

Secrets of the Torah's Holidays

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1. THE ESSENTIAL CONNECTION BETWEEN ABRAHAM AND CHANUKAH

Chanukah as the last of the 620 commandments

Among the various enumerations of the Torah's commandments, we find that apart from the 613 commandments found in the Torah itself, there are seven more commandments that were initiated by the Rabbis.¹ Of these, in chronological order, Chanukah is the last of the seven Rabbinical commandments. The total number of commandments is thus often noted to be 620, thus corresponding exactly with the 620 letters in the Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments. 620 is also the value of the word "crown" (כתר) in Hebrew, and alludes to the notion that the Ten Commandments, whose number of letters alludes to all 620 commandments, are the Torah's crown.

Chassidic sources note that even though Chanukah is the last of the 620 commandments, it relates back to Abraham the first Jew. The connection is that it says about Abraham, "Abraham began to shine light." Before Abraham the world was in darkness. Abraham's life begins with the final years of the second millennium (he was born in the year 1948 from creation). The third millennium began with his converting people, making righteous converts. Through his goodness and kindness he shined light to the entire world. That is exactly the message of Chanukah. Chanukah is about "publicizing the miracle" (פרסומי ניסא), both the miracle of the victory over Hellenistic culture and the miracle of the olive oil² that lasted for 8 days. So Chanukah is a holiday of light, of bringing God's Presence to light. Thus, at the very end of the 620 commandments of the

¹. These seven are: Washing hands before bread, Eiruv [combining private land into communal land for the purposes of moving things on Shabbat], Blessings, Shabbat candles, Reading the Scroll of Esther on Purim, Chanukah candles, and Reciting the Hallel on special occasions. These are not in the chronological order in which they were instituted, but rather in the order of an easy to remember acronym in Hebrew, **נע בשמחה**, which literally means to move with joy. The letters of this acronym stand for: נטילת ידים, עירובין, ברכות, (נר) שבת, מגילה, חנוכה, הלל.

². Olive oil is a symbol for the Torah's mysteries, for its inner dimensions. Pure olive oil is a symbol for the mysteries of the mysteries, or the highest level of concealed teachings that is Chassidut.

Torah, we go back to the first Jew, to spread light and spread not just the revealed dimension of the Torah but also its concealed dimensions.

How do we then bring the light of Chanukah into the rest of the year? We do so by shining the light of the Torah into the world, by taking its light and continuing the work and mission of Abraham. When we say the whole world, we mean both Jews and non-Jews. In the time of Abraham there were no Jews yet, so his light he spread to all of mankind, to humanity in general.

2. ISAAC AND PURIM

Chanukah is the holiday that commemorates Abraham's work, even though it occurred many years after Abraham passed away. It is one of the two festivals instituted by the Rabbis. The other is Purim. Historically, the events that led to Purim preceded those of Chanukah. Those events took place during the seventy years of the Babylonian exile. The events of Chanukah took place about three hundred years later. But, in the Jewish calendar year, Chanukah (which is in the months of Kislev and Tevet) precedes Purim (which is in Adar).

Just as Chanukah is related to Abraham through the common theme of spreading light to the entire world, so Purim is related to Abraham's son Isaac. The short answer is that Isaac enjoyed big banquets and he liked wine especially. We see this when Isaac wanted to bless Esau, his firstborn. He sent him to go and hunt meat, and prepare delicious food the way Esau knew that Isaac loved it. Rebecca, who heard that this was Isaac's intent, did not want Esau blessed, but rather that Jacob, the younger son, be blessed. She took two young goats from the flock and prepared it in such a way that it would taste just like the deer that Esau would hunt and prepare for Isaac. She dressed Jacob in Esau's clothing and made him seem hairy like his brother. Since Isaac was blind, he blessed Jacob. Just before he blessed him though it says that Jacob brought him wine and he drank it. So we see that to get his father Isaac to bless him, Jacob had to bring him wine. On these words in the Torah, "And he brought him wine and he drank" (וַיָּבֵא לוֹ יַיִן וַיִּשְׂתֶּה) there is a special cantillation mark called the *mercha kefulah*.³ The sages tell us that on Purim we should drink enough that we not know the difference between "blessed is Mordechai" and "cursed is Haman." Isaac's blessings came from this same state of existential doubt, and that thanks to this state that he was in, he was able to mistake Jacob for Esau. In fact, Mordechai and Haman are themselves reincarnations of Jacob and Esau (Haman is an Amalekite, a

³. This special cantillation mark appears only a few times in the entire Pentateuch. See also Exodus 5:15, Leviticus 10:1, Number 32:42.

grandson of Esau). So the very highest blessings in the Torah came from this state. This is akin to the famous phrase, “and it turned upside-down” (ונהפוך הוא), what was up went down and what was down went up.

So Chanukah is the holiday of Abraham and Purim is Isaac’s holiday. A very special teaching that is not commonly known.

3. CHANUKAH AND PURIM CORRESPOND TO LOVE AND FEAR

How does this teaching correspond to the *sefirot*—the Divine emanations through which God recreates the world at every moment. Abraham is loving-kindness (*chessed*) and Isaac is the second emotive *sefirah*, might (*gevurah*). Abraham is love and Isaac is fear. Indeed, Just as Abraham spread God’s light through loving-kindness, on Purim it was spread through might, or fear. One of the most important descriptions in the Scroll of Esther is that because of the miracle that the Jews were granted permission to defend themselves and kill those who came to kill them, there were many non-Jews who saw the sudden power given to the Jews, and they feared them, and so they converted (ורבים מעמי (הארץ מתיחדים). There were also many officers of the government that were afraid of Mordechai himself. Again, we have here an explicit reference to Isaac’s fear.

Chanukah is an explicit reference to how the nations of the world, those who are worthy of converting will come to Judaism, not through fear but rather through love, the attribute of Abraham. Even though Chanukah also includes an element of might in the miracle surrounding the victory in the war against the Hellenists, still, the essential miracle is the one of the olive oil and thus the light (of love) is what brings the nations of the world closer to Torah.

4. CORRESPONDING THE HOLIDAYS WITH THE SEFIROT

So we’ve begun with these two holidays that are pillars of connecting the non-Jews to the Jewish people. Chanukah is the very last of the commandments and is a throwback to Abraham, and it also ushers in the Messianic era of bringing redemption to the world, all with love.

What this suggests is to take this relationship between Chanukah and Purim, between Abraham and Isaac, and between love and might, and to see whether we can identify other such pairs in the full cycle of the year that would extend our meditation to the rest of the *sefirot*. To see how it all flows through the entire tree of the *sefirot*. Again, our lead is that Chanukah is loving-kindness and Purim is might. This is not a common way of looking at these two holidays. Usually, in the *Arizal* for instance, they are associated with victory and acknowledgement (in

both directions). Obviously every holiday must relate to a particular *sefirah*, even though they all inter-include, but there is one predominant *sefirah* that each holiday relates to. (Just as in souls, every person is predominantly related to a particular tribe, although every soul is inclusive of them all). What we will proceed to do is to meditate on what is perhaps the most straightforward way to correspond the holidays with the *sefirot*. We will begin with the crown that includes the super-conscious powers of the soul and conclude with kingdom.

Crown: Rosh Hashanah

The year begins with *Rosh Hashanah*. The first day of the Jewish calendar is also the most universal of all the holidays of the Torah. This is the one holiday that relates to the entire world, and should be immediately accepted by the entire world as its New Year. This is the real New Year for all the people of Earth, since it is the day on which Adam, the first human, was created. It is the day on which God judges not only the Jewish people, but all the people on Earth. In Hebrew, *Rosh Hashanah* doesn't mean "new year," but rather "the head of the year." In Kabbalah the head, meaning the beginning, the inception, relates to crown. It is what precedes even consciousness. The Torah commands us to observe *Rosh Hashanah* as just one day. But, later in the time of the Temple, *Rosh Hashanah* became two days, and it will even be two days when the Mashiach comes. This is also the only holiday that even in the land of Israel is two days long. It is eternally two days, both in space (all over the world, even in the land of Israel) and in time (always two days even when the Mashiach comes). The reason for this according to Kabbalah is because the crown is composed of two *partzufim*, two different aspects that unify: *Atik* and *Arich*. In the soul they correspond to the supernal pleasure principle in the soul and the supernal will of the soul.

What is the special spiritual work that we perform on *Rosh Hashanah*? We coronate the King [God], meaning it is as if through our prayers and through our celebrating God's coronation, we place a crown on His head, as it were. So we see explicitly that *Rosh Hashanah* is related to a crown. This is the purpose of the Jewish universal year (there is also the particularly Jewish year, which begins from Nissan)—that all human beings crown God on this day. In the *sefirah* of crown, what unites its two dimensions—the pleasure and the will—is simple faith. The service that we perform is to accept God as King and to place a crown on His head as it were. It could not be more explicit that *Rosh Hashanah* relates to crown.

Wisdom: Yom Kippur

The next holiday, ten days later, is *Yom Kippur*, described as the most unique, singular day of the year, “once a year,” as the Torah describes it. If *Rosh Hashanah* is the crown, and we are contemplating how the cycle of the year unfolds in the *sefirot*, then *Yom Kippur* is wisdom. Wisdom is described as the first flash of consciousness. Wisdom is insight.

In the Torah, *Yom Kippur* is called the holiday of “the tenth”⁴ (העשירי), because it is on the tenth day of *Tishrei*. This means that there is some special affinity between *Yom Kippur* and the tenth—there is actually no other holiday in the Torah that is referred to by the day of the month on which it occurs. Ten is the value of the letter *yud*, the first letter of God’s essential Name, the Tetragrammaton, which corresponds to the *sefirah* of wisdom.

On *Yom Kippur* there are 5 different things we have to refrain from. They are called afflictions of the soul, not to imply that they are negative, but rather, that by fasting (and refraining from the other things) we feel a special life-force,⁵ a special elation of the soul. It is like becoming an angel for one day. These five prohibitions on *Yom Kippur* are explained as being five different forms of nullification, the inner experience of wisdom. On *Yom Kippur*, a person feels self-nullification—I am not here—and that is the vessel that allows the Almighty to appear in us during that day. To experience the unity of God (as we say in the *Shema*), that is what atones for our sins on *Yom Kippur*. The experience of God’s absolute unity takes away all the blemishes that we have soiled our souls with during the year. *Yom Kippur* is referred to as *Shabbat Shabbaton*, the Shabbat of Shabbats, similarly to how there is the Holy (the Sanctuary in the Temple), and there is the Holy of the Holies (the inner Sanctuary). What is revealed when a person experiences nullification is God’s unity. The *Tanya* quotes the Magid of Mezritch who says that true unity (of God) can only be revealed in wisdom. And that is what is revealed and experienced on *Yom Kippur*. This is what cleanses all the blemishes from our soul. The Shabbat that we have at the conclusion of every week is in Kabbalah related to wisdom. All the more so that the one unique Shabbat of all Shabbats of the year—*Yom Kippur*—is the ultimate experience of wisdom and selflessness.

Understanding and Sukot

After *Yom Kippur*, we have the most joyful festival of *Sukkot*, which is called by the sages, “the time of our joy.” On *Sukkot* we build a *Sukkah* and we take the

⁴. Leviticus 23:27 and Numbers 29:7.

⁵. See Psalms 33:19.

Four Species, shaking them together as a sign of joy. *Sukkot* also comes right after *Yom Kippur*, only four days separate them alluding to how in Kabbalah wisdom and understanding are like two companions that never part. In fact, these four days are understood to correspond to the four letters of God's essential Name. They symbolize a radiation from the Name *Havayah* that provides us with God's compassion on *Yom Kippur* and then proceeds to connect us with *Sukkot*. The entire month of *Tishrei* is in effect related to all of mankind, because on *Rosh Hashanah* all people are judged and from the celebration of *Sukkot*, particularly from the service in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, all peoples of the earth are blessed.

Joy is of course the inner experience of the *sefirah* of understanding. The connection between understanding and *Sukkot* is also apparent in the *Sukkah*, the dwelling we sojourn in during the festival's seven days. The *Sukkah* is considered to be a manifestation of the surrounding lights of understanding (also known as the Mother principle). It allows the entire Jewish people to be surrounded as one, to sit under a single *Sukkah*.

Knowledge and Shemini Atzeret

The final day of *Sukkot*, the eighth day is a holiday unto itself, which is called the union of the transcendent and imminent revelations of God. This union takes place on *Shemini Atzeret*, the eighth day of *Sukkot*. This is the day on which the Divine Presence becomes, as it were, pregnant with all of the souls of the Jewish people that will be born that year. Another point about *Shemini Atzeret* is that from a Kabbalistic perspective it has the same *kavanot*, the same mystical intentions as those of *Rosh Hashanah*, apart from the fact that on *Rosh Hashanah* they are with an upward vector and on *Shemini Atzeret* they are with a downward vector, descending to permeate reality. This reflects how the *sefirah* of crown—which itself is above consciousness—manifests in our consciousness as the *sefirah* of knowledge. Knowledge is the word used in the Torah to indicate marital union.

Thus, *Shemini Atzeret* is essentially related with the *sefirah* of knowledge. In the land of Israel the eighth day is also *Simchat Torah*, the day that we rejoice and unify with the Torah. In the cycle of the year as we are now explaining it, *Rosh Hashanah* and *Shemini Atzeret* are the superconscious and the conscious parts of the soul, which reflect and complement one another.

Loving-kindness and might reflected in Chanukah and Purim

The next two holidays in the year are Chanukah and Purim, which we began with and which correspond to the *sefirot* of loving-kindness (*chessed*) and might

(*gevurah*). So again, the year begins with the universal New Year of all humanity and moves towards the love and fear of bringing humanity closer to God.

Beauty and Passover

The next holiday after Purim is Passover. Following the order of the Patriarchs (Abraham being Chanukah and Isaac being Purim) it corresponds to Jacob, the next Patriarch. Jacob is the essential soul of the *sefirah* of beauty (*tiferet*), the next emotive *sefirah*, and thus Passover corresponds to beauty as well. The inner emotive expression of the *sefirah* of beauty is compassion (*rachamim*), the spiritual attribute of Jacob. With compassion God took us out of Egypt.

Passover is the holiday on which the Jewish people become a people, the day on which the nation is born. Passover commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. Egypt was like a womb out of which the Jewish people were born. The Jewish people are described as God's sons, "You are sons for *Havayah* your God." Thus, the birth of the nation is like the birth of a son from his mother's womb. Kabbalistically, the *sefirah* of beauty is called "the son," relative to wisdom and understanding, the mother and the father. Thus, the birth of the nation out of Egypt is like the birth of beauty out of the womb of the Mother principle, out of the womb of understanding. Indeed, in the Passover *Haggadah* we relate how the Torah speaks of Four Sons.

Passover is known as the "time of our liberation," referring to the birth of the Jewish people. Like the other holidays, Passover also has universal implications, for the mission of the Jewish people is to teach all peoples on Earth to walk in the way of God. In particular, our "liberation" refers to our "freedom of speech," the vessel by which we address the world at large and shine God's light and goodness to all.

Victory and the Seventh day of Passover

The next holiday is the last day of Passover, the seventh day of Passover. On this day we commemorate the Splitting of the Red Sea, the day on which we sang the Song of the Sea. This is the greatest song that was sung to God. The entire Jewish people were like a choir and the conductor was Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses.

In Hebrew, a conductor is called a *menatze'ach* (מנצח) and this is one of the meanings of the name of the next *sefirah*, *netzach*, which means also victory and eternity. As it relates to victory, the seventh day of Passover was the final victory of God over the Egyptian exile. Until that moment, we were still in a state of fear lest the Egyptians pursue us and bring us back to our bondage in Egypt. Our perfect confidence and trust in God (which are the inner experiences of victory in

the psyche) that we are completely liberated only occurred on the seventh day of Passover.

Acknowledgment and Second Passover

The next holiday is called Second Passover. This is one of the holidays we are commanded to celebrate in the Torah, but it is only for those people who for reasons beyond their control were unable to celebrate the regular Passover on the 15th of Nissan. As such, the Second Passover presents a second chance to bring the Paschal lamb. It is held on the eve of the 15th day of the next month, the month of Iyar.

The message of the Second Passover is that it is never too late. In the psyche, and among the *sefirot*, the idea that one might fall, yet one should never give up and always look for another chance corresponds to the *sefirah* of acknowledgment (*hod*). The *sefirah* of acknowledgment is also essentially connected with two special days that come in proximity to the Second Passover, but are not Torah holidays themselves. These are the 14th and the 18th day of Iyar. The 14th of Iyar is the *yahrzeit* (day of passing) of Rabbi Meir who is described as having a mind so profound that the other sages could not fully understand his verdicts and therefore they had to simply acknowledge that he was correct (he is the main figure in the Mishnah). The 18th of Iyar, 3 days after Second Passover is known as *Lag Ba'omer* (the 33rd day of the Counting of the Omer). When corresponding the days of the Counting of the Omer to the inter-inclusion of the *sefirot* in themselves, *Lag Ba'omer* correspond to the acknowledgment of acknowledgment (the 14th of Iyar corresponds to the loving-kindness of acknowledgment, the first day of the week of acknowledgment). It is the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the author of the Zohar's teachings. *Lag Ba'omer* is about acknowledging the deepest mysteries of the Torah that the mind cannot rationally fathom or arrive at by itself.

Foundation and Shavu'ot

The next holiday is the third of the Torah's three festivals, *Shavu'ot*. It now corresponds according to our meditation to the *sefirah* of foundation (*yesod*). The inner experience of foundation is "truth," and the *tzadik*, the righteous individual in every generation is called "the truly righteous" (זכאי קשׁוּט) in the Zohar. What is truth? The only one truth is Torah, and *Shavu'ot* is the day on which we celebrate the Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

Foundation is related to Joseph. One of the stories that relates Joseph to the Giving of the Torah is from one of the great sages, Rav Yosef. He was fond of saying that his special holiday was *Shavu'ot*, because if it were not for the Giving

of the Torah on *Shavu'ot*, "I would just be another Joe." Rav Yosef's name itself has the same value as "Mashiach" (משיח), alluding to the Mashiach the son of Joseph (the dimension within the soul of the Mashiach that relates to the study of Torah).

Kingdom and Tisha B'av

The final holiday in the year has to correspond with kingdom. If we are out of holidays then the kingdom would be disconnected from the rest of the *sefirot*. To disconnect and sever the *sefirah* of kingdom is the archetype behind the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden.

Indeed, the holiday of kingdom is the holiday of the Mashiach (referred to as King Mashiach). Today it is not even a holiday, and only when the Mashiach comes will it be transformed into a holiday. This is the Ninth day of Av, *Tisha B'av*.

There were many terrible events that occurred on this date, beginning with the sin of the spies. But, in the future it will become the greatest of all holidays. A few days after *Tisha B'av* we have the 15th day of Av, which is likened by the sages to *Yom Kippur*. The two days are called "the two happiest days of the year" (the two days upon which *shiduchim* – wedding matches – were made). The reason for this special date originally was because on the 15th of Av of the 40th year in the wilderness, the day of the full moon of Av, the Israelites in the desert knew that for sure *Tisha B'av* had passed without the death of a single Jew (every year on *Tisha B'av*, the date of the sin of the spies, a part of that generation died) and so that no more of them would die. So the 15th day of Av (as the conclusion of a 7 day holiday beginning with the 9th of Av) is an allusion to the end of death, just as now, in Kabbalah, the feet of the *sefirah* of kingdom are described as descending all the way down to death.

To conclude, here is a traditional *partzuf* (Kabbalistic model) of all the Torah holidays as they correspond to the *sefirot*.

crown

Rosh Hashanah

understanding

Sukkot

wisdom

Yom Kippur

knowledge

Shemini Atzeret

might

Purim

loving-kindness

Chanukah

beauty

Pesach (Passover)

acknowledgment

Pesach Sheini (Second Passover)

victory

Shevi'i shel Pesach
(Seventh day of Passover)

foundation

Shavu'ot

kingdom

Tisha B'av