

Daily Teaching
15 Kislev 5768
Sunday, November 25, 2007

Vayeishev #1

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

The opening verse of *parshat Vayeishev* is: "Jacob dwelt in the land of the dwellings of his father, in the Land of Canaan. These are the offspring of Jacob, Joseph...."

One of the most important thinkers of Chassidut is Rabbi Hillel of Paritch. In his discourses, published under the title *Pelach Harimon* (lit., "A Slice of the Pomegranate"), for the book of Genesis, he writes what he heard from the third Rebbe of Chabad, the *Tzemach Tzedek*:

Regarding the verse "Jacob dwelt in the land of the dwellings of his father." It is known that the word "dwellings" (מגורי) has two meanings. The first is similar to its meaning in the verse: "...surrounding fear,"¹ which indicates the inner fear, or higher fear of God, the experience of which is equivalent to total and absolute nullification of one's being.

The second meaning stems from the word meaning "storage bin," like a storage bin full of fruit, alluding to the verse: "the fear of God is His repository" and the saying of the sages that this type of fear is a vessel for the essence of life, the essence of the Infinite. What they mean to say is that it allows one to take pleasure from Him, higher and higher, and this is what is said in the *Tikunei Zohar* that awe is a storage bin for wisdom, i.e., to the wisdom that is concealed within the essence, etc.

Now, the nature of fear is such that it causes one to flee from one's place, like at Mt. Sinai: "The people saw... and they stood far away." Likewise, in the verse: "They shall enter caves... from fear of God..." But Jacob our father was able to experience inner fear and to dwell comfortably in that state, remaining in it for a length of time. This is because the root of the middle axis [of the *sefirot*] inter-cludes the two faculties of [the right and left axes]: love and fear. Therefore, even though he experienced the might of fear, which leads to nullification of being, nonetheless, internally he still experienced love, specifically pleasurable love, the ability to take pleasure from the hidden source of pleasure as explained. And as we say: "All hearts shall fear you, and all organs and kidneys shall sing to Your Name [in pleasurable love]."

From Rebbe Hillel we learn that Jacob's "dwellings of his father" refers to "the fear of Isaac." Isaac is the archetypal soul of the *sefirah* of might, whose inner experience is fear, or awe. Indeed, Jacob describes God as "the fear of Isaac my father," indicating that Isaac's experience of the Almighty awakened in his soul the faculty of fear. Based on



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Rebbe Hillel's teaching, we also learn that apparently Isaac was always fleeing because of his fear and awe of God. Only Jacob, thanks to his source in the middle axis of the *sefirot*, which inter-cludes both love and awe, was able to settle down and embrace his awe of God and his total and absolute nullification. In other words, for all its importance, without inter-inclusion with love of God, fear of God cannot be tolerated by the soul for an extended period of time and leads a person to flee from the experience, for lack of peace of mind.

Before we continue, we need to see how the notion of fleeing or flight connects to the *sefirot*. The middle axis of the *sefirot*, which in Kabbalistic terminology is called the middle crossbeam (בריה התיכון), runs from *sefirah* of crown on top to the *sefirah* of kingdom on the bottom and connects them all. The Hebrew word for "crossbeam" is בריח (pronounced: *bariach*), which interestingly stems from the same root (ברח) as "flight" בריחה (pronounced: *berichah*) indicating that the middle axis is like an axis of flight. Now we can identify two directions of flight, because the middle axis is bi-directional. One can flee from below to above (kingdom to crown) and one can flee in the opposite direction, from above to below (crown to kingdom). Fear of falling into the abyss causes flight from below to above. Fear of God who stands above all causes flight from above to below.

Seemingly then, we should associate Isaac's fear of God with the above to below vector of the middle axis. The movement from above to below in fear of God is described by Ezekiel in his vision of the Divine chariot. Specifically, it is the movement "to and fro," the "run and return" of the living beings (a type of angel). *Rashi* writes:

"Run and return like a flash of lightning." Our sages likened the run and return to the blast of the furnace that erupts from it and then immediately returns into it. Likewise, when they [the living beings] stick their head into the firmament that lies above their heads, as is described [in the vision], they immediately withdraw from the Divine Presence that lies above the firmament, and therefore quickly draw their heads back down.

But, recall that Rebbe Hillel defined Isaac's fear as higher fear, or awe, which causes "total and absolute nullification of one's being." Clearly, this is not equivalent to fleeing from He who stands above because of a sudden awe-inspiring dread of God because such flight is meant to preserve one's self, not nullify it. The ability to reach nullification when experiencing fear of God is a special quality of the Jewish soul. This is in contradistinction to the various types of angels, who when suddenly becoming aware of God, are struck by external or lower fear. In Hebrew, these two types of fear are distinguished by the two different prepositions that appear in their idioms. The higher fear, or awe of God, is called יראה את ה', while the lower fear of God is called יראה מה'.² Unfortunately, English does not carry the same distinction.

Thus, the necessary conclusion is that Isaac's fear of God causes flight from below to above. The *Zohar* interprets the verse "flee to your place!" as referring to the soul

returning to its source in the essence of the Almighty. Earlier we said that flight from below to above is caused by fear of falling into the abyss. We can now interpret the abyss as the experience of self, the experience of being separate and distinct from God, which awakens the soul to seek its true and unsevered existence in its source awakening it to the rectifying state of total and absolute self-nullification. In the *Zohar*, the return to one's source, the selfless unification with the Almighty is likened to being sucked into the body of the King. But, far from being a traumatic experience, the flight from below to above is cause for happiness, joy, and laughter, as this is Isaac's constant awe of God, and Isaac's name in Hebrew means "laughter." After his ascent back into his source the abyss becomes the object of Isaac's ridicule. Indeed, the numerical value of "abyss" תהום is equal to the numerical value of "Ishma'el" ישמעאל.

¹. Jeremiah 20:3 and elsewhere.

². One of the best examples of this distinction is found in the first chapter of the Book of Jonah. Jonah flees before God, but his flight sends him into the belly of a ship where he falls asleep, i.e., nullifies himself before the awesome revelation of God's power. The sailors and other passengers exhibit terror in face of God's revelation and try to rescue themselves. When confronted by them Jonah explains his inaction (self-nullification): "I am a Hebrew, and I fear *Havayah*, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9).