א-ד-נ-י combined. Yaakov built himself through the Torah, which is comprised of His Names. Yaakov built booths, which are temporary dwellings, to indicate that he was sojourning in this world only temporarily (Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto, *Kesef Mezukak*). Eisav, who made this world his permanent abode, set up his house in שעיר (Seir), which contains the same letters as the word רשע (wicked one). Eisav wished to live wantonly, like the animals of the wild, answerable to no one. Yaakov, in contrast, built a *beit midrash*, a place of Torah study and sanctity.

Yaakov built a house with a tower in order to be able to see Eisav from afar (*Ramban, Bereishit 33:17*). He wanted to teach his children to beware of learning from Eisav's ways. Eisav was a man of the field, who established his base in this world, while we build a temporary home here. Although we may share this planet with Eisav, we must always remember that we are worlds apart. Let us cloister ourselves in the *beit midrash* where we abnegate this-worldly pleasures, and not copy the ways of Eisav.

Am Yisrael exist in the merit of their faith and prayers. I would like to relate what happened to me this past week in order to drive home this point. A man approached me for my approbation of his *sefer*. He had received numerous approbations from various Rabbanim. I asked if he had received approbation from a specific Rabbi and he replied in the negative, explaining that this Rabbi is an ignoramus. I asked what he meant; did he test him or examine his credentials? He replied no, but added that this Rabbi's works demonstrate his ignorance. "And your *sefer*?" I probed. He said that he had several letters of recommendation. We spoke about various subjects until we came back to the topic of my approbation. I promised to send him my letter.

Before leaving, the man said that his young daughter was unwell. I told him that if one is beset by troubles, he is advised to examine his deeds. If he finds nothing amiss, he should attribute his suffering to a lack of Torah study (*Berachot 5a*). The man replied that he set aside time for Torah study. I asked if he had first examined his deeds for any wrongdoing. The man said he had nothing to be concerned about. I told him that for that very statement, he should worry. *Chazal* exhort us not to believe in ourselves until the day we die (*Avot 2:4*). "Who are you to say that you have no area in life that demands improvement? Greater men than you have fallen into sin." I explained that the Torah testifies to the perfection of only one man – Yaakov Avinu (*Bereishit 33:18*). Moreover, I told him that while he is writing a *sefer*, he is involved in *lashon hara*, a Torah prohibition. I added that his prayers were probably lacking, as well.

Our ancestors in Morocco and Yemen may have been simple people, but they knew how to pray with a full heart. They had a connection with the Creator. They made blessings with concentration, and they felt that they were standing in the presence of Hashem.

The Greeks were given autonomy because Bnei Yisrael were not connected to Hashem as they should have been. Certainly, studying Gemara connects a person with Hashem. Plants need strong roots in order to stand up to the wind. Similarly, our *avodat Hashem* must have firm roots. These are our prayers.

“And they kindled lights in the Courtyards of Your Sanctuary” (*Al Hanissim*). It was forbidden to kindle the Menorah in the Courtyard. However, since the Beit Hamikdash still contained idolatry, they could not light the Menorah within and were forced to light in the Courtyard (*Chatam Sofer, Derashot Chanukah*). I would like to expound on this thought. One must feel sanctity even in the “courtyard.” Certainly, when one is ensconced in the cocoon of the *beit midrash*, he feels sanctified and protected from all foreign winds. However, even after one has left the security of the *beit midrash*, when he finds himself in the “courtyard,” where the *yetzer hara* lurks in ambush, one must maintain his sanctity. This is by maintaining his connection with Hashem, through constant Torah study, even on the road. One should not make light of the power of simple faith and prayer.

The Hellenists were remiss in their faith and fear of Heaven. The world exists in the merit of Torah, service of Hashem, and acts of kindness (*Avot* 1:2). If one is lax in any of these areas, he can easily spiral downward.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ In the future, all the festivals will be annulled except Chanukah and Purim. What is unique about these two festivals?
- ◆ Greater is the one who acts righteously after having been commanded than one who does so without being commanded. The miracles of the past were in merit of our forefathers, who observed the Torah without being

commanded to keep it, while Chanukah and Purim occurred after *Matan Torah*, when we were commanded to observe the mitzvot. This is why the miracle of Chanukah is greater, in a certain aspect, than the miracles of the other festivals.

- ◆ Yaakov and his sons descended to Egypt in order to pave the way for our nation to be able to survive in the immoral atmosphere of that country. Yosef, who had learned Torah from Yaakov, went down first in order to make spiritual preparations for the rest of the family.
- ◆ Eisav went to Seir, to submerge himself in worldly matters, while Yaakov built temporary booths for his family, indicating that life in this world is not permanent.
- ◆ Am Yisrael's power is in prayer. This is how we connect to our Creator and survive in this world.



## With Souls Aflame

Why is the miracle of the oil commemorated in such grand style, while the wondrous victory of the few, weak Chashmonaim is not? Additionally, why did Bnei Yisrael concentrate on finding a flask of pure olive oil before repairing and purifying all the defiled objects of the Beit Hamikdash? They could have begun this task and used impure oil, which was permissible since the entire nation was in a state of impurity (*Zevachim* 16b). Moreover, they knew full well that even if they somehow came across a flask of pure oil still bearing the Kohen Gadol's seal, it would contain enough oil for only one day. They did not expect a miracle, and surely did not rely on one. It seems reasonable to say that they intended to use the oil they would find for only the first day, and then use other oil until they managed to obtain pure oil.

The word חנוכה (Chanukah) is comprised of the words חנו כ"ה (they rested on the twenty-fifth). On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, Bnei Yisrael rested from their enemies. Why is Chanukah named after the date instead of the miracle that occurred then, as other festivals are?

The Greeks were bent on making Bnei Yisrael forget the Torah. They believed that once the Jews lost interest in the Torah, they would automatically lose their faith, as well. The Greeks knew that Bnei Yisrael's faith is most clearly demonstrated by those statutes whose reasons are unknown to us. When Bnei Yisrael would refrain from observing the Torah's statutes, their faith would soon be a thing of the past.

When the nations see Bnei Yisrael rise above logic, believing in things that are beyond human comprehension, they go out of their minds with envy and hate. The Greeks ordered Bnei Yisrael to write on the horns of their oxen, "We have no part with the G-d of Israel" (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 2:4). Just like the horns of the ox point upward, so does the glory of Am Yisrael point to the Torah's dictates, as we pray, "May the pride of the righteous be raised" (*Tehillim* 75:11). The Greeks wanted nothing more than to reduce Jewish pride. The phrase קרני השור (ox's horns) can be transposed to form נר קשור י-ה (the candle which is connected to Hashem), meaning the *neshamah*.

In direct opposition to the Greeks, who wished to sever our national *neshamah* from its Source, causing Am Yisrael to lose all faith in Hashem, He performed an open miracle by allowing one flask of oil to remain sealed and pure. This oil, alluding to the *neshamah*, was protected from the Greeks. Commensurate with the Greeks' desire to disconnect the body from the *neshamah* was Hashem's direct supervision of Bnei Yisrael, preventing the Greeks from succeeding in their diabolical plots.

Unfortunately, the Greeks did succeed to a large extent. A sizeable portion of the Jewish nation abandoned their heritage and adopted Greek culture. However, Hashem guarded the last smoldering coals of Bnei Yisrael so that they did not become completely extinguished. The pure olive oil, sealed with the Kohen Gadol's seal, hinted to the *neshamah*,

sealed with the seal of Hakadosh Baruch Hu Himself. The Jewish soul was nearly snuffed out. Without Hashem's help, we would have been completely lost.

The *neshamah* eventually returns to its source on High. But due to numerous sins, the body might be sentenced not to arise at the resurrection of the dead. When the Greeks tried to compel Am Yisrael to deny Hashem and forsake His mitzvot, He protected Am Yisrael's *neshamot*. Likewise, their physical aspect, which had begun to be spoiled, was preserved until the darkness of Greece was removed and Bnei Yisrael could serve Hashem with body and soul intact.

With their victory over the Greeks, the Chashmonaim removed the blanket of darkness and defilement that had covered the world until then. Hashem reinstated our glory. This demonstrated that the Greeks had never managed to violate the *neshamah* of our nation; it had always been protected by Hashem.

The Chashmonaim then wished to kindle the lights of the Menorah in the Courtyard, for they wanted to publicly display their love of Hashem. In recompense for their desire to serve Hashem in public, He enabled them to understand the meaning of His statutes, which are usually hidden from our understanding. This is hinted at in the name *החשמונאי* (the Chashmonai), which is numerically equivalent, according to the rule of *kollel*, to the words *נשמה* (*neshamah*) and the Name *י-ה-ו-ה*. The Greeks were bent on causing Am Yisrael to forget the Torah and renounce their faith. Hashem protected His nation's *neshamah*, thus allowing them to keep their faith intact and flawless.

Although many Jews became Hellenists, Hashem considered them all righteous. The Greeks defiled the Jews superficially but were unable to damage their essence. In the *Al Hanissim* prayer, we say, "You delivered... the wicked into the hands of the righteous." It is only natural for Hashem to allow the righteous to prevail; what is the miracle in this? The miracle lay in the fact that although Bnei Yisrael were not on the level of *tzaddikim*, Hashem considered them as such. Although the majority of the

nation were sinners and, as such, unworthy of victory, Hashem delivered the Greeks into their hands.

It is thus most fitting for this holiday to be named after the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the date that Bnei Yisrael rested from fighting their enemies. The people were fighting a physical war, while their *neshamot* were guarded by Hashem. Without the *neshamah*, hinted to in the oil (שמן and נשמה contain the same letters), they were in need of a great miracle to triumph. For this reason, these days are designated for song and praise of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Emphasis is placed on lauding Hashem, rather than feasting, as in the days of Purim. By focusing on extolling Hashem, one connects to his *neshamah*, which returned to him from on High, as it did to our nation in those days.

As we kindle the Chanukah lights, we ask Hashem the following. Just as in those days, when He preserved the *neshamot* of Bnei Yisrael and considered them tzaddikim in spite of their sins, similarly, we seek closeness to Him, through the menorah's lights. We wish to be reunited with our *neshamot* and purify our bodies. These are, at times, sullied by Greek culture, which is unfortunately still rampant. On Chanukah, the judgment of Rosh Hashanah is finally sealed. The menorah's lights have the power to rectify the body and unite it with the *neshamah*, enabling our hearts to burn with love of Hashem.

The eight days of Chanukah correspond to the eight days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when Hashem forgives us and purges our *neshamot* of all sins. The eighth day of Chanukah is the culmination of this process, and can be compared to Yom Kippur. There is no limit to our joy on this day, when our *neshamot* connect to their source on High.

Before rededicating the Temple, the Chashmonaim realized they had to purify themselves. They hoped Hashem would note their efforts to be righteous and earn success through their actions. Then, He would shower them with the light of the Upper Worlds and its blessings, which is demonstrated in the act of kindling the lights of the Menorah. They sought oil in order to kindle the Menorah in the Courtyard, where everyone could

see it. This demonstrated their desire that Hashem return their pristine souls to them, so that their hearts could burst into joyous song, serving Hashem proudly in public.

For this reason, the twenty-fifth of Kislev, when Bnei Yisrael rested from their enemies and sought the pure flask of oil in a state of *teshuvah*, was transformed into a festive day of praise and song. The sanctity of the day would ensure that the judgment would be sealed on a positive note. This was a day of purifying the soul, similar to Yom Kippur, when we attain forgiveness. Therefore, the Chashmonaim preferred not to use impure oil, even though they were allowed to. Instead, they used the flask of pure olive oil, although it was small and contained enough oil for only one day.

Chanukah is the time of the rededication of the Mizbe'ach. This act demonstrated the nation's rededication to Hashem. They reclaimed their *neshamot* from where they had been preserved, like the flask of pure oil. The date כ"ה (twenty-fifth) is the initials of the term כסא ה' (Hashem's Throne of Glory). After gaining victory over their enemies and purifying themselves, Bnei Yisrael received their *neshamot* back from under the Heavenly Throne, pure and pristine.

The Chashmonaim kindled the Menorah in the Courtyard of the Beit Hamikdash. Notwithstanding winds and rains, the lights remained burning all eight days (*Chatam Sofer*). I thought that perhaps this answers the question of the Beit Yosef, as to why we celebrate eight days of Chanukah when the miracle seems to have occurred for only seven days. It is because the winds and rains did not extinguish the lights even on the first day of Chanukah.

When one serves Hashem with a flaming soul, he will stand staunchly in the face of all winds and never weaken in his resolve. Even when he finds himself in the "Courtyard," meaning a place far from faith, he will maintain his virtue. His purity of soul, coupled with Heavenly assistance, will ensure his continued righteousness. Is it not a tremendous miracle that despite challenges and suffering, and even in places remote from Torah Judaism, one remains loyal to the Torah? It is the fire of Torah and

faith that burns within one's *neshamah* which keeps him connected to Hashem.

On Chanukah, we recite Psalm 30, describing the Chanukat Habayit. In it we say, "What gain is there in my death, in my descent to the abyss?" The *sefer Shemen Rosh* on Chanukah (pg. 13) says that the word בְּדָמִי (my death) contains the letters נ' and ד', numerically equivalent to forty-four. These are the forty-four lights which are kindled throughout Chanukah, including the *shamash*. Adding one for the rule of *kollel* totals forty-five, the *gematria* of the word אָדָם (man). As long as one is burning with love of Hashem, He assists him in his battle with the *yetzer hara*.

However, if his heart is drawn in other directions, "what gain is there?" For what reason does he have a *neshamah* burning within him? Only after one dies will he comprehend the truth, as hinted in the following words, "Will the dust acknowledge You? Will it declare Your truth?" (ibid.). As long as a person lives, he can gain greater awareness of the truth by ascending toward Hashem and understanding His wisdom. This ends with one's death. Then, he no longer has free choice, since his *neshamah* perceives truth in its full clarity.

"And David Hamelech was old, advanced in years" (*Melachim I*, 1:1). David Hamelech lived his entire life in a state of sanctity and purity, rectifying the sin of Adam (*Chida, Haftarat Chayei Sarah* 1). We call Hashem מִגֵּן דָּוִד (The Shield of David), the initials of which are numerically equivalent to forty-four, the *gematria* of the name אָדָם, when adding one for the rule of *kollel*. Hashem protected David because he united all elements of his body and soul to serve Him. In the seventy years that he received from Adam Harishon, David completed the life mission of Adam, the handiwork of Hashem.

Although the main aspect of Chanukah is the fact that Bnei Yisrael found a flask of pure olive oil, this point is mentioned only as an aside in the *Al Hanissim* prayer. I would like to suggest that the main miracle of Chanukah was that in spite of the Greeks' machinations, Bnei Yisrael remained steadfast to Hashem and were considered righteous in His eyes.

In closing this essay, I would like to add that after reading it, my friend, Rabbi Avraham Greenwald, shlita, added, in the name of the *gaon* and tzaddik, Rabbi Avraham MiBarnov, zy"א, that the word גוף (body) is numerically equivalent to the word חנוכה. On Chanukah, Hashem saved Bnei Yisrael from physical as well as spiritual harm. This is stated in the booklet *Kuntrus Nes LaShoshanim*. I am grateful to have had similar intentions.



## Plentiful Praise and a Modest Meal

We do not make a *seudat mitzvah* on Chanukah in order to commemorate the miracles, as we do on other holidays. Whoever wishes may certainly prepare a thanksgiving feast to honor Hashem, even replete with latkes, sufganiot, and dairy dishes. But the main way we demonstrate our gratitude is through song and praise for Hashem's wondrous ways (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 670b*).

The Greeks intended to disconnect Am Yisrael from the Torah, their life source. It is therefore appropriate to commemorate the miracles that were performed to ensure our identity as Torah-true Jews. *Chazal* feared that were we to focus solely on preparing a festive meal, we would forget the purpose of the feast. We would indulge in gastronomic gratification and forget to thank Hashem for His miracles in saving us from assimilation. Since it is imperative to thank Hashem during these days, *Chazal* enacted that we say prayers of thanks and praise rather than make a *seudat mitzvah*.

The decrees of the Greeks have a common thread running through them. The Greeks ordered the Jews to keep their homes unlocked. They assumed that, with time, the Jews would become used to this and slowly but surely lose their natural modesty. However, Am Yisrael took no heed and continued living in purity and sanctity.

Thousands of years earlier, Bilaam Harasha praised Bnei Yisrael for their modesty in his famous blessing of *Mah Tov*. He specifically noted that their entranceways faced different directions so that nobody could look into his neighbor's home. In this manner, Bnei Yisrael were able to maintain their privacy and modesty, their key to survival.

The Greeks further ordered the Jews to write on the horns of their oxen that they have no portion with the G-d of Israel. They knew that the Jews would never eat the meat of animals that had these words of heresy inscribed on their horns. They would thus refrain from eating meat, and this would make them depressed. Since Bnei Yisrael had to keep their doors ajar, their animals walked in. Bnei Yisrael then erased these heretical writings from their horns and slaughtered them according to Torah law.

Finally, the last straw came with the Greek decree that every maiden must have relations with a Greek officer before entering into marriage (*Ketubot 3b*). This was a further method of desecrating the sanctity of our nation and striking down the glorious heritage of our people. When the Jews heard of this decree, they announced an all-out war. Hashem granted them victory in a most miraculous manner.

The Greeks wanted to spoil Bnei Yisrael's modesty, an intrinsic part of their being. Adam and Chava immediately covered themselves up after eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, for they were ashamed to be unclothed (*Bereishit 3:6-7*). A breach in modesty brings to brashness and disgrace of the *oht brit kodesh*. The Greeks idolized the physique, to the extent that they would walk around unclothed in order to show off their beauty. The Greeks enacted laws that trampled modesty in order to bring Bnei Yisrael over to their camp, which eschewed all values of modesty.

Hashem allowed Bnei Yisrael to find a flask of oil that was sealed with the seal of the Kohen Gadol. In this manner, He showed His appreciation for His precious daughters, who had maintained their chastity throughout. Although, under the circumstances, Bnei Yisrael were allowed to use impure oil, Hashem enabled them to find pure oil. Whoever

does not look for loopholes and dispensations and preserves his purity is helped to observe mitzvot in their full, perfect manner, with all stringencies.

When Bnei Yisrael saw that the flask of olive oil sufficed for eight days even though it contained enough oil for only one day, they understood that the hand of Hashem was at work. He will never abandon us. Therefore, on Chanukah it is most fitting to express our gratitude to Hashem for saving the soul of our nation through offering praise and thanks, rather than through a *seudat mitzvah*.



## External Manifestations of Inner Glory

***“These lights are sanctified and we may not make ordinary use of them, but only look at them”***

*(Chanukah liturgy)*

Torah endures only in one who humbles himself before it (*Derech Eretz Zuta* 8). This is learned from the description of the olive oil used for the Menorah, which was “pressed, for lighting.” Only in a state of “pressing,” when one feels submissive and humble, can one perform mitzvot properly. The Chanukah candles are sanctified, as we say when we light them: “These lights are sanctified.” These candles hint to the mitzvot, which light up our lives, as “a mitzvah is a candle and Torah is light” (*Mishlei* 6:23). But this is only when we keep mitzvot humbly, realizing that they are sanctified. One should not keep a mitzvah with his own purposes in mind. Only when he does mitzvot for the sake of Heaven will they endure and elevate him.

Yaakov and Eisav were as different as the holy and the mundane. Yaakov treasured each and every mitzvah, going so far as to return for some small jugs he had forgotten, in order to avoid the prohibition of wasting. In contrast, Eisav performed one mitzvah only – honoring his father. Even this one mitzvah he did for selfish motives, in order to receive public acclaim and merit his father’s blessings.

*Parashat Mikeitz*, always read close to or on Chanukah, contains many lessons for us. Yosef acquiesced to his brothers’ verdict and did not openly object or seek ways to escape. Yosef is called “the tzaddik, foundation of the world” because he always justified the judgment that was decreed upon him. He knew that he was right and he did not deserve to be degraded by his brothers. Nonetheless, he kept his peace until the time was ripe to reveal himself before them. Not until after his dreams materialized did he see fit to inform his father of his whereabouts.

Yosef denounces the wicked, who believe that their glory is due to their own prowess (see *Yoma* 35b). Yosef reached the peak of power but attributed none of it to himself. He always accredited Hashem with his success. He loyally maintained his sanctity, adhering to Hashem’s word. He never attempted to seize the throne, although he was much more intelligent and astute than Pharaoh.

Yosef raised his sons, Menashe and Ephraim, in the ways of Hashem. They grew up as tzaddikim, who feared Heaven even in the defilement of Egypt. This was due to their father’s faith, sanctity, and unswerving devotion to Hashem. “The glory of the princess is within” (*Tehillim* 45:14). Yosef attested to his brothers that he had maintained his sanctity and purity. In this merit, Hashem’s glory was reflected in him. His virtue was so apparent that the Egyptians unanimously appointed him their ruler. Yosef was called “the tzaddik, foundation of the world” due to his immense humility before Hashem, the Torah, and even his brothers, who had degraded him.

After Yosef was rushed out of prison in order to interpret Pharaoh’s dream, he did not take any credit for himself, but stated that Hashem is

the One Who planted the resolution in his head (*Bereishit* 41:14-15). Instead of asking for Pharaoh to take revenge upon those who had wished to harm him, such as the wife of Potiphar and the cupbearer, who repaid his kindnesses with evil, Yosef remained righteous and humble, never asking for vengeance or reparation.

There is a connection between the events of Yosef's life and the Chanukah lights. Yosef submitted himself to the will of Hashem. The fact that we increase one light on each night of Chanukah is itself a form of humility. Instead of kindling all the lights at once, or adding a number of lights each night, we humbly add only one, showing that we are limited mortals who wish to grow greater each day, one step at a time.

Conversely, the wicked walk in darkness while defiantly claiming that they provide illumination for the world. Neon lights and dazzling theaters are modern-day symbols of Greece. They display brilliance and good cheer, while inside, they reveal darkness and gloom. A pauper who dresses the part of the rich man will fool people, but only for a while. The day will come when his charade will be over and he will be greatly shamed.

Who is the truly great man? One whose inner being is suffused with light, but outwardly, plays the part of the ordinary man. He never looks for honor. Eventually, his inner light will increase, until he can contain it no longer. His surroundings will be permeated with splendid light for all to see. Whoever shuns honor and wishes to humble himself will be pursued by honor (*Tanchuma, Vayikra* 3).

“A little bit of light dispels much darkness” (see *Chovot Halevavot* 5:5). The more brightly one causes his inner light to shine, the greater amount of darkness he will succeed in dispelling. I would like to suggest that each person can publicize the miracle of Chanukah by banishing the darkness within himself. Darkness refers to negative character traits, such as conceit and the pursuit of honor. When one kindles the Chanukah lights

in a state of humility, he should intend to light up his *neshamah*, as well. He will thus merit his own personal Chanukah miracle.



## illuminating One's Environment

It seems that the miracle of the oil in the Menorah occurred for only seven days, since there was enough oil for the first day. Due to this, the *Beit Yosef* asks why we kindle the Chanukah lights for eight days instead of just seven (*Orach Chaim* 670).

The main day designated for kindling the menorah is the first day of Chanukah. This is because the Menorah in the Temple continued to burn on the subsequent seven days from the remnants of the oil of the first day. Thus, if one has enough oil for only one night, the halachah is that he should use it on the first night of Chanukah.

A king is recognizable by his crown. However, without his royal robe, his appearance is incomplete. The crown, coupled with the robe, grants the king his majestic air. The same is true regarding the menorah. If we were to kindle the lights for just seven days, there would be something missing in the mitzvah. The fact that we light the menorah for eight days publicizes the mitzvah further, and brings greater glory to Hashem's Name.

Rabbi Tzvi Reisman, shlita, asks the following interesting question. If someone was freed from prison on Chanukah, what should he do? Should he first go home to kindle the Chanukah menorah, or should he head to the *beit kenesset* to praise Hashem for the Chanukah miracles?

Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, zt"l, suggests that since the main miracle of Chanukah was the fact that the oil burned for eight days, one should first head homeward and kindle his Chanukah menorah, thereby thanking

Hashem for this miracle. Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zt"l, in contrast, says that the essence of Chanukah is praising Hashem. Therefore, one should first go to the *beit kenesset* to fulfill the mitzvah of publicizing the miracle of Chanukah by reciting Hallel with the congregation.

There are two types of light. One is the type that bursts forth from one's soul, while the other is the type that is created by kindling the Chanukah lights. Perhaps this is the point on which the *poskim* differed. If the main aspect of Chanukah is the light that bursts forth from one's soul, he should head to the *beit kenesset* to spread his inner light among the congregants, by praising Hashem's Name in public. However, if the main feature of Chanukah is the light produced by kindling the menorah, one should first go home to kindle his Chanukah lights and spread its glow for all to see.



## Chanukah – Gems



### Increasing the Lights – Gaining Publicity

The reason we kindle Chanukah lights is to publicize the miracle (*Shabbat* 23b). This is why one must kindle his menorah both where people pass by and can see it, and at a time when people are still passing by (*ibid.* 21b). What is the reason for publicizing this miracle that happened over two thousand years ago?

Whenever one invests efforts into publicizing something, he is demonstrating his personal interest in the matter. For example, a businessman advertises his services, prints up business cards, and spreads information about his business through word of mouth. His intention is to acquire more clients and increase profits.

The benefit we gain from publicizing the Chanukah miracle is in educating our children. We show them how proud we are to be part of the Jewish nation. In those days, the Greeks tried to win our nation over to their ideology and make them forget the Torah. Notwithstanding the allure of Greek culture, our nation stood staunchly for Hashem's sake, and sacrificed their lives rather than become part of it. When Hashem saw their steadfastness, He granted them *siyata di'Shemaya* and saved them from their enemies. We, their children, continue publicizing this miracle by kindling the Chanukah lights. This proves our pride and loyalty to Am Yisrael, despite the difficulties involved. Although the miracle was “in

those days,” it is in merit of that miracle that we continue living as Torah-true Jews “at this time.”



## Private Lessons

The Admor of Sanz, zy”a, says that the main element of Chanukah is publicizing the miracle. Therefore, the halachah is that one must light in a place where people will see the menorah. He asks why we are not required to publicize the miracle of Purim. We do not read Megillat Esther in a public square, to ensure that everyone who passes by hears it. We suffice with reading it before a minyan in the *beit kenesset*.

“These lights are sanctified and we do not have permission to make ordinary use of them, but only to look at them” (*Tur, Orach Chaim 676*). The Chanukah lights hint to the light of the Torah, which we may not use for our own purposes (*Avot 4:5*). We must teach Torah to others and publicize it to all members of the Jewish nation, as well as be a “light unto the nations.” The Chanukah lights publicize our salvation from the Greeks, who wished to convert us to their ideology and make us a nation like all others. Therefore, publicizing the Chanukah miracle is a way of telling our fellow Jews to continue the practice of Torah study, which has kept us alive all these years. And it serves as a message to the nations of what eventually happens to those who try to steal our souls.

Purim, in contrast, is a different story. Our redeeming merit in the days of Haman and Achashveirosh was that our nation reaccepted the Torah through love. This concept is incomprehensible to the nations. Therefore, we remember the miracle of Purim in the *beit kenesset*, where Torah Jews are congregated, without announcing it to the public at large.

One Sukkot, my gentile neighbor approached me and asked why every year at this time, the Jews hold a bundle of plants and shake it in all

directions. I answered that deep secrets are contained within these plants. Even if I were to explain it to him at length, he would never understand. However, he insisted that I reveal the source of this custom, saying that he was intelligent enough to understand it. Seeing his persistence, I began explaining that the *etrog* hints to the heart, the *lulav* to the spine, etc. I noticed that he did not comprehend what I was saying, but he was too ashamed to admit it. I continued, saying that on Sukkot we invite our forefathers into our sukkah. Hashem Himself resides in it with us. The more I explained about Sukkot, the more I discerned wonder and puzzlement on his face. I ended my speech, and we parted ways.

There are some things a gentile will never understand. We therefore do not start explaining them. The gentile may be able to understand the concept of celebrating our connection to the Torah on Chanukah, but the message of Purim, which is reaccepting the Torah through love, is difficult for him to comprehend. We therefore refrain from publicizing it to the nations.



## Assarah B'Tevet



### The Beginning of the End

Tevet heralds the beginning of the destruction. During this month, our enemies surrounded Yerushalayim (see *Melachim* II, 25:1). In Tammuz they broke the walls of the city (*Yirmeyahu* 39:2), and on Tishah b'Av they destroyed the Beit Hamikdash (see *Melachim* II, 25:8-9).

After witnessing the Splitting of the Sea, “the chieftains of Edom were confounded, trembling gripped the powers of Moav, all the dwellers of Canaan dissolved. May fear and terror befall them” (*Shemot* 15:15-16). Further, we read, “For the kingship belongs to Hashem” (*Tehillim* 22:29). When Bnei Yisrael emerged from Egypt, everyone was afraid to harm them. They clearly saw Hashem’s hand at the sea and were terrified to start up with His nation.

Specifically when Hashem’s dominion was apparent to all, Amalek came and “cooled off the boiling bath” of the world’s faith in Hashem (*Tanchuma, Ki Teitzei* 9). This is why it is imperative to eradicate their memory. The word טבת (Tevet), adding one according to the rule of *kollel*, has the same *gematria* as the word בית (house), an allusion to the Beit Hamikdash. The Tenth of Tevet was established as a fast day, for that was when the gentiles had the temerity to surround our Temple.

Hashem accuses Bnei Yisrael of causing the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. Just as they brought about Amalek’s attack due to their laxity

in Torah (*Sanhedrin* 106a), so, too, were the Babylonians granted the power to destroy the Beit Hamikdash on account of Bnei Yisrael's weakening in Torah. To rectify this, it was decreed upon us to spend the Tenth of Tevet in fasting and repentance.



## Chodesh Shevat



### One United Goal

The constellation of the month of Shevat is a דלי (bucket). The *gematria* of the word דלי is equivalent to that of the word אדם (man), according to the rule of *kollel*. In order for us to be taken out of this dark exile like a bucket drawn from the well, we must earn the status of “man,” which is always singular. We must form one unit with our fellow Jews. When we are not, we are vulnerable to דם (blood), meaning that the destroyer is given reign to harm us, *chas v’shalom*. Moreover, the word דם hints to shaming our fellow man, which is akin to bloodshed, as the blood drains from one’s face when he is shamed (*Bava Metzia* 58b). This certainly brings dire repercussions.

The word שבט (Shevat) is similar to the word שִׁבְתָּ (sitting), an allusion to the act of brothers sitting together in harmony. The month of Shevat comes before Pesach to teach us that in order to merit redemption, we must be unified with our fellow man, as “הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד – How good and pleasant it is when brothers sit together” (*Tehillim* 133:1). In order to merit redemption, Bnei Yisrael always girded themselves with the quality of unity. Such was the case in Egypt, and such was the case in the Purim story, as Esther instructed Mordechai to “go and gather all the Jews” (*Esther* 4:16). When Bnei Yisrael are assembled in unity, the *Shechinah* rests among them.

The word דלי has the same *gematria* as the Name י-ה-ו-ה, with its letters spelled out as ו-א-ו-ה-א-ו-ה, according to the rule of *kollel*. When we will be united as one, Hashem will extricate us from exile. He will connect His Name to that of the Tribes, the progenitors of Am Yisrael. Once His Name is complete, the redemption can take place.



## Living Productively

*Parashat Yitro*, which discusses *Matan Torah*, is read close to Tu b'Shevat, the new year for the trees. When Hashem gave the Torah to Am Yisrael, *Olam Haba* and *Olam Hazei* were united. The *navi* says, “כי בי-ה – For in G-d, Hashem, is the strength of the worlds” (*Yeshayahu* 26:4). The Name י-ה refers to the two worlds that were combined at *Matan Torah*. The word אילן (tree) is numerically equivalent to the combined *gematrias* of the Divine Names י-ה-ו-ה and א-דני. Just as Hashem's Name is revealed by the trees, so must one make himself into a fitting repository for His Name. How does one accomplish this? Through studying the Torah, which is introduced to us in *parashat Yitro*.

The fruits of the tree burst forth in a riot of color and elicit gasps of admiration, causing a person to declare, “How profuse are Your works, Hashem!” (*Tehillim* 104:24). By studying nature, one becomes aware of the Creator and Manager of the world. He automatically feels obligated to fulfill the mitzvot of the Torah, which bring joy to their observers.

Often, after the elevating days of the festivals, one feels a regression in his service of Hashem. When he sees the splendor of the ripe fruits, he is filled with joy and gratitude toward Hashem. He is inspired to do *teshuvah* and recommit himself to the Torah.



## Adar and Purim



### Serving Hashem with a Wealth of Love

*“In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of the King Achashveirosh, the lot was cast in the presence of Haman from day to day and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar”*

*(Esther 3:7)*

Haman cast lots to determine which month was most auspicious for harming Am Yisrael. He sought a month that contained no merit. Rather, he was looking for a date propitious for prosecution and persecution. He went through the months, rejecting each for a different reason. Finally, he reached the month of Adar, the month of Moshe Rabbeinu’s death. “This is the month!” he exclaimed, rubbing his hands in glee (*Megillah* 13b).

However, Hashem blinded Haman to the fact that just as Moshe passed away in Adar, he was also born in that month. Hashem gives tzaddikim full lives, down to the last day (*Rosh Hashanah* 11a). Moreover, tzaddikim are considered living even in death (*Berachot* 18a). Moshe’s demise did not pose any sort of prosecution against Am Yisrael. On the contrary, it

earned them added merits, for Moshe's spirit hovers over his beloved people as he continues murmuring *divrei Torah* even from his grave (*Yevamot 97a*).

Regarding Yaakov, we also find the absence of the term "death." The *pasuk* merely says, "He expired and was gathered to his people" (*Bereishit 49:33*). Yaakov represented Torah. Just as Torah endures eternally, so does Yaakov live forever. As long as Bnei Yisrael continue learning the Torah of their father, Yaakov, they add vitality to his life.

Tzaddikim are greater after death than in their lifetimes (*Chullin 7b*). Since the *yetzer hara* has no control in the Upper World, the tzaddikim there are completely pure and sanctified. They continue studying Torah, from Hashem Himself, undeterred by the *yetzer hara*.

Haman erred greatly in assuming that Moshe Rabbeinu's death was an omen of evil for Am Yisrael. On the contrary, Adar was ordained as a joyous month even before the miracle of Purim took place in it, for this is when Moshe was born and when he passed away. Moshe dedicated his life to Bnei Yisrael. He was the matchmaker who married us off to the Torah, the most noble of brides (*Bamidbar Rabbah 12:8*).

Haman ended up blessing us, arousing merit instead of condemnation. According to the strict hand of justice, Bnei Yisrael deserved punishment for partaking of Achashveirosh's feast. But Hashem offered them an opening for *teshuvah* and overlooked their sins, all in merit of Moshe Rabbeinu, whose virtue envelops this month in compassion (*Megillah 12a; Esther Rabbah 7:13*).

"The Jews confirmed and undertook upon themselves and their posterity..." (*Esther 9:27*). Bnei Yisrael understood they had been punished for enjoying the feast of Achashveirosh. They understood, as well, that when their ancestors had originally accepted the Torah, it had been through coercion (*Shabbat 88a*). This type of acceptance was not perfect, as evidenced by the fact that, not much later, they made the Golden Calf.

Their enchantment with materialism drew them to join the celebration of Achashveirosh, who desecrated the holy vessels of the Beit Hamikdash, trampling Hashem's honor (*Megillah* 12a). Bnei Yisrael rectified this matter by reaccepting the Torah upon themselves on Purim. This time they did it through joy and goodwill, appreciating the gift they were getting.

It is likely that when Bnei Yisrael heard of Haman's sinister plan to annihilate them in Adar, warning bells went off in their minds. Adar! The month of the birth and death of their beloved shepherd! How remiss they had been in the way they had originally accepted his Torah and in upholding its commands! This was why Haman was able to prosecute them. This realization spurred them to do *teshuvah* and reaccept the Torah, out of love and willingness.

Hashem did a great kindness with Am Yisrael by blinding Haman to the fact that Adar is the month propitious for the defense and blessing of Am Yisrael. It is a month designed for *teshuvah*, through which Bnei Yisrael would merit Hashem's wonderful miracles in transforming their mourning to festivity.

Adar is the month of turnabout. Bnei Yisrael gained control over their enemies instead of vice versa (*Esther* 9:1). Additionally, Haman wanted nothing more than to blaspheme Am Yisrael and call them to court for their various iniquities. Instead, he became the conduit through which they gained merit by doing *teshuvah*.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's disciples asked why Bnei Yisrael were slated for annihilation. They responded to their own question by saying it was because they had taken part in the feast of the wicked Achashveirosh. Although the food and drink were one hundred percent kosher *l'mehadrin*, the feast itself was a gathering of mockery and immorality, where the holy vessels of the Beit Hamikdash were publicly desecrated (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 48).

In spite of Mordechai's warnings not to attend this feast, the Jews overtly disregarded his ruling and went. For degrading the words of the

Torah Sage of the generation, they were forced to endure the degradation of their precious holy vessels, as well as the desecration of Hashem's honor.

We are commanded to “love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul” (*Devarim* 6:5). One is adjured to love Hashem with all his resources and every fiber of his being. Every attribute, whether good or bad, offers the potential with which to serve Hashem (*Berachot* 54a). But how can one love a being that has no body or resemblance to one? We can love something that we see. How can we be commanded to love something that is concealed from us?

Hashem equated the mitzvah of “honor your father and your mother” (*Shemot* 20:12) with the command to honor Him. Through honoring and loving one's parents, human beings who brought him up, he will come to honor the third party in his creation, Who is actually the first, although He is not visible.

Similarly, contact with tzaddikim is a vehicle for expressing our love of Him. Maintaining contact with tzaddikim connects us to Hashem Himself. This is why it is essential to be extremely careful regarding the honor of *talmidei chachamim* and to cherish them. Whoever is disrespectful to Torah scholars will eventually show dishonor to Hashem Himself. Rabbi Akiva taught us this message in the words, “את ה' אלוקיך תירא – You shall fear Hashem, your G-d” (*Devarim* 6:13). The word את includes *talmidei chachamim* (*Kiddushin* 57a). By revering *talmidei chachamim*, one comes to revere Hashem Himself.

As we said above, tzaddikim and *talmidei chachamim* are the means through which we can connect to Hashem. Therefore, after Am Yisrael disregarded and even disdained Mordechai's words, they continued spiraling downward, eventually enjoying the meal of a coarse gentile who blasphemed Hashem.

By reaccepting the Torah, Bnei Yisrael rectified their misdeeds. They reconnected to Moshe Rabbeinu, the giver of the Torah. Only this time,

they willingly and lovingly accepted the Torah of Moshe, who originally had to drag them out of their tents to receive it.

We must halt in our tracks of frenzied living and consider who made this wonderful world. Who blessed us with so much goodness? Does anything come about of its own accord, without a guiding hand? Only an utter fool would believe such a thing. Contemplating one's blessings will arouse him to love Hashem, the Owner of everything, Who gives us all forms of kindness in order to enable us to live successfully (Introduction to *Avi Ezri*).

When Am Yisrael partook of Achashveirosh's feast, they accorded honor to a king of flesh and blood. They temporarily forgot that Hashem, the King of kings, is the One Who confers blessing upon the world. It is thus befitting to love and thank Him Alone. Just as a newborn turns to his mother for all his needs, instinctively knowing that his entire existence is in her hands, so do we turn to Hashem for our every need. He is the Master of the entire world. This knowledge ignites within our hearts tremendous love toward Him.

In contrast, when one cherishes materialism and physical pleasures instead of Hashem, Heaven sends him messages that he is headed in the wrong direction. Often, these messages are painful. Since Hashem did not manage to awaken him through pleasantness, He turns to methods of suffering.

Rabbi Solomon, shlita, our Rosh Kollel in France, offered the following analogy. A man found himself locked in his office on a high floor of an office building. Seeing he had no way out, he thought of a creative idea. He opened a window and began throwing dollar bills down to the street. He hoped that people would look upward to find the source of their newfound wealth and help him in his predicament. The man was shocked and chagrined to discover the people scanning the street for more bills, without lifting their heads even once to see where these bills came from.

Disappointed with his failed attempt, the man thought up another way to gain salvation. This time, he threw down small stones. He had hardly

thrown down any stones when everyone craned their necks to see where the stones were coming from. He explained that he had not wished to harm anyone, G-d forbid, but since they had not looked upward when he threw down money, he was left with no other choice. This was the only way he could draw attention to his plight.

This analogy illustrates how Hashem behaves with us. Hashem longs to shower upon us benefit and blessing. When we achieve success, He wants us to look upward and ascribe it to Him. However, when abundance causes us to look downward and connect more strongly to materialism, Hashem chooses other ways of attracting our attention. These may be in the form of challenges and difficulties. Perhaps through them, we will turn to Him for help.

Before bequeathing Bnei Yisrael the spiritual riches contained in the Torah, Hashem bestowed upon them the wealth of the sea. This was in order that they recognize that He is the Manager of the world and everything is His. However, instead of accrediting Hashem with the bounty at the sea and serving Him with love and willingness, Bnei Yisrael overindulged in the booty that lay before them. Moshe Rabbeinu had to literally pull them away from the Yam Suf. Although Bnei Yisrael attained tremendous wealth in Egypt, they desired more wealth. Their love of money took the place of love of Hashem.

Since their hearts were not full of love of Hashem, the Torah had to be forced upon them. Only after being threatened with annihilation in the days of Haman were they awakened to embrace the Torah through love and true desire.



## Serve with Joy

We read *parashat Terumah* in Adar. Certainly, there is a connection between the two. *Parashat Terumah* contains the famous command to “make for Me a Sanctuary so that I may dwell in their midst” (*Shemot* 25:8). The Gemara states that “with the beginning of Adar, joy is increased” (*Ta’anit* 29a). There is no greater joy than being the repository for the *Shechinah*. The word אָדָר (Adar) is similar to the word דָּר (dwell). This month is auspicious for one to make himself a fitting home for the *Shechinah’s* Presence (*Sefat Emet*). If one would only know how much Hashem loves him, he would be in a constant state of joy. He would surely strive to become a sanctuary for the *Shechinah*.

A person is a composite of the spiritual and material. Hashem, in contrast, is completely spiritual and holy. Why, then, does He wish to dwell within us? Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, zt”l, father of my mentor, Rabbi Chaim Shmuel Lopian, zt”l, used to say that when a person sins, his sins emit a bad smell that ascend to heaven. When the angels get a whiff of this smell, they pour vast amounts of water over it in order to douse it (*Lev Eliyahu, Vayikra* pg. 36, quoting the *Zohar*). If a person is so filthy from sin that the stench reaches the very heavens, why does Hashem desire to dwell within each of us? Why does He not suffice with accepting our Torah study and prayers?

There are two types of servants. One serves his master from time to time but is essentially a free man. The other is completely dedicated to his master and does not have any independence. Eliezer is an example of the first type. Although he faithfully served Avraham, he could live as he pleased, with all his master’s wealth available to him. When Avraham sent him to find a wife for Yitzchak, he made him promise to be loyal to his mission (*Rashi, Bereishit* 24:2). Certainly, Avraham had relied on Eliezer many times in the past. Why in this case did he ask him to swear to fulfill his task?

Eliezer had proved his trustworthiness countless times in the past. However, with the directive to find a wife for Yitzchak, he was being sent on a monumental mission: to choose the future Matriarch of our people, who would, together with Yitzchak, fashion Am Yisrael. In this capacity, Eliezer shed the cloak of servant and donned the cloak of matchmaker, earning him a broader range of liberty.

As long as Eliezer acted the part of the absolute servant, Avraham trusted him implicitly and had never made him swear to prove his loyalty. However, with the search for a wife for Yitzchak, Eliezer gained a measure of independence. For this reason, Avraham felt compelled to ask him to swear by the *brit milah*, the symbol of faith, that he would act faithfully. Eliezer was true to his mission, calling Avraham, “My master” whenever referring to him.

Rabbi Chaim Zeitchik, zt”l, asks why Eliezer hastened so greatly in the quest to find the right wife for Yitzchak, to the extent that he asked Hashem to help him do his job quickly and efficiently (*Bereishit* 24:11-12). Hashem shortened the way for him (*Sanhedrin* 95a). Eliezer could have taken his time, slowly and deliberately choosing the right girl, with calmness and peace of mind. Why all the haste? Eliezer considered himself obligated to Avraham to such a degree that he felt compelled to do his will in the quickest, most competent manner. He was afraid that if he stalled, he would unwittingly renege on his word.

A true servant puts aside his own interests and devotes himself entirely to his master’s will. Eliezer had a daughter of marriageable age. He wanted nothing more than to marry her off to Yitzchak (*Bereishit Rabbah* 59:9). Nevertheless, he proved that he was a true servant. He placed his personal concerns aside and saw only his master’s will before his eyes. He hastened to fulfill his mission as quickly as possible in order to prevent any personal interests from taking hold in his mind and disturbing his service.

The Ba’al Shem Tov says that many people are erudite but lack fear of Heaven. How is this? When they arise in the morning, they do not rush to

fulfill Hashem's word, but give priority to their own interests. When one overcomes his innate desire to continue cuddling under his cozy comforter and jumps up like a lion to a new day of serving Hashem, he proves he is a loyal servant. He threw off the blanket, and with it, his personal interests. In their place, he fixed Hashem's will.

When Bnei Yisrael departed from Egypt, they left the servitude of Pharaoh and entered the service of Hashem. When they accepted the Torah, they ascended to the level of the very angels. They had cast aside all forms of servitude. But within a relatively short time, they made the Golden Calf.

After this, Hashem ordered that they "make for Me a sanctuary so that I will dwell in their midst" (*Shemot* 25:8). Hashem wished to bring His beloved children back to the status of servants. He wanted them to feel connected to Him with every fiber of their beings, like a slave who is bound with his master and awaits the opportunity to fulfill his wishes joyfully and with alacrity. When Hashem dwells within a person, he feels enslaved to Him and tries to fulfill His word at every moment.

Am Yisrael were enslaved in Egypt until Hashem decided the time was ripe to anoint them as His Chosen Nation, a kingdom of priests, and a holy people (*ibid.* 19:6). At first, Am Yisrael were granted complete freedom. However, after they sinned with the Golden Calf, they were consigned to the status of a slave, who must serve his master implicitly.

When one places tefillin upon his head and his forearm, he subjugates his mind and heart to Hashem (*Ben Ish Chai, Shanah Rishonah, Vayeira* 1). The mitzvah of tefillin stems from the *pasuk*, "Bind them as a sign on your arm and let them be ornaments between your eyes" (*Devarim* 6:8). The word *bind* indicates that when one subjects his mind and heart to Hashem, he becomes bound with Him. We are commanded, "And you shall serve Hashem, your G-d" (*Shemot* 23:25). This indicates that when one prays, he must subject himself to Hashem, like a servant before his master (*Ben Ish Chai, ibid. Mishpatim*).

Hashem gave Bnei Yisrael the Torah in the wilderness, which is ownerless and accessible to everyone. We must relinquish ownership of our own interests in order to do Hashem's will.

Yitro dropped his fame and fortune in order to seek the truth. When he discovered it, after the war with Amalek and the Splitting of the Sea (*Shemot* 18:1), he rushed to embrace it. Did only Yitro hear about these earth-shattering miracles? All the nations heard about the wonders enacted on behalf of Am Yisrael, as we cite in the *Az Yashir* prayer (ibid. 15:15-16).

Although everyone heard about the miracles, Yitro was the only one who did something about it. He immediately left everything behind to join the nation that received the Torah. He wanted to serve Hashem alone. Yitro had held the prestigious position of priest of Midian. However, when he saw the truth, it drew him like a magnet. He abandoned his wealth, honor, and reputation to bask in the glow of the *Shechinah*.

“With the arrival of Av, we decrease our joy” (*Ta'anit* 29a). This is the month when both Batei Mikdash were destroyed. The beginning of this tragedy was the sin of the spies (*Sotah* 35a). The month of Av (אב – father) reminds us of our Heavenly Father, Whom we are adjured to serve with love, faith, and joy. All our national tragedies came upon us “because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, with joy and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant” (*Devarim* 28:47).

Conversely, Adar is the month we increase our level of joy. This is when Bnei Yisrael undertook to become sanctuaries for Hashem by accepting the Torah through love and joy. True joy and liberation come from observing the Torah, “for there is no free man except one who is occupied with the Torah” (*Avot* 6:2). Out of Hashem's tremendous love for Moshe, He called him, “My servant, Moshe” (*Bamidbar* 12:7). In the Shabbat Morning Prayers, we proclaim, “Moshe will rejoice with the gift of his

portion, for a loyal servant You called him.” Moshe’s loyalty earned him true honor.



## Wholesomeness

***“When Adar arrives, joy is increased”***

*(Ta’anit 29a)*

Although we are commanded to rejoice on all the festivals (*Devarim* 16:14-15), we do not find this instruction regarding any other month. What is the reason for this directive regarding Adar?

The word משנכנס (when arrives) has the root of כנס (gathering), depicting unity. The quality of unity brings joy. Hashem desires unity among His children. In his diabolical decrees, Haman drew strength from the fact that Bnei Yisrael were “scattered and dispersed” (*Esther* 3:8). Had this not been the case, he could never have had the power to dream up his evil schemes.

Many of the Torah’s commandments are mitzvot between man and his fellow man. Thus, one who casts aspersions upon a fellow Jew is degrading the entire Torah. Esther told Mordechai that the best defense against Haman was to “go and gather all the Jews” (*Esther* 4:16). The connection they would feel toward one another would counterbalance the damage they had caused with their previous diversity.

Let us step back a few generations, to the days of Yeravam ben Nevat. In his wickedness, he offered sacrifices to the idols. When one of the true prophets saw this, he said that all those who worshipped the Ba’al would die by this altar. Yeravam lifted his hand to strike the *navi*. However, his hand became paralyzed and he could not carry out his intentions. This is

perplexing. Yeravam was given full ability to serve idolatry. But when he tried to hit the prophet, his hand became immobile. Hashem's seal is peace. He hates dissention more than anything, even idolatry. This is why Yeravam was stricken so severely for raising his hand.

The mitzvot of Purim symbolize benevolence and unity (*Maharal, Ohr Chadash* 213). Purim is the day of "sending portions (of food) to one another – מִשְׁלֹחַ מִנּוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ –" (*Esther* 9:22). The word used to mean *another* is רֵעֵהוּ, which is similar to the word רַע (bad). Even if someone is unfriendly toward you, act kindly with him. The aim of mitzvot is to create camaraderie. This is why the mitzvah of sending portions of food to one another does not apply only to donating to the poor and indigent, but also to the wealthy, who lack nothing. The very act of giving has the power to plant peace among fellow Jews.

The mitzvah of bringing the half-*shekel*, which was announced in Adar, also fostered feelings of friendship among the people. When Moshe was informed of this mitzvah, he had difficulty visualizing the half-*shekel* coin. Finally, Hashem showed him a coin of fire, taken from under the Heavenly Throne. What was so incomprehensible to Moshe regarding the half-*shekel*? He had explained to Bnei Yisrael far more complex matters, with no trouble whatsoever. Moshe's difficulty lay in the fact that he could not understand why the nation should bring a half-*shekel* as opposed to a whole one.

Hashem was hinting to Moshe that Bnei Yisrael's essence is wholeness. Without this quality, they are not worthy of being called a nation. For this reason, each individual was instructed to bring a half-*shekel* coin. As each pair of Jews produced a complete contribution, the nation would attain wholeness. Hashem showed Moshe a coin of fire. This alluded to warmth and love, catalysts for uniting the hearts of the people. He took this coin from under the Heavenly Throne, the source of all *neshamot* (*Zohar* III, 29b), hinting to the importance of unity. When everyone is concerned for

the welfare of his fellow, encouraging him to reach his potential, joy is naturally increased among the nation.



## Paying Our Last Respects

The seventh of Adar is the day of Moshe Rabbeinu's birth (*Megillah* 13b) as well as the anniversary of his death. Hashem completes the years of the righteous (*Rosh Hashanah* 11a). Why do we not have the custom to commemorate the death of our loyal leader, who gave us the Torah, with a special *hilula* celebration? There is no need to enumerate the virtues of Moshe, the paragon prophet and tremendous tzaddik who spoke to Hashem face-to-face and was called the "man of G-d" (*Devarim* 33:1). Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes, and countless other tzaddikim who illuminated the world throughout the generations are all memorialized with a *hilula* celebration. Why, then, do we not do the same for Moshe Rabbeinu, the universally-recognized giant of Jewry? Moreover, on Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's *hilula*, we do not say *Tachanun*, while we do on the date of Moshe's death. This exacerbates our original question. Why is Moshe's *yahrtzeit* treated like any other day, instead of being given the honor it rightfully deserves?

Moshe Rabbeinu was head and shoulders above any of our other Torah leaders. Therefore, whenever we study the Torah, no matter what calendar day it may be, it is as if we are celebrating his *hilula*. The *navi* exhorts us to "remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant" (*Malachi* 3:22). Thus, every single day of the year is cause for celebration, as we elevate the soul of Moshe through our Torah study.

There is great significance in reciting *Tachanun* on the anniversary of Moshe's death for the following reason. After Bnei Yisrael sinned with the Golden Calf, Hashem revealed to Moshe the secret powers of reciting the

Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. This prayer has the potential to reverse Hashem's anger (*Shemot* 33:19). Similarly, *Tachanun* is a prayer of supplication. We pray to gain atonement, just as Moshe received atonement for the nation after the sin of the Golden Calf, as Hashem responded to him, "I have pardoned, because of your word" (*Bamidbar* 14:20).

Every generation contains a *nitzotz* of Moshe Rabbeinu (*Zohar* III 273a). Moshe's *neshamah* continues to live within us. There is no need for a *hilula*, since his *neshamah* continues living in each generation. Furthermore, the lips of tzaddikim move in the grave when their Torah teachings are repeated in this world (*Yevamot* 97a). This is why tzaddikim are called living even after they die (*Berachot* 18a). Their spirit lives on as they take pleasure in the continuation of their Torah teachings.



## The Inside Story

Moshe's *neshamah* lives in each generation. This is because, during his sojourn on High, all the future insights and methods of Torah study of each and every Jew, throughout the generations, from *Matan Torah* until the coming of Mashiach, were revealed to him, and it is in his merit that we have access to them (*Shemot Rabbah* 28:6).

Tremendous *siyata di'Shemaya* is needed to successfully discover novel Torah insights. This Divine assistance comes to us in the merit of Moshe Rabbeinu, who brought the Torah to us from Heaven. Everyone has the ability to express a Torah thought. If he refrains from doing so, he will receive a rude awakening after he has been laid to rest. When he ascends to Heaven, he will be offered a thick volume of Torah novellae. When he looks at it in puzzlement, he will be told, "These are the *chiddushim* which you had the potential to produce, but sadly forfeited the opportunity to

do so.” It is painful to see how many people are capable of learning Torah but forego this wonderful opportunity.

I once met a young man who had two children. He and his wife thought more children would be a burden to them and thus settled on only two. I replied that just as Hashem provides for two children, He can provide for three, four, five, and even more. *Baruch Hashem*, my words hit their mark. He and his wife had five more children. People have tremendous potential. I know people who have twenty-two children. Those who refuse to have large families will be shown how many *neshamot* they could have brought down to this world. What a shame for all that was lost.

A king had a beloved daughter who reached marriageable age. However, the king found it very difficult to part with her. He allowed her to marry on condition that she and her husband build a room for him in their home so that he could visit whenever he wished.

Similarly, it was extremely difficult for Hashem to part with His “beloved daughter,” the Torah, in whom He delights every day (*Mishlei* 8:30). On the other hand, He had to give it to people, for the world cannot exist without Torah (*Nedarim* 32a). Thus, Am Yisrael, the *chatan*, merited receiving the Torah, which is the *kallah*, the cherished daughter of Hashem Himself.

However, since Hashem was loath to part with His precious child, He made a condition. He would dwell together with this new couple. This is expressed in the command, “They shall make for Me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell in their midst” (*Shemot* 25:9). The precondition for receiving the Torah is that we treat it properly. It will then offer us closeness to Hashem, as Torah study enables a person to attain unlimited awareness of Hashem.

In *parashat Terumah*, Hashem told Moshe to “make a Menorah of pure gold, hammered out shall the Menorah be made” (*Shemot* 25:31). Rashi explains that “hammered out” means it was to be made of one hunk of gold. The *pasuk* says that the Menorah “shall... be made” instead of saying, “shall you make....” Moshe found it difficult to understand how to

fashion the Menorah. Hashem finally told him to cast a hunk of gold into a burning furnace, and the Menorah would emerge on its own (*Tanchuma, Shemini* 8).

Why did Moshe find it so important to discover how to form the Menorah, if it could have been, and actually was, formed miraculously? Why does the Torah describe how it was fashioned at length, since it was formed miraculously? Moreover, Moshe was extremely wise, and a prophet; why did he not understand how to make the Menorah?

Let us turn to Moshe's esteemed father-in-law for clarity. Yitro was accorded great honor by having a *parashah* named after him. There is a custom among Tunisians to prepare a "*seudat Yitro*" in memory of the miracle that took place when a plague was finally halted in their country, during the week of the Torah reading of *parashat Yitro*. What was so unique about Yitro?

We might explain his singularity as follows. After Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael, Yitro made his way to the yeshiva of Atniel ben Kenaz. To his dismay, he could not understand the back-and-forth discussion of the Torah scholars. He sat near the door and decided to ask about whatever it was he did not understand. Hashem was so pleased with his attitude that He told him, "You went to learn Torah at your advanced age, in spite of the difficulties involved. In merit of your virtue, I will rest My *Shechinah* upon you." Then he received the Torah as a gift and understood it.

This teaches that even if one does not understand what is being studied, he should go to the *beit midrash*. The very fact that one is sitting there gives Hashem untold pleasure. In this merit, Hashem allows him to understand the discussions taking place (*Tanchuma, Yitro* 4).

The Ben Ish Chai describes the Menorah in a most fascinating manner (*Shanah Rishonah, Terumah*). The Menorah symbolizes the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer. During prayer, one's thoughts must be directed to Hashem. We must constantly strive to enhance our prayers by banishing all extraneous thoughts from our minds. We should direct our thoughts completely to Hashem, just as the Menorah was "hammered out gold,"

fashioned from one solid piece of gold. The Satan is well aware of the significance of this encounter with our Creator, when all the gates of Heaven are open before us, in anticipation of our prayers. We must make every attempt to keep the Satan at bay.

I would like to suggest that the difficulty Moshe had with fashioning the Menorah lies in the concept we just explained. He could not fathom how one can be completely united with Hashem, despite the thousands of thoughts that inundate his mind at any given moment. How is it possible to make one's mind into one solid hunk of gold, devoted solely to Hashem?

By showing Moshe the completed Menorah, Hashem was revealing to him that if one makes every effort to fulfill this mission, he will receive Divine help. There is no need to wonder how one will succeed, for we are assured to "cast your burden upon Hashem and He will sustain you" (*Tehillim* 55:23). One's job is to ask, "Hashem, open my lips," and make every attempt to focus his first thought upon Hashem. Then he will receive unbelievable *siyata di'Shemaya*. Everything will fall into place, just like the Menorah was created on its own. Man has unlimited potential, for he was created to provide a repository for the *Shechinah*. The necessary tools for this are contained within each and every one of us.

Although the Menorah was formed miraculously, the Torah describes how it was made in detail. This teaches us a wonderful lesson. Moshe understood how the Menorah should be fashioned only after Hashem described the details to him. Similarly, even if one does not have the necessary knowledge to understand a certain *sugya*, but believes he will eventually succeed, Hashem will help him. The efforts that he makes in coming to the *beit midrash* will be rewarded with tangible results.

A lack of understanding does not exonerate us from exerting ourselves to the maximum. The more one studies, the more he will understand. There are people who are endowed with tremendous intellectual capabilities. They can succeed far beyond the scope of ordinary people. But even they must apply themselves in order to make progress.

In *parashat Terumah*, we read, “They shall make an Ark of acacia wood... You shall cover it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you cover it” (*Shemot* 25:11-12). The Aron, which housed the *luchot*, was made of three layers. The outer and inner ones were solid gold, while the middle one was wooden (*Yoma* 72b). What was the purpose of the inside layer of wood?

I would like to suggest that wood represents man’s essence. One might look impressive on the outside, sporting a long, white beard and *payot*, however, Hashem does not desire outer trappings; He wants us to be regal inside and out. The outer layers of gold depict externalities, while the inside layer of modest wood symbolizes an inner world of substance.

In our generation, we are governed by externalities. People shop for the latest styles. They even wear garments with the labels showing in order to tell the world how fashionable and costly their clothes are. Once, while on a trip to Mexico, I received a pair of shoes. Someone commented that they were ugly. I turned to him in surprise and told him that they had a very popular brand name. When he noticed the name on the shoes, he suddenly changed his tune. “They’re really very nice,” he said.

People constantly chase after luxuries. They’re not satisfied with top of the line suits, but must also have stylish socks. Who sees socks? When it comes to their outer appearance, people do not forego even the smallest detail. They want only the best, even if it is not noticeable to anyone else. The day will come when one will find himself under the ground. No classy suits or fashionable socks will adorn him then. This should shake us up.

After I delivered this message to a crowd of one hundred and fifty *avreichim*, they were all in tears. They understood how true this is. We put so much emphasis on enhancing our material lives that we completely forget Hashem. The more one invests in materialism, the more he divests himself of spirituality. It is imperative to expend energy in Torah study, even if it is difficult. There are many fine young Torah scholars who began their foray in Torah study as a complete ignoramus. *L’havdil*, even the

great Moshe Rabbeinu did not understand how to fashion the Menorah, but he was determined to understand, and therefore received Divine help.

Distancing oneself from materialism is a way of coming closer to Hashem. It is a great merit to spend the *yahrtzeit* of Moshe Rabbeinu in the Halls of Torah. This day, the seventh of Adar, is also the *hilula* of the tzaddik, Rabbi Meir Pinto, zy”a. It is fitting to light a candle on it. Moshe Rabbeinu gazes lovingly at his people, who flock to the *beit midrash* to immerse themselves in Torah study. It is a day auspicious to pray for *siyata di’Shemaya* in revealing new insights in Torah. With this attitude, we will not dread arriving at the Heavenly Court.

When I was in Mexico, Hashem granted me the privilege of attending the wedding of a young man who had completely transformed his life. He grew up in a secular home in Mexico. I met him and encouraged him to study at a yeshiva in Bnei Brak. He acquiesced, spending two weeks there. A year later, I visited his town again, and asked his parents to let him learn abroad once more. They agreed on one condition. At the end of the semester, he must return and then study at a university. The boy, for his part, truly wished to remain in yeshiva. I felt he had the potential to become a giant in Torah. I traveled once more from Argentina, where I was staying, to Mexico and begged his parents to allow him to continue on his trajectory of full-time Torah study. *Baruch Hashem*, I succeeded. This young man grew into a tremendous *talmid chacham*. In four years, he covered what it would take others fifteen years to master.

This student abandoned all forms of materialism. His iron will, coupled with tremendous *siyata di’Shemaya*, brought him to the level of a true *ben Torah*. If not for his determination, he would now be studying in a university. Torah Sages from around the world, including Eretz Yisrael, attended his wedding.

At Har Sinai, each of us declared, “*Na’aseh v’nishma.*” This indicates that we all possess a wealth of potential for Torah wisdom. At the very least, we should set fixed times for Torah study. After 120 years, Hashem

will greet us warmly, saying, “You are praised for dealing honestly in business and setting fixed times for Torah study.”

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu, the transmitter of the Torah, passed away on the seventh of Adar. Each of us has the potential to reach heights in Torah knowledge and reveal new Torah insights. Let us actualize this potential to the fullest, so that we do not arrive on High after 120 years in shame over not having fulfilled our purpose.
- ◆ A king married off his beloved daughter on condition that the new couple build a room nearby for him to use when he visited. Likewise, Hashem granted Am Yisrael His beloved Torah on one condition: that He can reside with us. This is possible when we observe the Torah and its mitzvot.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu found it difficult to understand how to fashion the Menorah. Nevertheless, he tried his best to comprehend this and as a reward for his efforts, Hashem miraculously made a perfect Menorah emerge from the fire. Yitro sought the Torah way of life and was granted success. This teaches us that if we apply ourselves to Torah study, we will be given *siyata di'Shemaya* to understand what we learn.
- ◆ The Ben Ish Chai compares the *Shemoneh Esrei* to the Menorah. If we focus solely on Hashem, with His assistance, we will be able to connect to Him in prayer.
- ◆ The Aron, which contained the *luchot*, was made of a layer of wood sandwiched between two layers of gold. This is a message to man, whose limbs and organs correspond to the mitzvot. We must eschew externalities, for, after he dies, man is left with nothing but his spiritual earnings. On the day of Moshe Rabbeinu's *yahrtzeit*, which is also the *hilula* of Rabbi Meir Pinto, zy" a, we should fortify ourselves with Torah study. Each of

us possesses a world of potential. If we would only tap into it, we would succeed beyond our wildest dreams.



## The Best of Both Worlds

***“And the drinking was according to the law, there was no coercion, for so the king had established for every officer of his house to do according to each man’s desire”***

*(Esther 1:8)*

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s disciples asked why annihilation was decreed upon Bnei Yisrael in the days of Mordechai and Esther. They answered “because they partook of Achashveirosh’s feast” (*Megillah* 12a). Achashveirosh was a world ruler. Had Bnei Yisrael refused to attend his feast, he would surely have punished them with death for contempt of the king.

Moreover, Vashti, his queen, was the daughter of the evil Nevuchadnezzar, who had destroyed the Beit Hamikdash. Certainly, Am Yisrael quaked at the thought of refusing to attend the feast of her husband.

This leaves us wondering. Bnei Yisrael were deathly afraid of disobeying the king by declining his invitation. This was compounded by the fact that all the food had a reliable kashrut certificate. Even the wine was prepared in a kosher way (*Esther* 1:4-8). Why, then, did Hashem deal so severely with them, allowing Haman to go ahead with his diabolical plans?

In *Tehillim* (1:1), David states, “Praiseworthy is the man who did not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor did he stand in the way of the sinful,

nor did he sit in the session of the scorers.” The word *אִישׁ* (man) is used to describe a person of wisdom and inner strength, as David Hamelech instructed his son, Shlomo to “strengthen yourself and be a man” (*Melachim I*, 2:2). Who is worthy of the title “man”? One who distances himself from the gatherings of idle men and instead takes his place in the *beit midrash*. We are descendants of “Yaakov, the wholesome man who dwelled in tents [of Torah]” (*Bereishit* 25:27). The place of a Jew is in the *beit midrash*.

Mordechai is called “a Jewish man in Shushan” (*Esther* 2:5). The term *אִישׁ יְהוּדִי* (a Jewish man) contains Hashem’s Name within it, indicating that Mordechai was completely devoted to the service of Hashem.

It seems that Bnei Yisrael were forced to attend Achashveirosh’s party. But the way they enjoyed the meal did not indicate that they were coerced (*Megillah* 12a). They ate and drank and made merry just like the rest of the guests, feeling neither compulsion nor revulsion toward the revelry of the others.

A Jew’s main pleasure should be in matters of the spirit. He should try, as much as possible, to distance himself from worldly pleasures. Man is a composite of both the physical and the spiritual. Each force attempts to pull in its direction and reduce the power of the opposing force. When the *neshamah* rules the body, it attains fulfillment through observing Torah and mitzvot. The material side of man becomes minimized, and he does not feel the need to pursue every possible pleasure.

However, if one spends his time fulfilling his lusts, his spiritual side diminishes until its voice is drowned out by the raucous cries of the outside world. When Bnei Yisrael partook of Achashveirosh’s feast, they were interested in a good meal. They wanted to indulge their passions. Seeing that he had them under his control, Achashveirosh hurried to bring out the vessels of the Beit Hamikdash in order to show off his great wealth. Bnei Yisrael were so sunk in their food that they were desensitized to the travesty taking place before them and did not raise

any objection. Their silence gave Achashveirosh the temerity to desecrate the holy vessels.

Bnei Yisrael's offense was that they clung to the force of Amalek within themselves. Enjoying Achashveirosh's banquet was only the outward manifestation of this iniquity. Since one sin causes another, they overlooked their obligation to defend Hashem's honor by denouncing the desecration of the holy vessels.

Once, when I was in Paris over Shabbat, I had to walk a long distance to reach the *beit kenesset*. On the way, I passed three historical landmarks, one of which was the Eiffel Tower. These places have become central tourist attractions, drawing visitors from all over the world.

As I watched people gasp in awe at these buildings, a heartfelt plea burst forth from my heart. I silently cried, "*Ribbono shel Olam!* When will You bring the redemption, when the whole world will stand in awe of the glory of Your kingdom? How much longer will You hide Your face from us and leave us in this dark exile? Instead of everyone making the trek to the Beit Hamikdash, they visit the handiwork of men. How much longer will Your nation be in captivity and Your glory in the hands of the enemy?!"

A woman once related that she had traveled a very long distance in order to visit the historical sites of France. With shining eyes, she enthused about the impressive wonders she saw in Paris. I asked if she had ever visited Israel. Did she ever see the Kotel Hama'aravi or the graves of our tzaddikim? She replied no. Israel didn't speak to her. She would much rather spend her time visiting the spectacular, modern-day sights that the world has to offer. I then asked her why she was so drawn to tour gentile attractions while the land of her heritage held no appeal.

Woe to the ears that hear such talk! When one pursues materialism, his baser instincts dominate and he has no interest in infusing his *neshamah* with purity and spiritual sustenance.

"The voice is the voice of Yaakov and the hands are the hands of Eisav" (*Bereishit* 27:22). When the voice of Yaakov's progeny resounds in the *beit*

*midrash*, spirituality suffuses the air and Eisav's power dissipates. However, when Yaakov's voice grows faint, Eisav's hands become strong, gaining the power to harm Am Yisrael (*Bereishit Rabbah* 65:20). When Am Yisrael were under the dominion of Persia and Media, their voice was reduced to a whisper. This was because they lent credence to their materialistic inclinations. Achashveirosh and Haman capitalized on this, empowering themselves with the vision of a Judenrein world.

When Yitzchak grew old, he wished to bless his sons. Yaakov entered first and stood before his father. Yitzchak felt his arms and was surprised. "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Eisav," he proclaimed. Yitzchak was well aware that the voice of Yaakov and the hands of Eisav cannot exist in one person. Yaakov's voice represents the spiritual world, while Eisav's hands represent physicality. We cannot enjoy two worlds at once, as they are diametrically opposed. When one rises, the other automatically descends.

We might say that Achashveirosh brought out the holy vessels of the Beit Hamikdash in order to test Am Yisrael's reaction. Would they be shaken at such blatant sacrilege and condemn this act, or would they placidly continue eating while being entertained in this blasphemous way? When Achashveirosh saw that his act of degradation did not awaken Am Yisrael from their spiritual stupor, he understood that Yaakov's voice had been stilled. This gave him the boldness to raise the hand of Eisav against them.

Hashem was enraged by Am Yisrael's attitude. Their enjoyment of Achashveirosh's feast and their pleasure in sitting among gluttons and scoffers indicated that they were at an all-time spiritual low. Gastronomic indulgence was more meaningful to them than spiritual quests. Allowing Haman to execute his diabolical decree would prove the perfect wake-up call to a nation in spiritual slumber.

After Haman announced his dastardly intentions, "the Jews confirmed and undertook upon themselves and their posterity" (*Esther* 9:27). From here we learn that Bnei Yisrael reaccepted the Torah (*Shabbat* 88a).

However, this time they accepted it with open arms. This indicates that Hashem's message, sent through Haman, had hit home. Bnei Yisrael understood that the tragedy decreed upon them was due to their severance from spirituality and their connection to materialism. As a form of rectifying this offense, they accepted the Torah, only this time, through willingness and love.

In Rome, there is a great monument called the Arch of Titus. It depicts the Romans leading the Jews into exile, with the Menorah as the most prominent feature of the sculpture. This archway was built thousands of years ago and has withstood revolutions and the ravages of time. Many historical monuments have crumbled, yet this one remains standing till today.

The Menorah represents Torah. As long as we learn Torah and keep mitzvot, the hands of the gentiles are powerless. The symbol of the Menorah stands stalwart, throughout history, as a testimony to the power of the Torah. It continues to light our path through exile. It shows us that only when the light of Torah is dimmed, as the *batei midrash* become empty, do the gentiles raise their muscular arms to harm us.

When Titus came to the Beit Hamikdash, he was overwhelmed by the beauty of the Menorah. However, he was deathly afraid of seizing it for himself. Perhaps Hashem would become enraged at this brazen act and punish him, as He had punished the wicked deeds of Nevuchadnezzar and other sinful kings. He devised a plan. He announced that if a Jew would step up and enter the Beit Hamikdash, he would be allowed to keep whatever he found, besides for receiving a sizeable reward. A Jewish apostate named Yosef Meshita heeded the call. He entered the Beit Hamikdash and remained there for a long while. He emerged with the shining Menorah in his hands.

When Titus saw this, he told Yosef to give him the Menorah, as it was not fitting for a plebian to own such a spectacular vessel taken from the Temple. He instructed him to enter once again and take whatever he

desired. However, Yosef surprised him by refusing to do this: “It is enough that I angered my Creator once. I will not anger Him again.”

When Titus saw the determination in Yosef’s eyes, he ordered his execution, amidst painful suffering. With each finger that was cut off, Yosef cried out, “Woe to me that I angered my Creator!” He eventually died in terrible anguish. A Heavenly Voice proclaimed, “Yosef Meshita is promised a share in the World to Come.”

How could an avowed apostate who was willing to desecrate the holy Beit Hamikdash suddenly convert to a penitent who refused to anger his Creator? I would like to suggest that his change of heart rested in the Menorah he carried against his chest. With glaring clarity, he realized that Am Yisrael’s power derives from the Torah, symbolized by this very Menorah. This understanding aroused him to do *teshuvah* for his previous iniquities.

Am Yisrael’s rectification during the days of Purim lay in “confirming and undertaking” the Torah with added vigor and love. They finally comprehended that it is the Torah that shields us from all harm.



## Accepting the Torah Increases Joy

*“Just like joy is decreased when Av arrives, so is joy increased when Adar arrives”*

*(Ta’anit 29:1)*

Why is the month of Adar singled out for increasing our joy? Shouldn’t we be especially joyful in Kislev, when we enjoyed spiritual salvation?

Conversely, why don’t we find the instruction to decrease joy in Tevet, when the destruction actually began, or in Tammuz, when the walls of Yerushalayim were broken? Why is the month of Av singled out for this?

The uniqueness of Adar rests in the fact that it contains the day when Bnei Yisrael “confirmed and undertook upon themselves.” They reaccepted the Torah, with zeal and enthusiasm. Since the Torah is our source of joy, it is only fitting to increase our level of joy in this month. Chanukah was the time of great miracles and salvation. But, unlike Purim, it was not marked by a Torah renaissance. Therefore, Kislev is not awarded the singularity as a month of increased joy.

Purim symbolizes the victory of the Torah in the merit of the simple faith of our people. By gathering to fast and repent for three days, they demonstrated their faith that Hashem would save them from their enemies. The precondition for receiving the Torah is simple, pure faith. When one walks humbly before Hashem, without cleverness or cunning, he merits basking in the joy of Torah.

We decrease our level of joy in Av, since the Beit Hamikdash, which symbolized the Torah, was destroyed during that month. The *navi* laments, “For what reason did the Land become forsaken? For their neglecting My Torah” (*Yirmeyahu* 9:11). When Bnei Yisrael abandoned the Torah, which was meant to bring them joy, the Beit Hamikdash was razed and the greatest source of joy was taken from us.

In the times of Haman and Achashveirosh, Am Yisrael renewed their acceptance of Torah through their simple faith. In contrast, their lack of faith during the days of the Beit Hamikdash caused them to weaken their level of Torah study. They believed that emulating the gentiles while keeping the mitzvot would be an ideal lifestyle. Hashem showed them that the voice of Yaakov cannot co-exist with the hands of Eisav. When Am Yisrael copy the ways of the nations, they lose out on all fronts. The gentiles expel them, and the Torah rejects them.

Let us all keep in mind that simple faith and humility are the keys to growth in Torah. “The Torah of Hashem is perfect... making the simple one wise” (*Tehillim* 19:8-9). The simple faith involved in cleaving to the Torah grants man wisdom, obviating the desire to emulate the gentiles.

We increase our joy in Adar, since this is the month when Bnei Yisrael reaccepted the Torah, which confers joy upon the heart of man (ibid.). Conversely, since the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed in Av because of a deficiency in Torah study, we decrease our level of joy then.

### **In Summary**

- ◆ Why is Adar the month designated for joy instead of Kislev, when the miracle of Chanukah took place? Additionally, why do we decrease our joy in Av as opposed to Tammuz or Tevet?
- ◆ The greatest joy is found in Torah study. On Purim, Am Yisrael accepted the Torah willingly and wholeheartedly. Thus, Adar is the month fitting to increase our joy. In contrast, Av is the month when the Temple was destroyed, in punishment for Bnei Yisrael abandoning the Torah. Thus, it is a month of decreased joy. Without Torah, there is no joy.



## **Acting Charitably**

On Purim, we offer portions of food to one another and charity to the poor. These acts increase love and brotherliness. These mitzvot are most appropriate on Purim, since Am Yisrael lacked unity in those days. Haman noticed this and denounced them to Achashveirosh: “There is a nation spread about and scattered among the nations” (*Esther* 3:8). It was their disunity that empowered Haman to hatch his evil plan.

Haman descended from Amalek, who attacked Bnei Yisrael when “their hands were weakened in Torah” (*Sanhedrin* 106a). The obvious question is why the commentators say that “their *hands* were weakened in Torah” instead of simply stating that Bnei Yisrael were weak in Torah (*Imrei Yaakov* pg. 48; and others).

The answer is that the word “hand” implies a defect in the use of their hands. Apart from their lax attitude toward Torah study, Bnei Yisrael were negligent in giving *tzedakah*, a mitzvah done with the hand. When Bnei Yisrael are not united in their concern for their fellow man, they quickly lose their singularity as the Chosen Nation. Their enemies then rise from their lairs and seek ways to oppress them.

The mitzvot of Purim: to give charity, offer portions of food to one another, and enjoy a festive meal together, help us rectify the deficiency of our hands and reconnect our hearts to our fellow Jews.

Rabbi Chaim Vital, zy”a, says that one’s sins have the power to erase all his mitzvot, except for the mitzvah of *tzedakah*. This will always remain with him and will stand in his defense in the World of Truth (*Sha’ar Hakedushah* II, 7). Charity is an act of self-sacrifice. One takes that which is most dear to him, his hard-earned money, and offers it as a gift to someone else. Money is called דמים, which connotes דם (blood), because it is a person’s very lifeblood. When one overcomes his natural instinct to preserve his money, offering it instead to a fellow Jew, he is considered having donated a portion of his soul. This is why *tzedakah* is singled out as the mitzvah that will endure forever.

I would like to share a miracle that happened to me. Once, in New York, I was asked to offer words of inspiration in the aftermath of tragedies that had occurred in a certain congregation. Before crossing the street to the venue of the speech, I had a sudden desire to enter a nearby *beit kenesset* for a short time. When I left, I was met with bedlam. A traffic accident had occurred just where I had been standing a few moments’ earlier, claiming two casualties. I told my escort, Rabbi Chananya, that it was Divine intervention that led me to the *beit kenesset*. Otherwise, I might have found myself lying lifeless on the asphalt. I had come to give a *shiur* in the first venue and afterward make an appeal for those in need. I fully believe

that it was this mitzvah of *tzedakah* that saved my life, in actualization of the *pasuk*, “Charity saves from death” (*Mishlei* 10:2).



## Cowed into Submission

Every year, as Purim approaches, I ask the same question: What was so significant about the miracle of Purim that it warrants being commemorated for all generations? We all know the story of how Haman wanted to annihilate Am Yisrael. Esther gathered the Jews and instructed them to fast and repent for three days. Ultimately, the decree was rescinded, and the Jews experienced a turnabout. But why was a special day enacted to remember this miracle? And what messages can we glean from the Purim story?

The Rema of Pano (*Gilgulei Neshamot, Oht* 6) says that Achashveirosh was eventually reincarnated as a convert to Judaism, and Vashti as a cow. The Midrash relates the incident of a pious man who sold his cow to a gentile. However, the cow refused to work on Shabbat. This cow was none other than the reincarnation of Vashti, who forced Jewish girls to work on Shabbat. To make amends, she returned in the form of a cow which refused to work on Shabbat, while the gentile who eventually converted due to this incident was none other than the reincarnation of Achashveirosh (*Pesikta Rabbati* 14).

Which merit allowed Achashveirosh the opportunity to rectify his iniquities? It was the fact that through his decrees Am Yisrael did *teshuvah*. “Greater was the removal of the [king’s] ring than forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses who prophesied to Am Yisrael” (*Megillah* 14a). The prophets did not succeed in inducing Bnei Yisrael to do *teshuvah*, while Achashveirosh merely removed his signet ring and Bnei Yisrael suddenly burst forth in repentance.

Vashti's merit for reincarnation and ultimate restitution rested in the fact that she stubbornly refused to attend Achashveirosh's party. As a result of this, she was put to death and Esther ruled in her stead. This allowed the Purim miracle to unfold. Since Hashem does not deprive any creature of its due reward, Vashti was allowed to return to this world in the form of an animal and rectify her sins.

If the characters of Purim were given a second chance, where is Haman in the picture? He was the villain behind the whole plot, and thus the initiator of Bnei Yisrael's *teshuvah*. Haman hated Bnei Yisrael with a deep, bottomless hatred. Stemming from Amalek, he inherited the trait of fearlessness and godlessness. He thus was beyond any type of rectification.

Achashveirosh, in contrast, possessed a certain measure of fear of Hashem, as well as the Jews. Vashti, the daughter of Nevuchadnezzar, inherited her father's innate fear of Heaven. This seems to contradict the Gemara that says Achashveirosh's animosity of the Jews equaled that of Haman (*Megillah* 14a). The *Me'am Loez* explains that Achashveirosh was told by the astrologers that a Jew would rule after him. He did not know that this would be the very child born to him from Esther. Out of his great fear of this future Jewish usurper, he came to hate the entire nation.

Haman was an entirely different story. His very essence defied Hashem's kingdom. He stemmed from Amalek, who took the plunge and jumped into the boiling bath of faith in Hashem. Although he was scalded, he cooled off the water somewhat. As a result, the other nations lost their innate fear of attacking Am Yisrael. Since we do not look for merit in one who incites evil, Haman will never receive atonement for his deeds.

Bnei Yisrael deserved death in the days of Amalek as well as the days of Haman. *Chazal* say they were accountable for partaking of Achashveirosh's feast (*Megillah* 12a). Although Achashveirosh served completely kosher food, Bnei Yisrael were taken to task for enjoying the company of coarse gentiles while ignoring Hashem. This was due to a lack of alacrity in their service of Hashem.

After doing *teshuvah*, their mourning was transformed to a holiday. They finally realized why such a harsh fate had been decreed upon them (*Shabbat* 88a). They girded themselves with the courage to fight their enemy through their love of Torah and zeal in performing mitzvot.

Purim is a holiday for all generations because it teaches us the lesson that Torah must be studied with exuberance and excitement. This is a true expression of feeling “the joy of a mitzvah.” One must be on guard against his *yetzer hara* even when doing a mitzvah completely for Hashem’s sake, without seeking any personal benefits whatsoever. We are encouraged to “be... swift as a deer to do the will of your Heavenly Father” (*Avot* 5:20). May Hashem grant us the merit to always do His will with alacrity and excitement. May we always savor the joy of a mitzvah.



## Deathly Afraid

*“Go assemble all the Jews that are found in Shushan, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day; and I with my maids, will fast also. Thus, I will come to the king though it is unlawful; and if I perish, I perish”*

*(Esther 4:16)*

In her great virtue, Esther was prepared to sacrifice her life for the sake of Bnei Yisrael. She offered to approach the king to beseech him on behalf of her people. This was a dangerous proposition, as everyone knew it was forbidden to approach the king unbidden. It was highly probable that when Achashveirosh would see Esther enter his room uninvited, he would

have her put to death. However, her love for her nation superseded all thoughts of personal peril.

When Achashveirosh noticed Esther approaching, he was indeed filled with rage (*Esther Rabbah* 9:1). He wished to have her put to death, as she had expected. Suddenly, Esther cried out, “My G-d, my G-d, why have You abandoned me? It is revealed before You that my entire objective in approaching the king is purely for the sake of Your people.” Hashem immediately sent the Angel Gavriel, who cooled off Achashveirosh’s anger and replaced it with love. Achashveirosh extended his royal scepter toward Esther, a sign that she was welcome to appeal to him.

Achashveirosh’s command to Esther that she might not approach him without being summoned was completely illogical. Achashveirosh preferred her over Vashti and cherished her. He should have desired her company at any given moment. How could he, then, act so illogically as to forbid her from approaching him?

Moreover, once he became sober, Achashveirosh realized that his punishment of Vashti for failing to appear before him was a fatal mistake. He should have learned his lesson and not repeated his error. It is clear that Hashem was behind the scenes, enacting each episode in order for Bnei Yisrael to be awakened to do *teshuvah* and increase their prayers. Their reaction to the goings-on in the palace would determine the outcome of events.

Bnei Yisrael were culpable for disobeying Mordechai when he forbade them from attending the king’s feast. Although at first Bnei Yisrael attended out of respect for the king, the fact that they disregarded Mordechai’s words caused them to take pleasure in the repast of a gentile and even stumble in viewing inappropriate sights and in watching the desecration of the holy vessels of the Beit Hamikdash.

Hashem placed into Achashveirosh’s mind the irrational thought that even Esther should be banned from entering the royal chamber at any time. This caused Esther to fear for her life at the thought of entering his

chamber unbidden. She then commanded Bnei Yisrael to gather in prayer and fasting. This rectified their previous sins and initiated their ultimate salvation.



## Behind the Curtain

***“And these days should be remembered and celebrated by every generation, every family, every province, and every city, and these days of Purim should never cease among the Jews, nor shall their remembrance perish from their descendants”***

*(Esther 9:28)*

The mitzvah to read Megillat Esther on Purim is learned from this *pasuk* (*Megillah* 2b). Esther asked the Sages to enact a festival for generations. Why is the entire Purim miracle attributed to Esther?

“Esther the queen wrote... and the word of Esther... was written in a book” (*Esther* 9:29-32). *Chazal* learn from here that a Megillah must be written with ink on parchment in order to warrant having a blessing made on it before it is read. Regarding Sifrei Torah, mezuzot, and tefillin, we also find this requirement. However, there is no such requirement regarding the Haggadah shel Pesach. Why did our Sages establish that, unlike a Haggadah, a Megillah must be written on parchment?

I would like to give the following preface to my answer. When Moshe ascended to Heaven, Hashem showed him everything that would happen to Am Yisrael in the future. He also showed him the Torah, Prophets, and Scriptures (*Berachot* 5a). The Scriptures refers to Megillat Esther. Rabbi

Yitzchak Ezrachi, shlita, Rosh Yeshivat Mir, asks why Megillat Esther was shown to Moshe, as opposed to the Talmud Bavli or other important works.

Megillat Esther reveals to us what happens when Bnei Yisrael deviate from the Torah. First, a devious despot is given permission to enact harsh decrees upon them. Then, Bnei Yisrael react by doing *teshuvah* and increasing Torah study. As a consequence, Hashem rescinds the decree. This message has such great import for all future generations that Hashem demonstrated this to Moshe by showing him Megillat Esther.

After the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash, Bnei Yisrael served idols (*Megillah* 14a). Hashem sent countless prophets to induce them to mend their ways. Regrettably, these prophets were not heeded. Even Yirmeyahu Hanavi could not influence Bnei Yisrael to do *teshuvah*. It was the threat of Haman that terrified our nation into doing *teshuvah*.

Hashem showed Moshe Rabbeinu the Torah on one side and a Megillah on the other. This is an allusion to the *luchot*, which were written “on one side and on the other,” miraculously legible from all four sides (*Shemot* 32:15). When Bnei Yisrael transgress the Torah, harsh decrees are enacted against them. They then ask themselves, “What is this about, and why?” (*Esther* 4:5). Introspection brings clarity, and they finally understand why they are beset by suffering.

The singularity of Megillat Esther is that it describes how Haman brought our nation back to *teshuvah*. Now we might understand why this scroll is called Megillat Esther. The word מגילה (*Megillah*) is similar to the word גלוי (revealed), while the word אסתר (*Esther*) is similar to the word הסתר (concealed). The timeless message revealed by the Megillah is that even when Hashem is concealed, He is always there, like the bright sun obscured by the clouds. Although Hashem is hidden from us, He is “standing behind our wall, watching...” (*Shir Hashirim*).

During the pre-Holocaust era, numerous Jews were drifting away from the fold. Hashem brought darkness upon our people in an extreme form of concealment. But it was only temporary. After the nation learned their

lesson, they repented and returned to their Heavenly Father. Bnei Yisrael then experienced a great Torah resurgence, when Hashem's Presence was once again revealed.

The Megillah opens with the words, "ויהי בימי אחשוורוש" – It was in the days of Achashveirosh" (*Esther* 1:1). The word ויהי denotes sorrow (*Megillah* 10b). The Purim story begins on a sad note, but ends in rejoicing (*Esther* 8:15). Every Jew undergoes difficult periods in his life, but he must remember that when he withstands the challenges, he attains true joy.

A man once approached me with a strange request. Since he suffered so terribly from his wife and children, he asked for a blessing to die. He said he had absolutely nothing to live for. I replied that in Shushan, too, the Jews were sure that Haman would annihilate them. Ultimately, they merited salvation. I told him to also pray and do *teshuvah*. The next day was Ta'anit Esther. He was visiting his mother when his wife phoned him by surprise and begged forgiveness.

Every Jew experiences his own Megillah. The scrolls of our lives resemble the Purim saga. The following story should strengthen our faith. Just before the terrible terrorist attack in the Sebarro pizzeria in Jerusalem, which claimed many lives, an American citizen was standing in line. He was in a great hurry. A helpful Israeli suggested he go to another eatery where he himself would pay for his meal. The American agreed. As soon as he got into his car, the Sebarro pizzeria blew up. After some days of investigating, he discovered that his Israeli savior had been injured and was in Hadassah Hospital, in critical condition. He waited a month until the man regained consciousness. Then he thanked him for saving his life. The American gave him his business card, begging him to call on him the next time he visited the States.

Not long afterward, the Israeli took a trip to the USA. The two men made up to meet outside the World Trade Center, where the American worked in an office on the one hundredth floor. The date was 9/11/2001. As soon as the American left the building to meet his friend, it began to collapse. This Israeli saved his life twice.

This story demonstrates that it is Hashem Who decides man's fate. If one is destined to die, he will die, no matter where he is. If he is meant to live, he will live, even if he is surrounded by death. Our destiny is decided by Hashem alone. Hashem watches over His beloved people, wherever they are: "Behold, He does not sleep nor slumber, the Guardian of Israel" (*Tehillim* 121:4).

"Therefore, they called these days 'Purim' from the word *pur* (lot)" (*Esther* 9:26). Haman cast lots to figure out the appropriate time for annihilating the Jews. He assumed that Am Yisrael's lot depended on this drawing. In a raffle drawing, there is only one winner. Everyone else loses. Haman was involved in drawing lots to determine his next move: "So Haman sought to destroy all the Jews... the lot was cast in the presence of Haman..." He erroneously assumed that the destiny of Am Yisrael could be controlled by lots. Nothing can be further from the truth. Our destiny depends on one thing only – Hashem, Who watches over us. Bnei Yisrael are above the influence of the zodiac (*Shabbat* 156a). Purim teaches us that Hashem is our lot.

David Hamelech said, "Let us fall into the hands of Hashem, for His mercy is great, but let me not fall into human hands" (*Shmuel* II, 24:14). When Bnei Yisrael are connected to Torah and mitzvot, their fate is clearly dependent upon Hashem. "All the nations of the land will see that Hashem's Name is called upon you, and they will revere you" (*Devarim* 28:10). However, when Bnei Yisrael distance themselves from Hashem, *chalilah*, turning instead to frivolities and fleeting pleasures, He hides His face from them. He allows them to think that their lives depend on the mercy of the gentiles.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Megillat Esther was shown to Moshe on High because it describes Hashem's behavior toward Am Yisrael. Since they abandoned Him in those days, Haman was able to enact his harsh decree, which brought about a wave of *teshuvah*.

- ◆ Megillat Esther literally means “a revelation of the concealed.” Even when Hashem seems hidden, He is there, behind the scenes. Darkness is only temporary. One must fortify himself with faith to believe that eventually, he will perceive the light and bask in joy.
- ◆ One man’s double rescue from disaster drives home the point that Hashem alone determines man’s fate.
- ◆ Haman believed he could manipulate our fate according to lots. But Am Yisrael is a nation above the constellations. Hashem decides what will happen to us.



## Perception amid Deception

Although many of our Scriptures will be hidden in the future, and will not be read after Mashiach’s arrival, Megillat Esther will exist forever. What is the timeless message of Megillat Esther?

This is similar to the fact that all the *korbanot* will be annulled in the times of Mashiach except for the thanksgiving-offering (*Vayikra Rabbah* 9:7). Hundreds and thousands of miracles happen to us all the time, but we are unaware of them. Only in the times of Mashiach will our eyes be opened and we will realize how many miracles Hashem did for us throughout the years. Then we will have the tools to perceive His wondrous ways, as “the earth will be filled with knowledge of Hashem, like water covering the ocean bed” (*Yeshayahu* 11:9).

Any life-saving miracle does not merely provide a new lease on life for the one for whom the miracle was done. Rather, all the generations born to him afterward benefit from this miracle, which allowed them to enter this world. In the times of Mashiach, everyone will recognize the enormity of the miracles that Hashem did for them and their forefathers. There will

be a tremendous arousal to offer thanksgiving-offerings for His great kindnesses.

The miracles of the days of Mordechai and Esther were performed in a hidden manner. We cannot fathom how many millions of miracles were enacted for our ancestors in those days, in the merit of which we are alive today. Every generation has its customized “Haman,” perhaps even more than one, who wishes to emulate his icon of old. It is only due to Hashem’s infinite kindness that he is unable to implement his devious plots against us.

As long as we live in the darkness of concealment, it is difficult for us to perceive Hashem’s miracles. In the times of Mashiach, the curtain of concealment will be lifted. The entire world will be suffused with brilliant light. We will see with blinding clarity Hashem’s myriad miracles, which were performed for us throughout history.

How many times do we place our faith in people who seem trustworthy? We assume they have our best interests at heart, when in reality this is far from the truth. In the times of Mashiach, we will see how Hashem saved us from the hands of these charlatans, despite our unworthiness. Out of His immense love for us, He did not allow these imposters to succeed in harming us.

This is why it is appropriate to read Megillat Esther even in the times of Mashiach. The Purim story is the prototype of our experience in exile. In those days, too, Bnei Yisrael found themselves in deep darkness. They could not imagine from where their salvation would come. Only after they experienced a turnabout and vanquished their enemies did they understand that everything that happened was from Hashem. Even that which seemed, at the time, to be a tragedy was eventually unmasked as the harbinger of salvation.

In the times of Mashiach, we will bring thanksgiving-offerings for all the millions of miracles that we failed to perceive when they took place, due to our near-sighted vision. The very act of reading the Megillah in the

times of Mashiach will be considered as if we are offering a thanksgiving-offering.

The word מגילה (Megillah) is comprised of ג' מילה (*brit milah*, three). Since Bnei Yisrael, in the days of Mordechai and Esther, lacked the faith of our three Avot, they were also remiss in observing the mitzvot of the Torah, which led to their partaking of Achashveirosh's feast.

The Ben Ish Chai says that *brit milah* confers upon its recipient the protection offered by the Name ש-ד-י. Beforehand, he was considered under the control of ש (one of the negative forces). With his *brit*, he receives the letter י, thus completing the name ש-ד-י (*Shanah Sheniyah, Ki Tavo*). We might say that in the days of Purim, this name departed from our nation. With neither the merit of our forefathers nor of *brit milah*, they were left to the devices of ש. This was why Haman was able to seize control. Only through fasting, doing *teshuvah*, and undertaking to reaccept the Torah did Bnei Yisrael merit the tremendous miracles that had been prepared for them from the start, amidst concealment. After their awakening, they merited the entire Name ש-ד-י returning to rest among them.

Avraham Avinu sits at the gate of Gan Eden and studies each Jew who wishes to enter (*Eiruv* 19a). Is the Heavenly Name ש-ד-י etched into his *milah*? If, *chalilah*, he damaged the sanctity of his *brit milah*, he is barred entry into Gan Eden. The word מגילה, containing the term ג' מילה, stands for the three signs between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael. They are: tefillin, Shabbat, and *brit milah*. One who protects his *oht brit kodesh* will surely observe the mitzvot of Shabbat and tefillin. Observing these mitzvot draws him to observe the rest of the Torah's decrees. He will eventually merit a portion in Gan Eden, basking in the glow of the *Shechinah*, for he has made himself a repository for the Name ש-ד-י.

In the days of Mordechai and Esther, Bnei Yisrael were lax in Torah and remiss in these three mitzvot. This was what led to Hashem concealing His face from them. Only after reaccepting the Torah and improving in these three areas did they merit the light of His revelation, enjoying the

benefits of the Name י-דש. Even when His face is concealed, Hashem protects us in the merit of our three Avot and the three basic mitzvot, of which *brit milah* stands at the forefront. This is what defended us against Haman's plot.

Amalek, the progenitor of Haman, brazenly cut the foreskin of the *brit milah* and threw it upward (*Tanchuma, Ki Teitzei* 9). This was in order to cause Bnei Yisrael to sink into depression, as *brit milah* was the first covenant they had entered into with Hashem. With this act, Amalek also wanted to separate Bnei Yisrael from the Name י-דש. When, generations later, Haman witnessed Bnei Yisrael partaking of Achashveirosh's feast, he was filled with glee. He assumed they had forfeited the protection of the Name י-דש. He did not realize that even when Bnei Yisrael do not deserve revealed miracles, Hashem always stands behind the scenes, lovingly supervising them.

In the times of Mashiach, Megillat Esther will continue to be read. It will serve as a reminder to Bnei Yisrael of the miracles Hashem did for His people in those days and throughout the bitter exile, in the merit of our forefathers. Everyone will be stirred to bring thanksgiving-offerings to Hashem.



## Blessed Gratitude

*Chazal* teach that on Seder Night, one is obligated to consider himself as though he himself left Egypt (*Pesachim* 116b). The Vilna Gaon further states that wherever the word חייב (obligated) is used, it is referring to a Torah-mandated obligation (Introduction to commentary on *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*). For this reason, Rabbi Elazar and his colleagues who were in Bnei Brak remained awake the entire night of the Seder, recounting the story of the Exodus. They observed the mitzvah of

considering oneself as having left Egypt in its purest form. By relating the story of the Exodus in detail, they vividly experienced the salvation from Egypt.

On Purim, we are obligated to become inebriated to the extent that we cannot distinguish between the phrases “Cursed is Haman” and “Blessed is Mordechai” (*Megillah* 7b). Why is it so important to become intoxicated to this degree? Why can we not just act as though we cannot distinguish between these two statements? On Pesach, we “merely” consider ourselves as having left Egypt. Why can we not adopt the same attitude on Purim, considering ourselves unable to distinguish between “Cursed is Haman” and “Blessed is Mordechai”?

A sober individual will never say, “Blessed is Haman.” In order to say such a thing, one cannot be in his right mind. This being the case, why do *Chazal* demand that we become inebriated, thus falling to the low level of blessing Haman?

We say “Blessed is Haman” as a form of thanking Hashem for sending Haman to bring us to the point of reaccepting the Torah through love and willingness. When Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah at Har Sinai, it was through coercion. Hashem had performed many kindnesses for Bnei Yisrael. They felt so indebted to Him that they were compelled to accept His Torah. Refusing it would be a blatant act of ingratitude. Moreover, Hashem overturned the mountain like an inverted barrel over their heads. He said, “If you will accept the Torah, fine. If not, here will be your burial” (*Shabbat* 89a).

Only in the days of Mordechai and Esther, when the decree of annihilation loomed over their heads, did Bnei Yisrael arouse themselves to do *teshuvah* and reaccept the Torah. But this time, with love and enthusiasm. Since this arousal came in the wake of Haman’s evil decree, we thank Hashem by saying, “Blessed is Haman.”

When Esther prepared a feast for Haman, she imbued it with sanctity. Haman was up to his neck in defilement. In order to vanquish the power

of the *kelippah*, Esther had to summon tremendous resources of sanctity (*Imrei Yosef, Vayishlach* 166a, and others).

How can we bless or attribute any measure of holiness to an anti-Semite who wanted to destroy our people? A Jew would never naturally bless Haman. Nevertheless, we are compelled to do this in order to demonstrate gratitude for the level of love for Hashem that we reached through his decree. This is why *Chazal* commanded that we become intoxicated on Purim (*Megillah* 7b).

Bnei Yisrael left Egypt in order to receive the Torah. However, they accepted it through coercion. This is because they had not prepared themselves sufficiently to receive the Torah. Consequently, they easily became lax in the few mitzvot that they had received. This resulted in the attack of Amalek, forebear of Haman, who injected doubts into the hearts of Bnei Yisrael, causing them not to accept the Torah in the optimal way.

Only hundreds of years later, with the removal of Achashveirosh's ring, which spelled their death sentence, did Bnei Yisrael awaken to the truth. Esther utilized the fear of the moment and instructed Bnei Yisrael to fast, even though it was Pesach. She specifically chose Pesach as the time for this, in order to remind them of their first Pesach as a nation, when they erred grievously and earned Amalek's original attack.

Even after Amalek attacked, Bnei Yisrael did not learn the lesson of accepting the Torah out of love. They had to be forced into it. Since they accepted the Torah out of coercion, it was only a short while later that they fashioned the Golden Calf, denying Hashem's supervision. It is astounding to note how far-reaching the sin of neglecting Torah study is.

Pesach is the festival of freedom. The truly free man is the one who occupies himself with Torah (*Avot* 6:2). By accepting the Torah upon ourselves through love on Purim, we feel truly liberated on Pesach. Haman's decree taught us the meaning of true freedom.

When one says, "Blessed is Haman" on Purim, he understands that the truly blessed one is Mordechai. The Purim story teaches that if Haman

deserves to be called “blessed” for unwittingly bringing us closer to Hashem, all the more is Mordechai blessed for successfully bringing the entire nation to *teshuvah* and leading them into a virtual proclamation of “*Na’aseh v’nishma*” through love and willingness.

Now we might understand why *Chazal* obligate us on Seder Night to consider ourselves as if we left Egypt. We are exhorted to reach the understanding that the only reason for the Exodus was to receive the Torah through love and willingness.



## Adar and Purim – Gems



### Complete Joy

***“The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor”***

*(Esther 8:16)*

The initials of the phrase **ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה** have the same *gematria* as the word **בם** (in them), an allusion to the phrase, “**ודברת בם** – You shall speak in them,” the command to speak in words of Torah (*Devarim* 6:7). Torah is light and gladness, for it directs our lives and gladdens our hearts.

The initials of the phrase **היתה אורה ושמחה** (had light and gladness) are numerically equivalent to twelve, an allusion to the Twelve Tribes, upon which our nation is founded. The last letters of this phrase are numerically equivalent to fifteen, as is the Name **יה**. The joy of Purim rectified the damage wrought by Amalek when they attacked Bnei Yisrael, marring the Name **יה**.



## Brotherly Love

***“For Mordechai the Jew was viceroy to King Achashveirosh; he was a great man among the Jews, and found favor with most of his brethren; he sought the good of his nation and spoke for the welfare of all his seed”***

*(Esther 10:3)*

Why did Mordechai find favor with only most of his brethren and not all of them? Rashi explains that after he became involved in state affairs, some members of the Sanhedrin distanced themselves from him (*Esther 10:3*).

This is puzzling. Mordechai got involved in the government for the sake of Am Yisrael. His decrease in Torah study was the sacrifice he chose to make on the altar of his beloved nation’s greater benefit. Certainly, he would have preferred “sitting and learning.” His involvement with national affairs was considered a “time to act for Hashem,” when one is permitted to “void Your Torah” (*Tehillim 119:126*). Moreover, even the mundane talk of Torah Sages contains words of wisdom. Certainly, Mordechai had vast storehouses of Torah knowledge to share with the other Torah Sages, even in his new position as the king’s viceroy. Why, then, did they distance themselves from him?

I would like to answer by analyzing the relationship between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. The Gemara is replete with their disputes regarding the halachah. Each side offers sound proof to support his opinion. The onlooker would assume that they were bitter enemies. However, this is far from the truth. Their arguments were *l’shem Shamayim*, contained within the walls of the *beit midrash* (*Avot 5:17*). After their study sessions, they were the best of friends, to the extent that they even married among themselves (*Yevamot 13b*). The aim of their disputes was to understand the Torah’s meaning, never, *chalilah*, to arouse friction or dissention.

I would like to suggest that the Sages in the days of Mordechai had similar motives. They distanced themselves from Mordechai not due to personal grievances, but for another reason altogether. Being close to the king, Mordechai's rulings would be considered law. Words of Torah cannot endure through coercion, as we find that after Bnei Yisrael originally accepted the Torah through compulsion, they rebelled (*Shabbat* 88a). The gift of Purim is enwrapped in the fact that Bnei Yisrael "confirmed and undertook upon themselves" the Torah, through love and willingness (*Rashi*, *ibid.*). Thus, the Torah could endure.

The Torah Sages knew full well that Torah cannot be forced upon the nation. Since Mordechai had gained a new status, they could not argue with him as equals, clarifying the fine points of halachah. Since his rulings did not emit from the *beit midrash* but from the king's palace, they no longer respected them.



## Nothing Can Spoil Our Love

***“The Jews who were in Shushan assembled again on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and killed three hundred men in Shushan; but they did not lay their hands on the spoils”***

***(Esther 9:15)***

There was no order not to touch the spoils. Why, then, did the Jews refrain from taking them? I would like to suggest that after Bnei Yisrael reaccepted the Torah, out of love, the spoils did not speak to them. They innately understood that it was the lust for money that had forced them to accept the Torah through coercion at Sinai.

After the Splitting of the Sea, “Moshe caused Israel to journey” (*Shemot* 15:22). He had to literally tear Bnei Yisrael away from the Egyptian booty on the shore. They were so submerged in gaining more and more wealth at the sea that they forgot the purpose of the Exodus, which was to receive the Torah. The brilliant glare of the gold blinded them to accepting the Torah out of love. This was why Hashem had to hold Har Sinai over their heads like an inverted barrel.

Conversely, in the days of Mordechai and Esther, Bnei Yisrael were aroused to accept the Torah with love and desire. Their hearts were so suffused with love of Hashem that there was no room for love of money. This was why they were not interested in taking the spoils.



## Present in Absentia

The Megillah does not mention Hashem’s Name even once. The Purim story took place after the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash. At that time, Bnei Yisrael experienced a drastic reduction of spirituality as a nation, and Hashem’s Presence became concealed (*Da’at Chachmah U’Mussar* II, 48:156). This would explain why the first half of the Megillah, describing the darkness of Haman’s diabolical decrees, does not mention Hashem’s Name. However, the second half of the Megillah reveals the joyous outcome of this saga, as our nation experienced “light, joy, gladness, and honor” (*Esther* 8:16). *Light* refers to Torah, while *gladness* and *honor* refer to *brit milah* and tefillin (*Megillah* 16b). Why wasn’t Hashem’s Name revealed as the curtain of concealment was lifted?

Although Haman and his sons were hanged, Amalek lingers on. As long as Amalek exists, Hashem’s Name is incomplete, as we read, “For the hand is on the Throne of Hashem (ה-י), a war for Hashem with Amalek from generation to generation” (*Shemot* 17:16). The Name of Hashem ה-י is an abbreviated form.

However, we can take solace in the fact that Hashem's concealment is always flecked with sparks of light, as the *navi* says, "In wrath, remember to be merciful" (*Chavakuk* 3:2). Even as He hides His face from us, He showers us with compassion. This was the case at the time of Purim.

Thus, even though the Jews of Shushan experienced great salvation, Hashem's Name remains incomplete, for His kingdom has not yet been established throughout the world. As long as Amalek lives, Hashem's Name is obscured, and we experience concealment. This is the message in the absence of His Name from the Megillah.



## Finding Him in the Pages of the Talmud

*“The drinking was according to the law, there was no coercion”*

*(Esther 1:8)*

The word וּשְׁתִּיה (the drinking) contains more than meets the eye. The last letters of this word are ה-י, while the first letters are וּ, together spelling the Name ו-ה-ו-ה-י. The two letters left in the middle of the word are תּש, which means six in Aramaic. This refers to the six thousand years of the world's existence.

Adam's sin brought about the concealment of Hashem's Name in this world. Amalek fought with Am Yisrael in Rephidim and caused further concealment of Hashem's Name. The way to feel Hashem's Presence even amidst His concealment is by "drinking... according to the law." One should immerse himself in the Torah's laws, as "from His right hand He presented a fire of law for them" (*Devarim* 33:2).

Amalek originally attacked those Jews who had become weakened in Torah study (*Sanhedrin* 106a). But those who drank from the Torah's

wellsprings were unaffected by Amalek and his accompanying concealment of Hashem's glory. This is the message of "drinking according to the law." Although Hashem remains concealed from us for six thousand years, whoever submerses himself in the life-giving waters of the Torah sees Him clearly.



### **When His Name Is United, We Stand**

*"In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Achashveirosh, the lot was cast in the presence of Haman, from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar"*

*(Esther 3:7)*

In his profound wickedness, Haman planned to annihilate every last Jew. He wished to execute his nefarious plot in a month that was merit-free. He did not want some long-standing virtue messing up his well-laid plans. The fact that he cast lots demonstrates that he felt a certain amount of apprehension about this matter. He was aware of the unique powers of Am Yisrael and did not want them to get in his way.

When the lot fell on Adar, Haman breathed a sigh of relief. Not only was it festival-free, it was the month of Moshe's passing. Why didn't he implement his plot on the actual day of Moshe's death, the seventh of Adar, instead of waiting until the fourteenth? Haman wanted to kill two birds with one stone. He chose the fourteenth of the month, representing double seven, as the seventh of Adar was Moshe's birthday as well as the day of his death. Since Bnei Yisrael had not yet received the Torah when

Moshe was born, and they refrained from learning Torah on the day of his death, Haman conjectured that the lack of Torah study would be a form of indictment against Am Yisrael.

After Am Yisrael experienced a turnabout in their fate and merited killing Haman and his people, Esther asked Achashveirosh for another day for the Jews to eliminate their enemies (*Esther* 9:13). This day was the fifteenth of Adar. This number is most appropriate as the date for additional warring, as it is the *gematria* of the Name  $\eta\text{-}\iota$ . Haman's intention was to divide the Name  $\eta\text{-}\iota\text{-}\eta\text{-}\iota$  and cause desecration of Hashem's Name. The additional fighting on the fifteenth of Adar would rectify this damage.



## Hanging Haman and Demolishing His Decrees

*“Esther yet again spoke to the king, she fell at his feet, and wept and implored him to avert the evil of Haman the Aggagite, and his scheme that he had plotted against the Jews”*

*(Esther 8:3)*

Generally, when a despot is killed, his decrees die along with him. Why, then, did Esther urgently request the annulment of Haman's decrees? This teaches us the profundity of Achashveirosh's evilness. He was an avowed anti-Semite, who was only too happy to embrace Haman's plans. He hated the Jews no less than Haman, and gave the decrees his stamp of approval. Esther was well aware of this and therefore asked that all of Haman's decrees be rescinded with his death. There would thus be no place to enact his plots after the fighting had died down. At her previous banquet with Achashveirosh and Haman, Esther's tongue nearly slipped into

indentifying her nation's persecutor as "a man who is an adversary and an enemy! This wicked Achashveirosh." An angel immediately changed her words to "the wicked Haman."



## Esther Was Hidden

The Purim story abounds with concealment. *Chazal* say that Esther was never violated by the wicked Achashveirosh (*Zohar* II, 276a). Every time the Megillah mentions that Esther was with Achashveirosh, it was her *sheid*. Esther remained pure to her husband, Mordechai. This is another one in the chain of miracles that occurred. The miracles of Purim were hidden from our people, unlike the miracles in Egypt and in the wilderness. Due to the general low level of the generation at the time of Purim, Bnei Yisrael were not worthy of open miracles.



## On Fasting and Feasting

***“One is adjured to become inebriated on Purim until he cannot differentiate between Cursed is Haman and Blessed is Mordechai”***

*(Megillah 7b)*

The Torah discourages intoxication, as it brings a person to all sorts of iniquities. After the Flood, Noach indulged in wine, which led to his debasement. Why, then, are we instructed to become so intoxicated on

Purim as to confuse “Cursed is Haman” and “Blessed is Mordechai”? This seems to contradict the behavior of a *ben Torah*.

The injunction to become inebriated on Purim can be interpreted to mean that one should be intoxicated with the wine of Torah, to the extent that he is oblivious to the fleeting pleasures of this world. One is generally pulled after materialism, for he himself comes from the earth. On Purim, he is charged with reaching higher levels by completely eschewing worldly matters.

When Hashem gave the Torah, the air was filled with the fragrance of Gan Eden. Just as one is drawn after a sweet smell and takes pleasure in it, so, too, are we adjured to follow the ways of Torah without even noticing the filth of the street. Am Yisrael is a nation of nobility, constantly questioning, “When will my deeds reach those of my forefathers?” After receiving the Torah, Moshe immediately “descended... from the mountain to the nation” (*Shemot* 19:14). Moshe went directly to Am Yisrael without taking care of anything else (*Rashi* *ibid.*). His sole interest was to transmit Hashem’s Torah to his beloved people.

In the past, people have come to me on Purim, drunk like Lot, asking for a blessing for fear of Heaven. I am always amazed at this request. How is it that even in an inebriated state they ask for fear of Heaven, instead of a good match or financial security?

יום כפורים – Yom Kippurim, the day of Yom Kippur, is “a day like Purim.” How can the two be compared? On Yom Kippur, eating and drinking are forbidden, whereas they are encouraged on Purim, in great measure. What similarity is contained in these two seemingly diametrically-opposed days? They are alike in our desire to attain fear of Heaven on them. Just as fear of Heaven takes hold of a person on Yom Kippur, dictating his every move, so does the intoxication of Purim bring

out the main desire of a person, which is to become closer to Hashem. “G-d’s nearness is my good” (*Tehillim* 73:28).



## In High Spirits

*“To observe annually the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and its fifteenth day”*

*(Esther 9:21)*

Jews who live in cities “without walls” celebrate Purim on the fourteenth of Adar, while those who lived in “walled cities” celebrate it on the fifteenth of Adar. Why don’t we all celebrate Purim on the same day?

On Purim we become intoxicated to the point that we do not know the difference between “Cursed is Haman” and “Blessed is Mordechai.” This symbolizes the turnabout that the Jews experienced with their miraculous salvation in the days of Mordechai and Esther. In one moment, their fate underwent a complete changeover and their grief turned to relief. However, intoxication carries a price. One who is inebriated does not have the clarity of mind to study Torah. In order to obviate a situation in which the entire nation is under the influence of alcohol, Purim was divided into two days. This way, when one part of the people is in a drunken stupor, the other can enjoy the heady pleasure of Torah study. Torah is the key to our survival and as such must never be neglected.

In his young years, the Vilna Gaon would not head home immediately after Yom Kippur, but would remain in the *beit kenesset*, studying the tractates of *Zevachim* and *Menachot* throughout the night. When his father asked why he did not eat or rest up first, he replied, “The entire world is engrossed in eating and sleeping. Who will support it if not me?”

The two days of Purim are comprised of forty-eight hours, corresponding to the forty-eight ways of acquiring Torah wisdom. Dividing Purim among the nation is a way to ensure that the sound of Torah never ceases to reverberate in the world.



### A Sorry State of Affairs

***“For Mordechai the Jew was viceroy to King Achashveirosh; he was a great man among the Jews, and found favor with most of his brethren; he sought the good of his nation and spoke for the welfare of all his seed”***

*(Esther 10:3)*

As mentioned above, Mordechai found favor with most of his brethren but not all of them, for some members of the Sanhedrin distanced themselves from him in the aftermath of his appointment as viceroy (*Rashi* *ibid.*).

We have a rule that we follow the majority opinion. The Talmud relates a case in which Rabbi Eliezer differed in his opinion from the rest of the Sages. Heaven proved that Rabbi Eliezer was correct. Nevertheless, the halachah was ruled according to the majority of the Sages (*Bava Metzia* 59b). Why, then, did some Torah Sages distance themselves from Mordechai, if he was accepted by most of the nation?

This was because now Mordechai had to tend to state affairs and could not devote his time solely to Torah study. In such a situation, the rule of following the majority does not apply. Each person must individually decry the disgrace to the Torah’s honor that is taking place. When the

Torah Sages saw how Mordechai's official position in the government took its toll on his Torah study, they expressed their distress by denouncing his halachic rulings.



# Pesach



## A Celebration of Unification

King Yoshiyahu of the House of David was extremely righteous, to the extent that he was called Hashem's anointed one (*Eichah* 4:20; *Ta'anit* 22b). He eradicated all remnants of idolatry in Eretz Yisrael (*Melachim* II, 23:4-20). The Pesach ceremony that he celebrated was considered the most praiseworthy of all Pesach celebrations up until his time. This is puzzling. Was anything lacking in the Pesach celebration of David Hamelech, the sweet singer of Israel? Shlomo Hamelech, too, certainly invested great effort into glorifying Pesach with every form of splendor.

We cannot compare the generations of David and Shlomo with that of Yoshiyahu. During the days of David and Shlomo, there was a tremendous thirst for Torah. Everyone aspired to observe Hashem's word. Materialism held little meaning for the masses. During Shlomo's times, money was regarded as valuable as stones strewn in the streets (*Melachim* I, 10:27). There was such a strong desire to hear Hashem's word that nobody sought anything else.

However, the generation of Yoshiyahu was entirely different. During his days, the *yetzer hara* was in full force and idolatry was rampant. Yoshiyahu Hamelech went on a crusade to banish idolatry from Eretz Yisrael. His generation was a far cry from those of David and Shlomo, who were G-d-fearing seekers of His Name.

Yoshiyahu's generation had to make a herculean effort to subdue the pull of materialism and overcome countless challenges, unheard of in previous generations. This is why Yoshiyahu's Pesach celebration was considered more praiseworthy than those of his ancestors. It was a Pesach purged of the defilement of the *yetzer hara*.

A friend once asked where I felt the most *kedushah*. Was it in Morocco, France, or Eretz Yisrael? This set me thinking about my childhood. When I lived in Morocco as a young boy, people were much more innocent and pure. The *yetzer hara* was not cunning like it is today. In order for one to defile his eyes, he had to drag himself a distance to places where such material was portrayed. Unfortunately, today the impure device is found inside many homes. With the click of a mouse, one can commit untold prohibitions. The more advanced technology becomes, the greater the risks of irreversible damage. Recently, a new device has entered the market. It is a mini-television which provides instant transgression with the press of a button.

Hashem created the world in exact balance (*Kohelet* 7:14). In opposition to the powers of impurity stand the powers of sanctity. One's level of *kedushah* is exponentially increased after he has overcome the forces of defilement that try to pull him down.

With Mashiach's arrival, the *yetzer hara* will be slaughtered. The closer we get to this time, the stronger the attempts of the *yetzer hara* to postpone it. The *yetzer hara* is like a candle that flickers strongly before it dies down completely. Before it is completely destroyed, it tries mightily to draw us into its vise. One who successfully overpowers his *yetzer hara* is filled with such intense sanctity that he cannot be compared to how he was before being faced with the challenge.

In the days of Shlomo Hamelech, the nation was united under his rulership (*Melachim* I, 11-12). However, immediately after his reign, his kingdom was split among the kings of Yehudah and Israel. With time, Sancheirev exiled the Ten Tribes of the kingdom of Israel (*Melachim* II, 17:6). Only a small group of people remained under the dominion of

Yoshiyahu, belonging to the kingdom of Yehudah. They were greatly tempted to serve the idols that had been left by Yeravam in various spots throughout the country. However, the righteous Yoshiyahu embarked on a mission to eradicate all forms of idolatry and inspire his people to turn back toward Hashem. He encouraged them to celebrate Pesach in an atmosphere of devotion to their Creator. The Pesach offering of Yoshiyahu was enacted with great self-sacrifice.

In spite of Yoshiyahu's best efforts, there remained those who could not override their desire to serve idolatry (*Yeshayahu* 57:8). They brought idols into their homes, which they then hid from the king. How could their Pesach celebration be considered superior, if they could not overcome the urge to serve idolatry?

Although they served idols, the people were united, similar to the situation at *Matan Torah*. Then, "Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain." Rashi explains that the singular voice of "encamped" indicates their status "as one man with one heart" – they were completely unified (*Shemot* 19:2, *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shemot* 275). Since the essence of Pesach is harmony, Bnei Yisrael in Yoshiyahu's day excelled in observing this festival.

It was Yoshiyahu himself who united the nation that had been left in Yerushalayim after Sancheirev's intrusion and capture of the Ten Tribes. Finally, the nation could celebrate Pesach as it was meant to be. For hundreds of years, the kings of Israel prevented the nation from ascending to Yerushalayim to celebrate Pesach. Finally, Bnei Yisrael could commemorate the Festival of Faith with appropriate festivity in unity.

When Bnei Yisrael were preparing to leave Egypt, on the first Pesach in our nation's history, Pharaoh jumped out of bed to drive them out (*Shemot* 12:30). In order to awaken, he first had to retire. Pharaoh knew that the firstborn of his nation were falling like flies. He himself was a firstborn. How did he not fear for his life, retiring for the night as if nothing were amiss?

I would like to suggest the following. Pharaoh remembered the previous plague, in which those of Bnei Yisrael who did not want to leave Egypt were killed. He assumed that now, as well, there would be such people. Hashem would kill them, too. This would cause a lack of unity, which, in turn, would prevent the Exodus from taking place. With this comforting thought, Pharaoh allowed himself to fall into sweet slumber.

Suddenly, Egypt was in an uproar. Not one house was left without a dead body. Pharaoh awoke in a cold sweat. Bnei Yisrael were more united now than ever, intent on doing Hashem's will. None of them was put to death. When there is unity, the Attribute of Mercy dominates. Bnei Yisrael merited leaving Egypt with heads held high.

The Pesach offering conferred merit upon Bnei Yisrael because it demonstrated their unity. Unity conceals sins. The unified desire to do Hashem's will afforded Bnei Yisrael the merit they needed to be saved from Egypt. Such was the case in the days of Achav, who ruled the entire world (*Megillah* 11a). He successfully vanquished his enemies despite his wicked behavior (*Vayikra Rabbah* 26:2). In contrast, Shaul Hamelech was extremely righteous, yet his men fell in battle. What was the difference between Achav and Shaul that warranted such outcomes, contrary to what we would expect?

Achav's men were united. Although they sinned, their unity spared them in times of battle. Conversely, Shaul's men were righteous, but there were gossipers and those who spoke *lashon hara* among them. These people planted seeds of dissention among the nation. This dissolved any semblance of unification, which is so necessary among those who go out to war together. For this reason, they fell in battle. How critical is unity! Although Bnei Yisrael were at the forty-ninth level of impurity at the time of the Exodus, their unity propelled them out of the land of Egypt and onward toward Sinai (*Zohar Chadash*, beginning of *parashat Yitro*).

### ———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Yoshiyahu Hamelech eradicated idolatry. The Pesach festival that the nation celebrated in his day was superior to the celebration of this festival

in the times of David and Shlomo. How?

- ◆ In the days of David and Shlomo, the people did not have to contend with the *yetzer hara* of idolatry, as in the days of Yoshiyahu. This is what made his Pesach celebration more praiseworthy.
- ◆ Despite Yoshiyahu's best efforts, there were those who hid idols in their homes. How can we say his Pesach celebration was superior, under such circumstances?
- ◆ Notwithstanding the remnant of idolatry, the nation was united. This was the force that earned them superiority. Although the people might have sin on their hands, their unity binds them against peril. Yoshiyahu brought the nation together after Sancheirev made off with a large portion of the Ten Tribes. He encouraged them to celebrate Pesach appropriately.
- ◆ Achav was wicked but succeeded in battle due to the unity that reigned among his people.
- ◆ Pharaoh had the audacity to go to sleep on the night of Pesach, when his nation was dying out, even though he himself was in danger of his life. He assumed that there would be some Jews who wished to remain behind, as in the plague of darkness. They would be put to death. This would spoil their unity and preclude the Exodus. He was proven wrong as Bnei Yisrael, despite their low spiritual level, maintained their unity. This earned them the merit of salvation.



## Free to Do His Will

Bnei Yisrael were redeemed from Egypt in order to receive the Torah (*Shemot* 3:12; *Shemot Rabbah* 3:4). If not for this, we and our descendants would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. This can be proven by the following. When Bnei Yisrael stood at the shores of the Yam Suf with the Egyptians in hot pursuit, Hashem asked the water to fulfill the condition

He made with it at Creation – to split for Bnei Yisrael at the designated time and then return to normal and drown the Egyptians.

At first, the water refused to part, claiming, “These are idol worshippers and these are idol worshippers. Why do Bnei Yisrael deserve to be spared?” The sea’s claim seems to be justified, for Bnei Yisrael were at the abyss of defilement. Only a hair’s breadth separated them from the fiftieth gate of defilement, the point of no return. Hashem mollified the sea by saying that Bnei Yisrael were on the way to receiving the Torah and become sanctified thereby. Then it agreed to change its natural course and split for Bnei Yisrael (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 234, 238*).

*Chazal* relate that Bnei Yisrael were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years in order to accustom them to the concept of servitude. After their redemption, they would subjugate themselves toward Hashem alone. They would understand that true liberation is servitude to Hashem. Serving Hashem represents nobility. This is a very different concept from the bondage to one’s lusts, represented by the Egyptians (*Abarbanel, Bereishit 15:12*).

The entire world was created in order for Bnei Yisrael to accept the Torah (*Rashi, Bereishit 1:1*). Just like water is the source of sustenance for fish, so is Torah the source of sustenance for the entire world, as the *navi* said, “If not for My covenant (of Bnei Yisrael learning Torah) day and night, I would not have established the laws of the heavens and earth” (*Yirmeyahu 33:25*). When a fisherman wishes to catch a fish, he puts bait at the end of his rod. As soon as he feels a fish pulling, he immediately lifts up his rod so that the fish cannot escape back into the water. Our sustenance comes from the Torah. The *yetzer hara* makes every attempt to pull us away from it by placing the tempting bait of worldly pleasures in our path.

Severing ourselves from the Torah is a form of spiritual suicide. One cannot live without the protective shield of the Torah. He will be left with nothing to prevent him from falling to the lowest level. The wicked are

considered dead even as they live (*Berachot* 18b). They have cut themselves off from the source of life.

“Taste and see that Hashem is good” (*Tehillim* 34:9). First of all, one must taste Torah. Only after he experiences its sweetness can he understand that Hashem is good. When one approaches Torah for the first time, he may be daunted by its enormity. However, when he persists in studying it, come what may, he becomes enlightened from Heaven and is granted the wherewithal to understand it. Just like mountain-climbers feel “on top of the world” despite, or perhaps because of, the difficulties involved in reaching the summit, so do those who aspire to gain Torah wisdom, given atop Har Sinai, feel tremendous fulfillment and incomparable satisfaction.

Words of Torah are not easy to understand. The beginner may be tempted to give up. This is why Shlomo Hamelech reassures us that it is a worthwhile pursuit, for “it is more precious than pearls and all of your desires cannot be compared to it” (*Mishlei* 3:15). One who wants to “make it rich” must invest his time and energy into this endeavor. He attends meetings, checks the stock market, etc. In the end, he reaps the dividends of his investments. Likewise, the Torah demands hard work, but ultimately, one will find fulfillment and earn reward for his labors.

A businessman who fails to keep himself updated on the latest developments in his industry will find his business gradually crumbling. Similarly, one who studies Torah must not suffice with learning minimally. The *yetzer hara* never rests on its laurels but constantly seeks new ways to trip people up. One must always involve himself in Torah study in order to acquire the tools to vanquish it.

Bnei Yisrael left Egypt laden with wealth. Each Jew left Egypt with many donkeys bearing bounty (*Bechorot* 5b). But their riches did not end there. After the Splitting of the Sea, Bnei Yisrael amassed the Egyptian spoils that were disgorged onto the shore. The spoils they amassed at the sea were even greater than the wealth they had taken from Egypt (*Rashi, Shemot* 15:22). Hashem wished to give them the Torah after they had

amassed the wealth of the sea to teach them the following timeless lesson: It is not materialism that offers a person true pleasure, but only the Torah that confers physical and spiritual wealth.

After Bnei Yisrael were redeemed from Egypt amidst tremendous miracles, they expressed their desire to serve Hashem. Why did Hashem subject them to difficulties, threatening them with the pursuit of the Egyptians? He wanted to show them that this world is rife with trials and tribulations. The challenges never end; they are just replaced with others. Had Hashem released Bnei Yisrael from Egypt without giving them these difficulties, they would likely forget Who had redeemed them and bestowed so much good on them. He thus sent the Egyptians after them in hot pursuit. This aroused Bnei Yisrael to cry out to Him, maintaining their connection with Him (*Shemot Rabbah* 21:5).

The highest level a person can achieve is connecting to Hashem when times are good. Some people, however, remember Him only when things are tough. When they are going through a crisis, they turn to Him for salvation. When Hashem sees they forget about Him when things are going their way, He sees no alternative but to send them suffering, in order to hear their voice call out to Him once more.

Regrettably, even when we are beset by suffering, we often continue in our stupor, not realizing that this is a Heaven-sent message to bring us back to Hashem. If neither abundance nor affliction reach their mark, Hashem has no choice but to increase our suffering until we finally respond appropriately.

Hashem sent the Egyptians to pursue Bnei Yisrael in order to prevent them from becoming complacent. This turn of events would teach them that they must constantly be connected to Hashem. Nothing is guaranteed, and one never knows when the next difficulty will befall him.

This brings to mind the following case in point. Often, young men assume that after marriage, all their problems will disappear. They don't understand that problems are always there, albeit in different forms. The institution of marriage merely begets new challenges. One who habituated

himself to escaping reality will continue doing so even after getting married. But his problems will continue pursuing him.

Life is like a ship in a stormy sea. Giant waves arise on all sides, threatening to capsize the ship. A wise captain will avoid traveling in stormy areas. The best solution is prevention. However, if the ship is cast into stormy areas, the captain cleverly steers it away. A smart person distances himself from places of dubious repute. However, if he finds himself in a situation of spiritual challenge, he utilizes Torah wisdom to navigate his way out. The more closely one adheres to the Torah, the more securely he can maneuver his personal ship through the sea. However, if he disconnects himself from Torah and mitzvot, he places his life in jeopardy, exposing himself to all the winds and waves that loom on the horizon. Who is to say that he will withstand the next hurdle that comes his way?

The world was created for the Torah. In its merit, Bnei Yisrael were rescued from Egypt. Let us sail through life with the tranquility offered by the living waters of the Torah and the security offered by trusting in Hashem.



## Zeroing in on Our Purpose

On Pesach, one may not own *chametz*, even if it is on someone else's property, and one may not have *chametz* on his premises, even if it is not his. Moreover, we are instructed to burn any remaining *chametz* before Pesach, even if it is not on our premises. Even old bread must be categorically eliminated, though nobody would consider consuming it. Hashem wants us to completely remove all vestiges of *chametz* from our possession. It may not be eaten, seen, or found. Why are the prohibitions concerning *chametz* so strict?

From the *pasuk*, “Do not cook a calf in its mother’s milk” (*Shemot* 23:19), we learn the prohibition of mixing milk and meat and its relevant halachot (*Kiddushin* 57b). If somehow a piece of meat became mixed with milk, one is certainly forbidden to either eat it or derive any pleasure from it. However, the Torah does not forbid seeing it, nor does it command us to remove it from our homes. If one decides to keep this meat in his storage room, he does not transgress a Torah prohibition (*Tosafot, Pesachim* 2a).

Perhaps the answer to why the prohibition of owning *chametz* on Pesach is so strict can be answered by examining why the festival is called Pesach. We are told that this name derives from the fact that Hashem **פסח** (passed over) the Jewish homes when He struck the Egyptians. Hashem is the Master of the entire world. He can do as He wishes. Why did He descend to earth in order to strike the Egyptians, thus necessitating a “passing over” of the Jewish homes? He could just as well have smitten the Egyptians from on High.

Hashem specifically wanted the element of “passing over” to be an intrinsic part of the Pesach event. “Passing over” denotes effort. Hashem wants to teach us that it takes effort to be a Torah-Jew, as “man was born to labor” (*Iyov* 5:7). Man’s purpose in this world is to exert effort. Through his exertion, he achieves his goal. If Hashem acted as though He were exerting Himself to pass over the Jewish homes, how much more are we obligated to toil in this world.

The prohibition of finding *chametz* on our premises teaches us something regarding the *chametz*, or materialism, in our lives. Although one cannot live without any materialism, he must make an accounting of how much effort he invests in pursuing it. Hashem commands us to detach ourselves from *chametz*, meaning worldly matters, for the duration of Pesach. This teaches us that one can manage just fine without the luxuries offered by this world.

Pesach teaches us to invest effort in overcoming desire and physical pleasures. The more one scrubs his house clean of all crumbs, fighting the battle against *chametz*, the greater the lesson he will extract. The

thrust of one's efforts should be in the field of Torah. He can manage quite well in this world without half the pleasures he pursues.

Even when involved in mundane acts, such as eating and sleeping, tzaddikim have lofty motives. They infuse these acts with the intention of having enough strength to serve Hashem properly. When one invests his ordinary physical needs with elevated thoughts, he sanctifies his physicality and becomes a repository of Torah and fear of Heaven.

I well remember the Pesach festivals of my childhood in Morocco. We would subsist on matzot, potatoes, and a few other items. This proves one can manage with a minimum of materialism. The *yetzer hara* tries to convince a person that he needs more possessions, to the extent that he cannot imagine surviving without certain things. This is not the case at all. If one wishes to strengthen his spiritual side while reducing his physical desires, he will succeed. Certainly, this form of serving Hashem demands hard work. Let us not forget that "according to the effort is the reward" (*Avot* 5:22). Hashem repays every detail of our efforts in this world.

On a trip to New York, I went to visit Ground Zero. This was the site of the Twin Towers, the icon of the American economy. In a short amount of time, it all went up in smoke. While considering the name Ground Zero, my eyes alighted on an advertisement that said: "We are at the top of the world." It was hung to draw attention to an exclusive restaurant which had been located on one of the upper floors and was destroyed in a brief moment.

The Twin Towers seemed to stand at the helm of the world, yet in such a short amount of time, they came crashing down into oblivion. Where is this fancy restaurant now? Buried under layers of debris, reduced to rubble.

Many people invest their lives in filling their passions. What will remain of their wealth after they die? Only their spiritual assets will remain to defend them before the Grand Tribunal.

A close friend of mine named Mr. Pitosi suffered from terrible foot problems. Nevertheless, he walked to a distant *beit kenesset* three times a day for prayers. Regardless of the weather, he was there. When I saw this, I turned to him and asked, “Mr. Pitosi, why do you trudge like this to the *beit kenesset*? You are old and infirm. Wouldn’t you prefer to pray at home?”

“Rabbi David, I do not deserve to be alive. Nonetheless, Hashem exerts Himself, as it were, to keep me alive. Doesn’t He deserve my efforts in making my way to the *beit kenesset*, even if it entails pain and suffering?!”

A few weeks later, I was informed that Mr. Pitosi had breathed his last. I told his family not to cover his casket before I asked forgiveness for slighting his honor. After asking forgiveness, I walked around the casket. The family asked if I was looking for something. I told them I was looking for drawers in the casket. They looked at me dumbfounded. Does a dead man take anything along with him to the World of Truth? Why would he need drawers in his casket?

I agreed that nobody takes anything along with him to the grave. Even one who spent all his days amassing possessions will eventually leave them all behind. Only Torah and mitzvot will escort him to his final destination.

We mention the Exodus from Egypt numerous times a day. Egyptian bondage is not a thing of the past, a historical event of thousands of years ago. We live it each and every day. If we analyze our daily lives, we will come to the sorrowful conclusion that we are still enslaved to materialism. Remembering our days in Egypt will help us focus on how to shake free of our personal shackles of slavery and be truly liberated. This is what is meant by the saying, “The truly free man is the one who occupies himself in Torah study” (*Avot* 6:2).

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why is the prohibition of *chametz* more stringent than that of mixing milk and meat, in that it may not even be found in one’s possession on Pesach?

Moreover, why is Pesach named after Hashem's "passing over" the Jewish houses, when He could have saved Bnei Yisrael from on High?

- ◆ *Chametz* represents desire. This is why it must be categorically eliminated from our property. Abstaining from *chametz* throughout Pesach demonstrates our ability to limit our physical desires during the entire year.
- ◆ "Passing over" denotes exertion. By "passing over" the Jewish homes, Hashem wished to teach us that man was born to toil. It is his choice to decide in which area he will toil. Will it be in Torah or in indulging his passions?
- ◆ Torah and mitzvot will escort a person after his time in this world. One should expend every effort in these areas. What is the point of increasing material wealth when it will not remain with him?



### With Hearts Full of Faith

***"Israel saw the great hand that Hashem inflicted upon Egypt, and the people revered Hashem, and they had faith in Hashem and in Moshe, His servant"***

***(Shemot 14:31)***

Pesach is the beginning of Bnei Yisrael's foray into faith. The miracles that Hashem wrought for them encouraged them to believe solely in Him. In order for us to connect to the faith of our people during the Exodus, we must first eradicate all vestiges of *chametz* from our hearts. This refers to all sin and improper thoughts which separate us from Hashem and prevent us from serving Him with every fiber of our being.

Thirty days before a festival, we begin studying its halachot (*Pesachim* 6a). Learning about a holiday puts one in the right frame of mind. When he cleans his home of all *chametz*, he fully understands that the main thing is to rid his heart of wrong ideas. We burn the *chametz* with the intention of burning our *aveirot*, so that we can approach Pesach purged of any trace of sin. In this manner, we will be able to wholeheartedly accept Hashem's sovereignty upon ourselves. While the month of Elul represents *teshuvah* out of fear, the month of Nisan represents *teshuvah* out of joy and the yearning to come closer to Hashem.

One might be loath to burn his *chametz* on Erev Pesach, claiming that it is a shame to destroy good food. The Torah clearly condemns wasting food (*Devarim* 20:19). But this is a fallacy. Burning the *chametz* is the physical act symbolic of destroying our *aveirot* in order that we enter Pesach in a state of purity. Moreover, it demonstrates that those who fulfill Hashem's word even at monetary expense will not lose out. Hashem, Who holds the key to sustenance, will bless his livelihood (*Ta'anit* 2a), as it says, "Wealth and honor come from You" (*Divrei Hayamim* I, 29:12).

We learn this from the *korban Pesach*. Since no part of it was allowed to be left over, many families gathered to share one animal. Paupers who could not afford their own animal joined with wealthy people. In this manner, everyone had a share in the *korban Pesach*. Even though numerous people would partake of one animal, there was miraculously always enough for everyone. If one does Hashem's word, Hashem sends him blessing above the laws of nature.

I once heard the following tale about my father, zy" a. He blessed a man from Be'er Sheva to have a baby boy. His blessing was realized and the man invited Father to serve as the *sandek* at the *brit*. There were so many people in attendance that it looked like there would not be enough food. Father heard someone complain that there was not even enough bread for the crowds that had come. He turned to the man and said, "We came to partake in the mitzvah of *brit milah*, not to fill our stomachs! However, if we made such effort to partake in this man's *simchah*, Hashem will surely send us enough food to satisfy us. There will not only be enough

food for everyone here, but all will leave satiated and even take some leftovers home with them.”

After the meal ended, Father approached the man who had originally complained. He asked if he had had enough to eat. The man said that he couldn't explain it, but everyone ate to satisfaction and there was even enough left over for the people to take home.

When one determines to fulfill Hashem's word with faith, He sends him blessing and success, providing for his every need. “One who trusts in Hashem is surrounded by kindness” (*Tehillim* 32:10).

A young man once approached me. He was scheduled to get married in another two months, but he did not even have the basics. He was distressed because the *kallah's* father had threatened to call off the *shidduch* if the *chatan's* side did not fulfill their agreed-upon obligations.

His family did not even have the means to provide for Pesach, which was fast approaching. Moreover, his future father-in-law was deriding him for believing that somehow he would come up with the money. Nevertheless, the young man told his father that he believed Hashem would send them their salvation. They would celebrate both Pesach and the wedding in security.

Sometime later, an uncle of the *chatan* passed away. When his will was opened, everyone was shocked to hear that he had left 100,000 euro for the *chatan*. The day this will was written was the day the *chatan* had registered for a marriage license. From the beginning of his engagement, Hashem had arranged for his financial security. This was all in the merit of his unswerving faith in Him.



## The Search Is On

On the eve of checking the house for *chametz*, many have the custom of hiding ten pieces of *chametz* throughout the house and searching for them with a candle. On the morrow, these pieces are burnt, together with all the rest of the *chametz*. This custom has attained the status of halachah. The reason we hide pieces of bread is the following. We have the mitzvah of searching for *chametz* the night before Erev Pesach, and we recite the blessing “On the burning of *chametz*.” Since we have cleaned the house so thoroughly of all *chametz*, we hide the ten pieces so that our blessing should not be in vain, in case we do not find any other *chametz*.

Who are we fooling by hiding these ten pieces of bread? We know that our homes are *chametz*-free. Isn't this some sort of trickery, as if to convince Hashem (or ourselves) that our blessing is not in vain? Moreover, why do we hide precisely ten pieces of bread? There is surely some symbolism in this number.

The *Ba'alei Mussar* teach that *chametz* is symbolic of our sins and negative character traits, which stem from the vice of conceit. Just as yeast makes dough rise, so does arrogance puff up a person with pride and make him hold his head high over nothing of consequence. Searching the house for *chametz* is symbolic of examining the crevices of our souls and removing all vestiges of sin, which are rooted in arrogance.

When one's heart is full of conceit, there is no room for love of Hashem. Since Pesach is the festival of faith, it is incumbent that we remove conceit from our hearts and fill them with belief in Hashem, in order to serve Him properly.

In Egypt, Bnei Yisrael were submerged in the forty-ninth level of impurity. They merited redemption because in the future, they would receive the Torah, which would cleanse them of all impurity. We might say that the ten pieces of bread that we hide symbolize the Ten Commandments. If we wish to be worthy of receiving the Ten Commandments on Shavuot, we must prepare properly on Pesach. We do

this by removing the *chametz* from our hearts, hinted to in the ten pieces of bread.

One may eat matzah only in a house that is *chametz*-free. As is known, מצה (matzah) is an allusion to מצוה (mitzvah). Only with a heart pure of pride and other negative character traits can one merit doing mitzvot perfectly. “One mitzvah draws another after it” (*Avot* 4:2). After one fulfills the fundamental mitzvah of clearing out his heart of negative character traits, Heaven offers him the opportunity to do additional mitzvot, thereby increasing his reward both in this world and the Next.

One does not recite a blessing prior to doing *teshuvah*. However, if he successfully eradicated the leavening from his heart, the blessing he recites on checking for *chametz* includes his *teshuvah*.

Now we can understand the reasoning behind hiding ten pieces of *chametz* in order to prevent making a blessing in vain. The search for *chametz* is symbolic of searching through the crevices of one’s heart for spiritual dross. As said above, the ten pieces of bread which we hide hint to the Ten Commandments, as Pesach is the beginning of our preparation for Shavuot.

Hashem Himself descended from heaven in order to smite the firstborn Egyptians. Why did He not merely send an angel to do the job? Bnei Yisrael were at the lowest spiritual point at that time. An angel would have found difficulty in distinguishing the firstborn Jews from the firstborn gentiles.

Although Hashem could very well have stricken the firstborn Egyptians from on High, He had a motive in descending to Earth to do this. The All-encompassing Light, from which the ten *sefirot* emanate, also came down with him. Bnei Yisrael were thereby aroused to cleave to Hashem. This is why Hashem passed over the Jewish homes. By this act, His light clung to them and they were aroused to do *teshuvah*.

The night of Pesach in Egypt was filled with great light. It was the radiance of Hashem Himself, incomparable with mere daylight. Why, then,

was it so urgent for Bnei Yisrael to quickly bake their bread to avoid falling further into defilement? “Everything is in the hands of Heaven, aside from fear of Heaven” (*Berachot* 33b). Therefore, removing the *kelippah*, represented by *chametz*, depended on Bnei Yisrael. They received the next forty-nine days to rectify the damage of the forty-nine levels of defilement, and became sanctified like the angels.

It was essential for Hashem Himself to kill the Egyptian firstborn in order to prevent Bnei Yisrael from falling into the fiftieth level of defilement, the point of no return. Experiencing His Divine light in Egypt drew Bnei Yisrael out of their spiritual slump and encouraged them to ascend from the forty-ninth level of impurity. The ten pieces of bread that we hide before searching for *chametz* allude to the ten *sefirot*. When one rectifies his deeds and removes the shell of sin, he merits clinging to the light of Hakadosh Baruch Hu, which is cloaked in the ten *sefirot*.

The Arizal guarantees that one who is careful not to have *chametz* in his possession or eat *chametz* on Pesach will not sin throughout the entire year (*Be'er Heitev, Orach Chaim* 447a). This is hard to understand. Every observant Jew is stringent regarding *chametz*. Nevertheless, we all fall into sin during the year. This is why we so desperately need Yom Kippur. Moreover, does the fact that one slips in sin indicate that he was remiss in eradicating *chametz* from his premises?

The Arizal is not referring to physical *chametz*. He is referring to the *chametz* of sin and negative character. If one manages to rid himself of such *chametz*, it is a surety that he will not sin, for the Torah protects a person from sin (*Sotah* 21a). However, if one failed to do *teshuvah* before the onset of Pesach, “one sin brings another in its wake” (*Avot* 4:2) and he will most likely continue on the road of iniquity.

Pesach, the festival of “passing over,” is the time to forgo one’s sins.



## Infused with Faith

Thirty days before a festival, one prepares himself by learning the relevant halachot of that festival (*Pesachim* 6a). Each festival has laws specific to it, such as hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Before Pesach, it is appropriate to learn the laws concerning removing *chametz* from one's possession. Pesach is called the Festival of Faith. It is thus fitting to prepare for this aspect of the holiday, as well, by infusing oneself with faith.

It was during the days of the Exodus that Bnei Yisrael became a nation of believers. During their first Pesach, Bnei Yisrael displayed the potential for firm faith in Hashem. With time, this faith would burst into a mighty conflagration of unswerving dedication to the Torah.

In Egypt, Bnei Yisrael were at the nadir of impurity. Nevertheless, Hashem redeemed them with great wonders. He knew they would eventually demonstrate unwavering faith in Him and accept the Torah with hearts overflowing with devotion. Indeed, Bnei Yisrael declared, "We will do and we will hear" before even knowing what was written in the Torah (*Shemot* 24:7).

Hashem testifies about His beloved nation, "I have remembered for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, when you followed Me in the wilderness, in an uncultivated land" (*Yirmeyahu* 2:2). How did Am Yisrael possess the courage to face the wilderness with its inherent perils? Although they could not tolerate the oppression in Egypt, would the conditions in the wilderness be any better? Just the thought of spending time in the open, exposed to wild animals and marauders, is enough to send chills down anyone's spine. Bnei Yisrael paid no attention to such things. They clothed themselves with perfect faith in Hashem, Who had redeemed them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. He would surely lead them safely through the wilderness and provide for all their needs.

Pesach was the festival that initiated their foray into faith. As Bnei Yisrael exchanged oppression for redemption, they united as one, with Hashem in their midst. As the Festival of Freedom, Pesach provides the perfect preparation for Shavuot, when Bnei Yisrael committed themselves to observing the Torah. This is why it is worthwhile to study the laws pertaining to Pesach thirty days in advance. Involving oneself in learning these halachot directly results in an increased level of faith and fortifies our connection with Hashem. Consequently, when Shavuot, which is the purpose of the Exodus, approaches, we are suitable candidates for receiving the Torah. Our hearts and souls have been infused with faith. The deeper we delve into the halachot of Pesach, the more powerful our faith becomes, to the extent that we are willing to sacrifice our lives for Hashem's sake.

On the second night of Pesach, we begin counting the Omer. This is another form of preparation for Shavuot. The faith that we summoned in the wake of learning the halachot of Pesach and observing this festival appropriately accompanies us throughout the days of *Sefirah*, up until *Matan Torah*. When we finally reach Sinai, we feel as though the Torah is being given to us anew.

If, however, one desists from studying the laws of Pesach beforehand, his faith will be deficient when the festival arrives. His acceptance of the Torah will also lack the fire of excitement and sanctity.

One is obligated to consider himself as if he went out of Egypt (*Pesachim* 116b). How can one be obligated to do this when he was never there? If *Chazal* exhort us to do this, it is obviously within our realm. We can imagine leaving Egypt, although our feet never touched its soil, through studying the halachot of Pesach from thirty days before the festival. As we said, this intensifies our faith in Hashem. With this increased level of faith, we are able to view ourselves as having left Egypt.

When we were little, Father would pour wine into Eliyahu Hanavi's cup, as is the custom in all Jewish households. When we read, "Pour Your wrath upon the nations," we would open the door for Eliyahu Hanavi. We

asked Father if Eliyahu would actually come to our house and drink from the wine, and he said, "Of course." Then we asked if he himself had ever seen Eliyahu Hanavi. He replied in the affirmative and said that when we got older, we would understand.

Although we never saw Eliyahu Hanavi, we wholeheartedly accepted Father's words, because we believed everything he said. I transmit these words to my children and grandchildren, as well. They cannot see Eliyahu Hanavi, but they believe he visits every Jewish home on Pesach night.

How powerful is simple faith, which originates on Pesach! The more we instill it in our children from a young age, the greater the chances that they will grow up as men of faith and fear of Heaven. When one celebrates Pesach with true belief in Hashem, he merits acquiring the Torah on Shavuot with fear of Heaven.

The faith of Pesach accompanies us throughout the year. Our profits are two-fold. Through this faith, we merit receiving the Torah on Shavuot, and we merit performing the mitzvot in a scrupulousness manner throughout the year.

When I first moved to Lyon, I had a strong desire to open a yeshiva in the spiritual desert that greeted me. This yeshiva would herald the opening of other Houses of Study which would increase Torah and faith among our people. Thirty years ago, this was mere fantasy with no sound basis in reality. When I conferred with my rabbi, he said it was hard to believe I would attract any disciples, due to the spiritual desolation of the place.

Notwithstanding his dire predictions, I could not shake off the urge to establish a yeshiva there. I fully believed that just like the spiritual wasteland of America flourished under the care of a few dedicated individuals, so could Lyon blossom. Just like today the sound of Torah reverberates proudly throughout America, so would it ring throughout the city of Lyon.

Technical difficulties set in. I wished to purchase a specific building to house my dream yeshiva. However, the price was 700,000 francs (over \$100,000). I was a young man in my mid-thirties. Where would I get such an astronomical sum?

One day, as I toured the villa that I was hoping would be mine, the landlord threatened that if I didn't sign a contract by the next day, he would go public. I returned home apprehensive. Where could I get the money for a down payment? My wife noticed my concern and asked about it. I told her the entire story.

Time was running out. I turned my eyes heavenward and said, "*Ribbono shel Olam!* You have everything. All I want is to build a sanctuary for Torah and *kedushah*. You know that I do not seek to glorify myself, but only You. I wish to increase soldiers for the service of Torah and bring merit to the public. However, in order to do this, I need a huge sum of money. Nothing can stop You from helping me. What is 700,000 francs to You, Hashem?" A feeling of relief washed over me as I concluded my heartfelt prayer. I believed my salvation would not be long in coming.

Out of tension, I could not sleep the entire night. Suddenly, at 5:00 a.m., the phone rang. A woman was on the other end, apologizing for the early hour. "I could not sleep all night long," she explained. "I have a number of gold bars in my possession, which I wish to sell at a profit. But so far, I have not found anyone appropriate to buy them and this disturbs me greatly. Please bless me that I find a buyer."

I was very surprised at this phone call at such an unusual hour. But I blessed her as she had requested, thinking how I would love to have such problems.

Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang again. This time, it was an acquaintance. In general, I would be the one to approach him regarding various matters. Now the tables were turned. He related that he could not sleep.

“It seems like tonight is a night of wakefulness,” I commented drily. “I myself could not sleep, and I just received a phone call from a woman who could not sleep. Now you are sharing the same sentiment. This is interesting.” I related the incident with the woman on the line and her gold bars that kept her awake at night.

When he heard this, the man asked for details about her gold. Seeing his seriousness, I gave him her phone number so that they could talk directly. A short time later, the woman phoned again, stating that she wanted to come to my house together with this man and a lawyer to sign a contract between them.

Of course, I agreed. The three walked into my home. While the deal was being concluded, I allowed a sigh to escape my lips. Here they were, signing a contract regarding tremendous sums, while I had no clue as to how to acquire the money for the yeshiva building.

Suddenly, the woman handed me an envelope. She explained that she had vowed that if the deal came through, she would donate this sum to me. I opened it and to my delight, found the sum of 500,000 francs. I thanked Hashem for His kindness and eagerly awaited the arrival of the remaining 200,000 francs.

When I got to my office in the yeshiva, I found an envelope sitting on my desk. There were the remaining 200,000 francs, a donation from the man who had purchased the gold. With a happy heart and a prayer of thanks, I went to sign the lease.

This is how our building in Lyon was purchased. The sound of Torah emanates from here to the entire world. Tens of branches have been established throughout the world, bringing thousands of Jews back to the fold.

Stories like this clearly demonstrate that Hashem alone is the source of our salvation. Our job is to place our faith in Him and fully believe that He can do anything. It is only simple faith that brings us salvation. Those

who help us in any endeavor are merely His agents. They will succeed in executing their mission only if He so wills, regardless of their intentions.

The way to acquire faith is by connecting to the essence of Pesach, which is faith. One who is saturated with belief in Hashem truly feels as though he himself left Egypt. By delving into the halachot of Pesach from thirty days beforehand, one taps into fountains of faith. The spiritual blessing inherent in this holiday can then influence him most optimally.

A woman who was a Holocaust survivor once asked me if it was okay to eat both bread and matzah on Pesach. I immediately understood that she did not understand the significance of *chametz*, which symbolizes the trait of conceit, or the fact that matzot represent the mitzvot. She explained that in her mind, Pesach was connected to matzot. As a young child, she watched her father being taken away by the hated Nazis. It was a week before Pesach. Her mother called out to her father, "Don't forget to bring along matzot so that you will have food for Pesach!" The young girl understood that Pesach means matzot. Now, tens of years later, she was aroused to discover the deeper meaning of these concepts. Pesach does not end with consuming matzot. It means purging oneself of *aveirot* and strengthening one's faith.

When a woman is due to have a baby, she does not wait until the last minute to make preparations. From the beginning of the ninth month, she has her bag ready with the essentials that she will need immediately after birth. Pesach is the birth of our nation. We cannot enter it without prior preparation. Studying the relevant halachot from thirty days beforehand will enable us to enter Pesach worthy of absorbing the abundance of sanctity and faith which are available to us during this festival.



## The Liberating Effect of Bondage

***“In every generation, one is obligated to view himself as if he left Egypt”***

*(Pesachim 116b)*

The Vilna Gaon writes that wherever we find the expression “obligated,” it is a command, which one is required to fulfill even to the point of self-sacrifice (Introduction to *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*). This makes the above obligation all the more difficult to understand. Can anyone feel the shackles of Egyptian slavery when he never even visited Egypt? Such a thought would be considered a lie, *chalilah*, because it has no basis in reality. How, then, are we expected to fulfill this Torah-mandated obligation?

Only one who possesses love of Torah can fulfill this obligation to perfection. The Torah sits in the corner, as it were. Whoever wishes may come and take it (*Kiddushin* 66a). Hashem exhorts us to delve into the Torah’s teachings day and night (*Yehoshua* 1:8). However, nobody is forced to observe the mitzvot. Every individual has free choice. Nevertheless, he should not forget that the day will come when he will give an accounting for all his deeds, for better or for worse.

I once read that Hashem does not force us to study Torah, rather it must be learned through love. Just as a young student cannot be forced to learn medicine if he has no interest in it, so can nobody be forced to study Torah against his will. Without love for Torah, all the Torah wisdom in the world will seep out of his mind. The precondition, then, for Torah study, is love of Torah.

Torah study builds a person, not just in the present, but for the future, as well. With each Torah lesson, one adds a brick to his spiritual edifice on High. But this must be constructed through inner willingness, not from any form of coercion. If one displays love toward Hashem and the desire to study His Torah, the Torah raises him to untold levels.

If we possess love for the Torah and have merited enjoying the spiritual benefits it offers, we certainly have the necessary powers of imagery to view ourselves as experiencing slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt and the subsequent Exodus. This is the true meaning of the adage, “The truly free man is the one who occupies himself in Torah” (*Avot* 6:2). After centuries of Egyptian bondage, the Torah testifies to our freedom. If we feel the liberating powers of Torah, we are capable of imagining the former chains of bondage.

On the topic of love for Torah, I would like to mention the following incident, which can inspire us in this area. There was a hard-working man who would spend his evenings after work at my *shiur* in the *beit kenesset*. However, instead of participating, he would immediately nod off. Noticing this, I took pity on this poor, weary soul. I turned to the man one evening and asked him, “Why don’t you go to bed after such a tiring day? Why do you choose to come to the *beit kenesset*, where you know you will fall asleep?”

The man humbly replied, “All day long, I work extremely hard to make a living. I end the day in a state of immense fatigue. My body wants nothing more than to rest. However, I force myself to come to the Rav’s *shiur*, for the sake of my children’s education.”

When I asked what was the connection between his children’s education and his dozing off in the *beit kenesset*, the man replied, with a voice full of pride, “When I come home, after a full day of work, take out a Gemara in preparation of the Rav’s *shiur*, and make my way to the *beit kenesset* instead of my bed, this infuses my children with love for Torah and respect for its importance. ‘If Father makes such a big deal out of Torah study, then it is certainly a worthwhile endeavor,’ they believe.”

The man said he wouldn’t exchange this lesson for anything. Perhaps he sleeps through the session, but his children are wide awake with the knowledge that Torah is his priority.

The Torah commands us to “teach them (words of Torah) to your children and speak in them” (*Devarim* 6:7). This is an injunction to every

Jewish parent. If we want to instill love for Torah and the desire to learn it in the hearts of our children, we must serve as role models of such behavior. Only when we “speak in them” will we successfully “teach them to your children.” Their hearts will be suffused with love of Torah to the extent that they, too, will consider themselves as having left Egypt.



## The Haggadah – A Blessed Tome

The Chatam Sofer (*Drashot Chatam Sofer L’Pesach* 580) asks why we do not recite a blessing over reading the Haggadah, as we do over reading the Megillah. The Megillah describes Hashem’s miracles in the days of Mordechai and Esther, when He transformed mourning into festivity. Similarly, the Haggadah describes the great miracles that Hashem wrought for our people in Egypt. He struck the Egyptians with ten painful plagues before redeeming Am Yisrael with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Furthermore, He split the sea for them while drowning their enemies in its depths.

It seems it would be most fitting to recite a blessing before reading the Haggadah. We are adjured to “relate to your children” the events that took place in Egypt (*Shemot* 13:8). This is the central feature of the Seder Night. The Maharal has a fascinating explanation (*Gevurot Hashem; Haggadah shel Pesach* pg. 128).

The Chatam Sofer offers the following explanation: The Haggadah begins with the words, “In the beginning, our forefathers were idol worshippers, and now Hashem has brought us close to His service.” We are adjured to imagine having originally served idols and, in His infinite kindness, Hashem brought us back to Him and gifted us His Torah. Since it is not appropriate to connect a blessing with the subject of idolatry, we do not recite a blessing over reading the Haggadah.

When a woman immerses in a *mikveh*, she recites a blessing beforehand (according to Sephardic custom, whereas Ashkenazim immerse before making the blessing). A convert, however, recites a blessing only after having immersed. This is because until he immerses, he is considered a non-Jew. He cannot say, “Blessed are You... Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us,” for he has not yet received the Torah. After immersing according to halachah, he becomes a full-fledged Jew and is eligible to recite the blessing (*Pesachim* 7b).

Originally, our forefathers were idolaters. Since we consider ourselves as having left Egypt, we, too, are considered to have originally been idolaters. Thus, it is unfitting for us to recite the blessing, “Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us” as long as we have not emerged from the forty-ninth level of defilement and entered the forty-ninth level of sanctity, as we stood at Sinai, ready to receive the Torah.

The Admor of Biala, shlita, takes issue with the Chatam Sofer’s explanation. He says we cannot compare Am Yisrael’s status in Egypt with that of a gentile before conversion. Even if a Jew were to transgress all the mitzvot, he is still considered a Jew, in contrast to a convert who maintains his status as a gentile as long as he has not yet immersed in a *mikveh*, no matter how many mitzvot he observes. Moreover, how could Bnei Yisrael in Egypt have offered the *korban Pesach* if they were regarded as gentiles, since gentiles are forbidden to do so?

I would like to add that we recite a blessing immediately before doing the relevant act. For example, we recite a blessing on the reading of the Megillah and directly begin to read it; we recite a blessing over food just before we eat it. Moreover, blessings are recited over acts that are limited by time, such as the blessing over the spices and the fire at *havdalah*. Although Torah study is not bound by time, we recite blessings over it each morning because the previous day’s blessings have lost effect after one has retired for the night.

We remember the Exodus from Egypt numerous times a day. This indicates that it is not a time-bound mitzvah, but constant. We still suffer from Egyptian torment in our dark exile. The Egyptian exile has not ended; it is simply cloaked in a different form. A blessing recited on the Haggadah reading would be invalid for two reasons: First, we constantly remember the miracles of Egypt throughout the day. Second, we have not yet merited the ultimate redemption.

Perhaps, after Mashiach liberates us with the final redemption, we will be able to recite a blessing on the Exodus from Egypt. At that time, Hashem's kingdom will be revealed throughout the world. Am Yisrael will be recognized as the Chosen People and honored by all the nations. With Mashiach's arrival, Hashem will invite the Avot to lead the blessings. David Hamelech will agree to lift the cup of blessing, leading the Birkat Hamazon at the culmination of all the exiles (based on *Tehillim* 116:13).

There is another reason why we refrain from reciting a blessing on reading the Haggadah. Relating the story of Egyptian bondage is not mere storytelling. It is a form of internalizing the feeling of slavery and the subsequent salvation. As stated above, *Chazal* exhort us to consider ourselves as if we personally left Egypt (*Pesachim* 116b). Since we cannot confidently say that we truly feel the bondage and the liberation, there is a question as to whether or not we have fulfilled the mitzvah to perfection. When there is a doubt concerning one's fulfillment of his obligation, the halachah rules that he should refrain from making a blessing (*Beit Yosef, Orach Chaim* 92:4-5). Therefore, we do not recite a blessing over the recital of the Haggadah.

I would like to add the following point concerning this. We begin the Haggadah by stating that our forefathers were originally idolaters. Can we honestly claim that we are not? How many of us deify the dollar, pursue honor, and chase after every imaginable passion? The phrase, "In the beginning, our fathers were idolaters" applies to us, as well. Only a select few tzaddikim can attest to the fact that "now, Hashem has brought us close to His service." It would not be appropriate to recite a blessing with

Hashem's Name upon saying words that are relevant to merely a few rare individuals.

Although we may have served idols in Egypt, we are worlds apart from the gentiles by virtue of the fact that we are Jews. However, since we are still enmeshed in some form of idolatry, we cannot recite a blessing on reading the Haggadah. Precisely for this reason, it is appropriate to sever ourselves from these modern-day forms of idolatry and come close to Hashem. In this manner, we will hasten the ultimate redemption.

As we lift the Kiddush cup at the opening of the Seder, we raise our voices in thanks to Hashem for His salvation. This can be considered a blessing over the Haggadah reading. In the future, when David Hamelech will lead the Birkat Hamazon before the whole world, it will serve as a blessing over the ultimate, eternal redemption.



## Avoiding Egyptian Influence like the Plague

In all Jewish homes, preparations for Pesach are more intense than preparations for any other festival. Aside from the regular preparations for Yom Tov, there is a specific prohibition against eating any form of *chametz* or deriving pleasure from it on Pesach (*Pesachim* 21b, 30a). Similarly, after Pesach, it is forbidden to eat *chametz* which was not sold before Pesach (*ibid.* 28a). *Chazal* adjure us to examine every nook and cranny of our premises for *chametz*, after which we nullify any remnant that escaped our eye (*ibid.* 6b).

Why did Hashem command us to replace *chametz* with matzah for the duration of seven days? This matter is so crucial that we spend much time in advance preparing our homes for Pesach. Moreover, why is the main name of this festival Chag HaPesach rather than Chag Hamatzot, in commemoration of the matzot we eat on it?

The Sefat Emet (*Shemot, Bo 5638*) says that the *pasuk*, “Hashem hardened Pharaoh’s heart” alludes to the mini-Pharaoh, the *yetzer hara*, lurking within each and every one of us. Hashem keeps “hardening its heart,” so that it continually disturbs our *avodat Hashem*. Our main desire is to serve our Master wholeheartedly. Isn’t it enough that the *yetzer hara* bothers us? Why does Hashem harden its heart so that it gains strength to seduce us into sin?

Bnei Yisrael were rushed out of Egypt, “for they could not delay, nor had they made provisions for themselves” (*Shemot 12:39*). Hashem hastened Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt before they would slip into the fiftieth level of defilement, from which they would never be able to emerge. This is puzzling. Bnei Yisrael spent hundreds of years in Egypt and succeeded in avoiding the fiftieth level of impurity. How can we understand that precisely now, after witnessing Hashem’s mighty hand and removing all vestiges of idolatry from their homes, they were in danger of descending to the nadir of defilement?

Let us move ahead some centuries, to the days of Chizkiyahu Hamelech. We find that Hashem wished to appoint Chizkiyahu as Mashiach (*Sanhedrin 94a*). The scene was Pesach night. The entire army of Sancheirev was encamped near the Jews, prepared to attack the next day. As they slept, Hashem killed them all. A great *kiddush Hashem* resulted from this. However, the angels on High leveled an indictment against Chizkiyahu for not bursting out in songs of praise to Hashem for the great miracle He had wrought for His nation. For the omission of singing song at this salvation, Chizkiyahu was denied the privilege of becoming Mashiach, which Hashem had originally deemed him worthy of, and Bnei Yisrael forfeited the ultimate redemption (*Sanhedrin 94a, 95b*).

How could Chizkiyahu, a righteous king of Yehudah, have overlooked the obligation to offer thanks for this wonderful miracle? Chizkiyahu had encouraged his nation to bear the burden of Torah instead of carrying weapons of war. How did he forget to sing songs of praise to Hashem, to the extent that he was indicted for this oversight? Certainly, Chizkiyahu offered praise to Hashem. What was lacking was the enthusiasm and

gusto that defines the praise of the virtuous, as David, the virtuoso of praise, said, “All of my parts will say, ‘Who is like You?’” (*Tehillim* 35:6).

When one is miraculously saved from certain death, he clearly sees Hashem’s hand at work. He is filled with gratitude and erupts in a joyous recitation of *birkat hagomel*. He may even prepare a *seudat hodayah* in which he recounts the great kindness which Hashem did for him.

However, it is human nature to return to routine and forget the events of the past. It may take no longer than a mere few weeks before the matter of his salvation is relegated to the annals of history. He may even return to the site of the miracle and not feel moved to recite the blessing, “Who made a miracle for me at this spot,” as one is obligated. Even if he will fulfill this obligation, it will not be with the same fervor as he recited the *birkat hagomel* immediately after being saved.

I knew a couple who had triplets born three months early. *B’chasdei Hashem*, they all lived. Today, they are in good health. Although the father thanked Hashem at the time for allowing them to survive, he did not take the next step: doing *teshuvah*. Notwithstanding the fact that Hashem performed such amazing miracles for him, he continues his secular lifestyle, devoid of anything Jewish. How can a person live such a paradox, extolling Hashem’s miracles while embracing secularism?

Now let us bring the message closer to home. Every morning, we wake up. Our eyes and ears function. We walk about with a heart that beats ceaselessly. In spite of the myriad miracles that take place in our bodies on a steady basis, we are remiss in Torah study and lax in many mitzvot. Were we to pay attention to the tremendous kindnesses that Hashem constantly does for us we would live life on a different plane. Appreciating the miraculous workings of our bodies should generate a never-ending song of praise to Hashem. One who truly contemplates the millions of details that make up his life realizes that he will forever be indebted to Hashem. He will take all precautions against sin. Moreover, faith and love of Hashem will soar within his heart, growing greater with each passing day.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin once passed by a bridge. He stopped and recited the blessing, “Blessed is He Who made a miracle for me in this place.” His disciples looked on in puzzlement, not recalling any specific miracle that their revered teacher had experienced there.

Rabbi Chaim explained: When the mother of the Vilna Gaon was a young child, she crossed this bridge together with her mother. Suddenly, it snapped and sent them falling into the deep water below. Her mother died on the spot, while she herself was saved and went on to become the mother of the Vilna Gaon. Had she died, the Vilna Gaon would not have been born and eventually become his exalted teacher. When passing the site of this miracle, Rabbi Chaim experienced such a stirring of gratitude to Hashem that he felt compelled to recite this blessing. The miracle performed for the Vilna Gaon was his personal miracle, as well.

If a person remains indifferent after experiencing miraculous salvation, it indicates that he does not comprehend the enormity of the miracle. He will not thank Hashem sufficiently for it. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin clearly felt that his spiritual life hinged on this bridge. A torrent of thanksgiving burst forth from his heart as he pondered the rushing waters below.

Certainly, King Chizkiyahu sang a song of praise to Hashem. However, this song did not come from the depths of his heart. Chizkiyahu was so attached to Hashem that it was self-understood that He would perform a miracle for his people. Bnei Yisrael in his day were so involved in Torah study that they did not even know how to hold a sword. It was only natural that a miracle should take place. This is why Chizkiyahu wasn't as fired up to sing as he should have been. The Attribute of Justice then stepped in and decreed that he was unfit to be Mashiach. Many great achievements could have been attained at the time, but the opportunity was lost.

An integral part of relating the story of the Exodus is to feel as if we ourselves were saved from bondage. Had our ancestors not been redeemed, we, our children, and our children's children would still be enslaved in Egypt. In order to reach this awareness, one must consider

himself as if he went out of Egypt. One does this by making extensive preparations before the festival and recounting Hashem's miracles in detail on it.

In Egypt, Hashem passed over the Jewish homes, preventing the Destroyer from harming Bnei Yisrael. On Pesach, He does not pass over our homes, but, on the contrary, He comes to visit each and every one of us. He wants to see if we all truly feel as though we were redeemed from Egypt. This must be the case, since one can wholeheartedly thank Hashem only when he himself feels as though he was redeemed.

By purging our homes of physical *chametz* and eradicating spiritual *chametz* from our hearts, we resemble our ancestors in Egypt, who prepared exhaustively for their departure from Egypt (*Shelah, Pesachim, Drush* 3:26). Our ancestors pulled themselves up from the forty-ninth level of defilement and eventually rose to the heights of sanctity. The command given to take a sheep for the *korban Pesach*, "Draw forth and take for yourselves" means, "Withdraw your hands from idol worship and take for yourselves the merit of mitzvot so that you earn Hashem's direct supervision as well as the Torah" (*Shemot* 12:21; *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 178).

Bnei Yisrael devotedly followed Hashem in the wilderness without having prepared ample provisions (*Mechilta, Beshalach* 3). They even managed to cleanse themselves of the defilement that had adhered to them in Egypt. Since they took the initiative of removing the *chametz* from their hearts, they merited the luminous revelations at the Splitting of the Sea, as well as the other miracles in the wilderness. "The deeds of the fathers are a signpost for their children" (*Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* 9). Just as our ancestors refrained from transgressions, so must we eradicate any vestige of *chametz*, which alludes to sin. By disposing of one's *chametz*, he is encouraged to remove any trace of the *yetzer hara*. In this elevated state, he will be prepared to receive the Torah on Shavuot.

Only the transition from *chametz* to matzah can enable one to understand the magnitude of the miracles done for our forefathers so long

ago. This frame of mind gives him the wherewithal to burst forth in song as though he himself experienced salvation. However, one who does not make this transition does not have the means with which to feel the immediacy of Hashem's miracles and thank Him accordingly. He forfeits the wonderful opportunities of growing in faith. He will be lacking in love of Hashem and devotion to His word. If one fails to transmit our rich heritage to his children on the Seder Night, they may deviate from the path of Torah-true Judaism. Who knows if they will not eventually assimilate among the gentiles, *rachmana litzlan*?

“Words that emanate from the heart penetrate the heart” (*Alshich, Devarim* 6:6). Thus, it is imperative that the head of the household relate the story of the Exodus with enthusiasm, identifying with it. If he fails to do this, his family is likely to reject his words and even make a mockery of it all. The damage can be devastating.

Often, we perform mitzvot with outside motivations. This is akin to mixing *chametz* with matzah. Similarly, we frequently observe mitzvot by rote, lacking thought or intention. For this reason, the Torah does not suffice with commanding us to remove the *chametz* from one's house, but commands us to check for any trace of *chametz* in every nook and cranny (*Pesachim* 8a). *Chametz* is an allusion to sin. Just as one must search for it in every crack, so must he analyze his every deed. Does he perform mitzvot to perfection, or do they perhaps contain some (or many) inappropriate thoughts, such as arrogance, etc.?

By engaging in introspection, which transforms a person from the status of *chametz* to matzah, he will draw upon himself the spiritual arousal that Bnei Yisrael experienced in Egypt. The more one scrubs the rooms of his house and the chambers of his heart, the greater the level of this arousal, and the more intense will be the radiance of the lights which shine upon him on this Night of Protection.

Bnei Yisrael were hastened out of Egypt so quickly that they did not have time to prepare provisions for the long journey ahead (*Shemot* 12:39). The reason for this is that they were in the process of being

refined from the dross of Egypt. Any foreign thought would cause their matzah (a reference to their state of purity) to become *chametz*. Bnei Yisrael were extremely careful not to allow the *kelippah* of Egypt to adhere to them during this time of spiritual awareness. They rushed out of Egypt, but not before taking along with them all the matzah left over from the Pesach celebration of the previous night. They did not want the *kelippah* to gain sustenance from any part of their mitzvah.

The Sefat Emet says that Hashem hardens the heart of the *yetzer hara* so that it should continue to disturb a person's service of Hashem. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is so that one should constantly study Torah in a state of watchfulness. Remaining alert to the *yetzer hara's* suggestions prevents a person from acting out of rote. When one observes mitzvot through a constant battle with his *yetzer hara*, he makes sure to perform them to perfection. In this manner, he successfully extricates himself from the *yetzer hara's* influence.

Although Bnei Yisrael could have left Egypt calmly, as the Egyptians were deathly afraid to do anything to them, they felt the ground burning under their feet. The *yetzer hara* was beginning to creep into their minds and hearts. Therefore, at this auspicious moment of acquiring such great spiritual wealth, they rushed away from all negative influences.

A second reason why Hashem hardens the heart of the *yetzer hara* is because by fending off the *yetzer hara* as one tries to perform a mitzvah, he purifies the mitzvah from any trace of *chametz*.

I was once asked why we burn the candle that we used in our search for *chametz*, together with the *chametz*. The candle represents mitzvot, for "a candle is a mitzvah and Torah is light" (*Mishlei* 6:23). We often do mitzvot imperfectly, influenced by thoughts of arrogance, or in order to gain honor. By burning the candle, we express our request that Hashem eradicate all the dross that has clung to our mitzvot and retain only the mitzvah, in its pure, untainted state. My son, Rabbi Moshe, may he live long, said that perhaps the candle is burnt for the following reason. One may feel bad that he has to destroy his *chametz*. By burning the candle

and feeling the thoughts expressed above, one mitigates this feeling of sorrow, thus making the mitzvah complete.

We must ensure that our mitzvot are perfect. There must not be any *chametz* attached to them, which is liable to cause them to go sour. When one performs a mitzvah after having struggled with his *yetzer hara*, he brings his *avodat Hashem* to a new level of perfection and thereby increases his merits.



## Greatness Defined

The Shabbat before Pesach is called Shabbat Hagadol, “The Great Shabbat,” due to the great miracle that took place then (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 430:1). Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zt”l, offers a number of reasons for this unique name (*Seder HaPesach*). The most famous is that it commemorates the great miracle that happened when Bnei Yisrael took the sheep, the idol of the Egyptians (*Tur, Orach Chaim* 430).

I would like to offer another explanation. The Torah tells us to “count for yourselves from the day after the rest day (Shabbat)” (*Vayikra* 23:15). This is the command to begin counting the Omer. This mitzvah was a point of contention between Torah-true Jews and the Sadducees (*Menachot* 65a). The Sadducees contended that Sefirat Ha’Omer begins the day after Shabbat, meaning Shabbat *parashat Bereishit*. We say that “Shabbat” refers to the first day of Pesach, since the Gemara says that a festival is also called Shabbat. The Shabbat of *parashat Bereishit*, however, is also “a great Shabbat,” for it is the day when Hashem “rested from all His work” (*Bereishit* 2:3).

In fact, every Shabbat is called “the great and sanctified Shabbat,” as we recite in the *retzeih* section of Birkat Hamazon on Shabbat. However,

we emphasize the “greatness” of Shabbat on the Shabbat preceding Pesach in order to remind ourselves that there is a day following Shabbat Hagadol that is also considered Shabbat. This is the festival of Pesach.

The initials of the phrase שבת הגדול spell the word ש (sheep). On this day, Bnei Yisrael tied the sheep designated for the *korban Pesach* to their beds. The Egyptians watched their deities being disgraced in this manner, but could do nothing about it (*Tur, Orach Chaim 430*).

In Egypt, Pharaoh forced Bnei Yisrael to labor on Shabbat, to prevent them from feeling the sanctity of this sample of the World to Come. Tormented and oppressed, Bnei Yisrael were far from feeling any of the delights offered by Shabbat. It was only on that first Shabbat Hagadol, when Bnei Yisrael tied the sheep to their bedposts as the Egyptians looked on helplessly, that they understood there was no power whatsoever in Egyptian idolatry. They reached such spiritual advancement that they tasted the flavor of the first Shabbat in Gan Eden. This was despite the fact that they were still sunk in the forty-ninth level of defilement. Shabbat Hagadol, representing the sheep reserved for the *korban Pesach*, as well as the taste of Gan Eden, is a “great Shabbat,” indeed.

During the Shabbat Hagadol experienced in Egypt, Hashem’s Name was sanctified greatly as the gods of the Egyptians docilely stood tied to the Jews’ bedposts. The first Shabbat of Creation, too, was “a great Shabbat,” for that was when Hashem rested from His work, and Adam’s sin had not yet brought damage to the world. However, “*The Shabbat Hagadol*” is the name reserved for the last Shabbat in Egypt. It was a Shabbat that revealed to the world that Hashem is the Creator and no other power exists.

The last letters of the phrase שבת הגדול are numerically equivalent to 430, the number of years Bnei Yisrael spent in Egypt (*Shemot 12:40*). When they tied the sheep to their beds without any mishaps, Bnei Yisrael

realized that redemption was on its way. This “great Shabbat” heralded a new era for our nation, as they stepped out of oppression and entered the glorious world of freedom to serve Hashem.



## Pesach – Gems



### Saw You at Sinai

***“Had He only brought us close to Har Sinai and not given us the Torah, it would have been sufficient for us”***

*(Haggadah shel Pesach)*

Am Yisrael felt such spiritual elevation from merely standing at the foot of Har Sinai that they were forever indebted to Hashem for this kindness.

Shlomo Hamelech describes our bond to Hashem with the words, “May He kiss me with the kisses of His mouth” (*Shir Hashirim* 1:2). This can be likened to a king who offers his son a plate full of mouthwatering delicacies. However, he does not stop there but spoon feeds him the delicious foods, displaying his immense love for his son. Similarly, Hashem did not suffice with relaying the Ten Commandments through Moshe, but descended with His full glory upon Har Sinai. This demonstrated His tremendous love for Am Yisrael.

A man promises his incarcerated friend that after he has him released from prison, he will bring him to a quarry where he can mine for gold to his heart’s content. The grateful friend replies, “My release from prison is the greatest gift you can give me. I find no interest in unearthing precious metals.”

Similarly, Bnei Yisrael were immensely indebted to Hashem for the very privilege of standing beside Har Sinai, which proved the strength of His love toward them.



### Consumed with Crookedness

The firstborn sons are obligated to fast on Erev Pesach (*Masechet Sofrim* 21:3). If one is too young to fast, his father fasts in his place (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 470:2). One can fulfill this obligation by participating in a *siyum* on a tractate of Shas. I have seen countless people, either firstborns themselves or the fathers of firstborns, rise early on Erev Pesach in order to participate in a *siyum* for this purpose.

However, during the rest of the year, they don't bother coming to pray in the *beit kenesset* at all. This is self-contradictory. Participating in a *siyum* demonstrates belief, whereas failing to attend *Shacharit* shows just the opposite. All I can say is that these people are fooling themselves. It is shameful to attend prayers in the *beit kenesset* only to allow oneself to eat, rather than for the sake of the mitzvah involved.



### Singing through Suffering

At the Seder, Am Yisrael sing songs of exaltation to Hashem. Hashem sends the angels to hear our praises of Him. The entire world is filled with His glory (*Yeshayahu* 6:3) and nothing is hidden from Him. Why does He send down angels in order to hear our songs of praise?

The purpose of the angels descending to earth is not to bring back a report to heaven. It is for an entirely different reason. Hashem specifically sends the angels to hear our songs of praise, in order to impress upon them how blessed and noble is His Chosen Nation, even above the angels. Notwithstanding their suffering in exile, compounded with the constant attacks of the *yetzer hara*, they burst forth in songs of adulation for their beloved Creator.

Hashem is thus conveying to the angels that although they sing His praises every day, they are neither bound by the commandments of the Torah nor opposed by the temptations of the *yetzer hara*, which are liable to spoil their work. In contrast, Am Yisrael is submerged in trials and tribulations, yet nevertheless praise Hashem and thank Him for His kindnesses. This puts them on a higher plane than the angels.



## Saved by Faith

***“You shall say it is a Pesach feast-offering to Hashem, Who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but He saved our households, and the people bowed their heads and prostrated themselves”***

***(Shemot 12:26)***

Pesach is called by this name to commemorate the miracle performed for Bnei Yisrael in Egypt when Hashem passed over the Jewish homes as He struck the firstborn Egyptians. Even if the firstborn of Egypt were together with those of Bnei Yisrael, Hashem distinguished between them, striking the gentile and leaving the Jew.

I would like to relate the following incident in order to enhance our understanding of Hashem's ways. One Friday, I decided to visit the grave of my friend, Rabbi Nissim, zt"l, in the cemetery in Givat Shaul, Jerusalem. As I stood by the grave, my cell phone suddenly rang. A distressed woman was calling from Brazil with the following harrowing tale. Her husband had been kidnapped by gentiles, who were threatening to kill him if his family did not deliver a sizeable sum for ransom. The woman wailed uncontrollably, begging me to pray on behalf of her husband's safety.

Of course, I acquiesced and blessed the woman with her husband's safe return. Suddenly, I remembered that I was standing by the grave of ר' ניסים (Rabbi Nissim). Surely, Hashem would perform a נס (miracle) on behalf of this poor woman and bring her husband safely back home. I strongly felt this was a Heavenly sign, as it was the first time I ever visited the grave of this friend.

Three months later, the kidnapped man returned home safely, ransomed by a huge sum of money. I was invited to the *seudat hodayah* that was conducted in his honor. The man spoke about his days in captivity and related the following awe-inspiring tale. He had been incarcerated in a cell with armed men, to make sure he did not escape. The room had a horrible stench, and mosquitoes were everywhere. This man, used to a comfortable life, prayed to Hashem to spare him from being bitten, as he was already suffering extensively from being imprisoned. Wonder of wonders! The mosquitoes buzzed around him but not one of them stung him, whereas they relentlessly bit the watchmen. When the gentiles noticed this interesting phenomenon, they asked him about it. He replied that he had prayed to be saved from mosquito bites and Hashem answered his prayer.

There were those who expressed doubt as to the veracity of his tale. Most likely he had a type of blood that mosquitoes do not find attractive. That very night, mosquitoes flew into his house and made a meal out of him. This proved to all that it was only his faith in Hashem that had saved him from being bitten in prison. In merit of his simple faith, he was saved from mosquito bites. This story illustrates Hashem's supervision over

those who trust in Him, similar to our forefathers in Egypt during the Plague of the Firstborn. Hashem passed over the Jewish homes and struck only the Egyptians.



## Nothing Personal

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zt”l, asks how one is permitted to sell his *chametz* to a gentile for the duration of Pesach. Isn’t this deceitful, as he knows full well that he will buy it back immediately after the festival (*Seder HaPesach*)?

The author of *Tevuot Shor* (*Bechor Shor, Pesachim 21a*) recounts an interesting phenomenon. People who owned animals would look for ways to feed them on Pesach. They decided to sell their entire herd to a gentile for Pesach so that he feed them fodder of *chametz*. After the holiday, they would buy back their animals. This is categorically forbidden, since it is considered taking advantage of a Torah dispensation for one’s own interests that oppose halachah. The Torah forbids deriving any form of pleasure from *chametz* on Pesach, including feeding animals *chametz*.

Regarding Torah law, it is sufficient to nullify the *chametz* in one’s possession, which we do with the recitation of “*Kol chamira*.” Selling one’s *chametz*, then, is acceptable, as it is done in order to fulfill the Rabbinic ordinance of not possessing *chametz* over Pesach.

Many have taken issue with this ruling (*Chatam Sofer, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 62*). The *chametz* that we sell is not the same as that which we nullify. For instance, the owner of a large cake factory sells his entire enterprise to a gentile for Pesach. Certainly, with the recitation of “*Kol chamira*,” he does not intend to make his factory ownerless. His

nullification of *chametz* refers only to *chametz* that he is unaware of, surely not that which he sold to a gentile. In that case, the original question remains: Isn't this sale considered taking advantage of a Torah dispensation, as one intends to buy his *chametz* back after Pesach?

I would like to suggest that after the *chametz* was sold to a gentile, it no longer belongs to the Jew. Since *chametz* refers to arrogance and other sins, one did complete *teshuvah* by searching and destroying his *chametz*. Hashem does not consider a negative thought that one contemplates as if he actually carried out that negative deed (*Kiddushin* 40a). This is the case specifically when one wholeheartedly nullified his *chametz*, which alludes to sin. Nobody would deceive Hashem, pretending to nullify his sins. Jews are not suspect of deceit regarding the mitzvot. Similarly, nobody would regret having nullified his sins. Therefore, selling one's *chametz* is not considered a form of deceit.



## Constructive Destruction

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach writes (*Seder HaPesach*): “Regarding burning one's *chametz*, we rule according to Rabbi Yehudah, who says that one should remove his *chametz* through burning it (*Pesachim* 21a). Therefore, many years ago, I announced that one should not pour paraffin over his *chametz* before burning it, but rather throw his *chametz* directly into the fire. Pouring paraffin over the food makes it immediately inedible and it loses its status of *chametz*, thereby obviating the mitzvah of burning one's *chametz*. However, if one sees his father doing so, he should not rebuke him for it. Pouring paraffin over one's *chametz* might be considered the beginning of the burning process.”

Although the ideal way to burn the *chametz* is to reduce it immediately to ash, one's intention in pouring paraffin over it is to make it easier to

burn. This is proven by the fact that he burns it immediately afterward, even though it was rendered inedible by the paraffin.

Certainly, it is best to burn one's *chametz* without the help of paraffin. In this manner, one performs the mitzvah of removing his *chametz* in the ideal way, according to the ruling of Rabbi Yehudah.



## Sefirat Ha'Omer



### Diminishing Damage by Raising Respect

During the days of Sefirat Ha'Omer, Rabbi Akiva's disciples died in an epidemic. Only five survived, among them Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi) and Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes. Any Mishnah that is written anonymously is attributed to Rabbi Meir. He was called "Rabbi Meir," or "Nehorai" (the equivalent in Aramaic), meaning "light," because he enlightened the *talmidei chachamim* through his teachings (*Eiruvin* 13b).

*Parashat Mishpatim* opens with the words, "These are the ordinances that you shall place before them" (*Shemot* 21:1). Rashi expounds: Hashem ordered Moshe to transmit the laws of the Torah to Bnei Yisrael in a clear manner, like one who sets a table before his friend. Moshe was told to explain the mitzvot so that the nation could observe them without having to expend undue effort in understanding them.

Rabbi Meir continued this line of reasoning by explaining the words of Torah in a lucid and pleasant manner. Bnei Yisrael were thus able to do the mitzvot in a better way. When people do not clearly comprehend what they are studying, they find it difficult to observe. However, when one delves deeply into the root of the matter, he does mitzvot with fervor and joy. Rabbi Meir brought the nation to a new level of Torah study by elucidating its teachings. This earned him the name "Meir."

In a similar vein, the Arizal says that if one realized, as sunset approaches, that he had forgotten to pray Minchah, and he hurries to pray before it is too late, he brings much pleasure to Hashem. His action proves that he is truly connected to Hashem and does not seek to exempt himself from his obligations. On the contrary, he hurries like a deer to do Hashem's will. Only one who understands the profound meaning of prayer will put aside all personal interests and commune with his Creator, refusing to lose this golden opportunity.

Rabbi Akiva's disciples died for not conferring honor upon one another. Since honor is a reference to Torah (*Avot* 6:3), it seems we can say that they did not fully respect one another's Torah teachings. As stated above, when one respects the Torah and enlightens his friend with its teachings, he brings glory to Hashem's Name by influencing others to do mitzvot with enthusiasm. Since Rabbi Akiva's disciples were remiss in this area, Hashem dealt stringently with them.

Rabbi Akiva's disciples did not demonstrate sufficient honor toward one another. His motto was, "כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה" – All of Israel are responsible for one another." The words זה בזה (for one another) and the word כבוד (honor) are each numerically equivalent to twenty-six. By failing to revere their colleagues, they caused a deficiency in the honor of Hashem, Whose Name יהוה also has the *gematria* of twenty-six. The Torah is comprised of Hashem's Names. Whoever disparages the Torah is essentially disparaging Hashem Himself. This is why Rabbi Akiva's disciples were dealt such a harsh punishment.

Rabbi Meir, one of the surviving disciples, rectified his colleagues' misdeeds by enlightening the *talmidei chachamim* with his Torah insights (*Eiruvim* 13b). The esteem of Torah soared, and Hashem's Name became glorified throughout the world. Nowadays, we have seen the unprecedented burgeoning of Torah institutions. *Baruch Hashem*, Torah

scholars abound. During Sefirat Ha'Omer, if we endorse the Torah teachings of one's fellow man, we will diminish the damage done in the past.



## The Magnificence of Man

You are called Man, but the nations of the world are not called Man (*Yevamot* 61a). Does this mean that gentiles are animals? Let us explain by looking into the first verse regarding the creation of man. Hashem told the angels, "Let us make man" (*Bereishit* 1:26). Did Hashem need the angels' help? He certainly could have created man on His own, just like He created the rest of Creation. Why is this phrase used specifically concerning the creation of man?

Hashem obviously does not need help in any area. His powers are limitless. However, He conferred with the angels before creating man for the following reason. He wished to inform them that a new creation was about to be formed, unlike any other. Its name was Man. It was so exalted that it was greater even than the angels themselves. This is demonstrated by the fact that angels are "those who stand" while people "go" (*Zechariah* 3:7). The Vilna Gaon (see *Siach Yitzchak*) explains that because angels do not keep mitzvot, they can never advance. Conversely, by doing mitzvot, tzaddikim ascend in Torah and fear of Heaven. They are in a constant state of progression.

At first, the title Man was given only to the unique creature, Adam, who was created on the sixth day. Who is the spiritual heir of this first man? It is the kosher and pure Jew who valiantly upholds the Torah. He utilizes each mitzvah as a rung in his steady ascent up the mountain of Hashem. In contrast, the gentiles do not observe the mitzvot and thus lack the tools with which to advance from their inferior status. They are not eligible for the title of Man.

Hashem did not say, “Let us make animals” before the creation of the animal kingdom. This is because animals have no independent purpose in the world. They were put here solely to serve man, the crown of Creation, and to enhance the scenery. Thus, it is abundantly clear that one who spends his life within the four ells of Torah is the central figure of the entire world.

The sanctified *Tanna*, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, was the quintessential man, in whose merit the existence of the entire world is justified. He devoted his life to learning Torah and discovering its secrets. He fought the corrupt culture of Rome, which emphasized physical beauty and hedonism. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai countered that by idolizing the body, they reduced man to nothing more than an animal on two feet.

In his classic work, the Zohar, Rashbi reveals the reasons for the mitzvot, in merit of which Am Yisrael has earned the title Man. Understanding their deeper meanings infuses us with excitement as we observe them. As we rise on the ladder of spiritual quests, the qualities of man become greater within us.

We are commanded to count seven weeks from Pesach until Shavuot (*Vayikra* 23:15). Just as a woman counts seven clean days as part of her purification process, Am Yisrael count seven full weeks as they steadily remove another layer of the *kelippah* that adhered to them in Egypt. They are then eligible for the Torah, the *mikveh* of purification. A Jew who immerses in the purifying waters of the Torah earns the status of Man.

The last letters of the phrase נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם (Let us make man) are numerically equivalent to forty-five, just like the Name יה-וה-וה, according to the rule of *kollel*. Hashem created man in His image and impressed His Name into his being. By devoting oneself to the Torah, he merits Hashem’s Name being called upon him, as it says, “Wherever I permit My Name to be mentioned, I shall come to you and bless you” (*Shemot* 20:21).

It is most fitting that Rashbi’s *hilula* occurs during the days of *Sefirah*, when our nation is busy preparing for *Kabbalat HaTorah*. His *hilula* helps us internalize the deeper meaning of the phrase, “Let us make man.” At

Rashbi's *hilula*, we sing, "The phrase 'let us make man' was said upon you." He is an example of the perfect man, for he taught us, by example, to reach perfection through Torah.

Rashbi attested about himself that he had the power to annul harsh decrees (*Sukkah* 45b). Even if the entire world would have been full of wicked people, he could have averted harsh decrees. How could Rashbi accomplish what giants of previous generations, such as Noach and Avraham, could not?

When Hashem created the first man, He was well aware that with time the generations would deteriorate spiritually. He therefore planted Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the symbol of the perfect person, in the generation confronted by Roman culture. In his great virtue, Rashbi successfully removed the *kelippah* of impurity and thus prevented the Attribute of Justice from prosecuting.

With Adam's creation, Hashem planted within him the ability to change His decrees, as "He does the will of those who fear Him" (*Tehillim* 145:19). By clinging to the Torah, tzaddikim are able to change the course of nature and rescind difficult decrees. This is referred to in various places where Hashem says, "My children have triumphed over Me" (based on *Bava Metzia* 59b). Through the tremendous achievement of revealing the secrets of the Torah, which is the secret to our survival, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was granted more power than even Avraham Avinu to change Hashem's decree of destruction.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ "You are called Man, but the nations of the world are not called Man." Gentiles have the same outer features as Jews. Why are they excluded from the class of man? Moreover, why did Hashem tell the angels, "Let us make man?" He certainly did not need their help in this venture.
- ◆ Hashem wanted to inform the angels that He was about to create a creation greater even than themselves. Angels are called "those who stand," while

tzaddikim “go.” Man alone has the opportunity to do mitzvot and ascend thereby. Only one who observes the Torah is considered Man.

- ◆ Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai testified that he could save the entire world from harsh decrees. This is because he devoted himself completely to the Torah and valiantly denounced the Romans and their corrupt culture.



## Speaking of Honor

A mourner refrains from cutting his nails as a sign of mourning (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 390:7*). I was once asked why we are permitted to cut our nails during *Sefirah*, the days of mourning the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's disciples. We are forbidden to do things that evoke joy; why is nail-cutting permitted?

When a *metzora* was purified from his impurity, he offered a sacrifice of two birds. He slaughtered one and dipped the other in its blood. Then he set it free (*Vayikra 14:4-7*). This seems like an act of cruelty. The Torah teaches us good character; how can it instruct us to do something so inhumane? It teaches us that the one who spoke *lashon hara* also did an act of cruelty. With his words, sharp as daggers, he spilled his friend's blood and then reveled in it. The living bird only shadows this man's misdeeds. It, too, dips into its fellow's blood and then goes happily off, without a backward glance, its friend's blood dripping from its own wings.

The word צפור (bird) is similar to צפורן (fingernail). The act of cutting our fingernails should remind us of the prohibition of *lashon hara*, a tremendous source of friction in interpersonal relationships. Rabbi Akiva's disciples were deficient in interpersonal matters, which include *lashon hara*. Therefore, when one cuts his nails during *Sefirah*, he should remember the slain bird and be spurred to improve in interpersonal matters.

The fingernails also remind us of the original clothes that Hashem fashioned for Adam and Chava in Gan Eden (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 20:12). These clothes were meant to remind them of the *lashon hara* spoken by the Snake in disparagement of Hashem. Thus, the act of cutting one's fingernails also reminds him of Adam and Chava's sin, which brought so much damage to the world. This should also serve as a warning to be careful in interpersonal relationships.

We mourn the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's disciples to a greater degree than the death of anyone else in history. This is because their deaths teach us the meaning of fine-tuning one's character. In death, they taught us how careful one must be to preserve the honor of his fellow. Hashem may forego His own honor, but He never overlooks a slight to His children.



## Respectfully Yours

During Sefirat Ha'Omer, we mourn the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's disciples. Twenty-four thousand perished in an epidemic (*Yevamot* 62b). Rabbi Akiva said afterward, "[The *pasuk*] 'Love your neighbor as yourself' is a great tenet of the Torah" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 24:7).

I used to ask my mother, may she live long, whom she loves most of her ten children. She would invariably answer, "I have ten children and I have ten fingers. Just as I love all my fingers equally, so do I love all my children equally." Similarly, Hashem loves all His children equally. Even a sinner is beloved by Him, as *Chazal* say, "Every person has his hour" (see *Avot* 4:3). Many people in our history sinned grievously, yet, in a single instant of *teshuvah*, they gained a share in the World to Come (*Avodah Zarah* 10b). They made a complete turnaround at the last minute. This earned them the privilege of eternally basking in the radiance of the *Shechinah*.

We are commanded to “cleave to Him” (*Devarim* 11:22). Since Hashem is an all-consuming fire, this means that one should emulate His qualities. This is the meaning of the injunction to “be like Him” (see *Shabbat* 133b). If Hashem loves His children intensely, despite their sins, so should we love each and every Jew, regardless of his shortcomings. Am Yisrael is one body with one *neshamah*. Just as we do not favor one finger over another, so may we not display respect toward one person while degrading another.

Even if someone shamed us in public, we may not bear a grudge against him or resent him for this. Rather, it is appropriate to forgive him and love him wholeheartedly. A mother cherishes each of her children, even though they are often a burden and sometimes even cause her physical pain.

If we are adjured to “love your fellow man as yourself,” we obviously have it within ourselves to do so. We would never be commanded to observe something beyond our ability. By cherishing our fellow man, whom we can see before us, we will come to love Hashem, Who is invisible to us.

The Torah juxtaposed the mitzvah of honoring one’s parents with the mitzvah of honoring Hashem. Through honoring one’s parents, one comes to honor Hashem. Also, we should love each and every Jew, regardless of his type or stripe. This is because Hashem deals with a person measure for measure (see *Sotah* 8b). One who acts kindly with Hashem’s creatures will receive kindness from Him.

Achav’s soldiers were victorious in battle because they respected one another. In contrast, the soldiers of Shaul did not always merit victory, even though they were righteous individuals. This is because they were not cautious in interpersonal matters and often spoke *lashon hara*. Certainly, they were judged harshly due to their spiritual level. The

message for us is that although Hashem overlooks a slight to His honor, He demands unity among His children and utmost mutual respect between them.



## Luminous Revelations

Our history boasts great tzaddikim who impacted our nation in a memorable way. However, their *yahrtzeits* are not celebrated in the same way as those of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes. In many households, these giants have become household names and the anniversaries of their deaths are commemorated with much ado. Why are they, from among all the Torah Sages of yore, such as Moshe Rabbeinu, David Hamelech, the Prophets, Kings, *Tanna'im*, and *Amora'im*, singled out for this honor?

Our question gains strength when we consider that the date of *Matan Torah* is not stated explicitly in the *pesukim*, but merely alluded to. We celebrate Shavuot after counting forty-nine days from Pesach (*Vayikra* 23:15-21). When one opens a new store, he advertises his wares to attract customers. We would expect to see Shavuot mentioned as the day of *Matan Torah*, in commemoration of the sixth of Sivan, when Hashem gave the Torah on Har Sinai, in the second year of Bnei Yisrael's Exodus from Egypt. However, we find that Shavuot is not the Torah-ordained name for the day of *Matan Torah*.

We live in the Internet Age. Technology is advancing at rapid-fire rates. Nobody has privacy; everything is exposed to the public. Additionally, nobody has time. Everyone is running about, too busy to invest in family life and child rearing. In many households, parents do not see their children all week long. They never have time to sit together for a meal and certainly cannot afford to listen to their children's experiences. Even if it happens that family members are at home simultaneously, they are

not really together, as each is cloistered in his room, talking to his friends on his cell phone.

Specifically in such an environment, one who maintains his faith is extremely commendable. Hashem longs to hear our voices in prayer. He wants to connect to us, but sometimes we are not wired to His station. We are involved in surfing the Internet and pursuing other meaningless interests. There is no doubt that if we put everything on hold and turn to Him in prayer and Torah study, we will be richly rewarded. Hashem will answer our call and confer upon us all forms of good.

The following story illustrates this point. A student of mine in Paris was married for seven years, yet did not have any children. The doctors gave up hope that he and his wife would ever become parents. This student would pray tearfully for a child and often asked for my blessing. I couldn't bear seeing him so broken, so I asked him not to come to me anymore. I felt I had nothing to offer him and advised him to turn to Hakadosh Baruch Hu in prayer, since He was the only One Who could help him.

The man indeed stopped coming to me. A number of weeks later, he returned with the good news that his wife was expecting twins. I was very surprised to hear this, as the doctors had said they had no chance of having children. I asked how he explained this obvious miracle. He said that after I turned him away, he began praying with tremendous devotion, knowing that Hashem alone could provide his salvation.

Months passed. One day, this student visited me with his two bundles of joy. He related the following story. On the previous day, he took his wife and twins in the car for a trip to the forest. Suddenly, the car stopped dead at a turn in the road. They were afraid that another speeding car would ram into them. The man became panicky and cried to Hashem like a child before his father, "Father in Heaven! You are all-merciful. Did You give me children after so many years in order to kill them? Please, save me and my family. Let us emerge safely from this trouble."

He tried the engine, and it suddenly jumped to life. He successfully maneuvered the car to the side of the road. As soon as they were parked

a safe distance away from the road, the engine breathed its last. He called a towing company to remove the car. After surveying the scene, the mechanics said that they could not understand how he had managed to coax the car to safety, as the motor had been completely dead.

I told my student that now our roles were reversed. I was the one who should come to him for his blessings. I have no doubt that he merited wonderful miracles, time after time, due to his unswerving faith in the Creator. He trusted in Him above the norm, and received treatment beyond the laws of nature.

Rashbi and Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes lived in the days of the Romans, who sought to sever Am Yisrael from Hashem and His Torah. The Romans emphasized sports, physical beauty, and secular wisdom. These two Torah giants foresaw the potential pitfalls this posed to Am Yisrael and fought a spiritual battle with the Romans. They aroused Am Yisrael to the reality that the only wisdom worth embracing is that of the Torah. All other forms of knowledge are liable to snuff out the Jewish spark within them.

Rabbi Meir (מאיר) was called by this name because האיר עיני חכמים בהלכה (he enlightened the Sages in halachah) (*Eiruvin* 13b). He removed the darkness of Rome, who wished to influence the purity of Bnei Yisrael with their defilement. Similarly, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai enlightened our nation by revealing the light of the Torah's secrets.

We celebrate the *hilula* of these great men for the timeless message they imparted to us. In every generation, enemies arise, in one form or another, according to the test of the times. They may wear a different guise, but their cause is the same – to draw Am Yisrael away from the path of righteousness. We commemorate the anniversary of the death of these two tzaddikim with a *hilula* ceremony. In this manner, we, too, enter the battle of those who believe versus those who try to vanquish the vineyard of Israel.

Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes was the disciple of Elisha ben Avuya, who was originally a great tzaddik but eventually became an apostate (*Chagigah* 15a). Even after this, Rabbi Meir continued learning Torah from him.

The Gemara (ibid. 15b) relates the following fascinating incident. Rabbah bar Shila met Eliyahu Hanavi and asked what Hashem was doing in heaven. Eliyahu replied that He was repeating the teachings of all the Sages, except for Rabbi Meir. Rabbah asked why, and Eliyahu replied that this was because Rabbi Meir learned Torah from Acher. Rabbah then said, "Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate. He ate its inside and discarded its rind." Rabbi Meir learned Acher's Torah teachings but did not adopt his alien outlooks.

Our generation is inundated with modern devices. These can be used for the good or for the bad. On the one hand, Hashem's word can be spread across the world in no time, with the click of a button. On the other hand, these innocuous-looking gadgets can cause a person to plummet to the depths, with the click of the same button. How many families have sadly been destroyed because of the Internet and electronic devices, which are upgraded each day? How many of our youth have left the fold due to inappropriate phones with non-kosher displays?

Technology serves as Acher's modern-day pomegranate. Let us be wise like Rabbi Meir, consuming the fruit while discarding the rind. The smart man will utilize technology to advance Hashem's glory, and always "pay attention not to spoil My world" (*Kohelet Rabbah* 7:19), as Hashem warned Adam.

A rind serves the beneficial purpose of protecting the fruit from spoiling. Some fruits can be eaten as they are, while others must first be peeled. This world hosts all types of people. Avowed *reshaim* can be compared to the rind, not containing any valuable fruit whatsoever. Perfect tzaddikim are like the fresh inner fruit. Ordinary people can be compared to a fruit enveloped in rind. The more one tries to remove the rind encrusting his inner self, through prayer, Torah study, and

disconnecting from materialism, the more luscious he becomes, like a ripe fruit, rich in nutrients and succulent flavor.

The date of *Matan Torah* is not mentioned in the *pesukim*, and the name Shavuot is not used as the primary name in the Torah for the following reason. The giving of the Torah is not relegated to one specific calendar date. Every day, one is adjured to accept the Torah: “Do not say, ‘When I have time, I will learn,’ for perhaps you will never have time” (*Avot* 2:4). And “do not allow a mitzvah that comes your way to turn sour” (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 201).

On Shavuot, the Torah commands us to “offer a new meal-offering to Hashem” (*Vayikra* 23:16). When one wishes to feel novelty in his *avodat Hashem*, the calendar date has no bearing. As long as he is determined to connect to Hashem, he is considered to be offering a sacrifice. He is experiencing his personal *Matan Torah*.

Another reason why the date of Shavuot is ambiguous in the *pesukim* is the following. We are adjured to count seven weeks until we bring a new meal-offering to Hashem, in commemoration of the seven weeks that our nation counted after their departure from Egypt until they received the Torah. This contains a message for all generations. When a person wishes to accept the Torah upon himself or wants to feel freshness in his Torah study, he has the tools to do so, by the power invested by our forefathers during these seven weeks.

In our generation of technology, with its daily dangers, it is imperative to strengthen our Torah study and distance ourselves from modern inventions that can lure us away from our purpose. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes teach us to empower ourselves with Torah. This is the best weapon against infiltration from the outside world, and guides us on the path of virtue.



## Liberty to Pursue Torah

There are seventeen days between Lag Ba'Omer, the day of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's *hilula*, and Shavuot. Seventeen is the *gematria* of the word טוב (good). It alludes to the *pasuk*, "For a good teaching I have given you; do not forsake My Torah" (*Mishlei* 4:2), since "the only good is Torah" (*Avot* 6:3). From Lag Ba'Omer and onward, one draws the light of Torah upon himself, as it says, "Unveil my eyes, that I may see wonders from Your Torah" (*Tehillim* 119: 18). When one finally reaches Shavuot, the date of *Matan Torah*, he is saturated with the teachings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. With a minimum of effort, he will merit discovering the Torah's hidden treasures.

There is a deep underlying connection between the *hilula* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and each one of us. Moshe's sojourn in heaven to receive the Torah is described in *Tehillim* (68:19): "עלית למרום שבית שבי" – You have ascended on High, you have taken captives." The word שבי (captive) is an acronym for שמעון בר יוחאי (Shimon bar Yochai). In heaven, Moshe came across tremendous *neshamot* that would in the future descend to the world and illuminate it with their greatness. Why, out of all these *neshamot*, did he chose to "capture" that of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai?

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's singularity lay in the fact that he illuminated Bnei Yisrael with the secrets of the Torah. Moreover, he had the ability to ward off the Attribute of Justice from prosecuting. He was such a towering figure that Rabbi Akiva told him, "Suffice it that I and your Creator are aware of your great powers" (*Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin* 1:2).

After writing the above words, I chanced upon the *Tikkun Lag Ba'Omer* of the *Bnei Yissachar*. He cites what I have just stated, nearly word for word. Upon discovering that Hashem led me to the same conclusion as the virtuous *Bnei Yissachar*, I was filled with the joy of one who unearths great riches.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is superior to anyone else in that he alone was granted permission to reveal the Torah's mysteries. By rejoicing on his *hilula*, we draw from his Torah wellsprings, infusing ourselves with faith in Hashem as we pray for the ultimate redemption.

The Gemara (*Shabbat* 138b) relates that when the Sages entered the vineyard in Yavneh, they bemoaned the fact that the Torah was destined to be forgotten. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai announced, "G-d forbid that it should be forgotten, as it says, 'For it will not be forgotten from among his progeny'" (*Devarim* 31:21). I would like to suggest that for this reason, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's *neshamah* rejoiced. His *hilula* is a day of celebrating the secrets that he unveiled for us. This day affords us spiritual gems that enrich our journey toward *Kabbalat HaTorah*.

The Ben Ish Chai (*Parashat Emor, Shanah Rishonah*) writes the following in the section on the halachot of making *berachot* over bread: One should collect the breadcrumbs that were dipped in salt and had the blessing recited over them and eat them at the conclusion of his meal. This provides a *tikkun* for the *oht brit kodesh*. What is the connection?

According to the hidden meaning of the Torah, we could answer as follows. The combination of the *gematrias* of מלח (salt) and לחם (bread) is 156, the total of six times the *gematria* of the Name יהוה-יהוה (6 x 26 = 156). This Name denotes mercy, thus the six times it is hinted to in the words מלח and לחם here correspond to the six days of Creation, which were created with mercy. Man needs bread for his physical sustenance and Torah for his spiritual existence, as we are adjured, "Go and eat of My bread" (*Mishlei* 9:5).

The name of Yosef (יִסְרָאֵל) is also numerically equivalent to the Name of Hashem multiplied six times. Yosef was called "righteous, the foundation of the world" because he guarded his *oht brit kodesh* in the decadent society of Egypt.

Perhaps the connection between preserving the breadcrumbs and rectifying the *oht brit kodesh* is the following: One who dips his bread into salt demonstrates humility and self-effacement toward the Torah. While

he eats, he is not merely consuming physical food, but connecting to the six forms of the Holy Name contained within Yosef's. In this manner, one rectifies any deficiency in this area.

The six forms of the Holy Name contained within Yosef, together with the word מלח (salt), are numerically equivalent to the word שבי (captive), an allusion to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who served Hashem with all components of his body.

Rashbi secluded himself in a cave for many years. The word במערה (in the cave), minus the letter ה, referring to Hashem, is numerically equivalent to the word שבי, an allusion to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, as stated above. When one cloisters himself in the cave of Torah and halachah, humbling himself before Hashem, he adopts the path of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. His livelihood will be provided by Heaven.

When Rashbi and his son, Rabbi Elazar, first emerged from their cave, they noticed people working the fields for their livelihood (*Shabbat* 33b). They burnt them with the intensity of their gaze. A Heavenly Voice cried out, "Did you come out of the cave in order to destroy My world? Go back inside!"

When they next emerged, Rabbi Elazar burnt people with his gaze, while Rashbi healed them. Two questions come to the fore. How could Rabbi Elazar continue burning people if Hashem forbade this, and why didn't he take an example from his father, who was greater than himself, and stop this form of behavior?

Years of seclusion in the cave with nothing for company but each other and the holy Torah enabled these giants to reach such elevated heights that they became as holy as the angels. Their bodies literally turned into fire. Rashbi's worldview was that one is meant to spend his entire life increasing his Torah knowledge and fear of Heaven. He believed that one who devotes himself fully to spiritual quests will receive succor from Heaven. One who ceases his Torah study in order to plant and plow is like one who stops his learning on the road in order to admire the scenery (*Avot* 3:7) and, as such, deserves to be put to death.

In *parashat Bechukotai*, we read, “If you go in My statutes and observe My commandments and do them, I will send your rains in their time and the earth will yield its produce and the trees of the field will give their fruit” (*Vayikra* 26:3-4). Hashem sends blessing and sustenance to one who spends his time productively in the pursuit of Torah and mitzvot.

Rashbi contends that when one occupies himself solely with Torah and eschews earthly pursuits, his work is done by others and he merits all Heavenly blessings (*Berachot* 35b). This is why he and his son could not tolerate people who exchanged a life of toil in Torah for one of laboring to gain material pursuits. Since their level of sanctity was so all-consuming, they consumed with fire those who worked for a living.

Hashem does not want his world to be devoid of people. For this reason, a Heavenly Voice castigated Rashbi and his son for destroying the world in this manner. Rashbi then understood that not everyone was on his exalted level. Although he maintained his former contention regarding man's mission in this world, he kept his worldview to himself and no longer killed people with his sharp gaze.

In contrast, Rabbi Elazar continued to do so, knowing that his father was still of the opinion that man should not waste his life on working the soil. Rabbi Elazar would kill people and his father would revive them.

Suddenly, they saw a man hurrying past, carrying myrtle branches. They asked what these were for. He replied that they were in honor of Shabbat Kodesh. Finally, these two great Sages realized that although a person might not be involved in Torah study or any particular mitzvah, he may be spending his time constructively, in preparation for a mitzvah, like this man who was preparing for Shabbat. This is also a most noble pursuit (*Shabbat* 33b).

The man carrying myrtle planted in their minds the realization that all forms of work, including planting and harvesting, can be considered a mitzvah if one does them in preparation for a mitzvah, such as taking tithes and reciting blessings upon the finished products.

This provides a ground-breaking message for each and every one of us. One might spend his entire day involved in business and transactions that seem mundane and materialistic, however, when he deals honestly and faithfully, all his actions are considered preparation for his observance of Torah and mitzvot. Rashbi and his son, Rabbi Elazar, retained their opinion that it is ideal to spend his life pursuing only Torah and delegate his earthly needs to others. Nevertheless, they judged favorably those who labored for a living. They came to the conclusion that they were serving Hashem in their own way, earning an honest living in preparation for observing mitzvot. This surely provided them with merit.

This conclusion elucidates an argument between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel (*Eiruvin* 13b). Beit Shammai contends that it is preferable for a person not to have been created. Had he not been created, he would never transgress the Torah's prohibitions or neglect Torah study. Even if he works to earn a livelihood in order to observe mitzvot, he must give an exact accounting of how each moment was spent. Who is to say that his losses won't outweigh his gains?

Beit Hillel, on the other hand, rules that it is preferable for a person to have been created. Although he may have personal interests in earning a living, eventually he will serve Hashem *l'shem Shamayim*. He will take pride in his mitzvot and bring satisfaction to Hashem through them. Ultimately, Beit Hillel retracted this opinion, admitting that one feels more satisfaction in working the land for monetary gain than in sweating over a *sugya*. Who knows what will happen to him when he yields to the lures of the *yetzer hara*? How many people made it rich only to cast off the yoke of Torah and mitzvot, believing it was their own prowess that earned them wealth (*Devarim* 8:17)?

In the final analysis, one is not asked whether or not he wants to be born. He is brought into this world, and it is his mission to ensure that his deeds are above board. He should elevate himself from acting for ulterior motives to doing every action *l'shem Shamayim*. Originally, Rashbi and his son ruled according to Beit Shammai. However, they eventually agreed that if one already came into this world, he should

spend his life examining his deeds, constantly raising them to the level of *l'shem Shamayim*.

“Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said, ‘If you studied much Torah, do not take credit for yourself, because that is what you were created for’” (*Avot* 2:8). If one should not take credit for his Torah wisdom, all the more so should he not take credit for his success in mundane matters, for this is not the purpose for which he was created. On the contrary, he will be held responsible for time wasted on frivolities.

One might believe that he is spending a considerable amount of time studying Torah and learning *mussar*. But when he will confront the Heavenly Court, he might be in for a rude awakening, finding himself wanting, but unable any longer to acquire more Torah. When one learns Torah but fails to observe what he has learned, or observes it for ulterior motives, he lacks the element of toiling in Torah. We are told to “go in My statutes.” Rashi explains this means that we are commanded to toil in Torah study (*Vayikra* 26:3). Had one studied Torah with sweat and toil, he certainly would have observed to perfection what he learned. If one is devoid of Torah and mitzvot in this world, when he comes to the World of Truth, his *neshamah* will be shamefully bare of the “Rabbinic robes” offered to those who assiduously pursued Torah and mitzvot. He may have known and even taught to others the correct path to take, but he himself was remiss.

The conclusion of the argument between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai is that it would have been better for man not to have been created at all. However, now that he has been created, he should examine his deeds. He will then proudly arrive on High dressed in garments adorned with Torah and mitzvot. One who adopts this attitude will merit receiving material benefits and having his work done by others, thus freeing him up to spend his time in Torah study (*Eiruvin* 13b).



## Less Is More

At the *hilula* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, we sing, “*Let us make Man* was said about you.” It was worthwhile for Hashem to create man in order for Rashbi to enter this world. Our nation does not lack Torah giants who enlightened us with their teachings. How was Rashbi superior to all others in that his *neshamah* warranted the creation of the entire world?

We do not have the ability to fathom this holy image. Who are we to describe this giant among giants? Nevertheless, we will try to comprehend in some measure the greatness of Rashbi, who revealed mysteries of the Torah and illuminated our nation with his brilliance.

When Moshe went on High to receive the Torah, he “ascended on High and took captives” (*Tehillim* 68:19). As stated above, the word שבי (captives) alludes to Rashbi (*Megaleh Amukot, Va’etchanan* 70). When Moshe was in heaven, he saw each generation and its leaders. Suddenly, one *neshamah* shone from afar. It was the radiance of Rashbi, whose light would endure until the end of time. The ultimate redemption will arrive in merit of the Torah’s secrets that he revealed (*Zohar* III, 124b).

Rashbi lived in the days of the Romans. He publicly denounced them and openly disobeyed their decrees. When the Romans got word of this, they wished to put him to death and sent out a search party to find him. Rabbi Shimon fled to a cave and remained there for thirteen years. A carob tree and a spring of fresh water miraculously appeared at the opening of the cave to provide him with sustenance (*Shabbat* 33b).

Rashbi and his son buried themselves in the sand in order to preserve their clothes, which they wore only for prayer. Afterward, they would quickly remove them and submerge themselves in the sand once again. I was once asked an interesting question. If Hashem already made the miracles of the carob tree and the river, couldn’t He have spared their clothes from becoming filthy or frayed, just like He did for our nation in

the wilderness? Didn't Rashbi's self-sacrifice deserve to be rewarded with the protection of his clothing?

Moreover, Rashbi suffered greatly from the extensive amount of time he spent in the sand. When he emerged from the cave after thirteen years, his son-in-law, Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, came toward him but did not recognize him, as his face had changed drastically. Rabbi Pinchas led Rashbi to the washhouse. When he removed Rashbi's shirt, he found his back covered with sores. Rabbi Pinchas washed his father-in-law, crying copiously. These tears trickled onto Rashbi's back, stinging him. Rabbi Pinchas begged forgiveness for his inability to halt them. In this manner, he cried over his father-in-law's state. Rashbi told him, "You have no need to be distressed. If not for studying Torah in such suffering, I would never have merited revealing its secrets" (*Shabbat* 33b).

Certainly, Hashem could have provided Rashbi with manna from heaven and all the other amenities that Am Yisrael enjoyed in the wilderness. But Rashbi asked Hashem for only the barest minimum in order to survive. He wanted specifically a carob tree and a spring of water, since carobs do not provide anything for the body other than sustenance. He sufficed with covering his body with sand in order to preserve his clothes and his reward for the World to Come.

Rashbi was eminently aware that this world is merely a vestibule to the World to Come (*Avot* 3:16). Therefore, he requested only his most basic needs. He forewent whatever he considered luxuries, even at the expense of great suffering. His sole aspiration was to increase his portion in the World to Come.

Going back in time, we read about Yaakov's famous meeting with Eisav. At that time, Yaakov was "very frightened and it distressed him" (*Bereishit* 32:8). He was afraid that Eisav would kill him and it distressed him to think that he might kill Eisav (*Rashi*, *ibid.*). Yaakov feared he did not have enough merit to be saved from Eisav. He was afraid his salvation would come at the expense of his reward in the World to Come.

Similarly, Rashbi waived having his clothing miraculously preserved during the years in the cave. He was afraid this would detract from his share in the World to Come. For this reason, he asked for only the bare minimum. Even while eating the carobs, he had to be careful, as its seeds are often very tough.

Torah studied in luxury cannot be compared to Torah studied in privation. *Chazal* adjure us to “beware of the children of the poor, for from them will come forth Torah” (*Nedarim* 81a). By delving into the secrets of Torah, Rashbi was also aware of the following: Torah studied through suffering elevates a person and extracts him from the layers of materialism in which he is cloaked. As he explained to Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, it was precisely because he underwent such affliction that he reached great heights in both the Written and Oral Law.

Conversely, the generation of the wilderness enjoyed unprecedented miracles. Hashem fed them manna and *selav*. Neither their clothes nor their shoes wore out. Because Am Yisrael suffered so terribly in Egypt, Hashem conferred upon them certain comforts so that they could feel a sense of comfort in Torah study. However, this type of lifestyle is not the norm.

A childless couple once approached me. Although they had been married for ten years, they did not ask for a blessing for a child, but rather that they should find a comfortable house at an affordable price. I was shocked. How could they confuse their priorities to such an extent? They wanted a lovely, large home, even though they had no children to fill it!

Don't we often act like that foolish couple? We escape the purpose for which we arrived in this world and instead, seek all sorts of creature comforts. We have no inkling of the level of Rashbi. Nevertheless, we can allow him to guide us in the right direction. We can try to resemble him in some form, as we are adjured to ask, “When will my deeds reach those of my forefathers?” (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 25).

After acquiring something, we anticipate the next acquisition, even though it may be totally superfluous. We assume that if only we had

such-and-such, our lives would be so much better. We must understand that all the materialism this world has to offer cannot offer a person the pleasure contained in the Torah. David Hamelech said, "The Torah of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver coins" (*Tehillim* 119:72). If all worldly pleasures would be placed on one side of a scale and the Torah on the other, the scale would break from the weight of the Torah.

Even if we have not reached the level of those who prefer to learn Torah in simplicity and privation, let us at least aspire to strengthen our spiritual side. Our desire for physical pleasures will automatically become reduced.

Rashbi desired one thing alone: to do Hashem's will without the hindrance of materialism. This was what earned him the singularity of the world being created in his merit. Moshe extricated Rashbi's *neshamah* from on High in order to learn the Torah's secrets with him. He saw how single-mindedly Rashbi would pursue Torah study, while paying minimum attention to his physical needs.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why is Rashbi singled out as the person in whose merit the world was worthy of being created?
- ◆ Why didn't Hashem miraculously preserve Rashbi's clothes in the cave, like He did for Bnei Yisrael in the wilderness?
- ◆ Rashbi was afraid that any kindness he received above his most basic needs would detract from his reward in the World to Come. Therefore, he settled on the barest minimum, to the extent that he was prepared to suffer in this world. Similarly, Yaakov was afraid to confront Eisav, fearing that he did not possess enough merits to be saved and his reward reserved for the World to Come would be depleted.
- ◆ Rashbi requested to study Torah in privation in order to increase his merits

in the World to Come. He attested that the Torah knowledge he gained was all in the merit of learning Torah through suffering. We are not on this level. However, we can enhance our spiritual side, and automatically our desire for materialism will be diminished.



## Sefirat Ha'Omer – Gems



### Seizing the Moment

“You ascended on High, you took captives, you took gifts of man” (*Tehillim* 68:19) refers to Moshe when he ascended to heaven to receive the Torah. Since the angels did not want Moshe to take the Torah, he grabbed it, like one seizes a captive after a bloody battle. This was similar to an actual battle, as is described in *Devarim* (21:10) in the words, “When you go out to war with your enemy and you take his captives...”

The *pasuk* describing Moshe’s sojourn on High ends with the words, “You took gifts of man.” This refers to the Torah, the greatest gift of all, as we read, “From Matanah, Nachliel” (*Bamidbar* 21:19). Aside from being names of places, these words have additional meanings. *Matanah* means gift and *Nachliel* means inheritance. The Torah was originally bestowed upon us as a gift and then it became our inheritance (*Eiruvin* 54a).

Ultimately, the angels expressed their admiration of Moshe and their appreciation for his bringing the Torah to this world. Each one, including the Angel of Death, conferred a gift upon him. The gift of the Angel of Death was the secret of the Ketoret, which had the power to halt an epidemic (*Shabbat* 89a). Moshe, indeed, employed this advice when an epidemic swept through the nation in the wake of Korach’s uprising (*Bamidbar* 17:11-13).

The Zohar gives a different perspective to the phrase, “You ascended on High, you took captives, you took gifts of man” (*Tehillim* 68:19). The captive that Moshe took was none other than the *neshamah* of Rashbi, as the word שבי is an acronym of the words שמעון בר יוחאי – Shimon bar Yochai (as quoted in *Megaleh Amukot, Va’etchanan* 70). What is the connection between Rashbi and the battle of Moshe with the angels regarding the Torah?

Rashbi revealed many mysteries of the Torah. Certainly, there were great men who learned these secrets before his time, but they did so privately. Rashbi was the first one who was given permission to publicize these deep concepts. He was the conduit through which the Torah’s secrets became available to the entire nation. Even Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of all men, who enacted many essential mandates, such as *netilat yadayim*, was not granted permission to publicize the Torah’s mysteries.

Moshe arrived on High and clearly saw that Rashbi would be the medium for bringing Torah knowledge to Am Yisrael. Thus, he captured this *neshamah* from on High. Moshe bested the angels regarding the Written Law. Concerning the Oral Law, however, the world would have to wait for Rashbi to fight this battle. In this manner, Rashbi resembled Moshe. Of course, Moshe Rabbeinu is the only one whose *nitzotz* is contained in each generation (*Zohar* III, 273a). Nevertheless, Rashbi played a pivotal role in *Matan Torah*. This is why thousands flock to his grave annually.

I heard a venerated Torah Sage tell someone that if he has the choice to either visit Rashbi’s grave or learn Torah on Lag Ba’Omer, Rashbi himself would definitely want him to spend his time learning Torah. “Your Gemara is like Meron,” he told him. Rashbi himself wrote that if we knew how much pleasure Hashem derives from our Torah study, we would dance in the streets.



## Appropriately Adorned

At *Matan Torah*, “Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (*Shemot* 19:2). The Midrash says that “they were like one man with one heart” (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 275). Only in this state were they worthy of receiving the Torah. Unity is an indication of submission toward Hashem.

In order for there to be true unity among us, we must work on ourselves to acquire the forty-eight qualities of the Torah. The Saba of Kelm states there are forty-nine days of Sefirat Ha'Omer, corresponding to the forty-eight attributes with which the Torah is acquired (quoted in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* III, pg. 323 and *Mishnat Rabbi Aharon* III, pg. 38). Each day corresponds to another quality, and the forty-ninth is a day of reviewing all of them. This enables us to reach *Matan Torah* bedecked with the finery of good qualities. We do not sleep on the night of Shavuot, for *Matan Torah* is like a wedding ceremony in which the *chatan* comes toward the *kallah* (*Zohar* III, 98a). Hashem is like the groom who comes toward Am Yisrael – the bride. Just as a *kallah* beautifies herself before her wedding, we adorn ourselves by acquiring beautiful character traits in honor of receiving the Torah, each year anew.



## Supplanting Bad with Good

The Chatam Sofer says that the days of Sefirat Ha'Omer are divided in two: The days from Pesach to Lag Ba'Omer, and those from Lag Ba'Omer until the end. There are thirty-two days leading up to Lag Ba'Omer, the numerical equivalent of the word כבוד (honor). The only true honor is that of the Torah (*Avot* 6:3). Rabbi Akiva's disciples, who displayed a deficiency in honoring their colleagues, perished during these days

(*Yevamot* 62b). There are seventeen remaining days from Lag Ba'Omer until Shavuot. This is the numerical equivalent of the word טוב (good). There is no good aside from Torah (*Avot* 6:3). How do we understand this?

I would like to suggest that this refers to the *pasuk*, “For a good teaching I have given you; do not forsake My Torah” (*Mishlei* 4:2). The word לקח (teaching) is also a direct reference to the Torah, as its letters can be transposed to spell חלק (portion). This alludes to each Jew’s particular portion in Torah.

First of all, one must work on his character and show respect for his fellow man. After this initial step, he can spend the rest of the *Sefirah* days acquiring all the other wonderful qualities essential for the Torah to endure within him. This is hinted in the words, “Unveil my eyes so that I may see the wonders of Your Torah” (*Tehillim* 119:18). The word גל (unveil) is numerically equivalent to thirty-three, the day of the *Sefirah* auspicious for beginning to acquire Torah traits. This is the day when one begins to “see the wonders of Your Torah” (ibid.).

Rabbi Chaim Vital writes that man is composed of four elements: earth, water, fire, and wind (*Sha'arei Kedushah*). Each of these elements is the source of various negative character traits. For example, the thirst for lust emerges from water, laziness and despair stem from earth, arrogance and idleness are sourced in wind, and anger originates in fire. Why didn't Rabbi Chaim Vital mention good qualities, to counterbalance these negative ones?

I would like to use the Saba of Kelm’s statement to answer. As we said above, there are forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuot, corresponding to the forty-eight ways of acquiring Torah, plus one day of review. Bnei Yisrael emerged from Egypt submerged in the forty-ninth level of defilement (*Zohar Chadash, Yitro*). They spent each day between Pesach and Shavuot assiduously correcting their character, one quality at a time. Eventually, they merited reaching the forty-ninth level of *kedushah*. As they uprooted another negative trait, a positive one automatically

replaced it. In this manner, they ascended a virtual mountain leading toward Hashem, until they reached the fiftieth level of sanctity, ready and worthy of the revelations at Sinai.

There is no such thing as a vacuum. As soon as one corrects a negative trait, a positive one fills its place. Rabbi Chaim Vital had no need to mention good qualities because they are a direct offshoot of weeding out the negative ones.



## Rejoicing in His Joy

It is the accepted custom to celebrate the *hilula* of the great *Tanna*, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, zy”a. A majority of the Sages are of the opinion that he passed away on Lag Ba'Omer. However, there are some opinions that this is not the anniversary of his death. Rather, we celebrate this day as the day when Rabbi Akiva's disciples stopped dying (*Beit Yosef* on *Orach Chaim* 493:2), and since Rashbi survived this epidemic, we sing for him on this day. Why do we single him out from among the other *Tanna'im* who survived, such as Rabbi Meir Ba'al Haness, Rabbi Yehudah, and Rabbi Eliezer?

Rashbi is the one who called Lag Ba'Omer “the day of our rejoicing,” and others say, “the day of our tiding” (*Arizal, Sha'ar HaKavanot, Drushei Pesach* 12). He called it “the day of our rejoicing” for on this day, the epidemic ceased. The reason for calling it “the day of our tiding” is for the joy over the fact that the Torah would have a continuation. Torah is called שמועה (tiding) in line with Bnei Yisrael's pronouncement at the time of *Matan Torah*, “נעשה ונשמע – We will do and we will hear” (*Shemot* 24:7). When the epidemic stopped on Lag Ba'Omer, Rashbi was extremely joyous that the remainder of Rabbi Akiva's disciples would live to spread Torah teachings throughout the world.

Rashbi called Lag Ba'Omer “the day of *our* rejoicing” or “the day of *our* tiding,” in the plural form. He attributed the termination of the epidemic to his surviving colleagues, and ascribed the Torah’s survival and dissemination to them, as well. In merit of graciously accrediting his contemporaries with the joy of the day, Lag Ba'Omer is marked as the day for commemorating his memory.

Rashbi’s calling Lag Ba'Omer “the day of our tiding” indicates his joy at the survival of the Torah. This shows how responsible he felt for the continued endurance of Torah among Am Yisrael. He was so relieved that the Torah was assured continuation through the teachings of the Sages that he could not contain his joy and shared it with us all. This is why we ascribe the day to his merit.



# Shavuot



## Sound Advice

On Shavuot, Rabbi Yosef would ask for a festive meal to be prepared for him. He would say, “If not for this day, how many ‘Yosefs’ are in the market-place?” He meant to say, “If not for *Matan Torah*, I would be no different from any other Yosef” (*Pesachim* 68b). The *Yismach Moshe* (*Bamidbar* 2) writes that by adding another day of preparation for *Matan Torah*, Moshe gave our nation the power of revealing insights in the Torah. He explains as follows: Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael to observe two days of preparation in anticipation of receiving the Torah, but Moshe added another of his own volition. Not only was Hashem not displeased with this, but He showed His approval by allowing Bnei Yisrael to reveal wonderful Torah insights in merit of this additional day.

When one reveals a Torah insight, it must be based on logic and sound Torah doctrine. I well remember the following incident. I once heard someone deliver a Torah discourse, but all his interpretations contradicted the Torah’s viewpoint, *rachmana litzlan*. It would have been better had he never spoken at all. I was appalled and ashamed at his words and wanted to speak up for the honor of the Torah that he was blatantly trampling.

Hashem “tells His word to Yaakov, His statutes and ordinances to Israel. He did not do this for any other nation” (*Tehillim* 147:19-20). The power

to reveal Torah insights was given only to Bnei Yisrael. How can we be sure that what we discover is in consonance with the Torah, and not an insult to it, *chas v'shalom*?

We are told that Hashem said the first two of the Ten Commandments, and Moshe Rabbeinu said the rest of them. I was once asked the reason for this. Wouldn't it have been appropriate for Hashem to conclude that which He began? The answer is that Hashem's words emanated from Moshe's throat.

Since Moshe Rabbeinu is equal to all Bnei Yisrael (*Shir Hashirim* 1:65), all of us possess a portion of his *neshamah* (*Zohar* III, 216a). Just as Hashem spoke through the mouth of Moshe, so does He speak through the mouths of all Jews who study Torah.

It was crucial that Hashem begin the recitation of the Ten Commandments and allow Moshe to conclude them. This teaches us a message for all generations. We, too, must continue reciting the Ten Commandments, just like Moshe before us. We should not suffice with just the first two commandments, an allusion to the actual words of the Torah. Rather, we should expound and explain them at length. By attempting, for Hashem's sake, to find deeper meanings and greater understanding in the Torah's words, we will resemble Moshe, from whose mouth Hashem spoke. We will merit revealing true Torah gems.

The first two commandments can be compared to the engine of a train. The engine provides the force for the entire train to run. With the word "*Anochi*," Hashem generated within us the ability to understand the Torah and to reveal new insights.

The Chafetz Chaim lamented a major shortcoming of our generation: Everyone considers himself "*Anochi*," a person of stature. This prevents him from feeling the "*Anochi*" of Hashem. If we ascribe this word to Hashem alone, we would automatically subject ourselves to His service. The Admor of Alexander, zy"ta, says that in order to attain spiritual heights, we must ponder the greatness of Hashem (*Yismach Yisrael, Chanukah* 81:2, 8). As soon as one perceives Hashem as the all-mighty

power, he immediately considers himself small. However, one who views himself as a man of significance will never succeed in fathoming Hashem's greatness.

In order to reinstate the "*Anochi*" of *Matan Torah* by revealing new Torah insights, it is imperative to approach Torah with humility and self-effacement. Whatever we manage to reveal is not due to our own wisdom or greatness, but stems only from the power of Hashem, Who gives power to everything. It is the original "*Anochi*" that grants us the ability to reveal new insights in accordance with Torah.

Bnei Yisrael can be Hashem's flock "even today, if you hearken to His voice" (*Tehillim* 95:7). If we but listen, every day, to the voice of Hashem within us and reveal Torah insights with the understanding that it is Hashem Who gives us the ability to do so, we will eventually merit the arrival of Mashiach.

Every person has the power to either amplify or muffle the voice of Hashem within him. This voice resounds throughout the world. The question is: Are we tuned into it or not?

A woman once approached Rabbi Akiva Eiger and complained about her terrible husband. Rabbi Akiva Eiger told her to demand a divorce from him. She replied that for a long time she had been doing so, but to no avail. The venerated Sage summoned the man.

He turned to the recalcitrant husband and asked why he refused to give his wife a divorce. But the man would not retract his refusal. Then Rabbi Akiva Eiger told him, "A woman is freed of her husband in one of two ways: either through a divorce, or through his death. If you refuse to offer her a bill of divorce, she will become freed in the second manner." Not long afterward, the man suddenly died.

One year in Essaouira, there was no rain. The people feared that the wheat crop would fail and there would be no flour available for matzot. A delegation was sent to Rabbi Chaim Pinto Hagadol, asking him to pray for rain. He asked them to meet him in the cemetery. When they arrived

there, Rabbi Chaim asked if so-and-so was among them. When they answered yes, he said, “The rains are withheld because of you. When there is immorality, the skies are closed (*Yevamot* 78b).” The man made a mockery of Rabbi Chaim’s words. He then fell dead on the spot.

These incidents teach us that every word of a tzaddik carries tremendous weight, since Hashem’s voice speaks through his mouth. A tzaddik decrees and Hashem fulfills (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel* II 165). Thus, if Moshe decided to add another day of preparation for *Matan Torah*, it was with Hashem’s full approval, for Hashem spoke through Moshe’s mouth.

A very tech-savvy young boy once came to me with his mother. I asked his mother what he could do, and she began listing his skills. He sounded like a wonder-child. In contrast, Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto, zt”l, was tremendously erudite, even as a young child. He wrote a *sefer* of Torah novellae at the tender age of thirteen, which he presented as a gift to his father in honor of his bar mitzvah. Everyone must decide what to do with the voice of Hashem that resonates within him. Will he use it for secular advancement, or to increase his Torah knowledge?

At *Matan Torah*, Bnei Yisrael reached the level of the angels, to the extent that they became one with the Torah (*Zecher David*). *Olam Haba* is a form of the Torah. This is why *Chazal* say, “All Israel have a portion in the World to Come” (*Sanhedrin* 90a). It is due to this portion of Torah within us that we have the ability to reveal new insights in the Torah. It all depends on us. Will we hearken to this voice or ignore it?

Regarding the Torah, Hashem told Yehoshua bin Nun, “You shall contemplate in it day and night” (*Yehoshua* 1:8). Why is this crucial statement made only in the Prophets, and not in the Torah itself?

When Moshe led the nation, the people clearly saw him immersed in the Torah without letup. Furthermore, Moshe was the one who added a day of preparation before *Matan Torah*. Bnei Yisrael had a living example of “contemplating in it day and night,” and thus did not need to have this message spelled out to them regarding the Torah. Moshe continued

Hashem's recital of the Ten Commandments in order to teach us that we, too, should undertake this mode of behavior. However, with Moshe's death, the generations were diminished in stature. They no longer had a role model of perfect connection to the Torah. Therefore, they had to be clearly told to "contemplate in it day and night."



## Determined and Devoted

The Ben Ish Chai writes (*Bamidbar, Shanah Rishonah* III, in the name of the *Zohar* II, 98a) the following: When Hashem sees his beloved children spending the night of Shavuot in Torah study, not wasting their time in idle chatter, He descends from His place on High and blesses them with both worlds – this world and the Next. He also inscribes them in His book. The Torah study of Shavuot night surpasses that of the night of Hoshana Rabbah in a certain respect.

What is so special about the night of Shavuot? There is a custom in the yeshivot to remain awake all night before Erev Shabbat and learn Torah. Does this also warrant Hashem's generous blessings?

Generally, the *chatan* arrives first at the wedding hall and waits for his *kallah* to come. Often, he must wait for a long period of time, as she is busy with last-minute arrangements. When he sees her at last, he forgets all about his long wait, in his great joy at marrying her. Imagine the reverse order. The *kallah* arrives at the hall well in advance of the *chatan* and awaits his arrival for a number of hours. The *chatan* will be very touched at this show of affection, realizing that she is so eager to be married that she arrived extra early in anticipation. This makes her even more cherished in his eyes.

The morning of the sixth of Sivan found Am Yisrael asleep in their tents. Moshe had to wake them up to receive the Torah (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*

40). They were like a *kallah* who had to be shaken awake to meet her *chatan*. In atonement for not hurrying happily to meet the *chatan*, Hashem Himself, we remain awake all night of Shavuot studying Torah (*Mishnah Berurah* 494:1). By doing so, we are like a *kallah* who comes early to the wedding hall and waits for her *chatan*. This is why Hashem descends on this night and inscribes His children in a special book. By learning Torah on Shavuot night, we express our excitement over receiving it once again. This gives Hashem untold pleasure.

The *Ba'alei Mussar* say that Shavuot is similar to Rosh Hashanah in that it is the day that Hashem decides how much Torah understanding one will have during the course of the year (*Megillah* 31b; *Maor Vashemesh, Bechukotai; Imrei Emet, Shavuot*). The determining factor is how well one prepares himself for Shavuot and how much Torah he studies on the night of Shavuot. The more effort one invests in learning Torah, the greater the dividends he will reap in comprehending its words during the course of the year.

Two of my daughters were once admitted to the hospital due to food poisoning. They were meant to be discharged one hour before the onset of Shavuot. A few hours before the time of their release, my wife called to tell me that the doctors decided not to release them before the *chag*. When I heard this, I turned to Hashem and said, “*Ribbono shel Olam!* I know that You want us to prepare properly for the upcoming *chag*, and to spend it spreading Your Torah. But how can I deliver *shiurim* and study Torah when my two daughters are spending the festival in the hospital?” I was scheduled to deliver a *shiur* to a group of approximately one thousand people who wished to reinforce their ties to Judaism. How could I focus on this while my mind was miles away, at my children’s bedside?

Approximately one-half hour before the festival, a doctor told my wife that the girls could go home. She rushed home with them so that we could all celebrate the *chag* together. *Baruch Hashem*, we experienced a most uplifting holiday and observed a tremendous *kiddush Hashem*, as well. In retrospect, I understood that Hashem saw how important it was to me to

celebrate Shavuot in a sanctified, elevated way and therefore brought my salvation at the last minute.

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabbah* 23:15) relates that at the Splitting of the Sea, Bnei Yisrael literally pointed to the *Shechinah* and proclaimed, “This is my G-d and I will sanctify Him” (*Shemot* 15b). Hashem’s revelation at this time was so intense that a maidservant was able to see revelations that great prophets such as Yechezkel ben Buzi did not merit seeing (*Mechilta, Beshalach* 3). The Ministering Angels were so excited that they suggested to Hashem that the time had come to give the Torah to Bnei Yisrael. Hashem had waited 974 generations for this. However, He preferred to wait. Although Bnei Yisrael had attained great awareness of His kingship, He wanted this awareness to take root in their hearts.

A person who has recently recovered from a life-threatening illness will not throw himself into his job all at once. Rather, he will slowly return to his former activities, building up his stamina little by little, as his body is still weak from the illness. Similarly, Bnei Yisrael had been submerged in the morass of the forty-nine levels of defilement, akin to both physical and spiritual illness. Although they were cured, and even reached the level of perceiving Hashem, they had a way to go in fortifying themselves with faith and implanting it within themselves, until they would be fit to receive the Torah.

The Gemara (*Shabbat* 88b) relates that when Moshe ascended to heaven to receive the Torah, the angels rose in an uproar, intending to kill him with their fiery breath. They demanded to know what a human being was doing among them. Why did they want to prevent him from taking the Torah? Hadn’t they admitted, at the Splitting of the Sea, that the time was ripe for giving the Torah?

When Bnei Yisrael emerged safely from the sea, they were at an all-time high. Their faith in Hashem soared with the waves. Hashem was so pleased with His people that, generations later, He told them, “I remember the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following me

in the wilderness, in an uncultivated land” (*Yirmeyahu* 2:2). The angels were deeply impressed by Bnei Yisrael’s unswerving devotion to Hashem.

However, with the crashing of the crests, Bnei Yisrael’s faith began ebbing. In Rephidim, they became lax in Torah study (*Sanhedrin* 106a). They were remiss in the mitzvot they had received in Marah. The angels then understood that Bnei Yisrael were unfitting recipients for the Torah. There was such strong indictment leveled at Bnei Yisrael at that time that the angels were prepared to burn Moshe, their venerated leader, whose mouth never ceased uttering words of Torah.

How potent is the protection offered by the Torah! Conversely, how devastating it is when there is a weakening in Torah study, to the degree that even Moshe, who dedicated his life for the sake of the Torah, was in danger on account of Bnei Yisrael’s laxity. Moshe was not afraid to speak to Hashem Himself. How is it that he feared the angels? His fear stemmed from the knowledge that they were right. The sin of neglecting Torah study is too great to bear.

After the angels made their claim that Bnei Yisrael did not deserve the Torah, Moshe was left speechless and chagrined. Hashem then told him to grab hold of His Throne and offer a response (*Shabbat* 88b). What is the significance in grabbing hold of the Heavenly Throne? Hashem was hinting that if one holds fast to the Torah without letup, he merits tremendous salvation, and the forces of destruction are powerless against him.

Moshe did as Hashem commanded. He held tightly to the Heavenly Throne and told the angels that he was about to bring the Torah down to Bnei Yisrael, who possess a *yetzer hara*. Torah is the tonic which cures them of its ills. Man is comprised of 613 spiritual and physical parts and therefore needs the 613 mitzvot. In this manner, he can become sanctified.

The angels finally conceded to Moshe’s arguments and allowed him to take the Torah. Additionally, they revealed to him great secrets. Even the

Angel of Death, whose task it is to destroy, revealed to Moshe the secret of the Ketoret, which is capable of halting an epidemic.

The word הקטורת (the Ketoret) contains the word תורה (Torah). The letter ק implies the one hundred blessings a person is adjured to recite daily. The Angel of Death, or the Satan, hinted that if Bnei Yisrael would cleave to the Torah and recite one hundred blessings daily, they would automatically be spared from any epidemic (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:21).

When Bnei Yisrael gather in the *batei midrash* and *batei kenesset* for Torah and prayer, immersing themselves in spiritual pursuits, any prosecution the angels might level against them is silenced. Hashem remembers His love for His people and inscribes them in His book. In their merit, the entire world is showered with Divine blessing (*Zohar* III, 98a).



## Taking Stock of Our Mitzvot

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 684) relates a fascinating incident. When Hashem gave the Torah to Bnei Yisrael, the gentiles approached Him and demanded to know why He had chosen Bnei Yisrael of all the nations to receive this gift. Hashem told the nations to produce their book of lineage. The gentiles do not follow in the tradition of the Avot and as such, do not have such a book.

Before offering the Torah to Bnei Yisrael, Hashem offered it to each nation individually. However, instead of displaying eagerness to receive this precious gift, they asked, “What is written in it?” Upon hearing the prohibitions, they declined to accept it (*Pesikta Rabbah* 21). After each of them refused Hashem’s offer, He went to Bnei Yisrael and offered it to them. They immediately replied, “*Na’aseh v’nishma*” (*Shemot* 24:7).

How, then, could the nations have the audacity to approach Hashem at *Matan Torah* with the grievance that they should have been chosen to receive the Torah? Why did Hashem even listen to such a claim? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate for Him to have cast them away instead of telling them to provide their book of lineage in order to prove Bnei Yisrael's superiority?

Let us preface our answer with another point. Shavuot is called by this name for the seven שבועות (*shavuot*, lit. weeks) that we count from Pesach until this festival. These are the seven weeks of preparation for *Matan Torah*. Why were Bnei Yisrael instructed to count specifically seven weeks as opposed to eight or nine?

The number seven holds great meaning. Hashem made the world in six days and rested on the seventh – Shabbat (*Shemot* 31:17). Similarly, the seventh year is *Shemittah*, the sabbatical year when the land lies fallow, and *Yovel* is the year after the seventh *Shemittah*. Pesach and Sukkot are celebrated for seven days. A woman is purified of her *niddah* status after counting seven clean days.

Shabbat fortifies our faith in Hashem. One who observes Shabbat attests to the belief that Hashem created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. In contrast, one who violates Shabbat testifies that he lacks faith. A heart full of faith is vigilant in observing Shabbat, the symbol of our belief in a Creator (*Rashi, Chullin* 5a).

Nobody can say that he saw Hashem creating the world in six days and rested on Shabbat. Nevertheless, we staunchly observe Shabbat because we have firm faith in this. Throughout the generations, Jews have been faithful to Shabbat due to this faith.

As we light the candles at the onset of Shabbat, the soul of each Jew is ignited with love for his Creator. There is no other nation in the world that can claim such devotion to the Creator. For this reason, “You did not give it, Hashem, our G-d, to the nations of the land, nor did You make it the inheritance, our King, of the worshippers of graven idols. And in its contentment, the uncircumcised shall not abide – for to Israel, Your

people, You have given it in love, to the seed of Yaakov, whom You have chosen” (*Shemoneh Esrei, Shacharit* of Shabbat). The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 58b) goes so far as to say that a gentile who observes Shabbat deserves the death penalty.

Since the seventh day is the symbol of our trust in the Creator, the number seven plays a central role in Judaism. Whenever we remember Shabbat or fulfill a mitzvah related to the number seven, we connect to the source of this number, reinforcing our faith in Hashem.

After Bnei Yisrael left Egypt on their journey toward Sinai, Hashem wanted them to count seven full weeks. This would engrave faith deep in their hearts. At the end of this period, they would be worthy of receiving the Torah. Why weren't seven days enough to count toward *Matan Torah*?

When Bnei Yisrael emerged from Egypt, they were immersed in the forty-nine levels of defilement. In order to shed this spiritual filth and attain the forty-ninth level of purity, they had to count seven Shabbat days, meaning seven full weeks. These weeks were comprised of forty-nine days. On each day, they shed one level of impurity and exchanged it for a corresponding level of sanctity.

Similarly, there are forty-nine positive traits, corresponding to the forty-nine negative ones. In order for Bnei Yisrael to acquire the forty-nine positive traits, they had to spend forty-nine days severing themselves from the negative traits. They replaced each negative trait with a positive one, through which they accepted the Torah in all its details.

Why did Hashem choose to silence the gentiles with the instruction to produce their books of lineage? He knew full well that they did not possess such books. I would like to suggest that the gentiles were aware of such a concept. Had they so wished, they could have connected to their lineage, in much the same way as Am Yisrael did.

At the beginning of Avraham's career, Nimrod incited the entire world against the Creator. Avraham alone denied his blasphemy. This is why he is called *Avraham Halvri* (Avraham of the other side) (*Pesikta Rabbah* 33).

Avraham allowed himself to be cast into the burning furnace for the sake of his beliefs. After emerging unscathed, he broadcasted Hashem's Name far and wide. People began listening and accepting. However, Bnei Yisrael were the only ones who continued his legacy of faith. Only they are the proud bearers of a book of lineage.

In contrast, the nations of the world returned to idol worship. They exchanged righteousness and perfection for perniciousness and rebellion. Bnei Yisrael, on the other hand, walked the road of their holy forefathers. Even when they were wallowing in the muck of Egypt, they did not let it adhere to them permanently. As soon as they were able, they worked on removing it, one layer at a time, for the duration of forty-nine days. After their great efforts in purifying themselves, they were finally worthy of receiving the Torah.

Hashem ordered the gentiles to produce their books of lineage, although He knew full well that they do not own such books. He wanted to inform them that one must work at earning the lineage he is bequeathed. One's spiritual status is not automatically conferred upon him with his birth. Only by rectifying his negative traits and replacing them with positive ones does he merit receiving the Torah, for "good character precedes Torah" (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 1). Only Bnei Yisrael, who worked on themselves to refine their natures, were worthy of receiving the Torah.

Our book of lineage stands in our defense only if we walk in the ways of our holy Avot. Yishmael and Eisav also claim ancestry from Avraham and Yitzchak. However, they rejected their ways and, as such, are unworthy of their merit. The merit of our Avot protects us only when we attempt to follow in their ways. Bnei Yisrael received the Torah only after expressing their desire to cling to the ways of the forefathers, who served Hashem faithfully and devotedly.

The following anecdote is related about two of our Torah luminaries. One Shavuot night, the Vilna Gaon was studying *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, while the Dubno Maggid sat and learned Gemara. The Vilna Gaon asked the

Dubno Maggid why he was learning Gemara instead of *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, which is the standard study material for the night of Shavuot.

The Maggid typically replied, “I will respond with an analogy.” And he told over this whimsical tale:

A man promised his son-in-law to provide for all his needs. However, with time, he found it too difficult to keep his promise. He asked his son-in-law to find a job so he could be independent. The young man replied that he had never been involved in business and had no idea where to begin. His father-in-law told him to stand in the marketplace and learn the ways of the vendors.

The son-in-law did as he was told, studying the peddlers and businessmen. After a few days, he gathered the courage to open his own store. He placed a number of samples in the display window and waited for customers. And waited. And waited. The next day, he optimistically opened his small store, hoping that perhaps today customers would come. For two full weeks, he waited for buyers, but to no avail.

He finally returned to his father-in-law, who asked how business was going. Shamefacedly, the young man said that although he had opened a store and decorated the display case in an eye-catching manner, he had not managed to sell a thing. After investigating, the father-in-law understood that although the window displayed pleasant merchandise, the store itself was completely empty! Even if somebody would have entered his store, he would have found nothing to buy.

The father-in-law exclaimed, “The items in the display window are only a sample of what you should be carrying in your store. This way, if someone sees an attractive item in the window, he can purchase a similar one inside. But how do you expect to sell anything when you haven’t stocked up on merchandise?!”

The Dubno Maggid then turned humbly to the Vilna Gaon and said, “In your store, you have a lovely display window with a shop full of merchandise. Therefore, you can afford to recite the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*,

which is a condensed version of your vast Torah knowledge. I, on the other hand, possess so little Torah wisdom that my recitation of *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* would be like the display case of an empty shop.”

He continued, “I will not be like that son-in-law who decorated his storefront while leaving his store empty. I am filling my store with Torah study, and I hope that, with time, I will become full of Torah wisdom” (*Yaynah shel Torah, Shavuot 34*).

Shavuot provides the unique opportunity to fill our storehouses with valuable stock. However, before we place our order, we must know what we are interested in buying. We must enter Shavuot well prepared so that we can merit a full stock of Torah wisdom. Just as one takes inventory before ordering new merchandise, so do we count forty-nine days before *Matan Torah*, in which we repair all negative character traits and transform ourselves into fitting vessels for receiving Torah wisdom. The more we prepare ourselves, the more we will be able to receive.

This idea explains the basic difference between a Jew and a gentile. When offered the Torah, the gentiles sufficed with display cases, proving that they were not interested in delving deeper into Hashem’s store. Hashem informed them that the Torah is not merely samples of mitzvot, but actually a repository of great stock. In order to acquire this stock, one must make extensive preparation. But this was too much to ask of the nations. Only Bnei Yisrael, who had the ability to declare “*Na’aseh v’nishma*,” proved they trusted that the Torah contained an unlimited line of products. However, in order to acquire a “membership card” to this exclusive boutique, one must exert tremendous effort.

The *yetzer hara* of our generation is extremely powerful. In order to overcome it, one must muster tremendous inner strength. When I think back to the days of the Ba’al Shem Tov, zy”a, or my holy grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a, it seems it was easier then to be righteous and have faith than nowadays, the Internet Age. But it is precisely in our days that we must hold tightly to our “book of lineage.” We must adhere to the ways of our Avot, who served Hashem unquestioningly in spite of their

challenges. Only by cleaving to our book of lineage can we hope to turn over a new leaf in our lives and protect ourselves from the foreign winds that blow around us. Otherwise, we are like a boat at sea, tossing to and fro in the waves of a violent storm.

To merit receiving the Torah, we must declare, “*Na’aseh v’nishma*” without questioning the ways of Hashem. As soon as we ask, we are like the gentiles who demanded, “What is written in it?” Rather, “We will do and we will hear” is the mantra of every Jew. It is the way to attain all forms of goodness, as symbolized by, and contained within, the Torah.



## Material Investments in Spiritual Interests

Rabbi Yochanan was walking with his disciple, Rabbi Chiya bar Abba, when they passed a field. Rabbi Yochanan told Rabbi Chiya, “This field was once mine, but I sold it in order to be able to spend my time learning Torah.” They continued walking and passed another field. Rabbi Yochanan once again turned to his disciple and said, “This field, too, used to belong to me. I sold it, as well, in order to be able to learn Torah.” This happened a number of times.

Suddenly, Rabbi Chiya burst into tears. When asked why, he explained, “I am worried about how you will support yourself in your old age.” (Rabbi Yochanan’s children all died young, so he had no children who could tend to him when he grew old) (*Berachot* 5b). To which Rabbi Yochanan replied, “I sold fields, houses, and gardens which were created in six days. I invested, instead, in that which was acquired in forty days” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 30:1).

Before his death, Rav instructed his disciple, “Be fervent when you eulogize me, for I will be standing there” (*Shabbat* 153a). This is difficult to understand. How could Rav be standing there after he already passed

on? He was emphasizing two points. One was to encourage the congregation to do *teshuvah*, and the other was to impress upon them the importance of Torah study, without worrying about one's old age. We will return to expound on these points.

The *pasuk* regarding the counting of the Omer states, "You shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the rest day, from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving, seven weeks, they shall be complete" (*Vayikra* 23:15). The Torah instructs us to count seven full weeks and informs us that the next day is a festival. However, it does not state that it is the day when the Torah will be given.

I would like to suggest that the act of counting the days of *Sefirah* is significant in and of itself, irrespective of the fact that we are counting toward *Matan Torah*. The Admor of Alexander (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh, Yemei HaSefirah* 7) states that the forty-nine days of Sefirat Ha'Omer correspond to the term לב טוב (a good heart), which is numerically equivalent to forty-nine. We count these days in order to reach the peak of perfection, which is to have a good heart. Bnei Yisrael attained this level when they were at Sinai, for "Bnei Yisrael encamped there opposite the mountain," which Rashi explains "as one man with one heart."

What is the connection between the Torah and a good heart? One who immerses himself in the life-giving waters of Torah does not suffice with its exhilarating effect. He wishes to share the gift of these wonderful waters so that others can also feel invigorated by their purifying qualities. A person with a good heart will reach out to others and share his Torah knowledge with them. This is an essential element of Torah study.

An analysis of the forty-eight methods of acquiring Torah reveals that one who has the quality of a good heart is capable of attaining the other forty-seven. Thus, a good heart is the basis for receiving the Torah. The days of *Sefirah* are designated for character improvement, which is crucial for receiving the Torah.

*Chazal* argue whether *Matan Torah* took place on the sixth or seventh of Sivan. (*Shabbat* 86b). If so, how can we celebrate Shavuot on the sixth

of Sivan? At the end of the account of Creation, we read, “The sixth day. Thus the heaven and the earth were finished, and all their arrangements” (*Bereishit* 1:31, 2:1). Some commentators cite this as proof that just as Creation ended on the sixth day, *Matan Torah* took place on the sixth day (of Sivan).

However, according to the opinion that *Matan Torah* occurred on the seventh of Sivan, why do we celebrate Shavuot on the sixth?

By way of *mussar*, I would like to suggest that after acquiring the attribute of a good heart during the days of *Sefirah*, one is ready to receive the Torah. Therefore, even those who rule that *Matan Torah* was on the seventh of Sivan do not want to prevent a person from receiving the Torah on the earliest possible date. By accepting upon oneself the commandments written in the Torah, he earns the opportunity to become a true *ben Torah*, with all its accompanying good qualities.

Moreover, even if the actual giving of the Torah occurred on the seventh, it is appropriate to make every effort to accept it on the sixth. A Torah student should not rush in to the study session at the last minute, but should come a few minutes early. Likewise, even if *Matan Torah* took place on the seventh of Sivan, it is proper for us to celebrate it on the sixth. This demonstrates our eagerness to accept the Torah anew.

This is the reason why the Torah does not give an exact date for *Matan Torah*. It is up to the person to decide when he will open his arms to receive the Torah. Let him constantly aspire to be from those who eagerly anticipate the opportunity to do mitzvot.

When one is planning a trip abroad, he does not go to the airport at the last minute, but arrives a few hours early. If this is the case with earthly trips, how much more so should we prepare in a timely manner for our voyage toward the Creator.

Now we can understand why Rabbi Yochanan sold his earthly possessions in order to acquire spiritual wealth. The Torah was given in forty days, whereas Creation was completed in only six. Furthermore, the

Torah existed with Hashem on High for 974 generations before this world was created (*Shabbat* 88b). This indicates its significance. The fact that the Torah preceded Creation by so many decades, before it would be needed, demonstrates its timeless value. Let us prepare ourselves accordingly and begin studying it even before the festival of *Matan Torah*, so that we may enjoy its sweet flavor.

When Rabbi Elazar fell ill, Rabbi Yochanan paid him a visit (*Berachot* 5b). As soon as Rabbi Yochanan exposed his arm, the dark room was suffused with light. Rabbi Elazar began to weep. Rabbi Yochanan asked the reason for this. To which Rabbi Elazar replied, “I am weeping for this beauty which will rot in the earth.”

Rabbi Yochanan had the practice of sitting at the entrance to the *mikveh*. All the women would notice him on their way out and be blessed with children like him. Rabbi Elazar bewailed Rabbi Yochanan’s tremendous beauty that would one day be buried in the earth. And Rabbi Yochanan cried with him.

As an aside, I once saw a burial casket which we brought in from France. From the entire body of the deceased, only one bone remained. This is what transpires after death.

We are not inspired to cry over the fact that great Torah Sages will one day be interred. What was the reason for Rabbi Elazar’s weeping, which triggered Rabbi Yochanan to weep, as well?

If we would tell someone he is good-looking, he will be extremely pleased and preen himself even more. However, regarding our Torah leaders, this is not the case at all. Let us take Yosef HaTzaddik as an example. He groomed his hair not in order to beautify himself but to enhance his surroundings. He worked on uprooting from his heart any form of vanity and quest for beauty (*Ma’or VaShemesh, Vayeishev*). Rabbi Yochanan was also extremely handsome. He did not take personal pleasure in his looks, but used them to give pleasure to others.

Another example of one who employed his assets for the benefit of others is Rabbeinu Hakadosh, who was exceedingly wealthy. Notwithstanding his great wealth, at the end of his life, he lifted his ten fingers heavenward and testified that he had taken no personal pleasure in his riches, but used them only to serve others (*Ketubot* 104a).

Rabbi Elazar wept for Rabbi Yochanan's sterling qualities, which were reflected in his shining beauty. He bemoaned the fact that these wonderful attributes would perish.

Good character is all-important. By enabling others to bask in his glory, Rabbi Yochanan taught us to share our resources with others. Acquiring positive attributes is the best form of preparation for *Matan Torah*. Once one has corrected his character through the *Sefirah* period, he is fit to receive the Torah. One who possesses positive qualities is a suitable repository for the Torah. After a person has invested effort into character improvement, he is capable of receiving the Torah. With good character, one can reach the summit of his personal Sinai. This is why all Jews, even those of the opinion that the Torah was given on the seventh, celebrate Shavuot on the sixth of Sivan.

Now we might better understand the words of Rav to his disciple. What did he mean by saying he would be present at his own eulogy, and what did he intend to do for his disciples at that time?

I would like to offer the following interpretation. There are those who do not have the stamina to sit and study Torah. They achieve greatness through being inspired to serve Hashem. Rav adjured his disciple to enflame the hearts of his listeners during his eulogy. When one contemplates his death, his heart is drawn to make spiritual repairs. The word חם (hot) is numerically equivalent to forty-eight, an allusion to the forty-eight methods of acquiring the Torah, as well as לב טוב (a good heart), according to the rule of *kollel*. Rav wanted all those listening to the eulogies to be fired up with enthusiasm to improve. They should feel as if their revered teacher was standing among them, encouraging them.

A young woman once approached me with a dilemma. She did not know if she should marry a *ben Torah* who would commit himself to full-time Torah study, or a working boy. Since this decision would have far-reaching implications, I spoke with her for a long time.

“Tell me something,” I finally said. “Do you enjoy games and similar pastimes?” When she replied yes, I said, “From your question, I can see that you want to marry a *ben Torah*, but you cannot forego materialistic pursuits. You must cease pursuing those things that pull you toward *Olam Hazeh*, and then you will be able to make an intelligent decision.” I am sure that she chose to marry a *ben Torah*.

Since this world is so enticing, Hashem preceded the malady with the remedy. Aside from giving Bnei Yisrael the Torah with its numerous commandments, He gifted them a time period in which to prepare to receive it, so that they could correct their shortcomings. It is impossible to receive the Torah without making the necessary improvements. These improvements take the form of “שבעה שבועות תספור – Seven weeks shall you count” (*Devarim* 16:9). The initials of these words are ששת (the sixth). This conveyed to Bnei Yisrael the message that if they would prepare themselves accordingly during these seven weeks, they would earn the Torah, given on the sixth of Sivan.

My esteemed mentor, Rabbi Chaim Shmuel Lopian, zy”a, once told me that nowadays, people do not prepare properly before they learn Torah. They rush about, non-stop, taking care of a million and one things. Finally, they breathlessly slide into the *beit midrash*. He related that the *Ketzot HaChoshen* would stand outside the *beit midrash* for some minutes before entering. He would spend this time asking himself, “Am I worthy of learning Hashem’s Torah? I am not worthy of this. I am going to learn because this is Hashem’s command, not because I deserve to.”

The gaon, Rabbi Natan Mrejen, shlita, told me the following analogy regarding *avodat Hashem*, in the name of Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, zt”l. Before an aircraft can take off, it must speed along the runway, gaining momentum to slowly but surely make its way upward. Eventually, it

reaches the skies and can proceed at tremendous speed. This should be a person's attitude in *avodat Hashem*. By taking small steps, one makes steady progress, keeping his feet firmly on the ground, while his head soars to the heavens.

We must improve our character in order to merit receiving the Torah. Just as we do this during the days of *Sefirah*, we must prepare ourselves before each study session.

The wicked King Achav forfeited his share in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin* 90a). However, when he died, half of his sins were atoned for, as he had supported Torah scholars. Achav was a study in contrasts. On the one hand, there was no hill in the land that did not contain an idol of his, yet, on the other hand, he supported Torah scholars.

This is because, evil as he was, he refrained from speaking *lashon hara*. During a famine, he was informed that Ovadiah Hanavi was feeding many tzaddikim. He replied, "Do not tell my wife, Izevel." In this merit, half of his iniquities were erased. This incident proves that even an avowed *rasha* like Achav can gain a level of atonement through revering Torah study.

Another example of Achav's zealotry for the sake of the Torah was when the king of Aram wished to deliver a Sefer Torah to him in a disrespectful way. Achav went to war with him and vanquished him, in order to uphold the honor of the Torah (*Melachim* I, 20:1-11, *Rashi*, *ibid*; *Sanhedrin* 102b).

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Rabbi Yochanan felt it was worthwhile to sell all of his assets in order to be able to spend his life pursuing Torah studies. He explained that this world was created in only six days while the Torah was given in forty days.
- ◆ Rav told his disciple to eulogize him fervently, since he would be present. It was imperative to excite the congregation with words of *mussar*, as not everybody merits the spiritual enthusiasm generated by Torah study.

- ◆ The Torah instructs us to count seven weeks from Pesach, without delineating that this counting concludes with *Matan Torah*. This indicates that the days of *Sefirah* have intrinsic significance, apart from being days of preparation for *Matan Torah*. They are days designated for correcting our character.
- ◆ The *gematria* of the phrase לב טוב (a good heart) is forty-nine. Man's mission during the forty-nine days of *Sefirah* is to acquire "a good heart." This will enable him to attain all good character traits.
- ◆ There are different opinions regarding whether *Matan Torah* was on the sixth or the seventh of Sivan. Why, then, does everybody celebrate it on the sixth? This teaches us to anticipate receiving the Torah and display our eagerness over it by coming early to study Torah.
- ◆ Rabbi Yochanan came to visit Rabbi Elazar, who was sick. As soon as Rabbi Yochanan bared his arm, the entire room was suffused with light. Rabbi Elazar bewailed the fact that such beauty would eventually rot in the grave. Rabbi Yochanan brought merit to the entire world. He would sit outside the *mikveh* so that the women emerging would see him and give birth to righteous children. However, Rabbi Yochanan never took any credit for his virtue.
- ◆ The wicked Achav does not have a share in the World to Come. However, because he allowed Ovadiah to support Torah Sages during a famine, half of his sins were absolved. Good character traits are so powerful that they can save even a *rasha* like Achav, who was an avowed idolater.



## Rags to Riches

“Taste and see that Hashem is good” (*Tehillim* 34:9). David Hamelech is telling us that by analyzing Hashem’s deeds, one comes to understand how good He is.

Shavuot is called the festival of the giving of the Torah – *Zman Matan Torateinu* (*Shemoneh Esrei* of Shavuot). The word *Matan* is derived from the word *matanah*, a gift. When one gives a gift, he spends money on purchasing an item which he then offers to someone else. The more valuable the gift, the greater the love it expresses. By giving us the Torah, Hashem’s most precious commodity, He showed us how special we are to Him.

Before the Creation of the world, nothing existed except for the Torah, which was created 974 generations earlier (*Shabbat* 88b). Since one day in Hashem’s eyes is the equivalent of one thousand years in this world, the Torah existed for thousands of years before Creation. Hashem enjoyed it on High until He favored us with this priceless treasure.

Only through the Torah can we gain knowledge of our Creator. Although it was difficult for Him to part with it, He gave it to us, His Chosen People. The Midrash (*Shemot Rabbah* 33a) offers a fitting analogy to describe the scene at *Matan Torah*:

A king had an only daughter. The time came for her to marry, but he found it extremely difficult to part with his beloved child. What did he do? He found her a fine groom and stipulated that they should set aside a room in their house for him. Whenever he would miss his daughter, he could visit, and this room would be available for his use. Hashem commanded, “They shall make for Me a sanctuary so that I may dwell in their midst” (*Shemot* 25:8). The Torah is Hashem’s sanctuary in this world, our way of connecting to Him, as it says, “And you shall know that I am Hashem” (*Yechezkel* 7:4).

The Chafetz Chaim suggests that the way to acquire faith in Hashem is by imagining the miracles that occurred to our forefathers. Through the power of imagination, one attains true understanding. In the *Haggadah shel Pesach*, we read, “One is obligated to view himself as if he left Egypt.” We did not experience the exile or Exodus from Egypt. However, this is a Torah-mandated mitzvah (*Pesachim* 116b), so it is obviously within our realm to fulfill it. How do we do this? By recalling the events of the past and keeping the halachot pertaining to the festival.

We must utilize the power of our imagination to picture the scene at Sinai, as well. By arousing our emotions, we can elevate ourselves to untold heights, as though we are standing at the foot of the mountain right now. We were all at *Matan Torah* and experienced what happened there. Instead of relating to the events as memory, we must create a vivid picture of them in our minds.

Rabbi Baruch of Mezibuzh, zy”a, the grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, felt a stronger sense of fear regarding Shavuot than Rosh Hashanah. This is surprising; Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, while Shavuot is a holiday when we rejoice, like any other. Although we remain awake on Shavuot night learning Torah, we might also spend a considerable amount of time partaking of dairy delights and other delicacies.

At *Matan Torah*, we were gifted the most precious commodity imaginable. This obligates us to observe everything written in it. One does not refuse a gift offered by the King of all kings. Every year anew, on Shavuot, Hashem gives us this gift once again. Rabbi Baruch of Mezibuzh was filled with awe at this very thought. The level of our fear of Heaven will determine to what extent we accept the Torah. Hakadosh Baruch Hu alone knows the inner workings of man, and only He is aware of who has prepared himself appropriately for *Matan Torah*.

I would like to offer the following analogy to explain the subject of preparing oneself properly for *Kabbalat HaTorah*. A pauper is told that the king will be sending him furniture from the royal palace. The first thing the man will do is get rid of his old, broken furniture. Then he will borrow

money to paint his house and spruce it up so that it will be fitting to contain the wonderful gift offered by the king.

Hashem wants to give us the regal furnishings contained in the Torah. Before accepting the Torah, though, we must first rid ourselves of all negative qualities. Then we will be fitting repositories for this wonderful gift.

A pitiful man once approached me. Although he was fabulously wealthy, he could not find a marriage partner. This was due to his numerous demands and preconditions. Eventually, all the matchmakers gave up on him. At this point, he was ready to marry anyone. I recommended that he recite *Tehillim*, to which he countered that he had no time for such things. One who cannot afford the time for a few chapters of *Tehillim* and a few minutes to lay tefillin is truly a pauper.

A free man is one who breaks loose of the shackles of the *yetzer hara* and controls his passions. A rich man is defined by his spiritual assets. Only one who possesses faith and trust can be considered truly rich (*Chida*).

Therefore, before accepting the delivery of Torah furnishings, one must remove all his old, dusty furniture. These are his negative qualities and thoughts. It is inappropriate to house the Torah in a spiritually poverty-stricken, corrupt body. After one has expunged all forms of negativity from his mind and heart, he becomes purified, and is ready to receive this Divine gift. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says that we should prepare ourselves fittingly to accept the Torah, like a *kallah* who prepares herself to receive her new husband (*Zohar* III, 98a).

The Saba of Kelm (as quoted in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* III, pg. 323) says the forty-nine days of preparation for *Kabbalat HaTorah* correspond to the forty-eight methods of acquiring the Torah. Each day of Sefirat Ha'Omer, we are meant to improve in another area. The good character traits that we adopt become our personal acquisitions and eventually, second nature. When we reach the forty-ninth day, we review all our newly-acquired traits, completing our preparation for *Matan Torah*.

One should not become discouraged, thinking he cannot uproot all his negative character traits. He should invest his energies into at least one area, such as eliminating anger or envy. This will help him more easily uproot all other negative traits, since all one's character traits are connected. *Chazal* say, "If you try to take a lot, you might end up with nothing. But if you try to take a little, you will retain what you have taken" (*Sukkah* 5a). The best way to improve one's character is by focusing on one trait. Through doing so, he will manage to repair everything else (from the teachings of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter).

In the wilderness, "Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting" (*Bamidbar* 1:1). Why do we need to know exactly where Hashem spoke to Moshe? The conditions of Rashbi in the cave give us an insight into this subject. He and his son were alone in the cave for thirteen years. Hashem miraculously caused a carob tree to grow and a spring of water to flow nearby. These sustained him all those years (*Shabbat* 33b). This should reassure us. When we study Torah, we have no need to worry about our livelihood. Our forefathers lived for forty years in the wilderness and were supported by Heaven. Rashbi, too, was filled with faith in Hashem, Who fulfilled his needs most miraculously.

The *pasuk* informs us that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness for the following reason. Despite their desolate surroundings, Bnei Yisrael lived in peace and lacked for nothing. This is because they dedicated their lives to Torah study, symbolized by the Tent of Meeting, as the tent symbolizes Torah (*Berachot* 16a). The wilderness served as one huge *beit midrash*.

The saga of our people in the wilderness teaches us a timeless message. One should not worry about sustenance, for it comes from Above. Certainly, one must make an effort to earn a living. However, he should not allow this to detract from his regular study sessions.

One should prepare himself appropriately for *Matan Torah* by purifying himself for this special occasion. He certainly would not want to be found wearing a pristine new shirt on a filthy body.

I heard an amazing story that pertains to this topic. A man wished to exhume the body of his father, Avraham Cohen, from the cemetery in Meknes, Morocco, and bury it on Har Hazeitim in Eretz Yisrael. This man wanted to be near his father when his own time came. After the reburial, it was discovered that the *Chevrah Kadisha* mistakenly exhumed the wrong Avraham Cohen. Having no choice, the man now paid for his father to be exhumed and brought overseas to be buried on Har Hazeitim, as he had originally intended.

The sons of the other Avraham Cohen contacted him with the following shocking account. Their father, who had passed on approximately thirty years earlier, always told them, and even committed to writing, his wish that when his time came, he should be buried on Har Hazeitim. This was his lifelong dream, which he constantly prayed for. His family, however, was extremely poor and did not have the means to even imagine executing his wish. In a most miraculous twist of Divine intervention, this man merited burial in Eretz Yisrael, on Har Hazeitim.

Every righteous individual who learns and loves the Torah will have the wishes of his heart granted for good. The Torah is the only thing that endures eternally and can give a person true satisfaction.

I was once on the way to a funeral with some colleagues. We could not find the place, so we stopped at a store to ask the proprietress for directions. She herself did not know where the funeral home was located and showed no interest in helping us. We noticed that the sign on her store read "Have your future revealed." This woman believed she had the key to a person's future and gave all sorts of advice and ideas for successful living. However, she had no idea about the vicinity around her. She professed to understand the inner workings of man, but was not interested in anything aside from her profession. Some people are only concerned in asking, "What's in it for me?" Nothing else matters.

At the funeral, the bereaved sons recited the same *Kaddish* said at the conclusion of a tractate. Somebody asked me to explain the connection between a *siyum* on a tractate and death. Hashem enlightened me with the

following answer. *Chazal* say, “Fortunate is the one who comes here (to *Olam Haba*) with his Talmud in hand” (*Pesachim* 50a). When one ends a tractate, he says *Kaddish* at the *siyum* to indicate that this is all he will bring with him to the World to Come. Everything earthly will be left behind, but his Torah study will be his eternally.

One’s sons say *Kaddish* at his funeral, as if telling their late parent: “We, your children, remain behind. Only your spiritual assets accompany you on your final journey.” As long as one lives, he can learn Torah, which translates into eternal treasures. Hashem gave us life and with it, the greatest gift, which is the Torah, comprised of His Names (*Zohar, Shemot* 124a). In order to cleave to Hashem after 120 years, one must do so during his life. This is the only way to be united with Hashem after death.

The Chafetz Chaim would make a daily accounting of every moment (*Chochmat HaMatzpun, Beshalach* pg. 170). Once, his family noticed him weeping bitterly. After repeatedly asking him why, he finally explained that seventeen minutes of his day were unaccounted for. This is a far cry from those who waste hours, days, months, and even years without making any reckoning at all of their time. They certainly do not bewail lost time. The tzaddikim, who appreciate the value of a moment of Torah study, teach us how priceless is every second of our lives. Let us strengthen ourselves in all areas of *avodat Hashem*, in anticipation of the festival of *Matan Torah*.

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Torah is a wonderful gift, which demonstrates Hashem’s tremendous love for us and enables us to love Him, in return.
- ◆ Using the power of the imagination allows us to understand those things which are naturally beyond our comprehension.
- ◆ Each year, as we approach *Matan Torah*, we have a chance to check if we are fitting to receive this wonderful gift. The way to prepare ourselves for this is by improving our character and our service of Hashem. This will enable us to eliminate the dross from within, like a pauper who rids

his home of undesirable furniture in order to make room for the king's gifts.

- ◆ Rabbi Yisrael Salanter states that correcting one negative attribute makes it easier to correct all others. Each day of Sefirat Ha'Omer is designated for uprooting another negative characteristic.
- ◆ The Torah states that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting. This contains a message for all generations: Torah is the purpose of our life. When we subscribe to a life of Torah, we need not worry about our daily sustenance. Bnei Yisrael were sustained for forty years in the wilderness and Rashbi was supported for thirteen years in the cave. This was in merit of his love of Hashem and His Torah.
- ◆ A Moroccan Jew dreamed of burial in Eretz Yisrael. By a twist of (Divinely-ordained) fate, his dream came true. Whoever dreams of closeness to Hashem will see the actualization of his desires.
- ◆ The fact that one recites the same form of *Kaddish* at a *siyum* and at a grave teaches us that the only thing one takes along with him to the Next World is his Torah study.
- ◆ The Chafetz Chaim taught us the value of every moment.



## Proud and Prepared

***“Go to the people and make them ready today and tomorrow... Let them be prepared for the third day”***

***(Shemot 19:10-11)***

The name שבועות (Shavuot) can also be read as “Oaths,” referring to the oath which Bnei Yisrael took when they accepted the Torah with the words, “*Na’aseh v’nishma*” (*Nedarim* 8a). Moshe Rabbeinu forged a

covenant between Bnei Yisrael and Hashem regarding this oath (*Shemot* 24:7-8). Unlike the other nations, Bnei Yisrael unanimously agreed to accept the Torah even before hearing what it contained. Their proclamation of the word “*Na’aseh*” (we will do) twice, gave it the status of an oath. The name שבועות impresses upon us the fact that our fathers, and indeed, we ourselves, stood at Sinai and gave our word to uphold the Torah.

The *pesukim* do not delineate an exact date for *Kabbalat HaTorah*, in contrast to the other festivals, whose dates are clearly spelled out. The reason for this is that the giving of the Torah did not end on the day that it was actually received. Rather, every year, we receive the Torah anew. This is by enriching our understanding of the festival of Shavuot. *Chazal* exhort us that “every day, they (the mitzvot) should be new in your eyes” (*Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei* 537). Every single day, one is required to accept the Torah anew. *Kabbalat HaTorah* was not a historical event; it is an ongoing occasion that we experience on a daily basis. This thought should make the Torah fresh and exciting to us and enflame us with eagerness to uphold it.

On the sixth of Sivan, we not only celebrate *Kabbalat HaTorah*, but we also commemorate the preparation that Bnei Yisrael made in the wilderness in anticipation of this festival. Bnei Yisrael left Egypt steeped in the forty-ninth level of impurity, a short step away from the fiftieth, from which they would never have emerged (*Shelah, Pesachim, Biur HaHaggadah* 3). They needed the forty-nine days of Sefirat Ha’Omer in order to prepare to enter the gates of purity. This indicates that the preparation for receiving the Torah was no less significant than receiving it.

Let us illustrate this idea with the following analogy. A man buys a lottery ticket and is informed that he won the big prize. He is ecstatic and wants to celebrate, but is in a quandary. Does he celebrate the day he was told about his winning, or the day he filled out the lottery ticket? He understands that the day he filled out the ticket is extremely significant,

for had he not bought the ticket in the first place, he never would have had a chance of winning.

Similarly, the Torah is the greatest prize available to mankind. However, had Bnei Yisrael not prepared themselves properly for *Matan Torah* by purging themselves of their spiritual defilement, they would not have merited this tremendous treasure. We count forty-nine days from Pesach to Shavuot to emphasize the fact that these days of preparation are part and parcel of the process of receiving the Torah and, as such, are significant in their own right.

Sefirat Ha'Omer represents the climb upward toward the summit of Sinai. One cannot wake up Shavuot morning and decide to accept the Torah with a coffee and a slice of cheesecake. It is essential to prepare oneself in advance.

Let's continue our previous analogy. There are various types of lottery tickets. The more expensive the ticket, the more valuable the prize one can win. A person who purchases a cheap ticket cannot expect to win the biggest prize.

The days leading up to *Matan Torah* serve as a wake-up call to prepare for this great event. The better one prepares, the more *siyata di'Shemaya* he will be accorded to observe the Torah in all its nuances.

Not everybody is eligible to receive this priceless gift from the King. Only a person who demonstrates his desire to obtain it is given the opportunity to do so. The more effort one invests in receiving the Torah, the more it will become his. The *pesukim* do not clearly state that *Matan Torah* took place on the sixth of Sivan to hint that not everybody merits receiving the Torah on this day. Only those who express their true desire to acquire it will merit doing so.

The Torah was given to Am Yisrael in the wilderness, away from the nations. Why didn't Hashem enact a universal gathering to testify to one and all that the Torah belongs to Am Yisrael alone? Why did He choose

to give it to them in a relatively modest manner, instead of proudly broadcasting to the whole world that Am Yisrael is His Chosen Nation?

“The sayings of Hashem are pure sayings” (*Tehillim* 12:7). The Torah is comprised of Hashem’s Names and, as such, is intrinsically holy (*Nefesh Hachaim* 4:27). When the Torah resides within a wholesome, G-d-fearing person, it uplifts him and increases his level of piety. However, when the Torah resides within one who is empty of good character and espouses skewed attitudes, it does not benefit him at all. He may even misinterpret it and become more corrupt than before. This is in line with *Chazal’s* saying that whoever teaches his daughter Torah is considered teaching her foolishness (*Sotah* 21b). Since she does not have the ability to get to the root of the matter, which is pure and holy, she is likely to interpret it wrongly. This can result in great damage.

A diamond is extremely precious. However, its beauty is revealed only after it has been polished and placed in a fitting setting. When a woman places an expensive diamond ring on a mud-encrusted finger, the diamond not only does not increase her beauty, but the diamond’s splendor is detracted by this sullied hand, which does not deserve to be adorned with such a delicate thing of beauty.

*Chazal* compare a person who is unfitting for Torah to a “golden ring in the nose of a swine” (*Avot* 6:2; *Mishlei* 11:22). Shlomo Hamelech chose specifically this analogy. A golden ring does not belong on a pig, which wallows in the mud and burrows in the refuse. There is no chance that such a ring will remain golden for very long. Although a golden ring is an object of beauty, it not only does not add beauty to a pig, but becomes disgusting as it becomes coated in sludge and slosh.

The Torah is unconditionally holy and pure. However, in order for its sanctity to be felt, it must be contained in a fitting vessel. When it is in an unclean vessel, its beauty becomes concealed. The one who contains it loses more than he gains.

Hashem wanted to give the Torah to Bnei Yisrael in the most perfect, sanctified way. Had the gentiles been present at *Kabbalat HaTorah*, the

impurity that they represented would likely have negatively impacted the event. It might even have created a barrier between Bnei Yisrael and the holy Torah.

“Blessing prevails only on that which is hidden from the eye” (*Ta’anit* 8b). An example of this is the fact that an angel teaches a baby the entire Torah while it is in its mother’s womb (*Niddah* 30b). At that time, the baby is concealed and can thus more easily earn the blessings of the Torah. Similarly, Hashem chose to give the Torah to Bnei Yisrael when they were alone in the wilderness, where they were free of the “evil eye” of the gentiles. When Bnei Yisrael received the Torah at Sinai, the nations became suffused with hatred toward them (*Shabbat* 89a). Had the nations been allowed to witness *Kabbalat HaTorah*, their hatred toward us would be a thousand times greater.

How precious is the holy Torah! By appreciating its value, one is more likely to seek it. He will thereby merit wells of wisdom being opened to him. As he increases his quest for spirituality, he will comprehend Hashem’s truths.



## Gifts of the Present, Gains of the Future

*Kabbalat HaTorah* can be compared to a wedding ceremony. Am Yisrael was like the *chatan*, and the Torah was like the *kallah* (*Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 40). Just as the *chatan* waits for his *kallah* under the *chuppah*, so were Bnei Yisrael commanded to sanctify themselves for three days in anticipation of this Royal Wedding. The families of the wedding party make extensive preparations beforehand. As the wedding date draws near, the preparations reach their peak. The air is electric with excitement.

Bnei Yisrael eagerly anticipated *Matan Torah*. They were told to prepare themselves for three days prior and arrive at the grand event with freshly washed clothes in honor of the Torah. Moshe told them, “Be prepared after a three-day period; do not draw near a woman” (*Shemot* 19:15). Rashi explains that the preparation required was to separate from their wives for three days. Hashem wanted all their thoughts and interests to revolve around the Torah. They were to remain free of all feelings of pleasure involved in mitzvot between man and his wife. In this manner, Bnei Yisrael would realize that the Torah provides the only true pleasure, for it alone is spiritual and holy. By distancing themselves from physical pleasure, they would focus solely on the Torah that they were about to receive.

There is a danger that materialistic pleasures may draw a person away from the spiritual joy inherent in the Torah. His thoughts are not concentrated on Torah alone. The greater one’s level of physical enjoyment, the lesser his satisfaction in spiritual pursuits. Eventually, his delight in Torah may be completely snuffed out. Conversely, when one rids himself of mundane amusements, which last but a brief moment, spiritual satisfaction settles inside him. He seeks to feed this other-worldly hunger, continually offering it sustenance and support.

Upon reading the command to separate from one’s wife, I wondered if Bnei Yisrael were commanded to desist from eating the manna, as well, as it too provided physical pleasure. I found my answer in the Midrash (*Tanchuma, Beshalach* 20): “The Torah was given only to those who consumed the manna.” This means that the manna was a necessary part of *Kabbalat HaTorah*, rather than a contradiction to it. Even though the manna contained every earthly taste, it was sanctified, Divine food. It had the necessary nutrients to elevate Bnei Yisrael, thus empowering them to receive the Torah.

Just as the manna fell from heaven, so was the Torah given to our nation from heaven. The people tasted its sweet taste, “like dough dipped in honey” (*Shemot* 16:31). This taught them that if they would be faithful to the Torah, they would taste its sweet bliss.

People often believe that by disconnecting from materialistic pleasures, they will live a pitiful life of privation. However, reality has proven otherwise. It is precisely when one severs himself from materialism and cleaves to the Torah that he is granted other-worldly satisfaction, which he finds difficult to describe. David Hamelech eloquently expressed this sentiment in calling words of Torah “more desirable than gold, sweet as honey and drippings of nectar” (*Tehillim* 19:11). In contrast, earthly pleasures are like salty water. The more one drinks of them, the greater grows his thirst. He never reaches the point of satisfaction.

We often see righteous people who suffer, while the wicked succeed (*Berachot* 7a). However, one must know that this world is temporary, while the Next World is eternal. If tzaddikim suffer, it is to atone for their few sins or the sins of their generation. They will arrive on High refined of any vestige of impurity and will be ready to receive untold reward. Tzaddikim sit in the World to Come with their crowns upon their heads, basking in the glow of the *Shechinah* (*ibid.* 17a). Life in this world is seventy or eighty years, while *Olam Haba* is eternal. Is anyone foolish enough to prefer a life of comfort in this temporary world over the eternal bliss of the Next?

I can personally testify to fantastically wealthy people who were so depressed, they wanted to commit suicide. This comes as a surprise to most people. If the lives of such people were so full of riches, why would they want to end them? They possessed honor, prestige, and power. They could have had whatever their heart desired.

This is as we have said above. Materialism is like salty water that never sates a person, but just increases his thirst. Millionaires are often dissatisfied with their lot and spend their time trying to obtain the next million. And if they have everything they could want, with no room for more, they are so fed up with it all that they feel like vomiting. They are like a person who feasts on fine delicacies. And feasts. And feasts. Eventually, he is so full of food, he cannot enjoy even the most delicious dish.

Regarding spiritual pleasures, the same principle holds true. The more one partakes of the Torah's delights, the hungrier he is for more. He constantly seeks ways of satiating his hunger. There are many tales of tzaddikim who were so immersed in their Torah study that they did not even realize the passage of time. Their family had to remind them to eat. When asked if they felt hunger or thirst, they replied that the Torah provides the sweetest sustenance they could desire. They felt no inclination to halt their learning in order to eat or drink. The Torah is compared to bread and water, the staples of life, as the *navi* (*Yeshayahu* 55:1) says, "Ho, all who are thirsty, go to the water." Water refers to Torah (*Bava Kama* 17a). *Mishlei* (9:5) says, "Go and eat of My bread." Bread refers to Torah (*Bereishit Rabbah* 70:5).

There are multiple profits to be gained from Torah study. One gains pleasure in this world and increases his reward in the World to Come, where he will sit with a crown and bask in the glory of the *Shechinah*. Conversely, those who pursue materialism lose out on two fronts. They are never fully satisfied with what they have and will also be denied the spiritual rewards of the World to Come, when they will have to give a detailed accounting of how they spent their lives.

Hashem bestowed upon us the wonderful gift of the Torah. Do we appreciate its value? When Bnei Yisrael unanimously proclaimed, "*Na'aseh v'nishma*," they were certainly aware of its greatness. However, ultimately, Hashem had to force them into accepting the Torah (*Shabbat* 88a). They escaped Har Sinai like a child flees from school (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 729).

If Bnei Yisrael understood the worth of the Torah, why was it forced upon them and why were they so happy to depart from the site of *Matan Torah*? This was nothing but the machinations of the *yetzer hara*. Even though one knows how precious the Torah is, the *yetzer hara* suggests that there are more important things out there worth pursuing.

The only way to fight the *yetzer hara* is by the power of the Torah. The more one cleaves to the Torah, the less he is attracted to outside

pleasures. One who immerses in Torah merits Heavenly protection from the temptations of the *yetzer hara* (*Sotah* 21a).

Along these lines, the Sefat Emet offers a novel interpretation of the famous Mishnah, “Make for yourself a Rav and acquire a friend” (*Avot* 1:6). He says that when one makes himself into a Rav in *avodat Hashem*, meaning that he dominates over his baser instincts, he merits acquiring Hashem as his Friend. However, when one fails to protect himself properly and allows his service of Hashem to be dependent on others, he will never come closer to Him.



## Torah – A World of Goodness

Shavuot, as stated previously, is called the festival of *Matan Torah*, from the word *matanah*, which means a gift. Hashem gifted His people the Torah on the sixth of Sivan. A gift is meant to confer pleasure on a person. The Torah, however, is replete with commands and prohibitions. How can the Torah, which is so limiting, be called a gift?

An item can be called a gift if it serves a purpose. When one receives something that is extremely expensive but is useless to him, it can hardly be called a gift.

When one delves into the intricacies of the Talmud, he finds purpose in his learning. Similarly, when one attends a Torah *shiur*, he does not do so out of boredom, but to fill a void. He longs to fulfill his *raison d'être*. The *neshamah* is drawn upward and constantly strives to unite with its Heavenly roots. It thirsts for spirituality and sanctity. When the *neshamah* successfully draws the person to Torah study, it gains a sense of satisfaction. It has successfully fulfilled the purpose for which it was created and descended to this world.

On a visit to Hong Kong, I was approached by a respectable, wealthy woman, who asked that I bless her to have her dream fulfilled, but she did not tell me what that dream was. I stipulated that I bless people only after hearing what it is that they desire. The woman then confided that she lacked for nothing, for she was as rich as Korach, and even owned her own private jet. Nevertheless, she was saturated with such emptiness that she felt no reason whatsoever to wake up in the morning. Whether she stayed in bed or got up, her life would be the same – devoid of meaning and pathetically boring. Her wish, then, was to succeed in committing suicide.

Needless to say, I was terribly shaken by her words. I explained that I didn't own a fraction of her wealth, yet I am the happiest man on earth. This is because I have a mission to accomplish. This gives me a reason to wake up in the morning, despite any setbacks and difficulties I might face.

What makes life worth living? I would like to suggest that the purpose of life is a cause which one lives for, which he constantly strives for. Many people believe it is their mission to increase their holdings. However, when their time will come, they will have to part with all the possessions they amassed over the years through sweat and hard work. Materialism belongs to man only in this temporary world. In contrast, Torah and mitzvot are spiritual acquisitions. As such, they accompany him wherever he goes, both in this world and the Next.

Obviously, everyone needs some materialism in order to exist. Food, sleep, and money are essentials. It is up to each person to decide how much emphasis he places on these commodities. Will he expand his physical aspect by increasing his material possessions, or will he enhance his spirituality by increasing his mitzvot, which have the power to facilitate the fulfillment of his mission in this world?

I told this pitifully rich woman that she felt empty because she had no spirituality in her life. Financial security definitely makes things easier.

But when one's life is one long marathon of running after money, a person quickly runs out of steam and is beset by depression and futility.

Therefore, I suggested she undertake something small but meaningful, perhaps to bake her own challah in honor of Shabbat. She replied that she had never cooked or baked in her life, so she did not believe she would succeed at challah-baking. However, after much encouragement, she agreed to give it a try.

After some time, she returned to me with the following heartwarming account. From the time she began baking her own challot, her life took on new meaning. It gained a dimension of sanctity. This woman, who merited revealing the light in her life, did not suffice with baking challah, but sought more aspects of Judaism to embrace, and eventually became a full-fledged *ba'alat teshuvah*.

The Torah is called a gift because it gives a person a reason to live. When a Jew opens his eyes in the morning, he knows his life has meaning. Even when he is involved in physical pursuits, such as eating and drinking, he knows that this is in order to fortify his body with the energy needed to serve Hashem optimally.

One who devotes himself to Torah and mitzvot experiences indescribable joy. Let us take the mitzvah of Shabbat as an example. Although it contains numerous prohibitions, Hashem calls it "a good gift in My treasury" (*Shabbat* 10b). Those who observe it find delight and sweetness in it, for it is a sample of *Olam Haba*. A Shabbat observer will forego all types of exciting amusements and adventures for the sake of Shabbat. With the first sip of the Kiddush wine, one imbibes the beauty of this day. Once he has tasted its other-worldly flavor, he will refuse to exchange it for anything in the world.

Before giving the Torah to Am Yisrael, Hashem offered it to each of the nations. They asked what was written in it. When He replied, "Thou shall not steal," "Thou shall not kill," or, "Thou shall not commit adultery," they flatly refused it (*Pesikta Rabbah* 21). The gentiles knew very well that Hashem is the all-powerful Master of the world. Moreover, they had been

eyewitnesses to His miracles. But they declined the Torah because they did not find their purpose in it. As such, they felt there was no reason to dedicate their lives to it.

In contrast, Bnei Yisrael declared, “*Na’aseh v’nishma.*” Although they, too, had not yet experienced the Torah’s wonderful properties, they believed that if Hashem was offering it to them, it must have inherent meaning for them. Thus, they wholeheartedly accepted it. David Hamelech adjures us to “taste and see that Hashem is good” (*Tehillim* 34:9). First, one must taste the Torah. After taking this initial step, he is guaranteed to “see that Hashem is good.” The very fact that Hashem conferred upon us the greatest gift this world can offer is proof of His goodness.

I do not mean to imply that one must categorically sever himself from any form of worldly pleasure. In fact, *Chazal* relate that when one arrives at the Heavenly Court, he will be asked if he enjoyed this world. If he replies in the negative, he will be indicted for abstaining from the wonderful world that Hashem created for him (*Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim* 688). Similarly, we are obligated to say, “The world was created for me” (*Sanhedrin* 37a). With this in mind, we should resolve to enjoy the wonderful pleasures this world has to offer, according to the mandates of the Torah.

Hashem wants us to enjoy His world. Toward this end, He created magnificent foliage, flowers, and fruits. He made breathtaking panoramas and amazing animals. The world is bursting with color. This is all in order to bring pleasure to mankind. One’s senses can bring him to a heightened appreciation of Hashem’s wonders. Through them, he takes pleasure in the world that was created for him. But one feels the ultimate pleasure in this world when he follows the path of Torah and mitzvot, thereby sanctifying materialism.

When one takes a drink of water, he makes a blessing both prior to the drinking and afterward. This sanctifies his physical act of drinking, while bringing him one step closer to fulfilling his mission. However, when one

gluttonously eats without thanking the One Who provided him with his food, he spoils the Divine image within himself and loses track of the road toward his destiny.

Hashem did a tremendous act of kindness with us by instructing us to celebrate the sixth of Sivan as the festival of *Matan Torah*. By designating this day as a festival, we connect to the holy day when the Torah originally came down to this world. By reminding ourselves that the Torah is Hashem's gift to us, we become aroused to fulfill His will. In this manner, we will merit arriving in the Next World having fulfilled the purpose for which we were created.



## I Pledge Allegiance

Before conferring the Torah upon Am Yisrael, Hashem offered it to the nations of the world. Bnei Yisrael were the only ones who said, "We will do and we will hear." Why didn't Hashem obligate the nations to accept the Torah, despite their refusal to accept it? Had that been the case, His kingdom would have been complete, and His glory would have filled the entire world. The fact that we alone possess the Torah has produced the hatred and contention of the gentiles, for which we pay a heavy price until this very day.

A diamond is precious because it is rare. There is no doubt that if precious gems would line the streets like common stones, they would plummet in value. The very fact that a diamond is scarce and there is great difficulty involved in mining it from underground lends it significance and worth.

Hashem gifted the Torah to one single nation in order that they safeguard its singularity. The Torah is extremely precious and thus is not fitting for just anyone. It is exclusive for the nation that has the wisdom

to protect it from damage. Just as a toddler cannot be trusted with a purse full of money, so are the other nations incapable of preserving the Torah. They simply do not possess the necessary tools to protect this precious gem. Moreover, were the gentiles to possess the Torah, they would impact Bnei Yisrael negatively. They would claim that since everyone possesses the Torah, it can be amended to one's convenience. The extent of the damage and destruction that would be caused is too great to fathom.

By conferring the Torah on Bnei Yisrael alone, Hashem raised its glory and granted it increased significance. But just as countries fight over properties that contain rich mines of precious resources, so do the nations contend with Am Yisrael over who possesses the truth.

Once, on a visit to Rome, I thought about the Arch of Titus. The plundering of the golden Menorah is etched into it for all to see. The mighty Titus fought the entire world. But one small nation, the Jews, left him with a lasting impression. Of all his battles throughout the world, Titus wished to memorialize specifically the act of taking the Menorah.

This is because nothing could compare to vanquishing Am Yisrael. The Menorah symbolized the light of the Torah, which illuminates the entire world. Titus assumed that by seizing the Menorah, he had extinguished this holy light. He was sorely mistaken. Bnei Yisrael are a resilient people. After the destruction, they returned to their holy Torah with renewed enthusiasm. The vessels of the Beit Hamikdash had been taken, but their connection with the Torah would never be severed.

The word מנורה (Menorah) is a combination of רומה, נ' (Rome, 50). Titus believed that if he seized the Menorah from Am Yisrael, this would herald Rome's victory and cast Bnei Yisrael into the fiftieth level of defilement. However, Bnei Yisrael were rudely awakened by this act and made a careful analysis of their actions. What brought about this terrible disaster? They made a complete turnabout and returned to Hashem, connecting once more to the holy Torah.

The nations of the world are defined by their territories. Entire empires were wiped off the map as their land was sequestered by the enemy. Having no territory of their own, they had nothing to bind them as a nation. In contrast, Bnei Yisrael does not exist only in merit of their land, but because of their Torah. They have been exiled numerous times and sent to the farthest reaches of the world. Nevertheless, “the eternal one of Israel does not lie” (*Shmuel I*, 15:29). Wherever we are dispersed, we proudly bear the title, “Am Yisrael.” It is the Torah that holds us together even as we are scattered throughout the Diaspora.

Certainly, settling Eretz Yisrael and observing the Land-related mitzvot affords us Hashem’s special protection. Nonetheless, our existence does not depend on living in our Land. It rests solely on our Torah study. This is what has enabled us to survive the trials and tribulations of foreign sovereigns. *Chazal* say that one who studies the mitzvot is considered as having observed them (*Chafetz Chaim, Zachor L’Miriam* 22). Thus, learning about the Land-related mitzvot even while in *chutz la’aretz* grants us merit, and we are considered having kept these mitzvot.

When they left Egypt, “Bnei Yisrael were going out with an upraised arm” (*Shemot* 14:8). The word ביד (with an arm) is numerically equal to the word טוב (good), according to the rule of *kollel*. Torah is the only true good (*Avot* 6:3). Bnei Yisrael merited being redeemed from the abominations of Egypt in the merit of the Torah which they would accept. Likewise, we will merit salvation from our present exile when we are united with the Torah and observe its mitzvot.

Our allegiance to the Torah is like a flag, proving to Titus and his ilk that they may have won the battle, but they lost the war. Their victory was only temporary. We have lost our Temple, but we have maintained our identity as the Chosen Nation, who upholds its ties with the Torah, come what may.



## Fleeting Fortunes vs. Eternal Equities

The Romans were incensed that Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon had the temerity to teach Torah in public. As punishment, they wrapped his body in a Sefer Torah doused with fuel and set it aflame. Before he breathed his last, his disciples asked him what he saw. He replied, “I see parchment burning and the letters soaring through the air” (*Avodah Zarah* 18a). He meant that although the Romans succeeded in burning a physical Torah Scroll, they can never destroy the Torah itself. Its letters soar through the air, continuing to endure, for Hashem’s Torah will exist forever.

The nations of the world never tire of trying to take the Torah from Am Yisrael. But they will never succeed. Things may look bleak for the Torah’s future, but its letters are merely “soaring through the air,” waiting for the opportune time to return to us.

I would like to add a different dimension to this Gemara. When a person dies, he leaves all his earthly possessions behind. However, “the letters soar through the air.” These letters are a reference to the Torah he studied and the mitzvot he performed. They alone will escort him heavenward. As the *navi* proclaims, “Your righteousness will precede you” (*Yeshayahu* 58:8). It is only the Torah, called righteousness (*Chullin* 89a), that escorts a person on his final journey and speaks in his defense in the Upper World.

A fantastically wealthy man asked his accountant to summarize all his assets. After a few days, his accountant approached him with a small note. The magnate found the following written on it: “The summation of your assets is three meters of fabric.” The man demanded an explanation. Why hadn’t his accountant listed his vast wealth? The accountant replied, “It is true that in this world you have tremendous wealth. However, when

you leave this world, you will be wrapped in nothing but a piece of cloth. All your possessions will remain behind.”

It is imperative to invest in eternal acquisitions, because these are the only things that will remain with us.



## Emulation Evokes Enmity

The words סיני (Sinai) and שנאה (hatred) are closely related. הר סיני (Har Sinai) is called by this name because together with the Torah, hatred came down to this world (*Shabbat* 89a). The nations are well aware that the entire world rests on the Torah of Bnei Yisrael and without it, the entire world would collapse. We would thus expect the nations to respect Bnei Yisrael for upholding the world. Why, then, is the opposite the case? Why has *Kabbalat HaTorah* triggered hatred and disdain among the gentiles instead of reverence and love?

The incident of Eliyahu Hanavi and the false prophets sheds light on this (*Melachim* I, 18:21-39). In Achav's days, many Jews served Hashem side-by-side with idolatry. Eliyahu castigated them severely for this, demanding to know how long they planned on straddling two worlds. In order to prove, once and for all, that Hashem is the Master of the world and there is none other than Him, Eliyahu offered to make an experiment. This would demonstrate who was really in charge and worth serving.

He instructed the false prophets to bring him two oxen. One would be offered to Hashem, while the other would be offered to the idol. If a fire would descend upon the sacrifice designated for Hashem, this would prove that He was the One to serve. If a fire would descend upon the altar of the idol, this would prove that it was a god.

The false prophets gladly agreed to this suggestion. They produced an ox and attempted to place it on the altar. However, it stood firmly in its

place and refused to budge. Eight hundred and fifty of these prophets were commissioned with this job, but try as they might, they could not move the stubborn ox. Finally, Eliyahu approached it and whispered in its ear that it had nothing to fear in ascending the altar of idolatry. The false prophets would fail in their venture, while a great *kiddush Hashem* would ensue from this incident.

The fact that the ox refused to alight the altar demonstrates that even the animal kingdom recognizes Hashem's sovereignty. They know Who created them and sustains them. This is why the animals burst forth in song, singing praises and thanks to Hashem, each in its own way, as we find in *Perek Shirah*, the compendium of the prayers of all Creation.

The false prophets foresaw that a fire would not descend on their altar, but only onto Eliyahu's. Therefore, they placed a man named Chiyel under their altar, with instructions to kindle a fire which would prove their veracity. When Hashem saw their stubbornness to sustain their sinful stance, He sent a snake to bite this man, who died on the spot (*Yalkut Shimoni, Melachim I, 214*).

This incident is astounding. How could the false prophets hold so tightly to their warped beliefs, trying, until the last minute, to prove their virtue, when they knew very well that Eliyahu was right? This teaches us how clever the *yetzer hara* is. Even when things are as clear as day, it does not surrender in its attempts to blind a person and blur his belief.

Only after Chiyel was put to death did the false prophets begin to see the truth that had been facing them all along. Then Eliyahu stood up and prayed to Hashem to send a fire to accept his offering. When this happened, the false prophets unanimously accepted upon themselves Hashem's rulership, declaring, "Hashem, He is G-d!" (*Melachim I, 18:39*).

How great is the power of the *yetzer hara*! Even when the truth screams out, the *yetzer hara* convinces a person to maintain his sinful ways. Deep in their hearts, the nations know that Am Yisrael's Torah is what keeps the world going: "If My covenant with the day and with the night would

not be; I would not have placed the heavens and earth upon their course” (*Yirmeyahu* 33:25). Nevertheless, instead of acknowledging the service Am Yisrael is doing in upholding the world, the gentiles are filled with senseless rage, which dates back to *Matan Torah*.

*Chazal* reveal a fascinating fact that occurred at the revelation at Sinai (*Zevachim* 116a). At that time, thunder and lightning shook the earth. It seemed like doomsday had come. The gentiles ran in panic to their prophet, Bilaam, and asked if the world was about to be destroyed. Bilaam reassured them that this was not the case. Rather, Hashem was giving the Torah to His nation, as it says, “Hashem will give might (the Torah) to His nation” (*Tehillim* 29:11). The gentiles replied, “May Hashem bless His nation with peace.” This indicates that the gentiles originally respected Bnei Yisrael for the wonderful gift they had been worthy of receiving. However, with the sands of time, this momentous event was forgotten. Not only have the nations ceased offering us their blessings, but they hurl curses and missiles our way. What made them change so drastically?

As the prophet of the nations, Bilaam had the power to utilize the moment of the gentiles’ goodwill toward Bnei Yisrael for their benefit, as well as ours. He could have capitalized on the awe-inspiring event to teach the nations that the world exists in the merit of Am Yisrael’s Torah. He could have trained them to revere this unique people. Instead, he hurried to cool off their enthusiasm and replace it with envy and hatred. Rather than adopt an attitude of adulation for the Chosen Nation, they embraced a dogma of derision, disparagement, and destruction.

Bilaam Harasha embodied all the powers of impurity. The Midrash relates that he received prophecy to the same degree as Moshe Rabbeinu (*Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 28). Notwithstanding the great heights he could have reached and the tremendous good he could have accomplished, Bilaam chose to deny the truth and cleave to evil. Since he was the prophet of the gentiles, he made every attempt to influence his followers with his wickedness. Furthermore, he tried to spoil the

*kedushah* of Am Yisrael by suggesting to Balak methods of causing them to sin in immorality (*Bamidbar* 31:16).

Before his death, Bilaam prayed, “May my soul die the death of the upright” (ibid. 23:10). He wished to die in sanctity and purity. How could he live a life of debauchery yet ask to die like the righteous?

In his heart of hearts, Bilaam recognized the truth. However, he chose to deny it, similar to the false prophets, who knew Eliyahu was right but clung to their stance until the last minute. The hatred that descended at *Matan Torah* was promulgated by Bilaam. Instead of channeling his jealousy of Am Yisrael into positivity, by encouraging his followers to admire this unique nation who upholds the world with its Torah, he directed his jealousy toward hate and hostility. This is in direct contrast to Yitro, the priest of Midian, who also perceived Am Yisrael’s greatness and hurried to join them under the wings of the *Shechinah*.

There is another central theme of the gentiles’ enmity toward Am Yisrael. Before the giving of the Torah, everyone did as he pleased. Aside from the Seven Noachide Laws, each person acted as he was accustomed to, without having to give an accounting for his actions.

However, as soon as Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah, the entire world became sanctified. The greater Bnei Yisrael grew in spiritual attainments, the more recognizable was the low level of the nations, who occupied themselves with idleness and frivolities (*Shabbat* 89b). The gentiles felt threatened by Bnei Yisrael. They resented this lofty people for giving them a guilty conscience, instead of appreciating their great achievements in enriching the world with the Torah.

The animosity of the nations defies logic. Nevertheless, it is alive, because Hashem has so decreed (*Sifri, Beha’alotcha* 11). Hashem implanted hatred in the very DNA of the gentiles in order to create a barrier between them and us. This hatred reminds us that we have no connection whatsoever with the culture of the gentiles.

As long as Bnei Yisrael maintain their position as “a nation that dwells alone and is not counted among the nations” (*Bamidbar* 23:9), the gentiles will respect them. However, as soon as Bnei Yisrael begin copying their way of life, their latent animosity comes to the fore. It bursts out in full fury. This hatred should serve as a warning to Bnei Yisrael that they have nothing to find among the gentiles.

Some people profess that if we emulate the nations and even assimilate among them, this will ensure that they like us. Instead of standing out with our distinct Jewish garb, perhaps we should dress more similarly to them. This thought is based on a misconception. It is a law that Eisav hates Yaakov (*Sifri, Beha'alotcha* 11). As said above, their intrinsic hatred serves to keep us separate.

When Bnei Yisrael cling to the Torah and preserve their Jewish identity, the reverberations of Yaakov's voice render Eisav's hands immobile (*Bereishit Rabbah*).



## The Fire of Torah

***“It was at the end of forty days and forty nights  
that Hashem gave me the two stone tablets”***

*(Devarim 9:11)*

When the time came to give the Torah, Hashem commanded Moshe to ascend to heaven in order to receive it from Him. Why did Hashem ask Moshe to spend forty days on High? Surely, Hashem could have revealed Himself to Moshe and given him the Torah while he was on earth. What was the purpose of bringing him up to heaven?

Moshe's ascent to heaven was a daunting feat. He had to fiercely defend his cause, as the angels wished to scorch him with their breath (*Shabbat*

889b). Moreover, he abstained from food or drink for the duration of his stay (*Devarim* 9:9).

I would like to explain this based on the words, “If you go in My statutes” (*Vayikra* 26:3). Rashi says this means that “you should toil in Torah study.” Torah is not just another form of worldly wisdom. Moshe’s ascent to heaven to acquire the *luchot* teaches us that the Torah is acquired only through suffering and challenges. When one withstands his suffering and overcomes his challenges, he has truly “ascended to heaven.”

The angels were aghast when they saw Moshe in their midst. “What is a mere mortal doing here?!” they demanded. They even wanted to kill him. This teaches us that at times, one must literally sacrifice his life for the sake of Torah. Throughout the generations, our nation has tenaciously upheld the Torah, preferring to sacrifice their life rather than transgress its laws.

Ultimately, Moshe was saved from the angels’ wrath, in merit of the Torah, which protects us from all harm. In order to teach us these lofty lessons, it was imperative for Moshe to ascend to heaven amidst great difficulty. He thereby taught us the meaning of dedicating our lives to Torah.

We are adjured to “be careful with their (the Sages’) glowing coal, lest you become burnt” (*Avot* 2:10). This is because the Torah is compared to fire (*Tanchuma, Yitro* 16). Hashem knew that were He to convey the Torah to Bnei Yisrael directly, they were liable to become scorched from its scathing properties. Therefore, He first transmitted it to Moshe. Hearing it from Moshe and not Hashem Himself would obviate any harm, as it would not be too overwhelming for them.

Since the Torah is compared to water, let us use the following analogy for *Matan Torah*. Water in a kettle on the flame is boiling hot. However, when it is poured into a cup, it loses some measure of its original heat. One cannot compare the heat of the water in the kettle to the heat of the water in a first, second, or third cup into which it is subsequently poured.

Parenthetically, this is the basis for using hot water on Shabbat (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 318).

After Moshe learned the entire Torah in heaven from the mouth of Hashem Himself, the words of Torah lost a measure of their intensity. We long to retrieve the power of Torah in its original form. How do we accomplish this? Through expending effort in Torah study. Bnei Yisrael were not worthy of receiving the Torah at Sinai in its full force, for they had not yet expended effort in learning it, and they would have likely become scorched by its intensity.

Moshe spent forty days and nights on High, studying Torah amidst great privation and hardship. Then he transmitted the Torah to his beloved people. When we put effort into understanding the Torah, we merit retrieving its original power. Hashem watches as we get “heated up” in our Torah arguments and takes pleasure in this.

This, then, is another reason why Moshe had to ascend to heaven to receive the Torah. Had it come directly to earth, the world would have been in danger of becoming destroyed, due to its intensity. Coming from Moshe, however, it was made more accessible to Bnei Yisrael. In this manner, they were able to accept it with open arms, averting any harm.

The Arizal explains a mystical facet of Creation in a similar way: Hashem sustains our world through the All-encompassing Light. This light makes its way to us through the ten *sefirot*. Without these “screens,” the light would simply destroy our world with its brilliance. This can be compared to a person wearing sunglasses in order to protect his eyes from the glare of the sun.

The World to Come was created with the letter ׀, while this world was created with the letter ׀ן (*Menachot* 29b). Our job is to connect both worlds through toiling in Torah. Moshe demonstrated this by ascending to heaven in order to receive the Torah. It is our mission to elevate the Lower World and bring it closer to the Upper World, by the power of the Torah. This is the way we bring the world to perfection. *Chazal* relate that at *Matan Torah*, Hashem connected heaven and earth as if through a kiss.

This implanted in Bnei Yisrael the energy to connect the World of ׳ with the World of ׳ through the power of the Torah. We have the potential to fulfill this mission only by the merit of Moshe's ascent to heaven and Hashem's descent to earth.

The Gemara relates a fascinating incident (*Yerushalmi, Chagigah* 2:1): At the *brit* of his son, Elisha, Avuyah observed a tremendous fire engulfing the table of the luminaries, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. Upon perceiving the profound power possessed by Torah scholars, he immediately vowed to sanctify his newborn son to a life of Torah. Rather than have altruistic intentions, Avuyah was interested in glorifying himself and his son by the honor accorded to Torah Sages. Since his motives were warped, he was unsuccessful. His son eventually defected and became "Acher," meaning "Other," indicating that he had left the fold (*Chagigah* 15a).

Those who are involved in the back-and-forth discussion of Torah study are emblazoned with enthusiasm and sanctity. Their interactions are termed "*ritcha d'Orayta*," which literally means "the boiling heat of the Torah." This term is most apt, since Torah is compared to fire. The deeper one delves in Torah, the stronger it boils within him, until it reaches the heat of its original state. One who learns Torah לשמה (for its own sake) is learning Torah למשה (for Moshe). He resembles Moshe, who learned Torah directly from Hashem. However, when one learns Torah to bring himself honor, the Torah becomes an all-consuming fire which scorches the one who studies it.

At Creation, the world was flooded with the All-encompassing Light (*Otzrot Chaim*). This light reached to the very ends of the world (*Chagigah* 12a). However, Hashem diminished the light in the world and concentrated it into the Torah (*Shelah HaKadosh, Toldot Adam*). The Torah is the blueprint of the world, as Hashem "looked into the Torah and created the world" (*Zohar* II, 161a). It is within our power to bring back this great light so that it can once again illuminate the world, as it did at Creation. The deeper one digs in the mines of Torah, the more light he will reveal.

Torah is like a vault containing limitless light. We open this vault by toiling in Torah. With the right combination, one can unlock a wealth of light and goodness. Who would forego the opportunity to accomplish this?



## Selective Memory

Rabbi Aharon Kotler, zt”l, Rosh Yeshiva of Lakewood, asked why we do not have a specific mitzvah to mention *Kabbalat HaTorah* on a daily basis, as we do regarding the Exodus from Egypt. Bnei Yisrael were redeemed from Egypt in order to receive the Torah. Why doesn't the Torah emphasize remembering *Matan Torah* to the same extent as it emphasizes remembering the Exodus from Egypt?

The festival of Shavuot is called *Zman Matan Torateinu* (the time of the giving of our Torah) (*Shemoneh Esrei*, Shavuot). The word *Matan* derives from *matanah*, a gift. Since Hashem is Sovereign over all worlds, His gift is the best gift possible. When a king confers a gift upon his friend, he will not suffice with some cheap trinket. On the contrary, he will give him an expensive item befitting the stature of the king. The king's family themselves all wear fine quality jewelry. It is self-understood that they would never wear costume jewelry of inferior quality; this does not befit their royal status.

Similarly, Hashem is the King of the entire world. He owns everything and is in charge of everything. If He created the Torah and gifted it to His children, it is obviously a one-of-a-kind gift, extremely rare and valuable. A gift is bound by an expiration date; as soon as one leaves this world, he can no longer enjoy it. In contrast, the pleasure of the Torah is not bound by time, but accompanies a person in this world as well as the Next. It is beyond the bounds of physicality and provides limitless pleasure to those who study it.

Let us picture the following scene: A king tells his good friend that on this-and-this date, he will give him an extremely precious gift in acknowledgement of their strong friendship and the man's devotion to his king. It is self-understood that the king's friend has no need to mark off the date on his personal calendar, as it is etched into his heart. He does not forget it for a moment, due to his overwhelming eagerness for its arrival. A *chatan* and *kallah* have no need to mark off their wedding day in their personal calendars, because they are constantly thinking about it. Hashem gave us the Torah on the sixth of Sivan. Since the Torah is so precious to us, we have no need to mention the date it was given to us on a daily basis, as its very essence is etched into ours.

The Midrash (*Pesikta Zutrata, Va'etchanan* 11:1) adjures us, "Every day, they (words of Torah) should be considered new to you." One should daily envision himself at the foot of Sinai. This will make the words of Torah precious to him. He will view mitzvot in a new light. He will then fulfill them with freshness and excitement, not out of lethargy and routine. Because it is our duty to reaccept the Torah anew each day, there is no need to mention the original date of *Matan Torah*.

The Exodus served as a means for us to receive the Torah. By mentioning the Exodus each day, we arouse within ourselves memories of *Kabbalat HaTorah*. In the final analysis, the Torah itself needs no special commemoration, as it is the essence of our lives. Does a person need a reminder to breathe, eat, or drink? Since his life depends on these acts, they come naturally to him. Similarly, it is unnecessary to mention *Matan Torah*, since our lives hinge upon this event. We should naturally be drawn after the Torah, for the Torah and mitzvot "are our life and the length of our days and in them we will meditate day and night" (*Ma'ariv*).

The Torah is a book of good advice, a manual for successful living (*Zohar* II, 82b). When one studies Torah *l'shem Shamayim* and lives by its tenets, he becomes cloaked in a spirit of purity and wisdom. He gains the knowledge to separate between right and wrong. His every action will be in accordance with the Torah, and he thereby memorializes the day it was given on a constant basis. I would like to suggest that one reason for the

plethora of mitzvot that Hashem gave us is to keep our mind on the Torah at all times.

I once heard the following illustrative anecdote. A man in England was addicted to the lottery. Every day, he would fill in the same numbers, with the hope that one day, he would hit the jackpot. On one occasion, he had to go out and asked his wife to fill in his numbers for him.

Upon returning home, he was pleasantly surprised to hear that his numbers had won. Excitedly, he rushed to relate the happy news to his wife. They had turned into millionaires in a brief instant. However, his jubilation was short-lived. One look at his wife's face indicated that something was amiss. She had simply forgotten to fill in the numbers on the lottery ticket. The man stared at her in shock; how could she forget something so important? Their sorrow was tremendous as their entire world turned black.

The desire to win the lottery was this man's drive in life. He never forgot to fill in a lottery ticket. His wife, however, had other things on her mind. This is why she did forget.

If one invests his thoughts into one specific matter, he needs no reminder about it. He is preoccupied with it every minute of every hour of the day. Those who fear Hashem do not need to be reminded about *Matan Torah*, for the Torah permeates their very beings. They feel as though they are constantly receiving it anew at Har Sinai.



## Investment and Interest

Rivers of words have been written about *Matan Torah*. Stacks of *sefarim* depict this momentous event. However, we are still very far from understanding this concept.

In heaven, Moshe saw each generation and its Torah teachers (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 23:5). He learned with Hashem everything that each Jew would reveal in the future (*Vayikra Rabbah* 22:1). At that time, Moshe Rabbeinu saw Hashem attaching crowns to the letters of the Torah. He asked what this was about. Hashem replied that Rabbi Akiva would expound on each crown piles of halachot. Moshe Rabbeinu was so impressed by Rabbi Akiva's diligence and broad knowledge of Torah that he asked Hashem to allow Rabbi Akiva to be the transmitter of Torah in his stead. Even Moshe Rabbeinu, who brought us the Torah, felt small in comparison to its sanctity and profundity. He therefore felt unfit to give it to Am Yisrael. The Torah is so holy and vast that its essence is beyond our comprehension.

Of one thing we can be assured. The extent to which a gift's greatness is felt depends on its recipient. One's perception of the gift of Torah is commensurate with his prior preparation to receive the Torah and the efforts he makes in learning it. Hashem placed the Torah in a corner, as it were. Whoever wishes can have it for the taking. Each person gains his share of the Torah according to his dedication and desire. The more one asks for, the greater the portion he will receive.

The Ramban (*Vayikra* 23:36) contends that Shavuot is an extension (עצרת) of Pesach. Just as Sukkot is extended by the day of Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah (*Bamidbar* 29:35), so is Shavuot the last day of Pesach, with Sefirat Ha'Omer serving as the intermediary days of Chol Hamoed. The word עצרת (Atzeret) can be divided to spell עת צר (a short time). Within a brief time, one can advance in spirituality, just as on the

festivals of Shavuot and Simchat Torah. It all depends on how one prepares for this.

Climbing the heights of Torah is not bound to specific times of the year, such as the holidays. Rather, one is capable of scaling the mountains of Torah and fear of Heaven at any given moment. Even “a short time” which is barely discernible can serve as the opportunity for change. One’s desire determines if he will indeed utilize the prospects at his disposal as opportunities for growth.

All the ink in the world is like a drop in the sea compared to the Torah wisdom of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai (*Masechet Sofrim* 15:8). If this is the case regarding the Torah knowledge of this one righteous individual, how can we expect to fathom the depth of the Torah itself, which is broader than the land and vaster than the sea?

For learning two halachot from him, David called Achitophel, “My teacher, my guide, my intimate” (*Avot* 6:3). David understood that each halachah contains infinite wisdom and is capable of building worlds. The tremendous gratitude he felt toward Achitophel for this is expressed in David’s description of him. *Chazal* say one night of David Hamelech’s Torah study was as precious to Hashem as one hundred years of Torah study of an ordinary *talmid chacham* (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel* 1:129). Nevertheless, David felt indebted to Achitophel for revealing to him two halachot. How profound is the Torah that possesses a plethora of halachot.

The following account reveals how beloved David’s Torah study was (*Shabbat* 30a). David asked Hashem to tell him when he would die. Although Hashem does not generally reveal this, He informed David that it would be a Shabbat. David was loath to die on the day of rest and joy. He therefore requested an additional day of life and asked to die on the following day. Hashem replied that Shlomo Hamelech would begin his kingdom on that day, and one king cannot rule simultaneously with another. When David heard this, he asked to be taken one day earlier.

Hashem refused this request, as well, saying that David's Torah study was so precious to Him that He did not want to miss even one day of it.

Despite David's vast Torah knowledge, or maybe because of it, he was extremely enthusiastic over the two halachot that Achitophel revealed to him. A person who appreciates the depth of the Torah revels in discovering new insights in it. He will "delve in it and delve in it," for he truly understands that "everything is in it" (*Avot* 5:22).

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi expounds on Moshe's ascent to heaven to receive the Torah. The angels demanded, "What is a human being doing among us?!" Hashem instructed Moshe to respond, but he was too frightened to do so, lest they scorch him with their breath. Hashem then told him to hold fast to the Throne of Glory and offer a fitting reply, guaranteeing him that he would not be harmed (*Shabbat* 88b).

Why was Moshe afraid of the angels? He had ascended to heaven only by Hashem's command. Certainly, Hashem would protect him. Moreover, he was already on High, the place of the angels, and was still alive. Why was he so afraid that at this point the angels would suddenly scorch him?

When Moshe originally arrived on High, he was unaware of the great powers he possessed, in merit of the Torah that he was learning and about to bring down to Bnei Yisrael. Thus, he became extremely afraid when he had to contend with the angels. He was a mere mortal of flesh and blood, and the angels were completely spiritual entities. Moshe was afraid that he had some deficiency which would spell his doom were he to enter into a debate with the angels.

Hashem told Moshe to hold tightly to His Throne of Glory. *Glory* refers to Torah (*Avot* 6:3). Torah is a "tree of life to those who grasp it, and its supporters are fortunate" (*Mishlei* 3:18). The word אָחַז (grasp) is numerically equivalent to twenty-two, corresponding to the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, of which the Torah is comprised. The merit of the Torah saved Moshe from the angels.

Rabbi Yosef testified that if not for the day of *Matan Torah*, he would be like any other Yosef in the market-place (*Pesachim* 68b). It was the event at Sinai that made him the giant he was. *Matan Torah* elevates a person. As we said earlier, the value of this gift is conditional on the price one pays in anticipation and preparation for it.



## Shavuot – Gems



### First and Foremost

Many of the commentators ask why we celebrate the festival of *Matan Torah* on Shavuot as opposed to Yom Kippur. The *luchot* delivered on Shavuot were smashed. It was the second set of *luchot* which were given on Yom Kippur that remained with Bnei Yisrael (*Ta'anit* 30b). Wouldn't it then be more fitting to celebrate this holiday on Yom Kippur?

Although the original *luchot* were broken, their letters hovered in the air. Had they returned to their source, Moshe would never have succeeded in bringing them back down to earth. Thus, we celebrate Shavuot for the letters of the Torah that came down to us on this day. Am Yisrael exerted tremendous effort in reinstating these letters, whose sanctity was greater than that of the letters of the second *luchot*, as the first ones were written by Hashem Himself.



## A Joyous Reception

Since Shavuot and Simchat Torah both commemorate the giving of the Torah, why are these days not celebrated as one?

A person better appreciates the value of a gift after enjoying it for some time. Once he uses it and sees how practical it is, it becomes meaningful to him and he can fully value it. Only after Bnei Yisrael received the Torah on Shavuot and spent time “getting acquainted” with it, were they able to rejoice in it, as they do on Simchat Torah.

When one utilizes the Torah to improve his character, like one who derives benefit from a recently-received gift, he is ecstatic over it a thousand times more than had it remained forlorn in the Ark. We celebrate Simchat Torah after the Yamim Nora'im, for these are the days when Hashem is especially close to us and affords us the opportunity to refine our character. Learning Torah throughout the year, and specifically on the Yamim Nora'im, brings a person untold joy.

Shavuot falls during the weeks when the *parshiyot* of *Bechukotai*, *Bamidbar*, *Naso*, and *Beha'alotcha* are read. The initials of בחוקותי and מדבר (*Bechukotai* and [*Ba*]midbar) spell the word במ (in them), an allusion to the mitzvah “ודברת במ – You shall speak in them (words of Torah)” (*Devarim* 6:7). The initials of the *parshiyot* נשא and בהעלותך (*Naso* and *Beha'alotcha*) spell בן (*ben* – son), a reference to a *ben Torah*. One who involves himself in Torah study merits becoming the true *ben Torah*. Whoever lives by the statutes of the Torah (*Bechukotai*) and makes himself humble as the desert (*Bamidbar*) is elevated by Hashem to untold heights of Torah and *yirat Shamayim*.



## Hardening Our Hearts – The Easy Road to Success

Although Bnei Yisrael were at the bottom of the spiritual ladder when they left Egypt, they were saved in merit of the Torah that they would in the near future accept (*Shemot* 3:12, see *Rashi*). At the Exodus, Bnei Yisrael expressed their deep desire to receive the Torah. This earned them the merit of redemption.

Similarly, the sea was split in merit of Bnei Yisrael's future acceptance of the Torah. "And the water was for them a wall, on their right and on their left" (*ibid.* 14:22). Rabbeinu Bachya (*ibid.* 14:21) states that the waters turned into walls of stone. Why did the waters turn specifically into stone as opposed to anything else?

The *luchot* were also made of stone (*ibid.* 31:18), as was the Mizbe'ach in the Beit Hamikdash (*Zevachim* 61b). What is the symbolism of the stone that accompanied Am Yisrael through the sea, at *Kabbalat HaTorah*, and even for the Avodah in the Beit Hamikdash?

Stone is an extremely strong element. The fact that these central pillars in Jewish history were made of stone teaches us that one must make his heart hard as stone to the suggestions of the *yetzer hara*. Hashem gave man the choice to follow his *yetzer hatov* or his *yetzer hara*. Although He commanded us to "choose life" (*Devarim* 30:19), one has the ability to choose his path in life. The struggle between the two inclinations is constant. In order to successfully overcome one's *yetzer hara*, he must make his heart as hard as stone to keep out this trespasser. Bnei Yisrael are called a "stiff-necked nation" because they have the power to say no to the *yetzer hara*.

The smashing of the original *luchot* and the carving of the second set teaches us an invaluable lesson. We have two choices: Either we break the *luchot* through our sins, or we hold them close to our hearts through smashing our passions and negative character traits. The word אבן

(stone) is numerically equivalent to the word גן (garden), an allusion to Gan Eden. One who smashes his evil inclination earns his share in Gan Eden. However, if he smashed the *luchot* with his wrongdoings, his personal גן will be transformed to דן (judgment), the *gematria* of אבן, according to the rule of *kollel*. Instead of enjoying Heavenly reward, he will face Heavenly indictment for his misdeeds and may find himself in Gehinnom instead of Gan Eden.

Stone is the foundation for building the most dazzling edifices. However, it can be misused to harm and destroy. The decision is up to man. Will he build himself, or will he sever himself from his heritage?

After taking an example from water that etched holes in a stone, Rabbi Akiva decided to devote his life to Torah study. He declared, “If water can carve a niche in hard stone, surely the powerful words of Torah can penetrate the heart of stone within me” (*Aderet d’Rabbi Natan* 6:2).

The word אבנים (stones) is comprised of the words אב, בנים (father, sons). This should offer us encouragement in our eternal inner battle. If we make the effort to harden our hearts as stone against the *yetzer hara*, and instead live by the dictates of the stone *luchot*, we will draw down Hashem’s sympathy, and He will act toward us like a father to a son. He will grant us the *siyata di’Shemaya* to overcome all obstacles strewn in our path.



## Happy New Year

The *sefarim* say that learning Torah on the night of Shavuot is preferable to learning Torah on the night of Hoshana Rabbah. Why? Just as there is a new year for the months and a new year for the fruit trees, so is there a new year for Torah. This is the day of Shavuot. This is why Torah study on Shavuot is more significant than on any other day of the

year. One who exerts himself to study Torah on Shavuot night, beyond the point of exhaustion, demonstrates his innate love for Torah and his simple faith that he will receive the Torah anew on this day. Certainly, one's Torah study on Shavuot night draws down Heavenly blessing upon his Torah study during the entire forthcoming year. This is why it is so significant.



## Every Minute Momentous

Many people visit the Kotel, Me'arat Hamachpeilah, the graves of tzaddikim, and other such holy sites. The Torah was given at Har Sinai and that is where we became the Chosen Nation. Why, then, isn't it included in their itinerary?

*Kabbalat HaTorah* is not consigned to any specific place or time. It is relevant wherever a person finds himself. Har Sinai was never considered a place for prayer because Bnei Yisrael take Har Sinai with them wherever they go. It is our obligation to carry with us a virtual Har Sinai, wherever we go and whatever we do.

Wherever one sits and studies Torah, that spot is transformed into Har Sinai. Similarly, when one observes a mitzvah that was given on Sinai, he is bringing Har Sinai into his environment. By imagining ourselves standing at the foot of Har Sinai, the words of Torah will be new in our eyes every day (*Pesikta Zutrata, Va'etchanan*).

The son of Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, hy"d, once wanted to make his father happy, so he bought him a pair of lace-up shoes. Some time passed, but Rabbi Elchonon did not wear the shoes. When asked why, he said that it was a shame to waste a few precious moments each day on tying the shoes, as this would take away precious time from Torah study (*Ohr Elchonon* pg. 221). Since he considered each moment of life a reenactment

of *Matan Torah*, he made sure not to let any moment slip into oblivion. In his view, one lost moment here and one lost moment there accumulates into a large portion of life wasted.



### **The Three-ply Cord**

“Two hold on to a garment” (*Bava Metzia 2a*). We could say that when we connect to the Torah, we connect to Hashem Himself, for He is connected to the Torah. Thus, when Am Yisrael and Hashem “hold on to a garment,” meaning when we are connected to the Torah, which is intrinsically connected to Hashem, we are then also connected to Him. This is the meaning of the proclamation in the *Zohar* (II, 90b), “Hakadosh Baruch Hu, the Torah, and Israel are one.”



# Yemei Bein Hametzarim



## Reconstruction

The destruction of the Beit Hamikdash began in Tevet, when our enemies besieged Yerushalayim (*Melachim* II, 25:1). In the month of Tammuz, they breached the wall of Yerushalayim (*Yirmeyahu* 52:7), and in Av, they set the Beit Hamikdash aflame (*ibid.* vs. 12-13). Thus, the three months of Tevet, Tammuz, and Av are designated for misfortune. These were the months when Hashem's wrath raged against Am Yisrael and the forces of destruction were in control.

The calamity of Tevet heralded an era of tragedy. This can be compared to a cancerous cell that spreads rapidly throughout the body. As soon as Bnei Yisrael's quota of sin reached the maximum level, Hashem's anger was kindled against them. The burning of the Beit Hamikdash was not long in coming.

Let this not cast us into a state of depression. Just like these months signal adversity, so do they contain the sparks of salvation. This is on condition that Bnei Yisrael do complete *teshuvah* and rectify those deeds which caused the destruction. These months are characterized by Hashem's concealment. However, with our turnabout, Hashem will lift the curtain of obscurity and reveal to us His shining countenance (*Zechariah* 8:16-19).

These months demonstrate either darkness and despair or light and love. Our actions determine how these months will look. The *parshiyot* of *Korach*, *Chukat*, and *Balak* are read during the weeks of Bein Hametzarim. This is most fitting, as they teach us to beware of the sins that caused the destruction: envy, slanderous speech, and arrogance. Moreover, these *parshiyot* discuss the land-related mitzvot, as well as various Torah statutes. If we are remiss in upholding the Torah's tenets, we are likely to incur the suffering of such *resha'im* as Balak and Bilaam, who brought untold devastation upon our nation.

Hashem deals with us measure for measure. When Bnei Yisrael unjustifiably refuse to obey the Torah's dictates, Hashem sends enemies to strike them with no valid reason. Let us take Balak as an example. Bnei Yisrael did nothing to provoke him, for they were commanded not to do battle with his nation of Moav. Nevertheless, Balak sought ways and means of destroying them and sent emissaries to Bilaam, to help him in his diabolical plans.

It is uncanny how these two rivals, Balak and Bilaam, suddenly made peace in order to band together against their common enemy, Bnei Yisrael. What possessed Balak to attack Bnei Yisrael in the first place? This was the result of Bnei Yisrael's wanton neglect of the mitzvot. Conversely, when Bnei Yisrael observe the mitzvot unconditionally, they find favor in the eyes' of the nations, without any logical reason.

*Parashat Shelach* delineates the severity of slanderous speech. This caused the destruction of both Batei Mikdash. In the wilderness, Bnei Yisrael wept over the spies' ominous report of Eretz Yisrael. The date was the ninth of Av. *Lashon hara* is an extremely severe sin, rooted in envy, arrogance, and baseless hatred. Hashem was enraged at their behavior and proclaimed, "On this day, you wept for nothing. I will give you a reason to cry on this day" (*Ta'anit* 29a). Korach teaches us the deleterious effect of envy and arrogance. These malignant traits festered within him, until he staged an all-out war against Moshe and Aharon. His ignominious end should give us pause to reflect on the severity of these negative traits. Balak and Bilaam, too, were motivated to fight against Bnei Yisrael by

their fierce pursuit of glory. How despicable are the traits of envy and arrogance, and how painful are their offshoots!

Instead of pursuing imagined glory, let us conduct ourselves with humbleness. This is indicated in *parashat Chukat* by the words, “A man who will die in a tent” (*Bamidbar* 19:14). It is our obligation to sacrifice ourselves “in the tent of Torah,” learning it with self-effacement and humility (*Berachot* 63b).

One would do well to consider his purpose in this world. All earthly pursuits are meaningless, for it is only the Torah that will remain with a person after his death.

One morning, a world-class businessman called me up. He related that he had invested most of his assets in a business deal that went sour. The bank threatened foreclosure if he did not hurry to pay his debts. This man had invested sixty-five years of his life in this business and now everything had gone down the drain. In contrast, one who devotes his days to Torah and mitzvot is making a sound investment. As he leaves behind all his earthly possessions, he takes the dividends of Torah and mitzvot with him to the World of Truth.

The words, “A man who will die in a tent” contain a command to each of us. It is our obligation to slaughter our passion for worldly possessions and our pursuit of pride. Instead, let us immerse ourselves in Torah study through humility. This will enable us to earn true, eternal acquisitions (*Kovetz Igrot Chazon Ish* vol. I).

A perusal of these *parshiyot* read in Tammuz will open our eyes to the truth and enable us to live by it. If we truly desire to connect to good and abandon evil, Hashem will transform the concealment of these days into revelation and great light. Eventually, we will merit the arrival of Mashiach, may it be speedily in our day, Amen.



## In Perfect Unity

The Rambam (*Hilchot Ta'anit* 1:2-3) says that when Bnei Yisrael experience misfortune, the entire congregation should make a personal accounting of their deeds in order to understand the reason for it. This will bring them to do *teshuvah* and eventually merit salvation from their troubles. The purpose of suffering is to bring us to *teshuvah*. As soon as this is accomplished, Hashem removes His wrath from His nation and showers them with love.

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Yeshayahu* 499) relates a fascinating fact, in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak: Before Mashiach arrives, the nations of the world will incite one another. The king of Persia (modern-day Iran) will fight the Western countries. The king of the Arabs will confer with the king of Edom (modern-day USA) regarding how to cope with Iran. However, the advice of the United States will prove unbeneficial. Then the king of Iran will come and destroy the entire world. All the nations of the world will be stunned and in pain, similar to labor pains. Am Yisrael, who will be in the midst of it all, will be utterly perplexed and incapable of doing anything about it.

Then Mashiach will arrive and calm them down. He will tell them not to fear, for their salvation is near. This ultimate salvation will not be like the first one, which was followed by suffering. With Mashiach's arrival, we will no longer experience servitude to the nations.

Bnei Yisrael understood that the first Beit Hamikdash had been destroyed due to their transgressing the three cardinal sins. They therefore made an accounting of their deeds and mended their ways. Yirmeyahu Hanavi explained that this was a temporary exile of seventy years, after which Hashem would rebuild the Beit Hamikdash and rest His Presence once more among Am Yisrael (*Yirmeyahu* 29:10).

However, the exile after the destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash, so long and so painful, is an entirely different story. Am Yisrael asked the Sages why Hashem brought this calamity upon them. The Sages did not

have an answer (*Bava Metzia* 85a). The nation was unaware of their sin and thus could not correct it. The reason for this is that their sin was baseless hatred. When something is baseless, it is hidden from public view. People hated one another in their hearts while displaying a pleasant countenance toward each other. Bnei Yisrael themselves were unaware of this attitude. They therefore did not do *teshuvah* for it. Measure for measure, the end of this exile is also hidden. The exile has stretched on for nearly two thousand years, and we do not know when Hashem will call an end to our suffering.

Reading these words in the Midrash filled me with dread. They are materializing before our very eyes! Not only do the nations threaten to destroy Am Yisrael, but there is an ongoing battle between Christianity and Islam. Heads of Islamic groups publicly declare their intentions of eradicating Bnei Yisrael. Their hatred of Am Yisrael burns so fiercely that they are prepared to fight the western world in order to actualize their dream of wiping Am Yisrael off the face of the earth, *rachmana litzlan*.

As we watch the words of our Sages unfolding before our eyes, we should eagerly anticipate the imminent redemption. We do not have an exact date for Mashiach's arrival, but current events should be cause for introspection and *teshuvah*. As mentioned above, the Rambam says it is imperative to make a thorough personal accounting to discover our faults and make amends.

During the era immediately preceding the destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash, Bnei Yisrael were careful not to transgress the three cardinal sins. They spent their days in the *beit midrash*. Therefore, when the enemy attacked, they were extremely perplexed. This is proven by the fact that even as Titus besieged Yerushalayim, the Jews did not enact a public fast day or gathering for prayer and *teshuvah*.

How could they remain placid when the dark clouds of destruction were hovering low? Since they were unaware of their sins, they did nothing to correct them. This is the meaning of baseless hatred. It is the act of hating

one's fellow Jew for no reason at all. The person himself is unaware of this hatred.

Unfortunately, Titus understood what Bnei Yisrael did not. He saw how they acted pleasantly and spoke politely toward one another, but inside were seething with enmity. They did not hesitate to turn their backs on their fellows and slaughter them through slander.

Titus set the Beit Hamikdash aflame and then defiled it through perpetrating a terrible act of immorality in the Kodosh Hakodashim upon the scroll of a Sefer Torah (*Gittin* 56b). Then he took the liberty of plundering the holy objects. He chose the golden Menorah first. Why?

The Menorah, unlike any of the other vessels in the Mikdash, was made of one piece of solid gold (*Shemot* 25:31, *Rashi* *ibid.*). This was in order to teach Am Yisrael to be united as one. Knowing the cause of their downfall, Titus allowed himself to take the Menorah, the symbol of unity. Heaven clearly indicated to him that his victory was not due to his personal strength but to Am Yisrael's deficiency in unity and their sin of baseless hatred. Exile was thus the most fitting punishment.

The Arch of Titus in Rome depicts Titus' various victories. Although the Romans seized many holy artifacts from the Beit Hamikdash, the sequestering of the Menorah was specifically chosen to be memorialized. It was the Menorah that alluded to Am Yisrael's deficiency.

When peace and harmony reign among Am Yisrael, Hashem rests His *Shechinah* among them. Their endeavors are blessed with *siyata di'Shemaya*. A look at two royal armies illustrates this point. Achav's army consisted of wicked men who served idols. Yet they merited victory, time and again. However, the soldiers of Shaul, who were manifold times more righteous, did not always return in peace from battle.

This is because Achav's men, although sinful, possessed one good quality. They were one cohesive unit. Therefore, Hashem, whose insignia is peace, protected them from their enemies. In contrast, with all their virtue, Shaul's men had one vice. They spoke *lashon hara* and were in a

state of constant contention. Therefore, many fell in battle. How great is unity and how despicable is dissention!

When Am Yisrael stood at the foot of Har Sinai, they were like one man with one heart (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 275*), as it says, “And Israel encamped there opposite the mountain” (*Shemot 19:2*). “Encamped” is written in the singular form to express their unity, in merit of which they received the Torah.

The fact that we are still in exile indicates that we have not yet attained perfect unity. We can achieve this goal through Torah study. The Torah teaches a person how to overcome his negative qualities and actualize his inner potential of good. When Bnei Yisrael espouse the Torah’s doctrine of loving one’s fellow Jew just like oneself, they will merit the ultimate redemption. Bilaam said, “וירד מיעקב והאביד שריד מעיר” – One from Yaakov shall rule and destroy the remnant of the city” (*Bamidbar 24:19*). The Rambam (*Hilchot Melachim 11:1*) explains that this refers to Mashiach. He will come from among Am Yisrael and do battle with the evil kingdom of Edom, thus bringing an end to Am Yisrael’s suffering.

I would like to interpret this *pasuk* differently. It can refer to each and every one of us. Through Torah study, we, as the sons of Yaakov, have the power to remove the yoke of Edom. The word מיעקב (from Yaakov) in the above-quoted *pasuk*, contains the added letter מ, which refers to the forty days in which the Torah was given to Am Yisrael. When we humble ourselves before the Torah and before one another, we will successfully overpower the reign of Edom. As Hashem’s sovereignty becomes complete, the entire world will reach perfection.



## Broken by Our Blows

***“I shall make Jerusalem heaps of rubble, a snake’s lair; the cities of Yehudah I shall make a wasteland, without inhabitation. Who is the wise man who will understand this? Who is he to whom the mouth of Hashem speaks, that he may explain this? For what reason did the land perish and become parched like the desert, without a passerby? But Hashem has said: Because of their forsaking My Torah that I put before them; furthermore, they did not heed My voice nor follow it”***

*(Yirmeyahu 9:10-12)*

On the Seventeenth of Tammuz, numerous troubles befell our nation. These include the breaking of the *luchot* and the breaching of the wall of Yerushalayim. These incidents give us pause for reflection and awaken us to do *teshuvah*.

Forty days after ascending to heaven in order to receive the *luchot*, Moshe descended with them to find his nation dancing around the Golden Calf. He immediately smashed the *luchot*. This took place on the Seventeenth of Tammuz. The *gematria* of the word טוב is seventeen. This day would have been the day of receiving the Torah, which is called good (*Avot* 6:3), as *Mishlei* (4:2) says, “For a good teaching I have given you; do not forsake My Torah.” Instead, the *luchot* were smashed on that day.

The Torah is compared to a wall (*Sotah* 21a), for it protects us like a fortress. Since Bnei Yisrael were remiss in Torah observance, they lacked its protective qualities. Thus, measure for measure, the Romans were permitted to break through the wall of Yerushalayim on the Seventeenth of Tammuz and subsequently destroy the Beit Hamikdash.

Jewish history proves that the only way to protect ourselves from harm is through learning Torah and severing ourselves from worldly pursuits. Chasing after money and materialistic pleasures is a form of idolatry, similar to serving the Golden Calf. It opens the gates to our enemies as it tears down our fortress of protection.



## The Inner Sanctum within Each Jew

Our Sages ask what caused the destruction of the Land, in the times of the first Beit Hamikdash (*Bava Metzia* 85a). This is puzzling, as it is clearly stated that Am Yisrael transgressed the three cardinal sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed. When Hashem saw that the *talmidei chachamim* could not point to the cause of the destruction, He told them, through the *navi* that it was because of “their forsaking My Torah” (*Yirmeyahu* 9:12).

Bnei Yisrael’s neglect of Torah study caused them to disregard the mitzvot. Study results in action (*Kiddushin* 40b). Conversely, a lack of study results in a decline in good deeds. We are left with a question: Why did the Sages find it so difficult to pinpoint the cause of the destruction?

When one is entrenched in sin, he reaches the point of denial and considers himself clear of any wrongdoing. Neglect of Torah study causes a person to denounce Hashem’s existence. Bnei Yisrael’s sins were apparent to all. Nevertheless, since they were so steeped in sin, they themselves were unaware of them. Their very misdeeds obscured their eyes from seeing the truth before them.

The disciples of Shimon HaTzaddik informed him that Alexander the Great was advancing toward the gates of Yerushalayim (*Yoma* 69a). His intention was to destroy the Holy City, as he had done to every other city he entered, in his crusade to rule the world. Upon hearing this news,

Shimon HaTzaddik went to greet this great monarch. Alexander the Great was accompanied by numerous dignitaries, who were eager to watch the downfall of the Jews. However, they were in for a tremendous surprise. As Alexander the Great beheld the face of the noble Shimon HaTzaddik, he prostrated himself before him.

The people looked on in wonder. What possessed this mighty world ruler to bow before a Torah Sage? An explanation was forthcoming. Before each battle that Alexander the Great waged against any land, the holy visage of an angelic Sage appeared before him, reassuring his success in battle. This was none other than the visage of Shimon HaTzaddik, who now appeared before him.

We clearly see that when Yaakov's voice is heard in the Study Halls, the hands of Eisav are powerless (*Bereishit Rabbah* 65:20). However, when the sounds of Torah study are stifled, Bnei Yisrael are afflicted with various troubles, the source of which they cannot even pinpoint.

My mentor, Rabbi Shammai Zohn, zt"l, relates the following account in his *sefer*. Our enemies wished to defile the holy Beit Hamikdash. However, they were afraid to do so lest Hashem take revenge upon them, as He had on all previous enemies. Nevertheless, they were so driven to seize the holy vessels that they thought up a plan which would save their skin while making inroads into the holiness of the Beit Hamikdash. They announced that any Jew who would muster the boldness to enter the Beit Hamikdash would be awarded tremendous wealth, and could keep whatever he laid his hands on. Many gentiles were willing to take up this offer, but the evil ministers wanted to choose specifically a Jew, which would increase the shame of this devious deed.

Regrettably, a Jew by the name of Yosef Meshita volunteered for the job. He entered the Mikdash and emerged with the golden Menorah. The gentiles were bedazzled with the beauty of this piece, which depicted the glory of the Torah. Their objective, however, was to trample the Torah's glory. Therefore, they told Yosef Meshita to re-enter and take whatever met his fancy. Perhaps he would like the possessions of the Jews which

had been hidden in the Beit Hamikdash. (It was common practice for the Jews to secret their valuables in this most secure place.)

Wicked as he was, Yosef Meshita could not bring himself to anger his Creator once more by re-entering His holy Sanctuary. He categorically refused to do so and was put to death in a most gruesome manner. A Heavenly Voice announced that Yosef Meshita was promised a portion in the World to Come (*Bereishit Rabbah* 65:22).

Yosef Meshita began as a *rasha*, who had the audacity to defile the Beit Hamikdash and abscond with one of the holy vessels. Only a short while later, he willingly died a martyr's death, staunchly refusing to anger His Creator. Where did his brazenness disappear to in the interim?

It was his foray into the Beit Hamikdash that effected this dramatic change within him. He tangibly felt the intensity of the *Shechinah* in all its glory. As he clasped the Menorah, the symbol of Torah, close to his chest, something stirred in his heart. He was filled with remorse over his dishonorable deed. The Torah was demanding retribution for being dishonored. The entire world is filled with Hashem's glory. It is enough to study Creation to gain an appreciation of a Creator. This man, whose eyes did not originally perceive Hashem's glory could not remain indifferent to it after setting foot in the holy Beit Hamikdash and grasping the golden Menorah. His newfound appreciation for Hashem's glory did not allow him to re-enter this holy site.

I once had to undergo surgery for which I was anesthetized. As the doctors injected the anesthesia, I tried mightily to remain awake. However, the drugs were stronger than I was and prevailed. I woke up after everything was over. I did not stop thanking Hashem for watching over me during the operation. Unfortunately, we hear plenty of stories of people who enter the operating room for a simple procedure but do not survive.

After giving the matter some thought, I came to the conclusion that every day, I am required to thank the Creator for returning my soul to me, in much the same manner as He did after the surgery. Sleep is one-sixtieth

of death (*Berachot* 57b). Every day of life is another kindness of Hashem. When we fail to recite *Modeh Ani* with the proper focus, we are similar to Yosef Meshita, who could not come to an awareness of Hashem's majesty by merely observing the wonders of Creation. How sad is this reality!

Rabbi Shammai Zohn, zt"l, once related the episode concerning the evil Titus, who brought a gentile woman into the Beit Hamikdash and sinned with her upon a Torah scroll (*Gittin* 56b). Reading this shook me terribly. How could such a terrible thing take place? Is there no limit to chutzpah?

After calming down somewhat, it struck me that we sometimes resemble the wicked Titus. Every Jew is considered a Sanctuary for the *Shechinah* to dwell in, as the *pasuk* states, "They shall make for Me a Sanctuary so that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8). The wording is not, "So that I may dwell *within it*," but, "So that I may dwell *among them*." Hashem wishes to live inside each and every one of us (*Eitz Hada'at Tov, Ki Tisa; Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4).

Likewise, each Jew is considered a Sefer Torah, as we are comprised of 248 organs and 365 limbs, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot of the Torah (*Zohar* I, 170b). Thus, when one transgresses by looking at inappropriate sights, which bring him to improper thoughts, he is similar to Titus, who defiled the Torah scroll in such an abominable way. We can be compared to a Sefer Torah, and we are a repository for the *Shechinah* (*Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4). Whose heart does not flutter with fear at this thought?

The Arizal (*Sha'ar Hakavanot*) states that the months of Tammuz and Av, in which the days of Bein Hametzarim fall, are the most difficult months of the Jewish calendar, as they are months designated for misfortune. They fall in the summertime, when spiritual stumbling blocks are at their peak. We unfortunately allow ourselves to be exposed to improper sights and are therefore met with tragedy.

Hashem assures us that there is a remedy for all ills. "I created a *yetzer hara*; I created Torah as its antidote" (*Kiddushin* 30b). Only the Torah can afford protection from sin. It is most urgent to gird ourselves with the

protective garb of Torah during Bein Hametzarim, which precedes the summer vacation.

### ———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Why didn't the Sages understand the reason for the destruction and had to be told by Hashem that it was due to the neglect of Torah study?
- ◆ When one is submerged in sin, his eyes are clouded to reality and he does not realize he is sinning.
- ◆ Alexander the Great bowed before Shimon HaTzaddik because he perceived his inherent sanctity.
- ◆ Yosef Meshita could not bring himself to re-enter the Beit Hamikdash at Titus' behest, as the Menorah, symbol of the Torah, aroused him to do *teshuvah*.
- ◆ Titus sinned with a harlot in the Beit Hamikdash, upon a Torah scroll. One's body is like a miniature sanctuary that houses the *Shechinah* and like a Sefer Torah that houses the mitzvot. When we see inappropriate sights, we are like Titus, defiling our inner sanctuary.
- ◆ Torah study is the antidote to the *yetzer hara*. Precisely during the summer months, when obstacles abound, it is imperative to protect oneself with the power of Torah.
- ◆ The Arizal says that many troubles befell Am Yisrael during the months of Tammuz and Av because that is when the temptation of seeing improper sights is at its peak.



## The Upper Hand

The Ben Ish Chai, quoting the commentators, says that Eisav took control over the months of Tammuz, Av, and Elul, while Yaakov Avinu gained control over the months of Nisan, Iyar, and Sivan (*Shanah Rishonah, Devarim*). A battle ensued regarding the month of Elul, eventually sequestered by Yaakov. This is why Elul is designated as a month of mercy and forgiveness, when Hashem is close to those who call to Him in earnest.

The commentators add that in the future, Yaakov will also gain power over the months of Tammuz and Av. These months will eventually be transformed from months of sorrow to months of joy, as the *navi* attests (*Zechariah* 8:19). Thus, Tishah b'Av, the saddest day of the year, will become a festive day. A perusal of history shows that Tammuz and Av were the most difficult times for our people, as terrible calamities befell our nation then (*Ta'anit* 26a). The Hand of Justice is held over us at this time, and danger is in the very air (*Eichah Rabbah* 1:29).

On the Seventeenth of Tammuz, Moshe Rabbeinu broke the *luchot*, the *korban tamid*, which had always protected Am Yisrael, ceased; and the Romans breached the wall around Yerushalayim (*Ta'anit* 26a). On Tishah b'Av, both Batei Mikdash were destroyed in retribution for accepting the negative report of the spies about the Land, despite Hashem's assurances that it is a land flowing with milk and honey (*ibid*, 26b; 29a). Throughout the generations, dreadful decrees were enacted against Am Yisrael during these days. Exterminations and expulsions occurred precisely during this time of year. For all the above reasons, we decrease our level of joy in these months.

Conversely, the months under Yaakov's jurisdiction are filled with grace and blessing. Bnei Yisrael were redeemed in Nisan and will be redeemed in the future during this month (*Rosh Hashanah* 11a). The month of Iyar is auspicious for healing, as the word אייר is an acronym of Hashem's assurance, "אני יי' רופאך" – I am Hashem, your Healer" (*Yismach*

*Yisrael, Metzora 2*, based on *Shemot 15:26*). The month of Sivan is when Hashem descended in full glory and gave Am Yisrael the Torah, compared to a *ketubah* between a *chatan* and *kallah* (*Shemot Rabbah 46:1*).

Since the months of Tammuz and Av are in the hands of Eisav, we must expend effort precisely at this time into reducing his power, which is that of the accusing Attribute of Justice. We do this by increasing our Torah study and mitzvah observance, and improving our interpersonal relationships.

But these are days of vacation, when one leaves his regular framework and visits places of rest and relaxation. Moreover, since this vacation falls during the summer months, when immodesty is rampant, the spiritual perils are compounded.

Since one does not maintain his regular Torah sessions during these days, there is a strong likelihood that he will decline in his level of Torah study. The *yetzer hara* is aroused precisely during this season, trying its best to cause us to stumble. If we truly want to combat the force of Eisav during these months, we must cleave to the Torah, our only protection from the Satan. In contrast, the sins of immodesty and neglecting Torah study are the first to indict a person on High. There is thus great danger at this time that the accusatory angels will have their say.

There are twenty-one days between the seventeenth of Tammuz and the ninth of Av. Adding one for the rule of *kollel*, the sum is twenty-two, corresponding to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The weapon we should employ to counteract the negative forces of Bein Hametzarim is the Torah, which is comprised of these letters.

The year contains 365 days, corresponding to the 365 sinews of the body, as well as the 365 negative commandments. By guarding ourselves from transgressing the negative commandments, we repair the part of our body that corresponds to that command, as well as the day of the year corresponding to that mitzvah.

When Eisav's angel wrestled with Yaakov, he wanted to paralyze all the parts of his body, thereby wresting control over all the days of the year. Yaakov placated him by giving him control over the *gid hanasheh*, corresponding to Tishah b'Av. Eisav's angel was appeased and left him alone.

Even over this sinew, the angel did not secure complete control. When Bnei Yisrael observe the Torah's command to refrain from eating the *gid hanasheh*, they reduce the power of Eisav's angel over this sinew. On Tishah b'Av, Bnei Yisrael abstain from all forms of eating and drinking. We are forbidden to partake of the *gid hanasheh* throughout the year, and all the more so, on Tishah b'Av, when all food is forbidden. Thus, Eisav's angel has lost out on all fronts: the single sinew that he gained control over is categorically forbidden from consumption, and the day corresponding to it is a day of fasting, when all food is forbidden. Thus, precisely on Tishah b'Av, our national day of mourning, when the strict Hand of Justice is in control, Bnei Yisrael increase their merits and decrease the power of the negative forces.

I would like to suggest that the *kelippah* attempts to increase its power on Tishah b'Av due to the prohibition of studying Torah on that day. As mentioned above, Torah protects us from sin (*Sotah* 21a). Although Bnei Yisrael have the merit of refraining from eating the *gid hanasheh* on that day, they are still in danger of being harmed by the negative forces, for they lack the Torah's protection against the *yetzer hara* (*Kiddushin* 30b) and all harm (*Berachot* 5a). This being the case, it is our obligation to reinforce our study of Torah throughout the year in the hope that this will protect us also on Tishah b'Av, when we are forbidden to learn Torah.

Man's body is comprised of 248 organs and 365 sinews, corresponding to the 248 positive commandments and 365 prohibitions (*Zohar* I, 170b). Thus, we could say that a person is a living Sefer Torah (*Shabbat* 105b). The Seventeenth of Tammuz marks the beginning of both our national destruction and each Jew's individual destruction. The downfall of the Beit Hamikdash was not merely the collapse of wood and stones, but also, and even more so, the symbol of spiritual devastation.

Since we anticipate the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash and the return of the *Shechinah* to Yerushalayim, we must commence building our inner Mikdash, our spiritual attributes, which correspond to the mitzvot. The destruction of the Beit Hamikdash was not a one-time event, relegated to ancient history. Rather, it symbolizes the personal destruction of each and every Jew, for each of us who contains the spirit of Hashem within him is considered a miniature sanctuary and a repository for the *Shechinah*. In order to recover from the ailments of exile, we must first heal ourselves of all spiritual ills.

To the *navi's* question, "For what reason did the land perish?" (*Yirmeyahu* 9:11), Hashem replied, "For their forsaking My Torah." The conflagration of the Beit Hamikdash was only the match that lit the flame of Am Yisrael's personal destruction. Since the *churban* of the Beit Hamikdash was due to neglect of Torah, its reconstruction will occur through a renewed commitment to Torah and mitzvot. Through this, each person will be able to build his personal sanctuary until we merit the ultimate salvation with the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash.

A man came to me complaining that he had terrible pains in his left arm. I asked if he suffered from a heart condition or any other physical illness, to which he replied he did not. Then I asked if he lays tefillin, to which he also replied in the negative. I instructed him to begin wearing tefillin, which are placed on the left arm opposite the heart. I explained that it was likely that his pains were signals from Heaven that he should begin donning tefillin.

The man asked indignantly, "Why does the Rav mix religion with medicine? What's the connection between the two?" I hurried to explain that he was making a serious mistake. The parts of the body correspond to the mitzvot of the Torah and are thus interconnected. All aspects of Creation were made by Hashem's word (*Tehillim* 33:6), but mankind was fashioned directly by Hashem's Hand (*Avot D'Rabbi Natan* 1:8). This is to impress upon man that each and every part of him corresponds to a mitzvah of the Torah. His job is to sanctify the parts of his body through observing the mitzvot.

Despite my pleading, the man would not listen. He hotly refused to wear tefillin, claiming there cannot be a bond between physical ailments and spirituality. Sadly, I was informed of the man's untimely death. His widow approached me before his burial, asking if it was still possible to place tefillin upon his arm. I replied that the privilege of wearing tefillin applies only while one is alive. Now it was too late.

How unfortunate it is to witness people willingly spending fortunes on all sorts of medications and procedures. But they are exhausted and have no strength to provide for their spiritual self. Pills and vitamins, injections and treatments, are methods of providing for one's physical health. The way to treat one's spiritual side is by nourishing it with Torah study and keeping mitzvot (*Mishlei* 3:8). In Nisan, Hashem redeemed Bnei Yisrael from Egypt. They were broken both in body and spirit (*Zohar*, beginning of *parashat Yitro*). They healed themselves by doing complete *teshuvah*.

Furthermore, the healing powers of the month of Iyar helped them recover from their spiritual ailments, until they were fit to receive the Torah on the sixth of Sivan. After attaining spiritual healing, the physically maimed were healed at *Matan Torah* (*Tanchuma, Yitro* 8). This teaches us that one's spiritual standing is reflected in his physical health. When Bnei Yisrael reached perfection in spirituality, they were automatically healed of all physical maladies.

However, as soon as Bnei Yisrael declined in Torah observance, they made the Golden Calf and transgressed other grave sins. Their bodies became vulnerable to physical illness. Their spiritual ailment reached its peak on Tishah b'Av, when the spies returned from Eretz Yisrael with a derogatory report.

Throughout the year, we are obligated to improve. However, it is most imperative during the months of Tammuz and Av, which are under the jurisdiction of Eisav, and when the Attribute of Justice prevails. After these months, Hashem has granted us the month of Elul, the month of mercy and forgiveness, in order to come close to Him and heal ourselves

from all forms of spiritual ailments. One who does *teshuvah* is considered as pure as a perfect newborn.

The *pasuk* relates that Pinchas observed an epidemic sweep through the nation on account of the sin of Zimri ben Salu and the Midianite woman. He zealously struck them with a “spear in his hand” (*Bamidbar* 25:7-8). The *sefarim* state that Pinchas was the agent of healing. This is learnt from the word רמח (spear), which is numerically equivalent to 248, the number of organs in the human body. The word בידו (in his hand) is numerically equivalent to גידו (his sciatic nerve), according to the rule of *kollel*. Pinchas utilized each limb in his body to repair the abomination that had taken place among the nation (see *Ateret Yeshuah, Pinchas* 3).

Not only did Zimri ben Salu, the prince of the Tribe of Shimon, die, but twenty-four thousand members of Am Yisrael died along with him (*Bamidbar* 25:9). This is because nobody denounced his terrible deed. This indicates a general spiritual defect among the nation. By taking matters into his own hands, Pinchas effectively remedied this spiritual deficiency and brought salvation to our nation. The epidemic ceased immediately. This is why Pinchas merited the blessing of “My covenant of peace” (*ibid*, vs. 12). In remuneration for bringing spiritual succor, Pinchas was awarded eternal peace, as precise reward for his brave act.

On the Seventeenth of Tammuz, Hashem sent Moshe down from heaven, telling him, “Go descend, for your nation has become corrupt” (*Shemot* 32:7). This was the day Moshe broke the first set of *luchot* (*Ta’anit* 26b). Seventeen is the *gematria* of the word טוב (good). Torah is the only good (*Avot* 6:3). The number seventeen is composed of one and seven, adding these numbers totals eight, a reference to the eighth world, which is above all other worlds. This should be a source of consolation for us. Although the Seventeenth of Tammuz is a day of Divine wrath and misfortune, it contains a message of hope and reconciliation. We can transform the decree of bitterness into an occasion of joy through studying Torah, about which *Mishlei* (4:2) says, “For a good teaching I have given you; do not forsake My Torah.” When Bnei Yisrael cleave to the Torah, they remove all forms of indictment from themselves (*Berachot*

5a). Even the difficult day of the Seventeenth of Tammuz can be converted to a day of delight. When one studies Torah, he merits acquiring a portion of the eighth world, which is eternal and beyond all other worlds.

Although the month of Av is officially under Eisav's jurisdiction, its very name gives us cause for hope. The word אב (Av) means father. The month of Av, thus, refers to our loving, merciful Father, Who supervises and protects us at all times. Our job is to demonstrate our desire to have a lasting relationship with Him.



## Finding Meaning in the Mourning

How well I remember the days of Tishah b'Av of my youth in Morocco. The women would rip their clothes in anguish, amidst copious weeping. As I sat on the floor beside my father, zy"א, in the *beit kenesset*, I couldn't help but cry with him, as his wails reached the very heavens. Whoever saw us on Tishah b'Av was sure that a close family member had just passed away. I believe that just as we commemorated Tishah b'Av in Morocco, so was it commemorated in all the lands of our exiles. I cannot understand how, a mere fifty or sixty years later, we find it difficult to weep over the loss of the Beit Hamikdash. Our tears are mere "eye service."

Hashem destroyed the Beit Hamikdash on account of our nation's sins. This was actually a form of self-affliction, as the Beit Hamikdash was His House on Earth, where His *Shechinah* was revealed. Why did He choose to demolish His precious home?

Let us illustrate with the following analogy. The king's subjects constantly angered him. When they exceeded the limit, he decided to destroy his palace and abandon them. But wasn't he punishing himself? Wouldn't it have been more effective to penalize his people, destroying

their homes and striking them? Why did he choose to destroy his own house?

When the Beit Hamikdash stood, it was the pride of our people. It awarded them the reverence of all the nations. Their lives revolved around the Avodah of the *korbanot* in the Beit Hamikdash. It became part and parcel of their very essence.

Some people are so attached to their money that they consider it an extension of themselves. There are those who consider their money even more precious than themselves. They would rather die than lose their possessions. Money is called דמים, which means blood, since people are generally so connected to their wealth that they consider it their very lifeblood.

Similarly, the Beit Hamikdash was so beloved to our people that they viewed it as an integral part of themselves. Thus, its destruction was considered a personal tragedy for each member of the nation. Since Hakadosh Baruch Hu is an ever-loving Father, He chose to cast His anger on wood and stone instead of harming Bnei Yisrael directly (*Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 824; Eichah Rabbah 4:14*).

Out of Hashem's unconditional love for Bnei Yisrael, He refused Moshe's entreaty to enter the Land. He knew that if Moshe entered Eretz Yisrael, he would immediately begin building the Beit Hamikdash. A Sanctuary built by Moshe Rabbeinu could never be destroyed. In later generations, when the nation would anger Hashem, He would have no recourse but to cast His wrath upon them. Since Hashem loves Bnei Yisrael so much, He prevented Moshe from building the Beit Hamikdash. When the time came for destruction, He destroyed His home instead of His children.

I think the reason why we cannot feel the sorrow of the destruction in the same way as past generations lies in the following. In those days, people lived honestly and simply. They were not occupied with materialism and all sorts of worldly pleasures. They thus had the wherewithal to truly feel the sorrow of the *Shechinah's* exile. Nowadays,

however, Tishah b'Av is immediately followed by Bein Hazmanim. Instead of focusing on the suffering of the *Shechinah*, we are busy making plans for the upcoming vacation.

The more we surround ourselves with materialism, the harder our hearts become. We pursue the latest form of pleasure instead of seeking closeness to Hashem. When I lived in Essaouira, Morocco, everyone subsisted on the bare minimum. Sometimes, people did not even have basic necessities. A person is comprised of two opposing forces – his physical body, which pulls him downward, and his spiritual soul which pulls him upward. A constant war is waged between these forces. The more lusts the body fills, the more the *neshamah* loses its influence. Conversely, the more one denies his body physical pleasures, the greater the power of his *neshamah* to draw him heavenward.

In order to mourn the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash like our forefathers, we must reduce our quest for outside forms of pleasure which dull our spiritual senses and distance us from our pure source. Needless to say, on Tishah b'Av, we must put all thoughts of vacation and recreation on hold so we can concentrate on the *churban*. Hopefully, by focusing on the subject of the day while banishing extraneous thoughts, we will have the tools to mourn properly.

A man once asked me what benefit we gain by bewailing the destruction. Can our tears accomplish anything? I answered that when we feel sorrow over the destruction, we show Hashem that He is missing from our lives. When He observes our ache over His absence and our strong desire to re-unite with Him, He will return His *Shechinah* to dwell among us. When a mother sees her baby crying, she is overcome with compassion. She knows he is completely dependent upon her, for he cannot fend for himself with his limited powers. We are like young babies in Hashem's arms. When He sees us truly beseeching His closeness, He will surely hasten to redeem us.

When the mighty emperor Napoleon would return victorious from battle, the Jews would turn out to greet him, bearing a Sefer Torah. After

an especially difficult battle, he was shocked to see that the Jews were not there to greet him, as was their custom. When he asked about this, he was told that it was the day the Jews mourn their fallen Temple.

Napoleon made his way to a *beit kenesset* to see this for himself. He was met with wailing Jews, sitting on the floor in mourning. They explained that they were weeping for their Temple that was destroyed nearly 2,000 years ago. “If you can continue to cry for a Temple that fell so long ago, you must still feel its loss. You surely possess the faith that your G-d will rebuild His Home once more.”

The Gemara (*Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:1*) says that a generation which does not rebuild the Beit Hamikdash is considered to have destroyed it. If we have not merited the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash, it is an indication that we do not sufficiently feel its lack. Had we lived during the days of the Beit Hamikdash, our coolness toward *avodat Hashem* would have incurred the *churban*. Nobody can say he is beyond reproach.

The way to feel the suffering of the *Shechinah* is by reducing our pursuit of materialism. Since physicality and spirituality share an inverse relationship, as soon as the physical is reduced, the spiritual can shine forth. This affords us the opportunity to come close to Hashem. May He see fit to redeem us soon and rebuild the Beit Hamikdash speedily in our day, Amen.



## Practice What You Preach

After the *churban* of the first Beit Hamikdash, the Sages grappled with the question as to why it occurred. They could not come up with a fitting reason for this national tragedy. They finally asked Hashem to enlighten them. Hashem replied that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed because of “their forsaking My Torah” (*Yirmeyahu 9:12*). Furthermore, the Gemara

tells us that the second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed because of baseless hatred and deficiency in interpersonal relationships (*Yoma* 9:2).

Since Torah gladdens the heart, we are prohibited from learning Torah on Tishah b'Av, the day we are adjured to focus on the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. One who is mourning cannot be involved in joyous matters (*Ta'anit* 30a). The prohibition against learning Torah on Tishah b'Av is measure for measure. Since Bnei Yisrael neglected the Torah, Hashem prevents them from studying it on this day designated for mourning and lamentation.

*Chazal* teach, "If there is no Torah, there is no good character; if there is no good character, there is no Torah" (*Avot* 3:17). Torah and good character are intertwined. Without the Torah's laws, one man would swallow another alive. Good character is the basis of Torah, and even precedes Torah (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 1).

The Gemara attributes the *churban* to the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. During the days of the second Beit Hamikdash, there were two adversaries who hated each other bitterly. One of them decided to throw a party and sent his servant to invite his friends to the meal he had prepared for them. However, the messenger mistakenly invited Bar Kamtza, the man's avowed enemy, instead of Kamtza, the man's friend.

Bar Kamtza attended the feast, believing his rival wished to make peace. He sat down and began tasting the fine delicacies. When the host made his rounds among the tables, he suddenly discovered his enemy seated at his party. He immediately ordered him to leave. Bar Kamtza suddenly understood that the host had not meant to placate him at all; he had been invited by mistake.

However, he asked to be allowed to remain in order not to be humiliated before all the guests. Bar Kamtza was so afraid to be shamed that he offered to pay for the entire elaborate feast, if only he were allowed to remain. The host flatly refused and had him evicted.

Many Torah Sages partook of this feast. Even though they observed Bar Kamtza's embarrassment, they did not denounce the host and continued enjoying the party as if nothing was amiss. Since silence often indicates agreement (*Bava Metzia* 37b), Bar Kamtza believed that the Sages agreed with the despicable behavior of the host. Otherwise, they surely would have protested this act and tried to save his honor.

Bar Kamtza was so insulted and angry over the injustice done to him that he sought a means of revenge. He finally came up with a devious plan which would incriminate all the Jews.

Bar Kamtza's plan was to inform the Roman Caesar of a Jewish uprising. Until now, the Caesar felt kindly toward the Jews, who were faithful to him and paid their taxes straight into his pocket. At first, he refused to listen to Bar Kamtza's words. Eventually, he agreed to test the Jews' loyalty in the manner suggested by Bar Kamtza. He would send an animal for them to offer upon their Altar. Their allegiance to him would be proven if they would honor him by offering it as a sacrifice.

The Caesar sent a calf to Yerushalayim and waited to see how things would develop. The Jews wanted to sacrifice this animal, out of respect to the Caesar, but they discovered a blemish, rendering it unfit. It was Bar Kamtza's doing. He had cut its lip in order to prevent the Jews from sacrificing it. This would serve as proof that they were disloyal to the Caesar and were planning a revolt.

Bar Kamtza succeeded. Because of their refusal to sacrifice the animal he had sent, the Caesar concluded that the Jews were planning to overthrow him. He immediately sent his general, Vespasian, to destroy Yerushalayim in punishment for the Jew's betrayal.

This is what is meant by *Chazal's* statement that Yerushalayim was destroyed on account of baseless hatred (*Yoma* 9b). Had the host of the party overlooked his personal honor and allowed Bar Kamtza to remain, this scheme would never have been enacted against the Jews. The destruction would have been avoided.

There was an indictment upon the Sages, as well, for not making any effort to save Bar Kamtza's dignity. We might say that although the Sages were great in Torah knowledge, they were lacking in good character. For this reason, their vast Torah knowledge did not stand by them. They, too, were held responsible for the *churban*.

The Torah is a Code of Advice (*Zohar* II, 82b). What is the point of studying it if one will not glean the proper message, but behave according to his own desires? That would be like a sick man who goes to the doctor and is given a prescription for medicine, but instead of buying the medicine, he throws the prescription in the garbage. Taking the step of going to the doctor indicates the man's concern for his health. But it does nothing to facilitate his recovery if he does not act according to the doctor's orders.

Torah is the remedy for all spiritual ills. It has the power to enable a person to correct his character. However, if he does not work on himself in the way the Torah advises and fails to improve in interpersonal matters, his Torah study is sorely lacking.

The initials of the phrase ט' אב (ninth Av) are numerically equivalent to ten. The last letters of the phrase תשעה באב are numerically equivalent to seven. The sum of these numbers is seventeen, the numerical equivalent of the word טוב (good). Torah is the only true good (*Avot* 6:3), as *Mishlei* (4:2) states, "For a good teaching I have given you; do not forsake My Torah." Hashem forbids us from learning Torah on Tishah b'Av. This day is not meant for delighting in the Torah but for introspection and improving one's fear of Heaven. When one utilizes this day properly, he merits the Torah's blessings.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the giant of Mussar, once traveled by train to Vilna in order to inspire his fellow Jews in that city. He sat in the smoking section, enjoying a cigar. A brazen young man asked him to put out his cigar. Rabbi Yisrael hurried to comply. Then the upstart demanded that Rabbi Yisrael Salanter close the window because he felt cold. Rabbi

Yisrael did this, as well. He ignored the brash tone, and the fact that it was the young man himself who had opened the window.

When they reached their destination, the young man was surprised to see a tremendous throng waiting at the train station. Upon inquiry, he discovered that these people had gathered to greet the venerated sage, the man whom he had insulted on the train. The young man's embarrassment knew no end. He hurried to ask forgiveness from Rabbi Yisrael.

Rabbi Yisrael asked him to return the next day. When the young man returned, Rabbi Yisrael preempted him by asking why he had come to Vilna. The man replied that he intended to be tested on the halachot of *shechitah* in order to receive Rabbinic ordination. Rabbi Yisrael wished him much success and asked that he report to him if he passed the examination.

After some time, the man returned, stating that he had failed miserably. Rabbi Yisrael suggested hiring a tutor to teach him the relevant halachot; only after mastering them should he take the test again. The man did as he was told. Sometime later, he returned and happily informed Rabbi Yisrael that the second time, he passed with flying colors. But he had a pressing question:

"Honored Rav," he began, "how is it that after I humiliated you time after time, you show me nothing but love and concern for my welfare? Not only do you not bear a grudge against me, but you offer me good advice and bless me wholeheartedly that I succeed. Please explain."

"When I was in the train with you," the Rav replied, "I was aggrieved by your humiliating manner. The entire ride, I repeated over and over to myself that it is forbidden to get angry. When you asked for my forgiveness, I was overjoyed at the opportunity to rid myself of any grievance I had toward you. However, in order to make sure that I fully forgave you, I was not satisfied with merely removing the anger I felt. I believed that by helping you out to the best of my ability, I could finally be secure in the knowledge that I had no complaint against you

whatsoever” (*Bemichitzat Rabbeinu*).

Hashem sends us Torah Sages who are giants of the spirit. They are steeped in good character and fine qualities. They are like a living work of *mussar*, gifted to us to study and emulate.

True love of another is unconditional. Often, we find ourselves behaving cordially toward someone because we want to curry favor with him. We frequently act generously with those whom we expect to gain from in the future. How unfortunate it is that there are those whom we refuse to help because we can expect nothing in return. If the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred and lack of good character, which caused a deficiency in Torah study, surely it will be rebuilt through improvement in interpersonal matters, unconditional love, and reinforcement of Torah values.

I know of a young man who arranged a *hilula* ceremony for Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes, zy”a. He took the entire enterprise upon himself, devoting himself to this task without thought of remuneration. Sadly, as he was making the rounds to invite people to this celebration, an emotionally unbalanced man shot him four times. He was on the verge of death.

His mother approached me and affirmed her belief that he would live. He had been on his way to bringing people to a *hilula* celebration. Certainly, this merit would save him from death.

I told her that I agreed with her words. Surely on High they saw the virtue of her son, who sought the benefit of his fellow Jews without thought of reward. He would merit full recovery. After being in a coma for three months, the young man suddenly awoke, to the surprise of everyone around him. He regained his strength, little by little, until he recovered fully.

That was a wonderful miracle. However, sometimes, it is enough to study ordinary acts in order to discern the meaning of life and realize that the Torah is our shield and protection, especially when it is coupled with good character.

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**In Summary**

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- ◆ Reasons given for the destruction of the two Batei Mikdash are neglect of Torah and baseless hatred. It is forbidden to learn Torah on Tishah b'Av, since it gladdens the heart, contradicting the essence of the day, which is sorrow and mourning.
- ◆ “If there is no Torah, there is no good character” (*Avot*). Conversely, “Good character precedes Torah.” The *churban* of the second Beit Hamikdash was caused by baseless hatred, as demonstrated in the story of Kamza and Bar Kamtza. The Sages were also culpable, as they did not speak up on behalf of Bar Kamtza but continued to eat their meal as if nothing was amiss.
- ◆ These Torah Sages were, in some way, lacking good character. This is why their Torah study did not stand by them and they were indicted for contributing to the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash.
- ◆ The Torah is the potion of life and a Code of Ethics. If one does not utilize his Torah knowledge to advance in good character, his Torah knowledge is sorely lacking.
- ◆ The initials of the phrase ט' אב (ninth Av) are numerically equivalent to ten. The last letters of the phrase תשעה באב are numerically equivalent to seven. The sum of these numbers is seventeen, the numerical equivalent of the word טוב (good). Torah is the only true good (*Avot* 6:3), as *Mishlei* (4:2) states, “For a good teaching I have given you; do not forsake My Torah.” Hashem forbids us from learning Torah on Tishah b'Av because it is not fitting to be involved in this ultimate pleasure on a day of mourning.
- ◆ True love is unconditional. *Be'ezrat Hashem*, we will merit the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash through increasing our Torah study and improving our interpersonal relationships.



## Yemei Bein Hametzarim – Gems



### Worldliness

***“Bring us back to You, Hashem, and we will  
return, renew our days as of old”***

*(Eichah 5:21)*

The *sefer Ner Yisrael* interprets this *pasuk* in a novel way. We often demand of Hashem that if He would only bring us back to Him, we would return. Then He could renew our days as of old. However, it is up to the individual to make the first move in repentance. As a result of one’s inner arousal, there is an arousal in the Upper Worlds (*Zohar* I, 88a). Without an arousal from below, there cannot be an arousal from Above. This is in accordance with Hashem’s entreaty: “Open for Me an opening the size of a needle hole, and I will open for you an opening the size of a banquet hall” (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 5:3; *Chida*).

The *Ner Yisrael* continues: If man must take the first step in this process, how can we explain Hashem’s arousal to create the world? Before Hashem created the world, He created various things, including the *neshamot* of the tzaddikim, Torah, and *teshuvah*. The *neshamot* of the tzaddikim aroused Hashem to create the world.

Thus, our request to “bring us back to You and we will return” is actually a plea that Hashem return us to our original status before Creation, when our souls were pristine. At that time, they had such power that they could even initiate the creation of the entire world. Sadly, in this world of earthliness, we do not have the ability to return to Hashem of our own accord.

Every Jew is guaranteed a portion in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin* 90a). We thus ask Hashem that this connection to the Next World arouse His desire to bring us back to Him in perfect repentance.



## Tu b'Av



### Having Occasion to Be Joyous

*“There were no greater days of joy in Israel than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur”*

*(Ta'anit 30b)*

This Gemara implies that the fifteenth of Av was even more joyous than the Torah-mandated festivals, when we are commanded to “rejoice in your festivals and you shall be especially joyous” (*Devarim* 16:14-15). How could the joy of Tu b'Av, festive as it was, surpass the ecstasy of the festivals, during which the entire nation ascended to Yerushalayim and perceived the sanctity of the *Shechinah*?

Similarly, how can Yom Kippur be defined as a day of joy, when Bnei Yisrael afflict themselves on it, trembling in awe before Hashem's judgment? Can a person call the day he appears in court, when his future hangs in the balance, a day of joy, and moreover, the most joyous day of his life?

On the fifteenth of Av, the days begin getting shorter and the nights longer. Night was created for Torah study (*Eiruvin* 65a). While the sun shines, man makes hay. As long as there is daylight, there is action and transaction. As soon as night falls, people shelter themselves in their homes. They resort to the soothing words of the Talmud.

As daylight dwindles, one feels a natural pull toward the Torah, which fills him with an inner glow and elevates him to greater spiritual heights. Tu b'Av is the turning point in this yearly cycle. Since we begin to increase our Torah study, the source of the greatest joy, on Tu b'Av, it has become a day of increased joy.

I was once involved in deciphering an enigmatic Torah passage when a very large check was given to me. Instead of reacting joyfully at such a windfall, I ignored it until I finished learning the *sugya*. I was suffused with the joy of Torah study. After I was done, I allowed myself to pay attention to the donation I had just received.

The joy of Torah knows no bounds. All we need do is “taste and see that Hashem is good” (*Tehillim* 34:9). As *Mishlei* (3:14-15) says, “For its merchandise is greater than silver... more precious than pearls.”

Those who were destined to die in the wilderness died on only one day of the year – Tishah b'Av. Each person would lie in an open grave, and the next morning, fifteen thousand members of the nation would not wake up. This happened throughout their sojourn in the wilderness. On the Tishah b'Av of the fortieth year, the people did as was their yearly custom. They nervously anticipated seeing who would rise the next morning and who would not.

The sun smiled upon a stunned nation. Not one person had died! Moshe Rabbeinu was filled with doubt. He instructed the people to lie in their graves on the next night, as well. Perhaps he had miscalculated the dates? Lo and behold, the following morning found everyone alive and well. They were told to lie in the graves the next night. And the next. When the evening of the fifteenth of Av arrived with no death notices, Moshe understood that Hashem had forgiven the nation. He allowed them to return to their tents.

How can we understand that such a great prophet as Moshe made such a blatant mistake? Whenever Hashem spoke to Moshe personally, it was for the benefit of Bnei Yisrael. However, when the nation angered Hashem in the wilderness, He refrained from speaking to Moshe. This was the case

for the duration of thirty-eight years. Moshe thus felt that if Hashem had indeed forgiven Bnei Yisrael for the sin of the spies, He would have spoken to him and let him know that they were pardoned. Since He did not do so, Moshe thought the nation was not yet completely forgiven.

This is why Moshe told Bnei Yisrael to return to the pits, night after night. On the night of the fifteenth of Av, Moshe understood that their sin was expiated. Fifteen is the numerical value of the Name ה-י, which represents peace.

This is borne out by the statement that when man and woman merit, the *Shechinah* rests among them. If not, a fire consumes them (*Sotah* 17a). The letter ך of the word אִישׁ (man), and the letter ה of the word אִשָּׁה (woman), combine to form the Divine Name ה-י. Hashem is happy to reside among a virtuous couple. However, when strife and contention abound, He removes His Presence from them. Both are left with only the letters ך and ן, which combine to form the word אֵשׁ (fire).

In *parashat Va'etchanan*, we read, “For you will beget children and grandchildren, and you will have been long in the land” (*Devarim* 4:25). Rashi explains that the word וְנוֹשַׁנְתֶּם (you will have been long), which is numerically equivalent to 852, alludes to the following. Bnei Yisrael were slated to be exiled after 852 years of living in Eretz Yisrael. However, we find that Hashem advanced the exile by two years in order to spare them the fulfillment of the verse, “You will surely perish” (*ibid.* vs. 26).

According to the strict Hand of Justice, Bnei Yisrael deserved to remain in their land for another two years. Out of mercy for His children, Hashem exiled them earlier in order to preserve them as a nation. In this way, they eventually merited redemption. Had Hashem allowed them to remain in their land for another two years, their spiritual status would have spelled their complete destruction. He thus went beyond the bounds of strict justice by decreasing their term in their Land, thereby affording them ultimate redemption.

In a similar vein, Hashem demonstrated His mercy on our nation in the wilderness. On their last Tu b'Av before entering Eretz Yisrael, He showed His forgiveness by allowing the remainder of our nation to live.

Another reason for the joy of Tu b'Av is the following. On this day, the Jewish daughters would dance in the vineyards in search of their life partners. The wealthier girls would loan their expensive clothes to those of lesser means in order to save them embarrassment (*Ta'anit* 26b). This led to an increased level of unity and love among the nation. The air was filled with a generosity of spirit. The young men would notice the maidens and take them as wives. Many Jewish homes were established in this way.

“Who is a rich man? One who is happy with his lot” (*Avot* 4:1). I would like to suggest that the wealthy Jewish daughters generously considered their less fortunate peers as part of themselves (their lot – חלקו). They therefore magnanimously shared with them their expensive clothing, gladdening their hearts.

Fifteen (alluding to the fifteenth of Av) is the *gematria* of the word גאווה (arrogance). The wealthier girls shed all forms of pride as they loaned their poorer friends clothes that befitted the daughters of the King. This act increased harmony and happiness throughout the nation, to the degree that Tu b'Av is one of the most joyous days of our calendar.

Let us return to our question as to how we can call Yom Kippur a day of joy. This is the day when we repent our sins, including interpersonal ones. It is relatively easy to ask forgiveness from Hashem, Whom ones does not see. But it is much more difficult to face one's friend and beg for forgiveness for harming him.

This is depicted in the case of Yosef. His brothers could not face him out of shame for what they had done toward him. From this incident, we gain some understanding of the shame one will experience when facing the Heavenly Tribunal on the ultimate Day of Judgment (*Bereishit Rabbah* 95:10-11).

Although Yom Kippur atones for sins between man and his Maker, it does not atone for sins between man and his fellow man, until one appeases him (*Yoma* 85b). Therefore, those who wish to be found innocent in judgment hurry to make amends with anyone they might have aggrieved. As a result, unity and peace reign among the nation. This causes immense joy, in spite of the solemnity of the day.

Thus, there are two reasons for the joy of Yom Kippur. One is the knowledge that Hashem is our All-merciful Father, Who will surely seal us for a life of peace. The other is that we make amends with our fellow men on this day. Peace and unity are a direct cause for celebration and joy.

A rabbi once shared with me the following thought: From the fifteenth of Av until the twenty-fifth of Elul, the day Hashem began creating the world, there are forty days. These correspond to the number of days in which a fetus is formed (*Bechorot* 21b). This indicates that forty days before Creation, Hashem desired to create mankind. From the twenty-fifth of Elul until Yom Kippur, there are fifteen days, corresponding to Tu b'Av; the fifteenth day of Av. This alludes to the saying, "There were no greater days in Israel than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur."

### ————— In Summary —————

- ◆ "There were no greater days in Israel than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur." This saying needs explanation. It implies that Tu b'Av was a greater festival than the others. Furthermore, how can we call Yom Kippur, replete with the fear of judgment, a day of joy?
- ◆ Beginning with Tu b'Av, the days begin to get shorter and the nights longer. People head home earlier and have more time for Torah study, which gladdens their hearts and fills them with an inner light. This is a cause for great joy.
- ◆ Bnei Yisrael in the wilderness ceased dying on this day. Hashem indicated that these people were now pardoned and ready to enter the Land. This too, was cause for great joy.

- ◆ The number fifteen alludes to the Name ה-י, the symbol of unity and peace, which are causes of joy.
- ◆ On Tu b'Av, the young maidens would dance outside in the vineyards. In this manner, many Jewish homes were established. The wealthier girls loaned their dresses to the poorer ones, thereby increasing peace and unity among the nation.
- ◆ The joy we feel on Yom Kippur results from our knowledge that Hashem will have mercy on us and seal us for a good life. Moreover, before Yom Kippur, everyone makes sure to appease his fellow. This increases peace and joy.





## Glossary



- Akeidah, Akeidat Yitzchak – the Binding of Yitzchak  
Al kiddush Hashem – for the sake of sanctifying Hashem’s Name  
Amora, Amora’im (pl) – Torah Sages of the Gemara  
Am Yisrael – the Jewish people  
Aravah, aravot (pl) – willow branches, one of the Four Species  
Asseret Yemei Teshuvah – the Ten Days of Repentance, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – the Day of Repentance  
Aron – Ark  
Avodah – service, referring to the Service in the Beit Hamikdash  
Avodat Hashem – service of Hashem  
Avot – Forefathers: Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov
- Ba’alei Mussar – Masters of Ethics, those who teach ethical teachings  
Ba’al teshuvah, ba’alei teshuvah (pl) – one who returns to Hashem (lit. Master of return/repentance)  
Baruch Hashem – Thank G-d (expression)  
B’chasdei Hashem – in Hashem’s kindness  
Bein Hametzarim – “Between the Straits,” referring to the three weeks between the Seventeenth of Tammuz and Tishah b’Av  
Bein Hazmanim – intercession between study semesters in yeshiva

- Beit Hamikdash, Batei Mikdash (pl) – Temple
- Beit kenesset, batei kenesset (pl) – house of prayer, synagogue
- Beit midrash, batei midrash (pl) – house of study
- Ben Torah – lit. “son of the Torah,” one who dedicates himself to Torah
- Bikurim – the first fruit, brought to Yerushalayim
- Birkat hagomel – blessing of thanksgiving recited after being rescued
- Birkat Hamazon – Grace after Meals
- Bnei Yisrael – the Children of Israel
- Brit, brit milah – circumcision
- Brit bein Habetarim – Covenant of the Parts, which Hashem made with Avraham Avinu
- Chag – festival
- Chalilah, chas v’shalom – Heaven forbid
- Challah – bread baked for Shabbat and festivals
- Chatan – groom
- Chazal – our Sages, may their memory be for a blessing
- Chiddushim – Torah insights
- Chol Hamoed – the intermediate days of the festival
- Churban – destruction, referring to that of the Temple
- Daf HaYomi – program to learn one page of Gemara every day, which is completed in approximately seven and a half years
- Eretz Yisrael – Land of Israel
- Erev – the eve of (e.g., Shabbat)
- Etrog – citron, one of the Four Species
- Gan Eden – Paradise
- Gaon – great scholar
- Gehinnom – Hell
- Gematria – numerical value of a letter of the Hebrew alphabet

Gid hanasheh – sciatic nerve

Haggadah shel Pesach – the Haggadah read at the Passover Seder

Igulim – spiritual circles which comprise the sefirot (Kabbalistic concept)

Hadasim – myrtle branches, one of the Four Species

Haftarah – portion of the Prophets read on Shabbat and Yom Tov

Hakadosh Baruch Hu – The Holy One, Blessed is He (referring to Hashem)

Halachah, halachot (pl) – Jewish law

Hilula – celebration of the anniversary of the death of a tzaddik

Hy”d – May Hashem avenge his blood

Kabbalat HaTorah – the receiving of the Torah

Kaddish – prayer said by a mourner for the merit of the deceased

Kallah – bride

Karet – excision

Kashrut – the laws of keeping kosher

Kedushah – sanctity, holiness

Kelippah, kelippot (pl) – force of impurity

Kiddush – the berachah made over wine to sanctify the Shabbat

Kodesh Hakodashim – Holy of Holies, Inner Sanctum

Kohen, Kohanim (pl) – priest

Kohen gadol – High priest

Kollel, rule of – rule of calculating a gematria by adding one for the unit to the original value

Korban, korbanot (pl) – (lit. bringing close) sacrifice, which brought us close to Hashem

Kosher l'mehadrin – the highest level of kashrut

Kotel Hama'aravi – Western Wall, the remnant of the Temple

Kriyat Shema – the recitation of the Shema

Lashon Hara – slander, evil speech

Latke – potato pancake eaten on Chanukah

L'havdil – to separate the holy from the mundane

L'shem Shamayim – for the sake of Heaven

Luchot – Tablets

Lulav – palm branch, one of the Four Species

Ma'ariv – Evening prayer

Mashiach – the Messiah

Matan Torah – the giving of the Torah

Matzeivah – stone upon which offerings were brought to Hashem

Megillah, Megillat Esther – Scroll, Scroll of Esther read on Purim

Mehadrin – the highest level of kosher food

Merkavah – Chariot, an allusion to those who are close to the Shechinah (Kabbalistic term)

Mikveh – ritual bath

Minchah – Afternoon prayer

Minyan – quorum

Mitzvah, mitzvot (pl) – commandment

Mishkan – Sanctuary

Mizbe'ach – Altar

Motza'ei – the time after Shabbat or a festival

Musaf – the Additional Prayer said on Shabbat and Yom Tov, specific to the day

Nachat – Jewish pride

Nasi, Nesi'im (pl) – prince, leader of the Jewish people

Navi – prophet

Nazir – nazirite, one who abstained from grapes and products made from them, such as wine, in order to come closer to Hashem

Nefesh – life force

Neshamah, neshamot (pl) – soul

Netilat yadayim – the mitzvah to wash one’s hands upon awakening in the morning and before eating bread

Niddah – a woman who became impure due to her menstrual cycle

Nitzotzot shel kedushah – “sparks of holiness” (Kabbalistic concept)

Oht Brit Kodesh – sign of Hashem’s covenant

Olam Haba – the World to Come

Olam Hazez – this world

Parashah, parshiyot (pl) – chapter

Pasuk, pesukim (pl) – verse

Payot – side-locks

Posek, poskim (pl) – arbitrators of Jewish law

Rasha, reshaim (pl) – wicked person

Rosh Chodesh – the first day of the month

Ruach – spirit

Ruach Hakodesh – Divine inspiration

Sandek – one who holds the baby at a brit milah

Sanhedrin – the High Court

S’chach – branches used as roofing for the sukkah

Se’ah – measurement

Sefer, sefarim (pl) – book

Sefer Torah, Sifrei Torah (pl) – Torah scroll

Sefirah, sefirot (pl) – channels through which Hashem gives blessing to this world (Kabbalistic concept); also referring to Sefirat Ha’Omer

Selichot – special prayers said before the Yamim Nora’im

Seudat hodayah – thanksgiving meal celebrating one’s salvation

Seudat mitzvah – meal eaten for a mitzvah celebration

Sevivon, sevivonim (pl) – spinning top, dreidel, traditionally played with on Chanukah

Shacharit – Morning Prayer

Shas – the thirty-six tractates of the Gemara

Shechinah – the Divine Presence

Sheid – negative spiritual force

Shemittah – the Sabbatical year, occurring every seven years, when the land is left fallow

Shemoneh Esrei – the silent, standing prayer, said three times a day

Shevet – tribe

Shidduch – match

Shiluach haken – the mitzvah of sending away a mother bird and taking its eggs

Shiur, shiurim (pl) – Torah lecture

Shlita – May he live many good years, Amen

Shofar – ram's horn blown on Rosh Hashanah

Simchah – joyous occasion

Siyata di'Shemaya – help of Heaven

Siyum – completion of a portion of the Torah, and the celebration of it

Sufganiot – donuts, eaten on Chanukah

Sugya – topic in Gemara

Sukkah, sukkot (pl) – booth, or other type of temporary dwelling used on Sukkot

Talmid chacham, talmidei chachamim – Torah scholar

Talmud – the Mishnah and Gemara

Tanna, Tanna'im (pl) – Sage of the Mishnah

Tefillah – prayer

Tefillin – phylacteries

Teshuvah – (lit. return) repentance

Tikkun – rectification

Tosefet Shabbat – the small amount of time added on to the beginning and

end of Shabbat

Tzaddik, tzaddikim (pl) – righteous person

Tzedakah – charity

Ushpizin – the seven holy Shepherds who visit us on Sukkot: Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, Yosef, and David Hamelech

Viduy – confession

Yahrtzeit – day of death

Yamim Nora'im – Days of Awe, referring to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Yerushalayim – Jerusalem

Yeshiva – rabbinical college

Yetzer Hara – evil inclination

Yetzer Hatov – good inclination

Yirah, yirat Shamayim – fear of Heaven

Yovel – the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year that comes after seven Shemittah cycles

Zman – semester of Torah study

Zt"l – May his memory be for a blessing

Zy"a – May his merit protect us