

B”H

Hebrew Calendar

## The Month of Nisan: Speak Your Faith

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Our topic this evening is the senses of the soul. The first classic text of Kabbalah, *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Formation), states that each of the 12 soul roots, inherent in each of the 12 tribes of the Jewish people, has a unique sense, a special talent.

The best time to begin discussing the senses, called *chushim* in Hebrew, is now, in the month of *Nisan*, which is the first month of the Jewish year (the month of *Tishrei* is the first month of the universal year). Historically, on the first 12 days of this month, the desert Tabernacle was inaugurated. On each day of the inauguration, one of the 12 princes of the tribes of Israel brought an inaugural sacrifice.

According to the Arizal, the tribes correspond to the months of the Jewish year (again, starting with Nisan), in the same order that the Torah relates the bringing of the sacrifices. The first inaugural sacrifice was brought by Nachshon ben Aminadav, the prince of Judah, the kingly tribe (King David was from the tribe of Judah). As we shall discuss later, the *Mishnah* also states that the month of Nisan is the New Year for the Kings of Israel.



One physical manifestation of the twelve senses of the tribes of Israel was in the *choshen*, the breastplate of the High Priest. In the breastplate, each tribe had a stone with a special color (this same color also appeared on the tribe's flag). Each stone and its associated color have the spiritual power to arouse the tribe's respective sense in the soul.

Let us first get an idea of what these twelve senses are, because we are used to thinking of five senses. The five senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) are included within the twelve. So let us present them in the order of the Hebrew months, note their corresponding tribe, and say a few words about each.



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Month	Tribe	Sense	Note
Nisan	Judah	speech	This is the sense we will talk about today. Each sense carries a great deal of meaning, based on the various connotations of its name in Hebrew. Speech ( <i>dibur</i> ) also means leadership in Hebrew, which is why it is related to the New Year for Kings, as noted before, because, as we shall explain later, the king rules with his word.
Iyar	Issachar	thought	Or contemplation. This is also the sense of meditation.
Sivan	Zevulun	walking	This sense also refers to movement in general, and to a sense of progress.
Tamuz	Reuven	sight	People who have this sense are especially perceptive.
Av	Shimon	hearing	People who have this sense are especially receptive.
Elul	Gad	action	This word also means rectification. To fix something. This relates to the month of Elul, the month before the High Holidays of Tishrei, which is dedicated to fixing our ways. Some people like to fix things that do not work, while others think buying something new is better.
Tishrei	Efrayim	touch	Touch also implies marital relations. The whole secret of the holidays of Tishrei is marriage between our people and God.
Cheshvan	Menasheh	smell	People who have this sense are especially sensitive to others and conscious of their character traits.
Kislev	Binyamin	sleep	It is explained in Kabbalah that if a person has a sense for something, they can do it well in a short time. This is also a sense of a person who is calm and cool. This is the sense of the soul to calm itself. It is also related to dreaming.
Tevet	Dan	anger	This sense must be directed against our own evil inclination. We have to know how to have righteous indignation at the evil that is within us. This has to come before being upset with the evil that is around us.
Shevat	Asher	taste	Taste is also the sense of eating properly, which is why it is sometimes called the sense of eating.
Adar	Naftali	laughter	This sense is of course closely linked with the holiday of Purim.

Now that we have gone through the 12 senses, let us note that this entire topic is one of the main points of correspondence between Kabbalah and psychology. The first thing that we learn in Kabbalah is to be conscious of the Almighty in every part of our lives. The same is true regarding our soul. Kabbalah teaches us, especially in regard to the topic of the 12 senses, how to be conscious of our soul and its various aspects. Though we all have something of each of these senses, we have one that is predominant. It does not necessarily mean that we physically come from the tribe that has this sense, but that spiritually, we derive from it.



The original root of the word Kabbalah (קַבָּלָה) in Hebrew means “parallel.” In the entire Five Books of Moses this root appears only twice,<sup>1</sup> in the same phrase, “the loops shall be parallel to one another.” Only later, in the Book of Esther do we find this root used in what has become its common sense in Hebrew, “to receive” (לְקַבֵּל). This means that the original sense of the word Kabbalah indicates an ability to see and draw parallelisms or one-to-one correspondences between different sets of elements that at first sight may not seem to be related to one another. It all starts from the fact that they have the same number of elements. In the Torah, the two sets were of 50 loops. When they were connected they formed one roof of the Tabernacle. Connecting the two sets creates unity. The whole purpose of our study of Kabbalah is to see unity within plurality. This is how one begins to return from the feeling of plurality to unity in the soul. This is the basic wisdom of Kabbalah.

*Sefer Yetzirah* also teaches us that there are 10 *sefirot*, the ten channels of energy, by which the Almighty creates the world. If we were to relate the *sefirot* to our own soul, we would see that they correspond (like the meaning of the word Kabbalah) to the 10 conscious powers of our soul: 3 intellectual (wisdom, understanding, and knowledge) and 7 emotional (from loving-kindness to kingdom).

In addition to the 10 conscious *sefirot* or power of the soul, there are also 3 super-conscious powers. In the language of Kabbalah, these are called the crowns of the soul. Thus, altogether there are 13 powers of the soul. Indeed, 13 is 12 plus 1, hinting to the additional month called *chodesh ha'ibur* that we add to the Hebrew calendar 7 times in every 19 years. The 13<sup>th</sup> month corresponds to the tribe of Levi. The sense of the tribe of Levi was music. In a certain sense this is the all encompassing sense, which dwells within each of the other senses. That is to say that each of the senses has a certain "tune" to it. The division of 13 into 12 and 1 is beautifully reflected in the figure of the *Magen David* (Star of David).<sup>2</sup> As in the diagram appearing on our website, the *Magen David*

may be pictured as composed of 12 triangular areas surrounding a central area. The central area corresponds to the *sefirah* of knowledge, which in the soul manifests as the power of unification.

Take speech, for instance. The first Rebbe of Chabad never simply spoke, rather everything he would say he would sing. This idea was also reflected in the way that the tribes were situated in the desert. The 12 tribes were encamped around the tribe of Levi.

So now we have 13 senses, 13 soul-roots (tribes), 13 months and 13 powers of the soul. Our task will be to see how each sense corresponds to a particular power of the soul, its tribe, its month, and as we shall also explain, a letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The first month of the year, Nisan, corresponds to the highest power of the soul, faith. Thus, we may say that Nisan is *the month of faith*. Since it also corresponds to the sense of speech, we need to understand how speech and faith are interdependent. When I speak, the song that is heard in my voice expresses my faith more than any other sense. There is a verse that describes this is Psalms: "I had faith as I spoke..."<sup>3</sup> So, of all the senses of the soul, this month we should focus on rectifying our sense of speech and doing so depends on our ability to express our faith.

As stated, faith is the highest of the super-conscious powers of the soul. Speech is associated with the *sefirah* of kingdom, the last of the *sefirot*, the last of the powers of the soul. Thus, this relationship illustrates the statement in *Sefer Yetzirah* that "the end is embedded in the beginning." The power of speech, which is in a certain sense the last of the powers of the soul, has its root in the highest level of the psyche.

The Arizal explained that Passover (פֶּסַח) should be read as two words that mean, "a speaking mouth" (פֶּה סָח). Why is Passover a holiday of speech? Passover is the time of our liberation, as we say in our prayers. So really, this is the holiday of freedom of speech, especially for a Jew, and especially for a Jew in a non-Jewish environment. It is the ability to freely speak with true modest Jewish pride, speaking our faith which is our deepest truth.

In Chassidut, we are taught that before the exodus from Egypt, the power of the soul that was truly in exile was the essence of our faith. Not that we did not believe in the existence of God; for this we believed in. We are even taught that because of the basic foundation of faith that we had, we were redeemed. Nonetheless, this was not the absolute faith of the Jew, for that remained latent during the exile in Egypt. The essence of our faith was revealed to the world by Abraham, of whom the Torah says: "And he proclaimed the name of *Havayah, Kel [God] Olam [world, in the sense of both space and time]*."<sup>4</sup> As explained in Chassidut, the phrase "*Kel Olam*" means that God and the world are in truth the same. In Yiddish the saying that reflects this is: *Got is altz, altz is*

*Got* (God is all, all is God).<sup>5</sup> During our years in exile in Egypt, we were unable to pronounce this essential aspect of our faith. True freedom of speech is called in Kabbalah: לִיבָא לְפִימָא גְלִיָּא, meaning that the innermost part of the heart can express itself through the mouth.

Therefore, on the night of the *seder*, the more that we speak of and retell the story of our redemption from Egypt and recollect the miracles of the exodus, the better. In short, there is something special about the holiday of Passover that has to do with expressing God's work and miracles.

According to *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Hebrew alphabet of 22 letters divides into three grouping of 3, 7, and 12 letters. The three letters (ש, מ, א) correspond to the seasons of the year (summer, winter, and spring/fall). The seven letters (ת, ה, כ, ב, ג, ד, ה) correspond to the days of the week. And, the twelve letters (ה, ו, ז, ח, ט, י, י, ל, נ, ס, ע, צ, ק) correspond to the months of the year, in order. Since Nisan is the first month of the year, its corresponding letter is *hei* (ה).

Phonetically, the *hei* is considered to be the simplest letter, as it is just breath passing unobstructed. Because of this it is considered the origin of speech. Its numerical value, 5, alludes to the 5 origins of speech in the human body (throat, roof of mouth, tongue, teeth, and lips) by which all the other letters are formed. The *Hagadah* has 15 stages. The 5<sup>th</sup> stage (corresponding to the *hei*) is *Magid*, the telling of the story of the Exodus. It even begins with the name of the letter itself: הָא לְהִמָּא עֵיָּא. So there are many other things in this holiday that have to do with speech. The holiday culminates on the seventh day with the song of praise sung by Moses and the Jewish people on the banks of the Red Sea, song being the culmination of speech.



What we are trying to observe are the three different functions of speech. In order to reach this state, as with any power of the soul, our sense of speech needs to be rectified and polished. We will now look at the three stages required for achieving this.

## Words of Thanksgiving

We begin by looking at the tribe of Israel that corresponds to this month: Judah. Judah was Leah's fourth son. When he was born, his mother said: "this time I will give thanks to God," and named him Judah, which means "to give thanks." Clearly, knowing how to give thanks is an element of rectified speech. In fact, as we shall see, it is the first stage in a three stage process of correcting our sense of speech.

The first word that a Jew says when waking up in the morning is "*modeh*," which means "I give thanks." The first spoken word expresses gratitude to the Almighty for

returning our souls to our bodies. The full statement that we say upon awaking is מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם שֶׁהַחַיּוּת בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה. רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ ("I give thanks to You, the Living and Existing King for returning my soul to me with compassion. Great is Your faith"). The word with which this expression ends is "faith," a beautiful allusion to what we have just explained, that speech expresses our faith.

The first ethical classic in Judaic thought is a work titled *Duties of the Heart* (חובת הלבבות). There the author explains that the beginning of rectifying one's morality is giving thanks. If a person does not recognize or acknowledge the good that has been done with him, his morality cannot be rectified.

The word "*modeh*" can also mean to confess the truth. An unrectified heart is one that does not recognize or acknowledge that someone else is right, because it always feels that it has to be right. When calling Judah by his name, the sages explain that Leah was also the first to confess and acknowledge the goodness that she was given. How so? The matriarchs had a holy spirit and knew that Jacob would have 4 wives and 12 sons altogether. Each wife was thus entitled to give birth to three children. When Leah gave birth to the fourth son, Judah, she confessed that she had been given more than she deserved. In fact, whatever we receive in life, it is more than we deserve and therefore we need to acknowledge the goodness in it.

Judah himself, true to his name, is famous for confessing to what at least seemed like immoral conduct on his part, in the story of his relationship with his daughter-in-law, Tamar.<sup>6</sup>

When praying before God, the words we speak are at once thanksgiving, acknowledgment of the truth and confession of the wrong that we have done. As the sages say, the ideal state of being is one in which a person is praying to God at every moment of the day, and thus is always expressing these three aspects of the thanksgiving in speech. The person who most illustrated this state was King David, which is why his Psalms make up such a large part of our prayers.

## Words of Torah

Let us move to another aspect of speech, which makes up the second stage of its empowerment. The sages ask why it is that we have only one mouth. Of everything else we have two: two eyes, two ears, etc. How is it that we are supposed to use the same mouth to eat, drink and speak of mundane matters, and to speak the words of the Torah. What this is implying is that our true inner essence is to speak the words of Torah.

The Torah is the rectification for Adam eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The outcome of Adam's sin was the introduction of ego and egocentricity into

the human psyche. It is very difficult for a person to negate their egocentricity altogether. Only the greatest *tzadikim* were able to do this. Nonetheless, speaking words of Torah makes it possible for us to dissociate ourselves from our egocentricity, even if we are not able to totally get rid of it.

The Torah, by its very nature is meant to be spoken, as stated in the verse: "For they [the words of Torah] are life to those who speak them."<sup>7</sup> When speaking words of Torah, our mouth has the power to clarify reality. In *Sefer Yetzirah*, speech is also called "the covenant of the tongue." Like the covenant of circumcision, the tongue is given the power to sever the impurity of the world and discard it.

### Words of Leadership

In the Mishnah,<sup>8</sup> we learn that the month of Nisan is the New Year of Kings. The Torah says that the king rules through his power of speech: "For the word of the king is his sovereignty."<sup>9</sup> Based on this verse, the sages say that: **אָמַר מֶלֶךְ, עָקַר טוֹרָא**, when a king speaks, he can uproot a mountain. The words of a king have tremendous physical power.

A leader in the language of the sages is called a **דַּבָּר**, a speaker. The sages teach us that in every generation there is one speaker (leader) and not two. More than any other individual, the king is able to inspire us to do great acts of the type that no one else could inspire us to. The first king of the Jewish people was Moses and from Moses and on, until most recently, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, all of our kings conveyed tremendous faith in their words.

The sages say that every Jew is indeed a king, meaning that each and every one of us can reach a state where our words have impact on reality, and most importantly have leadership qualities that can lead to the mending of reality. But, to have such power, our speech must be expressive of our essential faith, just like the Jewish king's speech. In the last discourse that the Lubavitcher Rebbe published, he called upon all of us to become kings, empowering us to lead reality into the Messianic era.

### Submission, Separation, and Sweetening

The overall goal of speech is to be able to liberate and express our faith. This is achieved by rectifying our speech with the three types of words discussed. The Ba'al Shem Tov taught us that every process (in our case the liberation of faith through speech) has to have three stages, which are: submission of evil, separation, and finally sweetening (the bitter).

The first stage, submission, here corresponds to the ability to recognize truth, and admit to being wrong. This is the essence of submission as humility, as spoken and expressed with words of thanksgiving and acknowledgment.

The purpose of the Torah is to distinguish between what is permissible and what is not. Thus speaking words of Torah is a process of separation—separating the evil from the good; and, in our own psyche, dissociating from our own egocentricity.

Words of leadership are the third function of speech. They inspire the hearers with the charisma that every king has. In Hebrew there is an idiom "Open your mouth and your words will shine forth."<sup>10</sup> This is based on the notion that words have the power to enlighten reality. Thus, words are the "light of the mouth,"<sup>11</sup> implying that they indeed have the power to heal, that is, to sweeten the bitter.

### Sweetening the Bitter Herbs

These three stages of rectifying our speech are achieved by the three basic components of the Passover celebration: the Paschal lamb (the special sacrifice eaten on the first night of Passover), the *matzah*, and the bitter herbs (פסח מצה ומרור). In the Hagadah we read that whoever did not mention, in spoken word, these three *mitzvot* of the Seder night did not fulfill his responsibility.

The Paschal lamb is simply called *pesach*. As noted before, this word means speech ("the speaking mouth"). In the *Zohar*, *matzah* is called the "food of faith."<sup>12</sup> The bitter herbs are eaten so that we may re-experience the harsh reality and bitterness of action that was the lot of our forefathers in Egypt. So in order, the Paschal lamb, *matzah*, and bitter herbs correspond to speech, faith, and action. With regard to speech itself, we are taught that the act of speech entails the moving of the lips, and so, in *halachah*, is considered action. Thus, all three—faith, speech, and action—relate to the act and purpose of speech.

In Hebrew, the numerical sum of the three words אֱמוּנָה (faith, 102), דְּבַר (speech, 212), and מַעֲשֵׂה (action, 415) is 729, which is also the exact numerical sum of the three words פֶּסַח (Paschal lamb, 148), מַצָּה (*matzah*, 135), and מְרֹר (bitter herbs, 446). This equation establishes an essential equivalence between these two sets of words. 729 is also  $27^2 (= 9^3 = 3^6)$ , implying, as all square numbers (and perfect powers) do, a wholeness in the joining of these sets of words (especially as each set of words contains 3 elements, and 729 is a power of 3).

Until the rebuilding of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem with the coming of the Mashiach, we are unable to offer the Paschal sacrifice as required by the Torah, and can only fulfill our responsibility with regard to it by mentioning it in speech. And so today,

the *pesach* is purely "the speaking mouth." We perform the *mitzvah* of eating *matzah* exactly as required by the Torah. The *mitzvah* of eating the bitter herbs is today only an injunction of the sages, for according to the law of the Written Torah we are only required to eat the bitter herbs together with the Paschal sacrifice (which we do not have today). Thus, each of the three *mitzvot* possesses today a different status.

Our perfect faith in God—the *matzah*—is exactly the same as it was from the time of our forefathers and the Giving of the Torah. By giving verbal expression to our faith, our unique consciousness of "Hear O Israel *God* is our God, *God* is One," we achieve the level of *separation* (of Israel from the nations) within speech. The *matzah* thus corresponds to the function of speech to reveal Torah to the world. And so, in our prayers, the reading of the *Shema* is considered to be the Torah within prayer.

The bitter herbs (*maror*) correspond to the *submission* within speech. They remind us of the hardship of our servitude in Egypt. The exodus from Egypt transformed our physical state and psychological sense of servitude to the commitment to serve, in submission and humility, the One God of Israel, our redeemer from slavery. This experience of transformation from foreign slavery (in the words of the sages, from being "a slave to a slave") to becoming a servant of God (and none other) is truly sweet and uplifting. But, so long as we are in exile (before the final redemption with the coming of the Mashiach) we cannot experience the transformation in full. We can, however, acknowledge it and give thanks to God for our redemption from Egypt with the surety that we will soon merit to give thanks to God for the final redemption. The *maror* still tastes bitter in our mouths and the memory of our slavery still bitters our consciousness (especially when expressed in speech). Nonetheless, we can experience the transformation in part, and so the eating of *maror* is still a part of our festive celebration of Passover.

The Paschal lamb, the ultimate "speaking mouth," corresponds to the absolute *sweetening* of speech, to the speech of true leadership. As long as the true leader (the Mashiach) has not appeared we can only speak about this level of speech, in expectation of the leader's arrival, but not actually "consume" it as a tangible entity, a physical sacrifice to be eaten.

We can now see that the order of *pesach*, *matzah*, *maror* (of the Hagadah) is actually the reverse order of submission, separation, sweetening. In our service of God we begin from action (*ma'aseh*, which, in Hebrew, implies forcing oneself, for it does not come easy), the *maror*, which then gives us the strength of character (the *koach mah* or *bitul*, selflessness, of the *matzah*, the unleavened bread, which follows the submission, *hachna'ah*, of the *maror*) to express our faith to others (without shame), the *matzah*, and

finally to manifest our inner spark of leadership (our individual spark of Mashiach), the *pesach*. This order is from below up. But in mentioning them, all in speech, on the Seder night, we begin from the end—"the end of action is in the beginning of thought"—from above down, in order to inspire us and ensure us that the end, the revelation of the Mashiach, is immanent. Each higher level inspires the one below it—the *pesach* inspires the *matzah*, and the *matzah* inspires the *maror*. We thereby become closer to the experience of the complete transformation of all the bitterness of our lives to the sweetness of serving God alone with a perfect heart in love (uninspired service is solely from fear, whereas inspired service is from love), for "there is no service as great as the service of love."

*(based on a lecture given in Zurich on 4 Nisan, 5766)*

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1. Exodus 26:5 and 36:12.
  2. In fact, elsewhere we discuss a series of numbers called *Magen David* numbers defined by the equation:  $\star_n = 12\Delta_n + 1$ , where  $\star_n$  is the  $n^{\text{th}}$  *Magen David* number, and  $\Delta_n$  is the sum of integers from 1 to  $n$ .
  3. Psalms 116:10.
  4. Genesis 21:33.
  5. This statement does not mean that Judaism sees as God as would a pantheist, but the difference is beyond our present topic.
  6. Genesis 38:26.
  7. Proverbs 4:22 as read by the sages in *Eiruvin* 54a.
  8. *Rosh Hashanah* 1:1.
  9. Ecclesiastes 8:4.
  10. *Berachot* 22a.
  11. In Hebrew, the letters that make up the phrase "light of the mouth" (אור פה) also spell the word "healing" (רפואה).
  12. III, 183b.