

30 Shevat, 5768  
 Tuesday, February 5, 2008

## ADAR: Absurd Dreams Are Really (Good) I

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

First Adar begins on the evening, Tuesday, February 5<sup>th</sup> and ends on  
 Friday evening, March 8<sup>th</sup>

### A Sense of humor

The Book of Formation is the first Kabbalistic text attributed to Abraham and compiled in its final form by the Tannaic sage, Rabbi Akiva. It enumerates the 12 months of the year and explains that each corresponds to a Hebrew letter and a particular sense, or talent, which is controlled by a particular organ of the body. The month of Adar corresponds to the Hebrew letter ק (pronounced: *kof*), its talent is laughter, and the organ that controls this talent is the spleen. Because the Jewish reckoning of months begins with the month of Nisan, in the Jewish year, Adar is considered the twelfth and final month. This means that laughter is the last of all human traits implying a well-known verse from the chapter on the woman of valor: "She laughs, awaiting the final days."<sup>1</sup> After all the ups and downs of the entire year, we enter a month of healthy and cathartic laughter.

Indeed, laughter is the best medicine and it has the power to turn all of the pain, misery, and difficulty of the past year into goodness and joy. At the end of the year, we find ourselves still standing, thank God, and all of the fears that we harbored in our souls (lest so and so happen...) are transformed and sweetened by our laughter. This transformation is alluded to in one of God's connotations: "the Fear of Isaac,"<sup>2</sup> which literally means "fear [itself] will laugh!" This is the theme of Purim, the holiday that we celebrate in Adar. On Purim we celebrate how all the fears of Haman and his planned genocide of the Jewish people were overturned. The fear turned into laughter. This is why the motto of the month of Adar is "abound with joy." When there is but a little amount of joy, it tends to remain concealed in the heart. But when there is an abundance of joy, it overflows and is expressed as booming laughter.



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## Laughter is the best medicine

Because laughter is linked with the ability to turn things around, it is an important ingredient for health. In fact, its healing potential is so great that it can cure even the most difficult of maladies. This link has been recognized since ancient times. In those times medicine recognized four fluids or humors as conducting the various energies—psychological and physical—that determine the body’s health:

- White phlegm was identified with the conduction of joy and spirited behavior.
- Black humor was identified with melancholy and lethargic behavior
- Green humor (or phlegm) was identified with cravings and obsessive behavior.
- Red humor (or blood) was identified with anger and energetic behavior.

Each of the four humors was believed to have a particular controlling organ in the body. The organ controlling the melancholy and lethargic influence of the black humor was considered the spleen. Yet, as was noted above, in Kabbalah, the spleen is considered the controller of the sense of laughter, indicating that laughter has the power to not only modulate melancholy but as is revealed in the month of Adar, to completely transform it into joy. In Hebrew, there is a beautiful allusion to this transformative quality of laughter, because the two idioms “black humor” (מרה שחורה) and “happy thought” (הרהור שמח) have the same exact letters!

On seven out of every nineteen years (this year, 5768, is such a year), we have two months of Adar on our calendar. The second Adar is in many respects like a second copy of the first Adar as it shares much of the same spiritual essence. Thus, laughter is not only transformative, it is indeed overflowing. Laughter is the only one of the 12 senses that can last an entire 60 days! So on years like the present, we have 60 days of laughter at the end of the year.<sup>3</sup>

What is the significance of the number 60? With respect to many laws regarding quantities (particularly dietary laws), the Torah prescribes that a 60:1 ratio is a nullifying ratio. Likewise, 60 days of laughter have the power to nullify and sweeten any bitter taste leftover in our mouths from the preceding year.

## Of monkeys and elephants

The letter with which the month of Adar was created is ק pronounced *kof*. The literal meaning of the word *kof* in Hebrew is “monkey.” This presents us with another beautiful connection between the month of Adar and laughter. The monkey is without a doubt one of the most entertaining animals and one of the few animals capable of actually smiling and laughing. The Ba’al Shem Tov once related that the snake strikes fear because it was created from the essence of fear. Likewise, based on this relationship between the monkey and the month of Adar, we can say that the monkey makes us laugh because it was created from the essence of laughter. Chassidic teachings make use of a parable describing a king whose melancholy spirit is lifted by the novelty of a speaking bird. We may surmise that what is uplifting about the bird is its novelty, but as

soon as the novelty wears off, so does the birds ability to lift the king's spirit. But, a monkey is able to amuse again and again because its essence is one of laughter.

But, the word *kof* in Hebrew has a second meaning: "the eye of a needle." This second meaning ties our monkey with another wonderful and strange animal: the elephant. In their lengthy discussion of dreams in the ninth chapter of the tractate of Berachot, the sages<sup>4</sup> provide us with what seems like a very strange example of something that a person cannot spontaneously see in a dream: an elephant being threaded through the eye of a needle. First the elephant's trunk is threaded through the eyelet, then his head, followed by his entire huge body. What a strange thing to imagine. How strange it would be to have such a dream! But, it is entirely possible that if a person concentrates on this strange image during the day, he may come to dream about it at night.

### All things great

How can we understand such an absurd image? Everything that the sages say has some meaning though this meaning is not always easy to understand. In this particular case we first have to know what the elephant represents. There is a beautiful *midrash* that we discuss from time to time called *Perek Shirah* (usually translated as "The Song of Creation"). This *midrash* was written by Kind David after he finished writing Psalms and documents the various parts of nature, like the sky, the earth, the ocean, rivers, etc. and different animals and the song that they continually sing in praise of the Creator. The song of each creature describes its essence. *Perek Shirah* also describes the song of the elephant, which is: "How great Your actions are, God!"<sup>5</sup> The elephant is the biggest (or greatest) animal (on land) and this is a very fitting verse for it.

But, the elephant's song reflects something deeper. There is another, very similar verse, "How multitudinous your actions are, God!"<sup>6</sup> This verse helps us focus on the elephant's verse. That God acts in a multitude of ways this depicts His quantitative greatness. But, a "great" act is characterized as wondrous and surprising (like the elephant itself)—it is great in the qualitative sense. The great acts of God reveal some deep thought, as indeed the end of the elephant's verse hints: "...How deep are Your thoughts." Regarding another instance of the word "great," in the verse enumerating the *sefirot*,<sup>7</sup> the sages explain that it refers to the act of Creation itself. Thus, God's greatness—God's great acts that are the essence of what the elephant represents—is identified by the sages as His infinite capacity for creation that turns the nothingness into somethingness.

### And small...

Now let us go back and reinterpret the image of an elephant being threaded through the eye of a needle. Now that we know that the elephant represents God's infinity revealed in His power of creation, it follows that the tiny eye of the needle represents God's finite

aspect. Threading the elephant through the eyelet therefore represents the embodiment of God's infinity within His finite aspect. This is exactly what our world is: the encloded reality of God's infinity within finite physical objects.

That people do not see such images in their dreams indicates that realizing this about our reality is so beyond the normal capacity of our minds that even when dreaming the impossible, this does not appear. Indeed, Chassidic teachings maintain that were a person to fully grasp how he is being created at this very moment something from nothing, that person would immediately return to nothingness. Nonetheless, by meditating on the image of the elephant being threaded through the eye of the needle, we can certainly come to the verge of grasping the reality of God's infinity embodying into the limited reality of our physical world—eventually the image may even appear in our dreams.

The notion of the needle's eye representing a miniscule, infinitely small passageway, through which reality is infused, is not foreign to modern physics. Indeed, in modern physics, many elementary particles are considered to fluctuate into and out of reality at every moment. Elementary particles are formed from the vacuum of space and then return into it a fleeting moment later. One has only to imagine that the same is true not only at the microscopic level but at the macroscopic level as well. This is the major tenet of Jewish mystical thought about creation: everything, from the smallest sub-atomic particle, to the biggest elephant, is continually moving back and forth from existence to non-existence. In this sense, the eye of the needle is not only the passageway but the essential residue which is always left over and from which everything returns into reality. The essential residue of a human being from which he or she will be recreated in the resurrection of the dead is called the "bone of *luez*." Amazingly, in Hebrew the "bone of *luez*" (עצם הלז) and "the eye of the needle" (קוף המחט) have the exact same numerical value, 248, which is also the numerical value of Abraham (אברהם).<sup>8</sup>

### **“Who can dictate to Him what He should do?”**

Chassidic philosophy speaks a great deal about the infinite and finite aspects of the Almighty and the interplay between them. One of the most important conclusions is that the finite aspect of God, including our own limited physical reality, are dependent on God's infinite aspect. How so? God's infinite aspect is what makes it possible for Him to reveal His finite aspect in the first place, for thanks to God's omnipotence He is capable of carrying the paradox of a reality that is at one and the same time "outside of Him" yet "part of Him." The most famous phrasing of this paradox is in the form of a question: "Can God create a stone that He cannot lift?" The answer is a paradoxical "yes!" Paradoxical to us, but consistent within God's infinite aspect where the two sides of a paradoxical statement can co-exist simultaneously without nullifying each other.

Carrying this conclusion over to the elephant and the eye of the needle, it follows that the very existence of the eye of the needle, which represents God's finite aspect,

originates in the elephant, which represents His infinite aspect. It is as if the elephant creates the eye of the needle and then jumps through it! But the elephant does not emerge from the other side. In other words, on our side of the cosmic needle's eye, we are not openly aware of God's infinite aspect. Everything on our side of the needle's eye seems very limited and very well behaved, fitting within the confines of nature's laws (no elephants jumping through the eyes of a needle on this end!). This is so because the moment that the infinite aspect enters within the finite realm, it is concealed by the limited capacity of the finite realm.<sup>9</sup> Still, this is why the image of the elephant threaded through the eye of the needle (and not emerging on the other side) is so powerful. If one cannot come to dream this image, one can at least understand what it means and imagine it in the mind's eye. Imagining such images and their symbolic meaning facilitates the heart's being able to grasp that though God's infinite aspect (the elephant) cannot be seen in a revealed manner in our physical realm, it is nonetheless present and not only present, but continually recreating our space. The heart then begins to experience God's true and total omnipresence within and around everything.

A good sense of humor and a lot of laughter are needed to discuss these topics using such seemingly absurd imagery, yet this is exactly the gift that the month of Adar gives us. The month of Adar's joy originates in our ability to transcend the contraction (or, the concealment) of God's infinite Presence and to see that everything is indeed within His total Providence.

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<sup>1</sup>. Proverbs 31:25.

<sup>2</sup>. Genesis 31:42.

<sup>3</sup>. More in depth, the replication of laughter and its playful nature over two months is alluded to in a very important pair of verses describing the role of the Torah before the world was created: "I [the Torah] was entertainment for two days, providing Him with recreation at all times. Recreation for the earth, and entertainment for men" (Proverbs 8:30-1). The word recreation, *משחקת*, appears twice in these verses, symbolizing the double extension of laughter and joy of the first and second Adar. Following the verses, the first recreation—the recreation corresponding to the month of first Adar—is considered loftier and more Divine ("providing Him with recreation"), thus the laughter of first Adar is higher. The second recreation is for men, implying that the laughter of second Adar is more mundane and reveals in our human realm the higher enjoyment and joy of the Almighty.

<sup>4</sup>. *Berachot* 55b.

<sup>5</sup>. Psalms 92:6.

<sup>6</sup>. *Ibid.* 104:24.

<sup>7</sup>. I Chronicles 29:11.

<sup>8</sup>. See in length our series on 248 Elementary Particles. Indeed, as explained there, all of reality is considered to have been created through this number 248, which is hinted in the verse beginning the second account of creation. We have now found that this number also equals "the eye of the needle" and "the bone of *luez*."

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<sup>9</sup>. In Chassidut this is called the “source entering the space of the light,” the source being God’s absolute infinite aspect (the ultimate source of His finite aspect) and the space of the light being the finite realm, represented by the eye of the needle.