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The Kabbalah of Novels, Films, and Comics

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The Power of Dramatization

Without a doubt, as much as this essay may be of value, dramatizing it would have been far better. Making a play or movie out of it, would have brought thousands of people to watch it on our website. And making a cartoon out of it would have even gotten the message across to children that normally seem to have an attention span of, say, about 5 seconds! But, dramatization, story-boarding, filming, and drawing cartoons are very costly—but if this article strikes home, why not think about doing exactly that to get its message out.

Which brings us to the topic at hand: the tremendous power and impact that dramatization has. It may seem a little strange that the month of Av would prompt us to talk about novels, plays, movies, and comics, but as we shall see, the essence of the month of Av is what fuels the human capacity for portrayal and dramatization.

My Left Eye

The Book of Formation, which describes the inner essence of each month, was written by Abraham long before the month of Av became associated with calamity. Abraham (whose name in Hebrew begins with the two letter "Av"), identified the month of Av with the sense of hearing. All of the negative events that occurred in Av were fueled by a spiritual illness that derailed our ability to utilize our hearing correctly. For this reason, the Chassidic masters encouraged the proper use of the month of Av's spiritual essence in order to restore our spirits to a healthy state.

The spiritual illness began on Tishah B'av (the ninth day of Av), the day on which the 12 spies came back from their 40 day mission to the Land of Israel. The disheartening report they gave struck fear in the hearts of the Jewish people—fear that they would not be able to vanquish the Canaanites from the land. This lack of trust in the power of the Almighty to fulfill His promise to deliver the Land of Israel to His chosen people was the result of tainted hearing. Indeed, the Book of Formation adds that the organ controlling, in the sense of regulating, hearing is the left kidney, which corresponds in Chassidut with the *sefirah* of thanksgiving and the psychological motivator for (passive) trust in God. But, there is no dismissing the fact that the tainted hearing of the people



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was encouraged by the way in which the spies presented their findings. To understand this connection we have to expand further on the essence of the month of Av.

The Arizal¹ (whose *yahrzeit* is on the 5th of Av) offers a complementary correspondence between the months and the organs of the body to the one given in the Book of Formation.² In his scheme, the month of Av is related to the left eye. Spiritually and functionally the left eye and the right eye are not identical. The right eye sees reality simply for what it is; the left eye tends to search for meaning in the reality it sees. Meaning is particularly related to our sense of hearing. Therefore, the left eye can be understood to be the aspect of sight that is particularly related to our sense of hearing.³ To sum this point up, we can say that the left eye indeed senses that a picture is worth a thousand words. But, for the right eye, a picture is just a picture.

Spies, Inc.

We can now understand that the spies' mistake was that they interpreted what they saw and they over-dramatized what they thought was negative. Moshe sent them to see the Land of Israel and to report back only what they had seen (nothing more nothing less). Initially, the spies may have gazed at the land with their right eye (which is the organ corresponding to the month of Tamuz, the month in which they performed the first 30 days of their mission) and seen it for what it was—a land of milk and honey, overflowing with the abundance of God's blessings. But, they also chose to gaze at the land with the power of their left eye—they chose to interpret their findings. The metaphoric images used by the spies to describe the military strength of the Canaanite inhabitants of the land are some of the most powerful in the entire Torah. The spies said,⁴

The land we explored devours its inhabitants. All the people we saw there are giants. We saw the Nephilim [strain of giants] there. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.

To make sure their point got across the spies even carried eye-candy with them—the tremendously huge fruit that they had collected—as Rashi explains,⁵

Eight of them took a cluster [of grapes], one took a fig and one took a pomegranate. Joshua and Caleb did not take anything, for the intention of the others was to present a slanderous report, [namely,] just as its fruit is extraordinary, so its people are extraordinary.

They had returned with the necessary props, the exaggerated dialogues, and the vivid imagery to give a convincing presentation of their intelligence report and its final conclusion: it would not be possible to conquer the land. If we would use modern language we would say that the spies had used the unique ability of the left eye—the organ representing the essence of the month of Av—to set up the first Jewish production company and to produce the first Jewish play: “Walking with Giants....” All of this

happened on the 9th day of Av—the left eye had been used to dramatize that which should not have been dramatized. In the final analysis it was the spies' powerful portrayal of the oddity of the Land of Israel that confused the Jewish people and damaged their ability to trust that God was with them and would lead them to victory.⁶

Drama-therapy

To undo the damage, we must first fix our left eye. In other words we must learn how to portray reality correctly and in a positive way. As the prophet Isaiah stated a few hundred years after the spies' mission: "If you shall yearn for it [the Land of Israel] and hear [the word of God], then you shall eat the good of the land."⁷ The words "you shall yearn" in Hebrew are one word (תִּאַבֵּן) whose two-letter root is "Av" (אב). The beginning of this verse—"If you shall yearn for it"—thus refers to the month of Av and to the rectification of the left eye, by using positive imagery to explain a subject.⁸ The continuation—"and hear"—the sense of the month of Av, reflects the impact that dramatization and imagery have on our hearing, i.e., our understanding and conviction. Finally, the last part of the verse—"then you shall eat the good of the land"—reflects the result of the final state of rectification when we shall merit to return to our holy land and enjoy its bounty, freely and without fear.

Three times daily, we call upon the Almighty: "May our eyes gaze upon Your return to Zion with mercy." Both eyes are needed to perform the central commandment of the Temple: the *mitzvah* called *re'ayon*, which literally means to gaze. The main thing one does when entering the Temple is to gaze—literally at the splendor of the Divine Presence that dwelt within it. To celebrate seeing the Divine Presence in the Temple, one would even bring a special sacrifice and as the sages relate,⁹ this could be performed without end:

These are the commandments without a maximal limit: how much one leaves from one's field for the poor, how much of one's first fruit to bring as an offering, how many times to come to the Temple in order to gaze upon the Divine Presence, acts of kindness, and the study of Torah.

To see the Divine Presence once more in the rebuilt Temple, we must learn how to gaze. In our article on the month of *Tamuz*, we explained how to utilize the right eye in order to see only the positive. The month of *Av* teaches us how to utilize the left-eye's gift for dramatization in a positive way. With both eyes working together, we will shortly merit gazing upon the splendor of the Temple.

The Almighty Himself used the elements of storytelling to create the world, as explained in *The Book of Formation* that He created the world with a book, a scribe, and a story. Indeed, a great deal of the Torah—the entire Book of Genesis and large portions of the remaining books of the Torah—read like a novel. There is little doubt that for the Torah's message to come across we have to use positive dramatization and portrayal.

From Non-fiction to Comics

So, now that we know the value and importance of our left eye's ability to dramatize let us review the basic types of dramatization and construct a model that can help us better understand them.

We begin by noting that all types of dramatization are a manifestation of the *sefirah* of kingdom, the *sefirah* that represents the power of expression.¹⁰ One of the most basic models in Kabbalah is that of the Four Worlds, or states of consciousness called: Emanation (*Atzilut*), Creation (*Beri'ah*), Formation (*Yetzirah*), and Action (*Asiyah*). Each of the Worlds has its own distinct *sefirah* of kingdom, meaning that at each of the four levels of consciousness, the power to express ourselves is different. In relation to the way in which God expresses Himself to prophets, we find that the styles of expression as they correspond to the four states of consciousness are described as speech, allegory, figurative, and epic/mythic, respectively.¹¹ Of all the prophets, only Moshe Rabbeinu is described as speech—as one person speaking directly to another.¹² All other prophets experienced their prophecy in a more dramatized style.¹³ Translating these four types of expression into our modern media forms we find that speech is best defined as non-fictional or scientific writing, allegory has become the novel, figurative dramatization is the heart of a play or film, and epic/mythic style is found in comics.

World	type of expression	media form
Emanation	speech	non-fiction
Creation	allegory	novel
Formation	figurative	play or film
Action	epic/mythic	comics

Let us look at this correspondence a little more in depth. Though a great deal can be written about each part of this correspondence and many more examples can be given, we will limit ourselves to some basic ideas.

Non-fictional writing uses the least amount of dramatization and is not very different from a speech or lecture that could be delivered at an academic conference. In fact, the crossover from lecture to non-fiction writing is almost direct. Non-fiction is based on pure research and introspection—the right eye looking at reality for what it is, without trying to dramatize it. Still, the left eye comes into play because even in non-fiction, to get a point across the writer needs to make use of a certain degree of symbolic and metaphoric language, all within good taste.¹⁴ Therefore, non-fiction corresponds to the consciousness of the world of Emanation, where consciousness is in its most pristine state, void of any of the limitations that define physical reality. It is heart to peg who the best non-fiction writers are (although a Pulitzer is awarded in this category every year). The reason for this is that to a certain extent, good non-fiction writing requires a sense of selflessness on the part of the writer. The less the writer expresses himself and the more

he or she concentrates on getting the subject matter across the clearer and more lucid the writing. As we know, consciousness at the level of Emanation is characterized as a sense of self-nullification.

In Kabbalah, the World of Emanation stands separate from the lower three worlds. To pass from Emanation to Creation (the first of the three lower worlds) requires a quantum leap. Corresponding to Creation we find the strongest form of non-visual dramatization: the novel. Like the World of Creation, which corresponds to the intellectual consciousness, the novel appeals to the mind, but it is a fictional form, which takes the content of the World of Emanation and transforms it into an allegorical form—a story. In the novel, the drama is captured in words alone, which allows the mind to interpret the words however it chooses (children's novels use pictures to illustrate some of the points in a story, because the child's intellect cannot satisfy itself autonomously). Without a doubt, the novel offers the writer-dramatist the widest scope of expression, as much as it requires from the reader the greatest amount of effort. Russians, like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, are usually considered among the greatest novelists. Their greatness lies in their ability to capture and illustrate with words the turmoil of the soul, which as we know is the aspect of our spirituality that corresponds to the World of Creation.

Following the novel are the play and its younger sibling the film, which utilize the figurative form of expression of the World of Formation. Emotions are the building blocks of Formation. The power of playwriting and theatre lies in the possibilities it offers for the expression of emotions. This is true just as much for tragedy as it is for comedy. Though the play uses props and a set, it hinges on the thespians' acting ability and their emotional breadth. In today's modern world, plays are very often adapted into films. Films carry over some of the emotional power of plays, but use a much more advanced form of visualization—the film's ability to offer a visual interpretation for emotions and relationships is astounding. Naturally, the figurate power of the film lies in cinematography. Though the big blockbusters lend their material from the epic and mythical nature of comics,¹⁵ which we have yet to consider, truly classic cinema is concerned with drama and emotions. Case in point is Kieslowski's trilogy, *Blue, White, and Red*.

Corresponding to the lowest of the Four Worlds, the World of Action, are comics, which like the novel, return to the written word, but this time couple it with fictional images. Comics lend themselves best to epic and mythical stories. Hands down, the most common form of comic book deals with superheroes and themes of an epic nature. Comics illustrate and express the abstract points originally appearing in the World of Emanation in their most simplified and basic form and like the consciousness of the World of Action, are usually full of action scenes.

Jewish Media

One of the greatest challenges that these four modern forms of media is how we can use them in a positive manner in order to illustrate the Torah's message and to bring it to the masses. As we have seen, successfully meeting this challenge represents the rectification of our spiritual left eye and is instrumental in preparing humanity for the rebuilding of the Holy Temple.

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1. *Sha'ar Hakavanot, Drushei Rosh Hashanah, Drush Alef.*
 2. The Book of Formation corresponds the twelve months to the 12 simple letters of the Hebrew alphabet and to 12 organs in the body (the organs in the head are explained to parallel the 7 double letters and the 7 days of the week). The Arizal divides the months into summer and winter months, which he categorizes as female and male, respectively. Hard labor, which is relatively masculine is required in the cold of the winter. But, the summer's heat represents God's palpable effluence making it easier to function—a relatively feminine reality. Therefore, the Arizal corresponds the 6 months of the summer with the 6 primary organs in the female head (skull, 2 ears, 2 eyes and nose) and the winter months with the primary organs in the male head; since there can be two months of Adar, giving 7 months of winter, he corresponds the additional month to the mouth.
 3. The sense of sight is related to the *sefirah* of wisdom. The sense of hearing is related to the *sefirah* of understanding. In the Book of Formation, the auditory aptitude of the left eye is described therefore as “understand in wisdom.”
 4. Numbers 13:32-33.
 5. Ibid. 13:23.
 6. For the advanced reader: The sages say that one who does not live in the Land of Israel is similar to a person who has no connection with the Divine, but that one who lives in the Land of Israel is similar to a person who has a connection with the Divine. Because of various difficulties with the grammar in this well-known statement, Rebbe Isaac of Homil explains that its deep message is that the Land of Israel has the power to perfect with holiness our abstract ability to compare and contrast correctly, an ability associated with the *sefirah* of understanding, the same *sefirah* that corresponds to the sense of hearing.
 7. Isaiah 1:19.
 8. Based on Numbers 15:39, the sages equate the eyes with coveting: “The eye sees and the heart covets.” But, note that they use the singular form of “eye” implying that only one of the eyes is particularly inclined to covet, or yearn. Of course, this is the left eye. Thus, yearning for the rebuilding of the Holy Temple and the Land of Israel starts with the left eye.
 9. *Pei'ah* 1:1.
 10. See in length *Consciousness and Choice*, pp. 61ff.
 11. These last two, figurative and epic/mythic are a contextual translation of the Hebrew words that are normally literally translated “Riddle” (חידה) and “Allusion” (רמז).
 12. See Numbers 12:8.
 13. Since the Torah as a whole (the Five Books of Moses) are part of Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy it follows that they cannot be understood as only figurative. As the sages say: “No verse in the Torah lacks literal meaning.”
 14. One of the most interesting areas of research today is the use of metaphor and imagery in the sciences. One of the best treatments of this topic is David Bloor's *Knowledge and Social Imagery*.

¹⁵. <http://www.the-movie-times.com/thrsdir/alltime.mv?adjusted+ByPG+1> for a list of the top grossing films of all time. It is hard to spot a single non-action, non-epic film in this list. One prominent film reviewer once said that the spectacular fiscal success of Star Wars in 1977 (the first film to bring in profits in excess of 400 million dollars) marked the demise of cinema as an art form. From now on, producers would be tainted by the promise of incredible profits, in return for their willingness to devalue the power of film by producing action movies.