

Tishrei—Making Positive Resolutions

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The best time for dealing with ideas relating to the new month is on Rosh Chodesh (the beginning of the month). But, what about the month of Tishrei? Tishrei doesn't seem to have a Rosh Chodesh at all, only Rosh Hashanah (the New Year). On the final Shabbat of the month of Elul there is no "blessing for the new month" as there is for other months, and the Rosh Hashanah prayers hardly make mention of Rosh Chodesh. Even during the long additional prayer (*musaf*) we don't say the verses relevant to Rosh Chodesh, but suffice with a general declaration referring to "the monthly sacrifice."¹

Rosh Chodesh Tishrei is definitely elusive, as in the masked reference, the "hidden time for our holiday."² However, the truth is that it is not completely hidden; rather, it is incorporated into Rosh Hashanah. This is as the sages state, "One memory rises both here and here."³ In the phraseology of Jewish law:

*"On Rosh Hashanah, one says, 'And You have given us this Day of Remembrance' and there is no need to mention Rosh Chodesh and to say 'And this day of Rosh Chodesh.' Because, when one says, the 'Day of Remembrance,' Rosh Chodesh is also included in it because it is also called 'remembrance' as the verse states, 'On your days of rejoicing and on your festivals and on your new months... and you shall remember.'"*⁴

Also, the fact that the month of Tishrei has no blessing on the preceding Shabbat indicates this month's unique quality, as the Ba'al Shem Tov explained, "On the seventh month [i.e., Tishrei, the seventh month from Nisan], which is the first month of the year's months, the Almighty Himself blesses it on the preceding Shabbat, which is the final Shabbat of the month of Elul, and by this power the Jewish People bless the other months eleven times a year."⁵

So, the month of Tishrei, which has the honored privilege of God Himself blessing it, has a unique essence. But, before we expand upon it, we will give a short introduction that will come to our aid throughout all the coming months.

¹ See *Rosh Hashanah* 8b, *Tosfot* ad loc, beginning with the words, "That the month" (שהחודש) and the discussion whether or not the goat-sacrifice of Rosh Chodesh is offered or not.

² Psalms 81:4. See also, *Rosh Hashanah* 8a; *Tosfot* ad loc, in the name of Rabeinu Meshulam.

³ *Eiruvin* 40a.

⁴ *Shulchan Aruch Harav* 582:9.

⁵ *Hayom Yom* Calendar, 25th Elul.

Kabbalistic Wisdom and the Wisdom of the Hebrew Letters

How do we learn about the essence of a month? Obviously the festivals and special moments that are diamond-studded into the month teach us a lot about its nature; but not everything. Much of what we learn about the secrets of the months is taught in the Torah's inner dimension: Kabbalah and Chassidut. Kabbalah (קַבְּלָה) is from the same root as "parallel" or "corresponding" (מְקַבֵּל). Indeed, Kabbalistic wisdom deals profusely with differing systems that nonetheless correspond to one another. The Torah's inner dimension offers us a complete system of correspondences for the twelve months of the year. As outlined in *Sefer Yetzirah*, one of the most ancient Kabbalistic works,⁶ every month corresponds to one of the twelve tribes of Israel, to a special soul-talent, to a limb in the human body, and to an astrological sign.

Another significant system of correspondences connects between the months and the Hebrew letters. To this end, let's recall the basic division of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew *alef-bet* in *Sefer Yetzirah* into "Three mother letters, seven double-letters and twelve simple letters." The three 'mother' letters are *alef* (א), *mem* (מ), *shin* (ש); the seven double-letters are *bet* (ב), *gimel* (ג), *dalet* (ד), *kaf* (כ), *pei* (פ), *reish* (ר), *tav* (ת); and the twelve simple letters—each of which is associated to one month in the yearly cycle—are *hei* (ה), *vav* (ו), *zayin* (ז), *chet* (ח), *tet* (ט), *yud* (י), *lamed* (ל), *nun* (נ), *samech* (ס), *ayin* (ע), *tzadik* (צ), *kuf* (ק).

In general, Kabbalah devotes the Hebrew letters an honored place, in the knowledge that the Hebrew language, in writing or in speech, is an inherently Divine creation (and not a human convention). Hebrew is the Holy Tongue, and each one of its letters represents an abstract essence that lies at the foundation of Creation, so much so that it is correct to say that God created the world **by means** of the letters and words of the Hebrew language. Similarly, relative to the time dimension, the creation of every month in the yearly cycle was achieved by means of the "spiritual channel" of one particular letter.

Learning Letters

And, one final introduction: what does a lone letter have to say, before it has been set into a word with a significant meaning? There are three central ways to contemplate the essence of a letter:

- a. by the letter's name, which can be related to as a word in its own right;
- b. by the letter's form in the exact "Assyrian lettering" that is used to write Torah scrolls, *tefillin* and *mezuzot*;
- c. by the letter's numerical value, its *gematria*, where *alef* = 1, etc. (there are additional ways of calculating *gematria*, as we shall see later).

⁶ It should be emphasized that there are a few different versions of *Sefer Yetzirah* and the one we follow is the Arizal's.

In addition, attention must be paid to the various special uses of the letter, its pronunciation, where it appears in the Torah, and of course, the sages' and Kabbalists' references to it. In this context, we will discover the fascinating associations between the Hebrew letters and the months of the year, in a deliberate attempt to extract insights that relate to our Divine service.

[In this context there are two Chassidic masters worthy of mention who methodically dealt broadly with the essence of the months: Rebbe Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov in his book, *Bnei Yissachar*, and Rebbe Tzadok Hacohen of Lublin in his book, *Pri Tzadik*, both of which are "compulsory reading" for anyone who takes an interest in this subject. All this is apart from the abundance of Torah teachings from the Lubavitcher Rebbe which have been published in various compilations on the meaning of the festivals and the months.]

The Vessel of Kingdom

Let's get back to the month of Tishrei, which according to Kabbalah was created with the letter *lamed* (ל), and let's contemplate the essence of the letter and the month together.

Since Rosh Hashanah is also Rosh Chodesh – both have "one memory" – so, Rosh Hashanah teaches us something about the entire month. Very briefly, the essence of Rosh Hashanah is that on this day, God is revealed as King of the Universe, the "Holy King." This is also the literal rationale behind blowing the *shofar* (ram's horn) as a symbol of royalty,⁷ "On trumpets and with the sound of the *shofar*, blow before the King, God" (and the reason why Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment is a direct result of its being a day of coronation).

The letter *lamed*, the central letter of the word "king" (מֶלֶךְ), undoubtedly matches this royal theme, especially in its numerical value, which is 30. In fact, one of the most significant appearances of the number 30 in the sages' teachings is in the phrase, "Kingdom is acquired with thirty qualities."⁸ Similarly, in Kabbalah, the number thirty appears with reference to the *sefirah* of kingdom, the final *sefirah* of the ten *sefirot* in the Divine World of Emanation because it has thirty vessels by means of which and through which it evolves and is revealed in the lower worlds (Creation, Formation, and Action). Kabbalah teaches us that it is not only Rosh Hashanah, but the entire month of Tishrei that is devoted to the "construction of kingdom," as is emphasized in the Kabbalistic intentions of the Days of Awe and the festivals according to the Holy Arizal. Let's not forget the thirty *shofar* blasts that one is obligated to hear on Rosh Hashanah, and that in each of the three blessings unique to the *musaf* prayer on Rosh Hashanah (kingdoms, remembrances and *shofarot*) we say ten verses, adding up to a total of thirty.

However, there is no doubt that the number thirty is most well known as the number of days in a month.⁹ From this perspective, the letter *lamed* of the month of Tishrei simply

⁷ As in the words of Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon, quoted in Avudraham and printed in many prayer books.

⁸ *Avot* 6:6. Kingdom belongs to the tribe of Judah (יהודה), whose name has a numerical value of 30.

⁹ Although some Hebrew months have only 29 days, the exact length of a lunar month is more than 29.5 days, so the number thirty is more exact than twenty-nine.

represents the thirty days of the month itself, and we can certainly perceive it as a symbol for the entire year that follows, as if it comes to remind us that from now on we need to turn the page of the calendar every thirty days. In fact, the number of months is even alluded to in the ordinal number of the letter *lamed*, which is the twelfth letter of the *alef-bet*. When we contemplate it, the length of a month is obviously related to kingdom, since the months of the Hebrew calendar are lunar months, following the periodical revelation and concealment of the moon from our eyes, and the most obvious parable for the *sefirah* of kingdom is the moon. Like the moon whose light is not its own, but that of the sun, so too the *sefirah* of kingdom “has nothing of its own at all,” but merely reflects the light of the *sefirot* that are above it; like the moon that waxes and wanes, so too the *sefirah* of kingdom rises and falls, appears, disappears and reappears (and all of history is the story of changes in kingdom). The lunar cycle further corresponds to the female monthly cycle, and a woman too is compared both to the moon and to the *sefirah* of kingdom.

A parenthetical remark: “The New Year for Kings of Israel” is actually on Rosh Chodesh Nisan, while in Tishrei we relate to God’s sovereignty over the entire world, especially on Rosh Hashanah, which is the New Year for non-Jewish kings and even the prayers we say on that day have an obvious universal dimension to them. But, even during Tishrei, God’s sovereignty appears to the world via the kingdom of Israel, “And You will reign, You are He, *Havayah* our God, speedily alone upon all Your acts on Mt. Zion, the abode of Your Glory and in Jerusalem, Your Holy City.” “Rule over the entire world at large with Your Glory... and all who have a breathing soul in their nostrils will say, ‘*Havayah*, God of Israel is King, and His sovereignty rules over everything.’” The main difference is that on Rosh Hashanah we refer to the appearance of God’s kingdom in the most natural way possible, therefore there is a common denominator with the gentile nations, while in Nisan, we refer to a miraculous revelation, in which the Jewish People and Jewish sovereignty begin an independent history.

However, God’s sovereignty on Rosh Hashanah ‘stretches’ over the entire month of Tishrei,¹⁰ and throughout all the thirty days of the month we construct the vessels that enable the revelation of kingdom to enter reality.

Happy Birthday

So, we have seen that God’s Kingdom appears on Rosh Hashanah, or more precisely throughout the entire month of Tishrei; but God’s Kingdom is not renewed of its own accord. We play an important role in this story: we have to coronate God, as the Talmud states, “Recite ‘kingdoms’ before Me, so that you coronate Me upon you.”¹¹ However, beyond the act of general coronation, “Accepting Heaven’s yoke of kingdom,” we can also identify a personal service on Rosh Hashanah and throughout the entire month of Tishrei.

¹⁰ Here we might note that the term Rosh Hashanah, the “Head of the Year” actually appears in the Bible with reference to Yom Kippur; Ezekiel 40:1.

¹¹ *Rosh Hashanah* 16a.

The first day of Tishrei is the day on which the world was created, “This is the day of the beginning of Your acts, a memory of the first day.”¹² More precisely, this is the day on which the first man was created, i.e., the sixth day of Creation.¹³ Happy birthday to mankind!¹⁴

The proper way to celebrate a birthday (as the Lubavitcher Rebbe taught), is by solemnly soul-searching our acts of the previous year and accepting positive resolutions for the coming year—and that’s exactly what we do on Rosh Hashanah!

The Heart that Hovers in the Air

But, here we encounter a serious problem. This is not our first birthday, and we remember that exactly a year ago we made some positive resolutions... what happened to them? In a bout of holy enthusiasm during last Tishrei, we promised ourselves that we would do so many more good things, we promised to be one hundred percent perfect and never act foolishly again, and we even added a few more restrictions that would help rectify ourselves and rectify the world... but where are we at now? Maybe it would have been better not to make those resolutions? Maybe we should have chosen a different route? It’s those positive resolutions that stand in our way and prevent us from advancing, and to the list of “We are guilty, we have been unfaithful...” we can add some more sins of not standing up to those obligations that we took upon ourselves.

But, before we get to the solution, we once again meet up with the letter *lamed* which stands out amongst all the other Hebrew letters in the fact that it is the only letter that rises above the line, and as such it is referred to by the sages as a “tower soaring in the air.”¹⁵ One of the more profound explanations for the “tower soaring in the air” relates to the heart’s upward yearning, “My heart and my flesh pray to the Living God.”¹⁶ Although it might seem that there is nothing better than a heart that yearns for God, nonetheless, there is a certain danger when one “soars in the air” without a sound and stable course of direction, like that pile of positive resolutions that we took on during the year.

[Similarly, the sages state that Doeg and Achitofel taught “three hundred [three times thirty] laws in a tower soaring in the air.” Doeg and Achitofel are a classic example of great wise men whose wickedness was as great as their wisdom, so much so that they do not have a

¹² Rosh Hashanah prayers.

¹³ As Rabeinu Nissim explains, *Rosh Hashanah* 3b (from the pages of the *Ri”f*).

¹⁴ It’s fitting to explain here that according to Rashi’s opinion, Exodus 30:16, all “people’s years” are counted from Rosh Hashanah! See Nachmanides (ibid 30:12), who disputes Rashi’s commentary, and Rashi’s interpreters who uphold his view.

¹⁵ *Chagigah* 15b, *Sanhedrin* 106b (see Rashi in both sources); also mentioned in many Kabbalistic works.

¹⁶ Psalms 84:3. and the Kabbalists add that the word “heart” (לב) alludes to two (the numerical value of the letter *bet* in “heart”) *lameds* that stand opposite one another to form the shape of the “Jewish heart.” To see a “Jewish Heart” pendant, and other Kabbalistic jewelry designs by Rabbi Ginsburgh, click [here](#).

portion in the World to Come.¹⁷ In this case too, the tower soaring in the air reflects the danger of “soaring” off course onto an unstable route. However, in this case, it is referring to the intellectual plane and not to an over-enthusiastic heart.]

¹⁷ *Sanhedrin* 90a.

They Are All Permitted for You

So, what is there to do about all those good resolutions? – We cancel our vows! One of the most important preparations for Rosh Hashanah is cancelling one's vows on the day before Rosh Hashanah, and the opening service on Yom Kippur is "*Kol Nidrei*," which is another form of vow cancellation that has an awe-inspiring, sacred aura about it. Cancelling our vows allows us to clear our desktops and turn over a new leaf. Obviously, we need to completely cancel any negative vows, but the emphasis is actually on those "good" vows that we have made, as we see from the words stated by someone who comes to cancel his vows:

Any vow or oath... and all that has left my lips and exited my mouth, or that I have vowed and promised myself in my heart even to do a mitzvah or take upon myself a good habit... I regret them all from their very beginning, and I ask and request that they be allowed. But, I do not feel remorse, God forbid, for keeping those good deeds that I have done, but I do regret that I did not explicitly state that I was doing them without vowing or taking an oath...

There is no problem with the good deeds that I have done. The problem is that I have made myself promises that are like a "tower soaring in the air." Cancelling my vows means untying all the knots that I have tied; I am no longer obligated to my previous decisions and I am free to redirect myself to a new route. Even the literal meaning of the name *Tishrei* (תִּשְׁרִי) is an idiom that relates to releasing oneself of prohibitions and untying knots, as the people who perform the cancellation reply, "They are all permitted to you... they are all allowed to you." Then we can begin anew, since in Aramaic *Tishrei* (תִּשְׁרִי) is from the same root as "beginning" (שִׁירֵי תַּא).¹⁸

The connection between cancelling vows and the "tower soaring in the air" is alluded to in the words of the *mishnah*, "Cancelling vows soars in the air; and they have nothing on which to support them."¹⁸ The literal interpretation of the *mishnah* is that the possibility for releasing someone of their vows is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, nonetheless, on a deeper level the meaning is that cancelling our vows is the viable solution to extricate us from the sticky situations we get into as a result of our "soaring towers."

Balanced Decisions

Having cancelled all our vows and having extricated ourselves from the complications we have brought upon ourselves, we might think that it is preferable not to take on any good resolutions during Rosh Hashanah and the month of Tishrei. If we have no expectations there will be no disappointments. However, if we accept God's kingdom in all its gravity, and internalize the fact that this is obviously our mission on earth—then it is clear that we are going to accept some very good resolutions because, "You and I can change the world."

¹⁸ *Mishnah Chagigah* 1:8; see also Zohar III 255a; *Megaleh Amukot* on *Parashat Ve'etchanan* (third method).

The wisdom is to balance and temper our enthusiasm to rectify the world with a sense of realism that gives us correct counsel and guides us how to act in practice. This balance is alluded to in the zodiacal sign of Tishrei: the “scales” (מאָנײַם; Libra), which not only represent the scales of judgment during the Days of Judgment, but also relate to our sense of correct balance (אַזױן). If the letter *lamed* (ל) is drawn as a vertical line, like a rocket taking-off skywards, then in order to prevent dizziness and vertigo, we also need a horizontal (מאָױן; from the same root as “balance”) line to keep our center of gravity in the right place.

So far, we have related to the *lamed* as blasting upwards, but now we come to the meaning of the letter’s name, which means “learn.” We need to learn how to balance the *lamed* and harness its power in the correct manner. By the *lamed*’s rectified combination of vertical and horizontal lines, we can begin to proceed. Indeed, the letter *lamed* is the leading letter of Abraham, the first Jew’s eternal commandment, “Go for yourself” (לֵךְ לְךָ), and even the word “king” (מֶלֶךְ) has this same meaning of leading the people. In Kabbalistic terminology, the scales allude to the *sefirot* of victory and acknowledgment, which correspond to the two legs or to the two “counseling kidneys.” The manifestation of victory and acknowledgment in man’s psyche is the practical sense that knows how to walk and where to walk to. Indeed, the *sefirot* of victory and acknowledgment are called, “God’s learned ones” (לְמוּדֵי הוֹי)—this is the insight that we gain from the letter *lamed*.

From the outset of the month of Tishrei, we must stand upon our own two feet and begin to realize our great aspirations to rectify ourselves and to rectify the world, in the anticipation that already in this month we will reach the great joy of the festival of Sukot, the “Time of our Rejoicing,” and the infinite joy of Simchat Torah.

May we all be written and sealed for a good new year!

לשנה טובה נכתב ונחתם!