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5777: The Year of the Dove, the Olive Branch, and World Peace

Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh's Monthly English Broadcast

1. MAY IT BE A YEAR OF...

Today we're going to devote our thoughts to the coming year. The number of the year has many allusions. This coming year is 5777, according to the Jewish calendar, the number of years from creation. The way we usually count it is as 777, the 5000 being set apart. It is customary to create an acronym out of the letters that spell the 777, which are **תשעז**. The acronym which is customarily given starts with the two words, "May this be a year of..." (**תהא שנת**). And what we are asking for is to interpret the two final letters, which in our case are **ז**. So the full acronym depends on what the letters **ז** stand for.

2. A YEAR OF MIGHT

Before we look at phrases whose initials are ayin-zayin (**ז**), let us note that just these two letters together are a word that means "might" (**ז**). So may this be a year of might.

Might can be very good, if a person serves God with might, loves God with might, these are good, but it can also be a negative attribute. Might is normally associated with a king. To be a king over a people you must possess might, the might necessary to lead, and as a king you must serve God mightily. In the song sung by Channah, the mother of Samuel the prophet who anointed Saul and David (David was anointed with olive oil, as we will explain), she concludes with the words, "God will give might to His king and raise the horn of His Messiah"¹ (**ויתן עז למלכו ויגדל קרן משיחו**). A king can use might in a positive way or in a negative way (if he is full of ego). If he is like David, the true king of Israel, then he is full of lowliness internally, but acts with might externally. In fact, David refers to himself as a worm. Again, he can act with might externally, but internally he senses existential lowliness.

First, we need to clarify what the might of the good king is. Every soul has a spark of kingship in it. You have to strive to be a leader in your own sphere of influence. Good might is the might a leader needs in order to fulfill his duty towards those that he is responsible for. We pray to God to use our might the

¹ 1 Samuel 2:10.

right way and thereby reveal the might of God, the Creator. So may 5777 be a year of might.

3. THE FIRST PHRASE WITH INITIALS AYIN-ZAYIN IN THE TORAH

Now, where do these two letters, **עז**, appear as the initials of an idiom in the Bible. Whenever we have such a question, we look in the Bible for the very first appearance of the initials we are looking for in a phrase. Obviously there are many throughout the Bible, but it's not that every single chapter has such an idiom. Therefore it is very significant that the first place that such an idiom appears, it does so twice (with the same words) in a single verse. This verse is in the Torah's 29th verse, in the first account of creation. The verse relates to us that after creating man on the sixth day, God tells man what his food will be. We know that Adam was a vegetarian. He was not allowed to eat meat. It remains a question what the situation will be like in the time of Mashiach, but there certainly are opinions that mankind will go back to being vegetarian. God says to Adam, "Behold, I have given to you all the seed bearing grasses [or herbs] that are upon the earth, and all the trees that have fruit that are seed bearing; they shall be yours to eat" (הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת כָּל עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ וְאֵת כָּל הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ (פְּרִי עֵץ זֶרַע זֶרַע לָכֶם יְהִיָּה לְאֲכֹלָהּ).

Every word in Hebrew has a three-letter root. The three-letter root of **עז**, or "might" is **עזז**, like in the word **עוזז**, which is sometimes translated as "strong" as in the verse, "God is strong and mighty, God is a great warrior"² (ה' עוזז וְגִבּוֹר ה' גִּבּוֹר (מִלְחָמָה). In the verse of creation, the actual phrases whose initials are **עז** are **עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זֶרַע** and **עֵץ זֶרַע זֶרַע**, meaning that the initial of the next word is also a **ז**, making each of the phrases the initials of might's full 3-letter root, **עזז**. This is a very important phenomenon.

What do strength and might have to do with vegetables and fruit that are seed-bearing? The first thing we might say is that to be strong and mighty you need to eat a lot of vegetables and seeds. Don't think that to be strong you need to eat meat. The fact that the vegetables and fruit have seeds, have the power to reproduce is very essential. And this is the diet God gave man initially. This is the first and very significant appearance of the initials **עז** in the Bible.

4. THE DOVE AND THE OLIVE LEAF

Continuing in the Bible, the next significant appearance is the one we will contemplate today. It is an idiom from the portion of Noach. The portion of

² Psalms 24:8.

Noach is about the flood. At the end of the flood, the waters still covered the Earth, and Noach and his family remained with the animals in the ark. At first he sent a raven to see if there was dry land. The raven wouldn't go anywhere, just circled around the ark, so he sent a dove. The first time he sent the dove it came back empty-beaked. The second time it came back with, "a plucked olive leaf in its mouth"³ (וְהָיָה עֹלֵה זַיִת טָרֵף בְּפִיהָ). The initials of the two words, "olive leaf" (עֹלֵה זַיִת) are עז. So we can say that the "olive leaf" image is perhaps the primary phrase associated with the letters *ayin-zayin* (עז), which as a word mean "might," in the Bible.

Actually, one of the great Kabbalistic sages, the author of the *Kehilat Yaakov* (a very well-known Encyclopedic work of Kabbalah) explicitly explains that the essential might alluded to in the Bible is in the olive leaf. According to him, this is the secret of the verse, "God gives might to His people, God blesses His people with peace"⁴ (ה' עז לעמו יתן ה' בְּרָךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ בְּשָׁלוֹם). Everyone knows that the dove with an olive leaf (branch) in its mouth is a universal symbol of peace. You might think that this comes from a non-Jewish source, but of course it comes from the story of Noach. When the dove returns with the olive leaf, it symbolizes that a new world-order is beginning. Some people say that the image symbolizes freedom.

The sages explain that the dove was telling Noach about its sustenance: that it prefers that its sustenance be bitter as an olive but come directly from the Creator, rather than that it be as sweet as honey but come from people. So this is a symbol of a self-subsistence. The dove is saying: Thank God that I can go out to nature and be sustained directly by the Creator. The fact that the leaf was in its mouth, the sages say, symbolizes the dove saying something to Noach. Another point related to the sages' interpretation of the dove with the olive leaf in its beak is that the word "plucked" (טָרֵף) also means, "sustenance." (This word is also the Aramaic translation of the word for "leaf"). It doesn't mean that the dove was ungrateful for having been fed for a whole year (during the flood) by Noach, but rather that from now on it wanted its freedom from being dependent on Noach.

In any case, today this image symbolizes peace in the world. Where does this come from? Is it really from the story of the flood as told in the Bible, or perhaps from a non-Jewish source adopting the image taken from the flood? We are here connecting this to the coming year, saying that this year should be a year of peace. So again, the *Kehilat Yaakov* says that this symbol as a symbol of peace is

³ Genesis 8:11.

⁴ Psalms 29:11.

stated explicitly in the verse that we say every day, that God gives might to His people ("might" alluding to the olive leaf, whose initials spell "might") and that God blesses His people with peace. This is an excellent *kavanah* (intention) when we recite this verse. Especially this year, when we recite this verse, we should concentrate on God giving us might (alluding to the olive leaf), and through this might God blessing us, and the entire world, with peace.

Let's continue to another stage of our meditation on this image. When we open the Zohar, the classic text of Kabbalah, we find that the olive itself (the fruit) symbolizes King David, while the olive leaf is a symbol for the Mashiach the son of David.⁵ Yonah means dove, but it is also the name of the one prophet in the Bible who was sent specifically to the nations, Jonah. He was the child that Eliyahu the prophet brought back to life. Like the dove (the Yonah) that brought tidings of the new world to Noach, so Eliyahu brings us all tidings of redemption for the world. The literal meaning of the flood story and the dove returning with the olive branch is that a new world, a new epoch is about to begin. When translated by the *Zohar*, the dove bearing the olive leaf is a symbol for Elijah coming and heralding the coming of the Mashiach.

5. THE 25TH DAY OF ELUL

Do we know the date on which the dove came back with an olive leaf in its mouth? We do, if we read *Rashi*. *Rashi* takes care to carefully document all the dates surrounding the flood,⁶ and we find that this event (which again is a symbol for peace on earth brought by the Mashiach) took place on the 25th of Elul.

Did anything else that was significant happen on that same date? Indeed it did! The 25th of Elul is actually the first day of creation. *Rosh Hashanah*, the 1st day of Tishrei, is the 6th day of creation, corresponding to the day on which man was created. On this day, when man was created, he also sinned (disobeyed God's command) by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. On *Rosh Hashanah*, we atone for the sin that occurred on our universal birthday (the birthday of Adam and thus of all of humanity). We are given the opportunity on this day to rectify this sin. The meaning of the word *Shofar* (that we blow on *Rosh Hashanah*) is to "improve," to better oneself, by remembering the sin of Adam and Eve, and repairing it (by accepting God's sovereignty—the Divine service of *Rosh*

⁵ *Zohar* III, 165a.

⁶ *Rashi* to Genesis 8:5.

Hashanah is to coronate God as our King, to commit ourselves to live by His word).

We said that the first idiom of “might” referred to the seed-bearing grasses and trees, and the second significant idiom is the olive leaf. The olive leaf unifies in a sense both the grasses and the fruit of the trees, again as the Zohar says, that the leaf of the olive is even more important than its fruit (as every intermediate is actually higher than the two extremes it unifies). A tree that has a lot of leaves to it (the leaves are like the feathers of the wings, the branches of the tree) can fly. What's special about an olive tree's leaves? It says that, “its leaves never wither”⁷ (וְעֵלֶי לֹא יָבוֹל). For most trees there are seasons when the leaves are on the tree and seasons when they fall off. But, olive trees are evergreen. The leaves are always moist and green. They are always fresh, “A thriving olive tree with fruit beautiful in form”⁸ (זֵית רֶעֶנָּה יִפְהַ פְּרֵי תֹאֵר).

5. THE YEAR OF WORLD PEACE

Being moist and fresh is a sign of good health. We are taught in Chassidut that peace on Earth depends on good health. When people are healthy they are peaceful. When they aren't healthy, either spiritually or physically, then they can't be at peace with one another. Rebbe Nachman teaches this concept based on the words, “peace in my bones”⁹ (שְׁלוֹם בְּעַצְמוֹתַי), or as we say in English, peace of mind, peace in my self. The complete verse reads, “There is no peace in my bones because of my sins.” The peace in a person is a direct result of the freshness and wholeness of his self. With inner peace, we can pray properly and then our prayers bear fruit. What fruit is this? Peace on Earth.

Peace on earth in Hebrew is said, “world-peace” (שְׁלוֹם עוֹלָם). In Hebrew, the words for “world” and “eternity” are identical. So the phrase שְׁלוֹם עוֹלָם can be translated as either “world peace” or “eternal peace.” The first *gematria* for today is on this phrase, “world peace” (שְׁלוֹם עוֹלָם) equals 522, the exact numerical value of “olive leaf” (עֵלֶה זֵית). 522 is actually a multiple of Noach (נֹחַ), 58. 522 is the product of 9 and 58.

[In times of old it was recognized that olive leaves are very beneficial for health. In more recent times, there are many scientific studies of the medicinal value of olive leaves. They strengthen the cardiovascular system (regulate blood

⁷ Psalms 1:3 and *Zohar* III, 126a.

⁸ Jeremiah 11:16.

⁹ Psalms 38:4.

pressure) and the immune system (help with the common cold and even tuberculosis). We're saying this parenthetically just to mention that there is great value to the olive leaf in the dove's mouth, bringing us tidings of a new world, with world-peace.]

6. TRANSFORMING DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

Once more, we're in the middle of explaining that the day on which the dove returned was the 25th of Elul, which again is the very first day of creation, the day on which God created light. That creation of light took place, and continues to take place every day on the 25th day of Elul. That's why there is a very good custom to read the Torah account of each day of creation on each day from the 25th of Elul. The word "leaf" (עֵלֶף), what is its meaning in Hebrew? It comes from the Hebrew root, עלה, which means "to elevate," to ascend. It suggests what we said before that the leaf is like the feather on the trees wings (its branches). But, there is something much deeper, especially in relation to the olive leaf. We said before that olives are naturally bitter, while olive oil (the most common product of olives) gives light (lamps and candles use olive oil) and is also eaten (and is also used to anoint kings). Olive oil is good for memory, while olives without the olive oil make one forget. Again, the olive itself is bitter, and thus the olive leaves, that mean to elevate, can transform the bitterness of the olive into sweetness. The sickness of the world, its bitterness, will be transformed and elevated to become sweet.

There are two things that have to be transformed by the Mashiach: darkness (into light) and bitterness (into sweetness). Both of them then relate to the olive, since it is both bitter and can become sweet and can be used to produce oil to light a lamp. Forgetfulness in Hebrew is related to darkness, since the two words are permutations of one another in Hebrew, "forget" (שָׁכַח) and "darkness" (חֹשֶׁךְ). So the olive leaves elevate the olives into producing light and into sweetness. So that is the meaning of the idiom "olive leaf" (olive elevation).

7. DAVID'S SIN WITH BATSHEVA: THE SOURCE OF TESHUVAH

What other significant event occurred in the Tanach on that day? The 24th day of Elul was the day on which David sinned with Batsheva. This sin had three very severe elements in it: adultery (even though it wasn't a hundred-percent adultery), idolatry, and murder. These are the three most severe offenses in the Torah. A Jew should be willing to give up his life and not perform any of these offenses.

When Adam sinned, it seems that all he did was eat from forbidden fruit. But, the sages by analyzing his psychological state, find that there were dimensions of these three offenses in his act. David, Batsheva, and Uriyah are according to Kabbalah a replay of the original sin made by Adam, Eve, and the primordial serpent. Whether Batsheva consented or not, it definitely looked like she was committing adultery with David. The sages say that it really wasn't adultery because Uriyah had given his wife a full divorce (as was the custom amongst those going to battle) before he set out to war. It looked like David had murdered him, but the sages explain that in effect, Uriyah had committed mutiny and was guilty of death. Still, it looked like murder. The idolatry was in how Uriyah was killed—by the sword of the Ammonites, who had their idol inscribed on it. By doing so, their idol was given life-force. So all three great offenses seemingly were transgressed here.

How could King David, a messianic figure, fall in all three of these sins? First of all it is important to know that he immediately confessed his responsibility that he had sinned when confronted by the prophet Nathan. Still, the punishment was that war and conflict would always be within David's family, and the worst manifestation of that was that David's son Absalom rebelled against him and wanted to kill him. Eventually, David's general, Yoav killed Absalom (against David's wishes).

In the account of Absalom's mutiny, we find that only other instance of a phrase that brings the world "olive" together with the root of the word for "leaf" (עלה). The prophet reads, "And David climbed the ascent of [Mt.] Olives..."¹⁰ (וַיַּדַּח עֹלֶה (בְּמַעְלֵה הַיַּיִתִּים). All this was the result of David's sin with Batsheva. It says that as David was ascending the Mt. of Olives, he was ascending and crying (the root עלה appears three times in this phrase, וַיַּדַּח עֹלֶה בְּמַעְלֵה הַיַּיִתִּים עֹלֶה וּבֹכֶה; the root to ascend, עלה, also meaning leaf, equals in *gematria* 105, which is the triangular value of David, 14). This was his repentance for his sin. God made David's sin happen in order to teach us that no matter how great our sin, even if it involves these three great offenses, there is always the possibility of doing *teshuvah*. David was pardoned on the Yom Kippur of the following year (Batsheva gave birth to her first child who died, and then Nathan came and chastised David, David confessed and Nathan informed him that he had been pardoned and would not die. He was sick for half a year, mortally ill with leprosy). Now, it's not 100% clear when this exactly took place. It says that it happened on the 24th of Elul. But, if you read the Bible, it's written that David took Batsheva towards the evening,

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 15:30

לעת הערב (which equals 777, the number of our coming year). This is the same phrase used (for the first time in the Bible) when the dove returns with the olive leaf in its beak. If David took her at late afternoon, towards the evening, it was already the night of the 25th that they sinned, or perhaps the Zohar means that he took her on the late part of the 23rd of Elul and the sin itself occurred on the 24th. In any case, the 24th of Elul, the day before the creation (of light), represents total, primordial darkness (as does the night of the 25th of Elul, the darkness of the first night of creation that preceded the light of the mornig).

There are again three things that occurred on the 25th of Elul, the creation of the world, the return of the dove, and the sin of King David (the origin of the Mashiach). David's *teshuvah* is the elevation of the bitterness and the transformation of darkness into light.

Possibly everyone has heard and can sing the song Eimatai Katei Mar (when will our master come). In the Talmud, it was Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who asked this question, and heard the Mashiach replying, "today!" Elijah explained to him that there is a condition—if you listen to God's words. The Ba'al Shem Tov also asked the Mashiach this question and he replied that it is dependent on the entire world knowing the secrets of Chassidut. The word in this phrase that means "mister" our "master" (מָר) also means "bitterness." Moshe Rabbeinu threw a branch, an olive branch, into the bitter waters and sweetened them. The olive itself is bitter, but it has the power to transform bitterness into sweetness.

We now have a full meditation for this coming year. It is a year of might, and the most important idiom of these two letters is an "olive leaf," which has the power to heal illness and to bring first inner peace, peace of self, and give a person the inspiration to pray on Rosh Hashanah that God should bring peace to the entire world.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

Question: I understand that according to Judaism it's better to be a vegetarian?

Answer: We'll leave that for the Mashiach to answer. In the meantime, we have a *mitzvah* to eat meat on the coming holidays (which for most people, in the present order, increases joy). But, there are certainly sages who say that the ideal diet of the future is vegetarianism.

Question: We dip an apple in honey on the first night of Rosh Hashanah to remind us of the primordial sin of Adam. Is it also good to eat olives on Rosh Hashanah?

Answer: the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge from which Adam ate was not necessarily an apple. The reason we dip an apple in honey is because the apple is a symbol of the two cheeks in our face, which when the face shines, indicates our health and wellness when we are joyful. There is no special custom that I know of to eat olives on Rosh Hashanah (olive oil is obviously an ingredient of many dishes). From what we learned today, olive-leaf tea is good all year round.

Question: the Rabbis give many symbols for the New year. How do these work, or are they just to keep the children interested like on Passover eve?

Answer: Every type of food has certain characteristics and properties. We don't know all of these, but if we are told by the sages that a food with a certain name is related to a property, that is not just to keep the children interested. Rather it is engraved within the food itself, just like everything's essence is related to its Hebrew name.

Question: Is the inner peace as a foundation for our prayers also dependent on what we eat? If so, what does the Rav recommend we eat?

Answer: It's important to know that every person needs an individual diet, this is on the physical plane. On the spiritual plane, like the symbols we eat on Rosh Hashanah, it is recommended to eat these. Clearly there is a relationship between peace of mind and diet, but it's not dependent only on diet. The real peace of mind comes from our relationship with God, through our learning of Torah, meditation on its teachings and secrets, performance of the commandments.

Question: What about the *gematria* of Donald Trump in Hebrew being the same as Mashiach ben David?

Answer: Come to your own conclusions about this one.

Question: Why is the blessing for grapes בורא פרי העץ ("Blessed be You God... the Creator of the fruit of the tree"), while the blessing for wine is בורא פרי הגפן ("... the Creator of the fruit of the vine")?

Answer: The sages explain that wine is so important that it warrants its own blessing, which comes from the grapevine. The word גן is also an acronym in Yiddish for געזונט פרינסה נחת, health—livelihood—nachas from family. It's part of how you drink the wine.

Question: What is the relationship between olive oil and the *sefirah* of *yesod*?

Answer: This is a quote from Kabbalah and Chassidut, that the sixth of the Seven Species with which the land of Israel was blessed is olives and thus it corresponds to *yesod*, foundation, the sixth *sefirah* of the heart. So there is indeed a very important relationship between the "seed" that is in the olive leaf. The olive leaf must have a strong connection to reproduction.

Question: ע is also an acronym for "False Idols" (עבודה זרה). How do we sweeten this?

Answer: we said that the ע has to do with the rectification of King David and his sin. There are 3 major sins in the Bible: the sin of Adam, the sin of the Golden Calf, and the sin of King David. These three correspond to the sins of all of humanity (Adam) and then the entire Jewish people (calf) and finally that of the Mashiach of the Jewish people (David). King David is the heart of the Jewish people. Sin has to do with the heart. The olive leaf strengthens the cardiovascular system. The Jewish people are the heart of all of humanity, and David is the heart of the Jewish people. The worst of all is idolatry, which is the very opposite antithesis of all that is good in the meaning of ע (might).

As far as sin itself, the universal sin is against God who commanded to not eat from the Tree. The sin of the Jewish people was against Moshe Rabbeinu, as the sages explain. And the sin of the Mahsiach is the sin against oneself, the opposite of possessing peace of mind. There is once again sin against God, the sin against the leader of the Jewish people, and there is the sin against oneself. The sin that David committed against himself was because Batsheva was actually destined to be David's wife, but the sages say that he took her prematurely. He was sinning against his own destiny, against his own mazal. By taking her prematurely he sinned against his own essence, against his own self-fulfillment. All these 3 sins have to be atoned for, which happens on Yom Kippur.