"Open my eyes so that I may see the wonders of Your Torah"

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TORAH AND FAITH FOR ALL PEOPLE

In this first part of a three-part class delivered in Barcelona on 3 Kislev, 5779 in front of an audience consisting of both Jews and Noachides, Rav Ginsburgh addressed the topic of the reasons for creation and creation’s purpose (appeared in the Bo 5779 edition of Ve’abita). In the second part, he described the basic meditation for Jews and non-Jews alike called “Divine Space,” a meditation that uses the six constant commandments, or Duties of the Heart, to create a sacred space clean of negative influences (appeared in the Mishpatim 5779 edition of Ve’abita).

In this third and final part, Harav Ginsburgh discusses the historical revolutions in Torah learning that have occurred over time. These three revolutions from the past set the stage for the coming fourth revolution that calls upon us to open Torah learning to sincere non-Jews who are drawn to connecting with God.

The First Torah Revolution

Some individuals have heard about the concept of the fourth revolution in Torah learning that we have been discussing for the past few years. Since it is the fourth in a series of changes that have altered the way in which Torah is learnt and by whom it is studied, we will first outline the three revolutions that preceded it. All four revolutions pertain to methods of teaching and studying Torah.

Together with the Torah that God gave Moses at Sinai, He gave 613 commandments to the Jewish People, and 7 commandments that must be observed by all mankind. The Tanach (the Hebrew Bible) comprises the Five Books of Moses (the Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings. The Tanach is called the Written Torah. In addition to the Written Torah, God gave Moses the oral tradition, which explains how to correctly interpret the Written Torah according to the will of God (as mentioned in a previous section, the fact that God possesses will is a paradox). None of the commandments of the Torah can be fulfilled as God intended without the oral tradition. For reasons that are clear to God, the Giver of the Torah, the oral tradition was intended to remain oral, and God forbade it to be written down. It had to be passed on
by word of mouth from generation to generation. This would enable the oral tradition to remain “organic,” and grow and develop with a life of its own, without ever becoming static in book form.

About 2000 years after the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, the oral tradition was still transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. However, it became clear to Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi (Rabbi Yehudah the Prince), the last sage of the era of the Tannaim—the Mishnaic era—that if they did not transcribe it now, the oral tradition would, God forbid, be forgotten. He saw that the generation was no longer capable of remembering the totality and the wholeness of the oral teachings. He instructed that the essence of the oral tradition, the Mishnah, be transcribed.

Although studying the Oral Law in book form had previously been prohibited, it now became permissible, and even a mitzvah to do so. The oral tradition underwent a total metamorphosis. Now we must write it down in order to convey it, so that it will never be forgotten.

The Second Torah Revolution

In Maimonides’ times and for several generations following, it was forbidden for a sage to receive a financial stipend to study Torah. Every Jewish scholar worked for his living and studied Torah in his own time. He was not allowed to receive financial support from the community, nor to take charity to allow him to devote all his time and life to Torah study. A Torah scholar should be independent. Maimonides was so strict about this prohibition that he said that a Torah scholar who receives a stipend from the community in order to study, desecrates the Name of God. He offers examples of Talmudic sages, who toiled to make a living and studied Torah at their own expense. Maimonides states that combining work and studying sanctifies God’s Name. This prohibition was still in force until about a thousand years ago, until the second Torah revolution took place. The reasoning was the same as with regard to the previous revolution. The rabbis were concerned that if they would continue this way, the Torah would be forgotten, God forbid.

Although it is good that a scholar is self-sufficient and does not rely on receiving charity from the community, the way life and society work are such that no-one can devote his
entire life to Torah study without a source of livelihood. The sages of the generations after Maimonides, and most importantly Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575), author of the *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law), authorized receiving a stipend from the community, to enable an individual to devote himself to Torah study, even as an a priori situation. Even today it is preferable for scholars to be self-dependent and to support themselves if they can. Nonetheless, anyone who cannot support himself and desires to devote himself to Torah study is permitted to accept support from the community; he is even instructed to do so.

**The Third Torah Revolution**

As we approach the coming of Mashiach, a positive feministic trend is manifesting in the Torah. As taught in Kabbalah, this trend is imperative to enable the redemption. Until about 150 years ago, there was no formal education for women in Jewish tradition. Women were educated at home. Like the original oral tradition, Jewish law and values were passed on from mother to daughter. There were no formal education systems for girls or women. Many girls were drawn to secular education and this led to them straying away from Jewish tradition. The great sages of the time instituted elementary education for girls, and even higher education. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that this is not only something that happened out of need, but it is because of a positive evolution in the essence of femininity. Kabbalah teaches that in order for Mashiach to come, the stature of the male and the female must become equal. At a later stage, the feminine figure will rise even higher than the male. This manifests itself in reality as formal Torah education for women develops.

[Question: This sounds like modern feminism.] The feminist movement today around the world is indeed a secular movement. Nonetheless, any phenomenon that occurs in the world is an indication, a sign that a corresponding movement is happening inside. Secular feminism points to the fact that there is a corresponding rise of femininity is taking place within the context of holiness. According to Kabbalah, the rise of the feminine figure is one of the indications that we are approaching the messianic era.
The Fourth Torah Revolution

As the Lubavitcher Rebbe taught, the way to usher in the era of Mashiach is to teach Torah and by doing so, to arouse Jewish sparks throughout the world to return to their source. Statistics state that in Catalonia, for example, one out of five people in the population is of Jewish ancestry. There are opinions that hold that the number of Marrano Jews in the world is between 100 and 500 million. In addition to those Jewish souls who were detached from their Judaism by force, there are also countless non-Jews who have an inner spark of Judaism that is waiting to be revitalized. Chassidut teaches that in order to hasten the redemption, these souls must become aware of this spark and unite with the Torah and the Jewish People. The Jewish People are the emissaries of God to bring the light of the Torah to the entire world.

A non-Jew who converts to Judaism is called “a convert who has converted.” One of the great sages from almost a thousand years ago, Rabbi Yehuda Hechassid (1150-1217), said this means that the convert was never a non-Jew. He was always potentially a convert, because from the moment he was born, he possessed a spark that was hidden. We cannot fathom why, but God, who is the ultimate paradox, knows the purpose behind everything. This is why at a certain point in the life of the convert, that spark becomes ignited. We do not know how many millions of such sparks exist around the world. Many people all over the world have become disillusioned with the traditions that they received, and they are spiritually open to seek the truth.

All over the world hearts are opening, and this is a trend that carries the message that Mashiach is coming. By spreading the light of the Torah, we can bring this trend to fruition. We cannot know who contains that potential spark. It might be everybody, or it might be a few people. Whichever the case, now is the time to ignite all the sparks around the world. The way to ignite the spark is by disseminating the light of the Torah, even the deepest Torah mysteries.

One of the most profound Torah mysteries is that the essence of God is paradoxical. We offered several examples of four different levels. Whenever we have four different levels of something, they correspond to the secret of the four letters of the essential Name of God, the Tetragrammaton. Regarding faith in God, there are also four levels. Our purpose for initiating
the fourth Torah revolution, spreading the light of the Torah to everyone, is to elevate everyone from his present level of faith to at least one level higher, if not to the highest of the four levels. So let us take a look at these levels of faith.

Four Levels of Faith – The World of Action - Idolatry

The lowest level of faith relates to fear of punishment, which can devolve into paganism, God forbid. We are commanded to believe that no force other than holiness controls us. Someone who sets his mind on evil is liable to become paranoid about things he thinks affect his life. As mentioned, the most basic teaching of the founder of Chassidut, the Baal Shem Tov, is not to fear anything in the world except for the one God, and to know that He is good. There is nothing else that can affect our lives. Wrongly placed fear is liable to degenerate into idolatry. This is the lowest level of faith, and it is not faith in God. This corresponds to the lowest of the four spiritual Worlds, Assiyah (the World of Action).

The essential statement of the Jewish belief system is, “Hear O Israel, Havayah is our God, God is One.” The next three levels of faith correspond to three different interpretations of the Sages, regarding the meaning of “God is One.”

The World of Formation - Negating Idolatry

The simplest interpretation is that there are no other gods except God; i.e., it negates idolatry. Not every form of idolatry involves worshipping physical idols. An idolater may believe that God created the world. He may believe that at one point, e.g., the Big Bang, a primal force brought the universe into being. This is the philosophical view that a first cause set the forces of nature (or other spiritual forces) into motion, but since then, it is no longer in conscious control of what is taking place. This philosophy is expressed in the phrase, “God has left the earth.” God was the first cause, but He is no longer involved in what transpires in our world. Believing that reality is controlled by forces other than God, and worshipping them, or believing that everything that transpires is a chain of causes and effects is a form of sophisticated idolatry.
Denying such idolatry is our primary intention when we say that God is One. God is the primal cause, but He is as involved with creation in the present as He was at the outset. The belief system of Yetzirah (the World of Formation), the second highest spiritual World is denying that God, or some primal cause once put things into motion, but now He is no longer personally involved.

Although the belief system of Yetzirah admits that God is involved with the world, nonetheless, He might have partners. One example of this is belief in a "trinity." There is a controversy amongst the sages whether believing in such a religion is idolatry or not. Some hold the opinion that it is considered idolatry because it believes that there are other entities besides one God. Others state that it is not idolatry per se and for non-Jews it is permissible, because it only believes in partnership. According to this opinion, idolatry refers only to those who believe that God the Creator is no longer involved at all. Since that religion believes that God is still involved, even though He has two other gods working with Him, a non-Jew is permitted to believe in it, but for Jews it is forbidden. This opinion makes it clear that such a belief system is on a different level than idolatry.

One of Maimonides’ outstanding innovations is that although they are not correct in their belief system, the “rebellious daughter religions” that were born out of Judaism represent a positive progression relative to the paganism that preceded them. Their establishment brings the world closer to the ultimate monotheistic belief in one God. The redemption depends on all mankind progressing towards a correct belief system. As mentioned, this relates to purifying one’s thoughts of all diversions from belief in one God.

The World of Creation – Negating Partnership with God

Belief in God at the level of Beri’ah (the World of Creation) corresponds to the second interpretation of “God is One,” i.e., that there are no other powers with free will who work in partnership with God.

Yet, even the oneness of God at this level does not relate to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in whom we believe. Of such a God, who is involved in the world and has no partners, we cannot yet say that His
oneness is unique. We cannot yet say that “there is nothing like unto Him.” As Maimonides teaches, there is something anthropomorphic about such a God. Maimonides is strongly opposed to anthropomorphism, because God is not like us, nor like anything else we can imagine. God has no comparison. The essence of such a belief system is that our logic is like God’s logic.

The World of Emanation – Belief in God as the Bearer of Paradox

Unlike our logic, which is binary logic, God is paradoxical. Whereas in human logic, two opposites are contradictory, God is infinite, yet at the same time, He appears to us in finitude. In human logic, infinity and finitude are opposites and cannot exist simultaneously. Either something is finite or infinite, but it cannot be both at one and the same time. The true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob contains any two apparent opposites simultaneously. This relates to the third interpretation of “God is One”: “There is nothing like unto Him.” As Maimonides states, the reality of God is the only true reality. We believe we are here, we are not dreaming, but we are not true reality. All our meditation and all the spiritual enlightenment that we will receive as we approach the messianic era, will deepen the revelation that God, the Creator, who is present here and now, so much so that I can speak to Him in prayer, is a personal God, not a philosophical God. Our God is not the impersonal God that Spinoza described and that Einstein believed in. God is a personal God. Nonetheless, He is simultaneously infinite. This is the paradox that only God can bear. Eastern religions solve the paradox by claiming that reality is a dream. They strive to abandon reality. For them there is also no purpose to life. They do not know the secret of true unity between infinite and finite. They cannot fathom how God has a passion to dwell in the lower, finite Worlds.

The goal of the fourth Torah revolution is to bring all of humanity to the level of Atzilut (the World of Emanation). This is the one true belief system: that God is absolutely unique. Even though one’s goal in life is not to reach bliss (but to fulfill the God’s will), reaching the belief that God paradoxically is infinite yet takes an interest in every one of us is the ultimate bliss of life. This is the ultimate goodness and blessing of humanity.
Question: Is meditation an acceptable tool for approaching God.

Answer: Yes. According to some Torah opinions meditating is one of the 613 commandments. The purpose of meditation is to know God.

The Torah commands us, “You shall love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might,” but love is an emotion that happens naturally. How can one command someone to love? The Ba’al Shem Tov acknowledges that it is impossible to command someone to love someone or something. Nonetheless, you can command someone to meditate upon the positive qualities of the individual or object. Doing so will naturally arouse love. For example, a parent may tell their son, this girl is the best match for you. If the boy does not love the girl, but he thinks about all her positive qualities, it may ignite the potential for love (the same is true for a girl). Similarly, the commandment in the Torah to love God, means, “Contemplate those things about God that arouse your love.” Moreover, by contemplating those things that arouse love with sincerity, even if you do not yet experience love in your heart, and even if it does not appear to work for you, at some level of your psyche you have fulfilled the commandment to love God.

Many souls around the world are attracted to the God of Israel. For a convert to convert he or she must be sincere. The most important example of an insincere conversion is when one converts to marry a Jewish man or woman. Nonetheless, if he/she converts and they do live a Jewish life, and fulfill the commandments, the conversion is valid. If they do not continue to live a Jewish life, the conversion is null and void.

In the past, anti-Semitism was so common that non-Jews were rarely attracted to the Jewish People. Even today, for every non-Jew who loves the Jewish People, there are far more individuals who hate the Jewish people. Nonetheless, because of our return to the land of Israel, and seeing our success in developing a government and an economy (despite all the spiritual issues that have yet to be resolved), many non-Jews are attracted to the Jewish faith.

Yet, falling in love with the Jewish People is not yet enough reason for conversion. If falling in love with one Jew, a Jewish boy or a Jewish girl is not sincere, then falling in love with the entire Jewish People is also not the ideal. We can only know that such a conversion is valid once the individual has converted and continues to live a Jewish life.
True conversion is falling in love with the God of Israel. Igniting the lost spark is falling in love with God, as Jacob fell in love with Rachel at first sight. When a convert recognizes God at first sight, he or she falls in love with God. Such a conversion is so potent that Maimonides says, that the convert is greater than a Jew. Someone who recognizes God’s unique Oneness and falls in love with Him and converts to Judaism is greater than someone who was born a Jew.

Questions & Answers

From Harav Ginsburgh’s correspondence

“If I Were King of the Forest”

Q: What is the trait of courage and how do I get some?

A: Courage is the ability to think out of the box, to separate oneself and to swim against the current for the sake of truth, as you understand it. One of the reasons that we learn Torah is in order to understand the real truth and not just the “truths” dictated to us by society. A person who chooses to speak the truth even when it is not accepted, popular, or politically correct must fortify himself with courage. The sages (Sanhedrin 8a) call the leader a “speaker” (dabar). The courage required of a leader is to speak the truth and to lead his followers to it.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe said that particularly when we bring up new, controversial ideas that are different from accepted wisdom, we must say them “in a manner that is easily acceptable,” so that they will enter the hearts of the listeners and will not result in the opposite outcome.
Parashat Behar: Becoming Conscious of Time

The personal, national and global commandments to count time correspond to the three intellectual sefirot.

The Torah portion of Behar enumerates the mitzvot of shemitah (the sabbatical year; pl. shemitot) and yovel (the Jubilee year). Every seventh year is a shemitah year and the year following every seventh shemitah cycle is a Jubilee year:

“Count for yourselves seven sabbatical years, seven years seven times. And the days of these seven sabbatical years shall amount to forty nine years for you... And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year and call freedom in the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee year for you.”

This verse is reminiscent of the commandment to count the Omer, which appears in the previous Torah portion:

“Count for yourselves from the day following the festival... seven complete weeks they shall be.”

During the Omer period, we read the Torah portions of Emor and Behar that contain the commandments of shemitah and counting the Omer.

Earlier, in the Book of Leviticus, the Torah commands us to count units of time in two more situations. The first refers to a man who has an impure discharge, “When a man with a discharge is purified of his discharge, and he shall count seven days to his purity.” Similarly, a woman who has a discharge is also commanded, “She shall count seven days and then she shall be purified.” In most years, these verses are also read during the Omer period.

A man or a woman with a discharge count the days in the same way. There are thus three different commandments to count units of time: the Jubilee year, the days of the Omer and the purification of an individual who suffered a discharge.
These three are the only examples of commandments that require counting time. All of them relate to multiples of seven units; from the seven days of counting purity, through the seven weeks of the Omer and finally, the seven years of shmitah followed by the Jubilee year.

**Coming with All our Days**

Counting time is a characteristic of human culture. We should always be aware of what we have accomplished and what remains for us to do. Some of the greatest Torah scholars recorded how they spent every moment. To paraphrase a Chassidic saying, “Serving God means taking care of the hours; then the days take care of themselves.” Every moment is unique; it has never been before and will never be again. Our task is to infuse time with significance.

Abraham was the initiator of Jewish counting (ספירה). He accounted for all his moments and days without wasting time. The Torah describes Abraham as “coming of days”; i.e., all his days came with him and none were wasted. *Sefer Yetzirah* (ספר יצירה), the Book of Formation, is the earliest Kabbalistic text. Attributed to Abraham, it reveals the secrets of creation according to the ten sefirot (ספירות; sing. ספירה, identical to “counting”).

**Three Intellectual Sefirot and Seven Emotive Attributes**

The ten sefirot include the three intellectual powers of the soul, which direct and refine the seven attributes of the heart: chesed (the sefirah of loving-kindness), gevurah (the sefirah of might), tiferet (the sefirah of beauty), netzach (the sefirah of victory), hod (the sefirah of acknowledgment), yesod (the sefirah of foundation) and malchut (the sefirah of kingdom). In the psyche, these seven attributes are the “emotive” and “instinctive” powers of the soul; i.e., the world of emotions in the heart and the powers of action.

The three “counting” commandments correspond to the intellectual ability to count time. Each of the different types of counting in the Torah expresses a different level of time-consciousness, as we will explain.

The act of counting time is a cyclical, periodical series of sevens. As explained in *Parashat Shemini,*
the number seven is an expression of nature. While counting the Omer, for example, we intend to rectify these attributes by including the seven one within the other, from chesed in chesed to malchut in malchut.

Da’at (Knowledge) and Chochmah (Wisdom)

There are a number of differences between the way one counts “clean” days and the commandment of counting the Omer. During the clean days counted after an impure discharge, the individual has no need to count the seven days and certainly does not make a blessing over counting them. The sages teach us that in this case, “counting” means, “paying attention to the days,” i.e., taking account of the days and consciously verifying there has been no more discharge. During the Omer we count the number of days at the beginning of the day (in Jewish tradition, each day begins on the previous evening), making the blessing and saying, “Today is one day of the Omer,” “Today is two days of the Omer” etc.

Another difference between the two types of counting is that during the seven-day period, the individual affected by the physiological discharge must verify his/her cleanliness in practice. In contrast, the principal issue of counting the Omer is to count the days. Once I have said, “Today is twenty-two days of the Omer,” for example, I have no further obligation to do anything more on that day. These two types of counting reflect two types of consciousness.

The time scale of the individual who suffers from a discharge has descended into the realms of the subconscious. Their illness requires them to become aware of the passage of time by counting seven clean days. The level of consciousness that directs our mundane actions is at the back of the mind. Like the back of the head that has neither eyes nor mouth, the days counted have no identifying features. At this level, verbally articulating the number of days is unnecessary, because there is no essential difference between them. By counting the clean days, the individual cleanses himself or herself of illness and rises above the cycle of impurity. The individual elevates himself or herself from their fall into the subconscious and reconnects with the conscious levels of the soul.

Counting the Omer is a higher, intellectual realm of awareness. “A man’s wisdom illuminates his face,”
and like the unique features of every face, each new day of the Omer has a distinctive character. We observe this commandment by expressing the number of days in speech. The emotive powers of the soul are initially “immature”; i.e., unrefined and instinctive, without particular consciousness. Our task is to raise them to “adulthood” by consciously refining them. Counting the days of the Omer elevates and refines the emotive attributes by infusing them with human intellect; the advantage man has over animal. On each day of the Omer, we are also required to bring an offering of barley, which is animal fodder. The transformation is completed when we bring the “two [loaves] of bread” offered on Shavuot. The two loaves are made of wheat, which is human fare.

Despite the differences between the two types of counting, the Zohar\(^5\) compares counting the Omer to counting the seven clean days before a married couple can resume marital relations after becoming impure. The seven weeks of the Omer correspond to the seven clean days, and the Giving of the Torah on Shavuot, when the Divine Bride and Groom—the Jewish People and the Almighty—unite, corresponds to the day the couple resume their physical relationship.

Counting the clean days corresponds to da’at (the sefirah of knowledge), which resides within the lower sefirot (as the soul resides within the body). Counting the Omer corresponds to chochmah (the sefirah of wisdom), which is on a plane above da’at. Whereas the emphasis on counting clean days is on the emotive level of the soul, counting the Omer elevates the attributes of the heart to the intellectual level of the soul.

The Grand Jubilee - *Binah*

Counting the shmitah and Jubilee years requires counting years. This commandment applies to the Sanhedrin (Supreme Court), not to individuals. Only the Sanhedrin, as the public representative, records the succession of years and generations.

There are differing opinions amongst the sages\(^6\) regarding how the Sanhedrin count the years. One opinion is that the Sanhedrin count the years verbally, like we count the Omer, and make a blessing before counting. Other opinions hold that the Sanhedrin count the years until the Jubilee as an individual counts the clean days after
an impure discharge. They note the number of years and shemitot to verify that the correct result is achieved. Thus, counting the Jubilee is an intermediate type of counting.

The years of the shemitah cycle and the Jubilee year are counted from the creation of the earth; they are of great historical significance. In the Jubilee year, all individuals return to their own territory and slaves are freed. This symbolizes the Grand Jubilee; the World to Come.7

In addition, the sages8 teach that the earth will exist for six thousand years, followed by a seventh millennium similar to a sabbatical year. The shemitah cycle thus symbolizes the entire progression of global history. Kabbalists describe a progression of seven sabbaticals of seven millennia, followed by the fiftieth millennium, or even “fifty thousand millennia.” The Arizal9 explains that this is allegorical and refers to spiritual processes in the higher realms.

In the Kabbalistic system of sefirot, the Jubilee year corresponds to the sefirah of understanding. The forty-nine years of seven shemitah cycles correspond to the forty-nine days of the Omer. The fiftieth year, like the day of Shavuot, corresponds to the fiftieth gate of understanding, which remains beyond human comprehension.10 In the Zohar, the sefirah of understanding is “the Jubilee.”

Binah (בינה, the sefirah of understanding) is the “intermediate” (地中) intellectual power, which lies between chochmah (the sefirah of wisdom) and da’at (the sefirah of knowledge). It includes both a “face” and a “back.” The sefirah of understanding can relate to reality, but is not totally engaged in it. She is the mother who has “given birth” to the emotive attributes. Together with them, she experiences every fluctuation in their development, while guiding them through an ongoing developmental process. Each shemitah and Jubilee cycle takes us ever higher on an upward spiral course. Only the leaders of the Jewish People in the Sanhedrin can sense the extended rhythms of the collective consciousness.

The Countdown to Redemption

Each type of counting (ספרות) tells its own story (ספר): counting the clean days to purity is the personal story of the individual. Counting the Jubilee is the universal history book (ספר הימים המşiים).
Counting the *Omer* relates the exodus of the Jewish People from Egypt, and how they received the Torah. *Chochmah* (the sefirah of wisdom) is the highest of the three intellectual sefirot. Just as wisdom illuminates the face of an individual, like a brilliant sapphire (כַּסְפִּיר), counting the *Omer* illuminates all the sefirot (סְפִּירוֹת) and all the stories (סִפּוּרִים). It teaches us that we do not require an extended redemption process that takes decades or years. We can reduce the process into a few short days. Redemption can even come, “Today – if you hear His voice.”

Notes
2. Genesis 24:1
4. Ecclesiastes 8:1.
7. See commentaries of Nachmanides and Ibn Ezra at the beginning of *Parashat Behar*.
9. *Sha’ar Ma’amarei Rashbi*; see also *Torah Or*, Shemot 51:4.
11. Psalms 95:7; *Sanhedrin* 98a.
Parashat Bechukotai: The Fragrance of a Perfumery

God loves us despite everything and all the bad smells become a wonderful aroma

From Rabbi Ginsburgh’s class of Iyar 23, 5774

The Torah portion of Bechukotai begins with a list of the blessings that will be bestowed upon those who keep the Torah and a list of curses with which the transgressor is liable to be punished. The list of curses ends with two verses of assurance to comfort us, “Yet even this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I am not revolted by them nor am I sickened by them to annihilate them, to violate my covenant with them, for I am Havayah, their God. And I shall remember them the covenant of the forefathers.” In the Zohar, the first phrase of these two verses is addressed by Rabbi Chiya’s words to Rabbi Yossi:

Rabbi Chiya said, I heard Rabbi Elazar [son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai] teach something new. The verse states, ’I am not revolted by them nor am I sickened by them to annihilate them,’ but should it not have said, ‘I did not strike them nor did I kill them?’ The answer is that when someone hates someone else, he is revolted and sickened by him, but here, ‘I am not revolted by them nor am I sickened by them,’ why? Because the one I adore is amongst them, and by virtue of her, all of them are adored.’ I am not revolted by them nor am I sickened by them. Because she is my beloved and my love is for her.

This like a man who loved a woman who lived in the leather market [where the odor is most repulsive]. If it were not for her, he would never have gone there. But since she is there he perceives the market as if it was a perfumery that contains the most beautiful fragrances in the world. So too in our case, ‘Yet even this, when they are in the land of their enemies,’ which is like a leather
‘I am not revolted by them nor am I sickened by them,’ Why? This is the meaning of the word lechalotam (לְכַלֹּתָם), ‘to annihilate them,’ which is written without a vav and can therefore be read, lekalatam (לְכַלָתָם), meaning, ‘For their bride.’ By virtue of their bride, who is the love of my life. Because the bride is there I perceive it as if all the best fragrances are there.

Rabbi Yossi said, ‘Had I only come here to hear this interpretation, it would have been worth my while.’

God’s love of us ultimately transforms the rebuke and punishments that He sends us while we are in the most repugnant “leather market” of exile. Even when we have descended to the lowest spiritual level possible, God loves us immeasurably, so much so that the repulsive odor does not deter His ardor at all. He can only smell a fragrance like that of a perfumery.

All this is by virtue of the “bride,” i.e., the Divine Presence, who accompanies the Jewish People wherever they are and never leaves them. Superficially, many Jews seem to be steeped in an abominable smell. Nevertheless, the Divine Presence accompanies them. It guarantees God’s eternal love, so much so that from His perspective we emanate a pleasant fragrance, “like the fragrance of the field that God has blessed.”

How Rabbi Elazar Honored His Father

Immediately following the parable in the Zohar above, Rabbi Yossi explains the verse, “A son honors his father and a servant, his master.” He offers Rabbi Elazar as one example of a son who honors his father in this world and in the World to Come. “Now [after his interpretation of the abovementioned verse] he has increased Rabbi Shimon’s praise in both worlds, more than he did while his father was alive, by virtue of his holy son…”

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explained why Rabbi Elazar’s interpretation was such a great honor to his father, Rabbi Shimon. This was because honoring one’s father is achieved by following his ideology. Here, Rabbi Elazar takes it one step further until he reveals the true essence of his father’s intention. Rabbi Shimon said, “Come and see how beloved the Jewish People is before God, for wherever they were exiled, the Divine Presence was exiled with them.” Here, Rabbi Elazar agrees that the Divine Presence accompanies us under all circumstances. However, he elaborates on this theme, saying that God loves the Jewish People so much so that a foul odor turns into a wonderful fragrance.
Rabbi Elazar’s Revolution

When we consider Rabbi Elazar’s previous perspective on life, as described elsewhere, this elaboration on his father’s philosophy is indeed surprising. When Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar came out of hiding after twelve years of living in a cave they saw people ploughing and sowing the fields. They became angry at them for “leaving eternal life [i.e. the Torah] and dealing with the transitory life.” Everywhere they looked was incinerated by their fiery gaze. A voice called out from Heaven, “Have you come out to destroy My world? Get back into your cave!” Another twelve months passed before another Heavenly voice told them, “Leave your cave.” This time when they left, Rabbi Elazar continued burn everything he saw with his gaze. However, Rabbi Shimon healed the places that Rabbi Elazar struck.

Rabbi Shimon had learned the lesson of the extra year in the cave and now understood that God has no desire for His world to be destroyed. God loves the Jewish People even as they plough and sow. Conversely, Rabbi Elazar was still unable to concede to the secular world, and incinerated it. Finally, one Friday afternoon, they met an elderly man running home with two bunches of myrtle in honor of Shabbat. This appeased even Rabbi Elazar. Yet, his initial harsh criticism of reality appears to remain intact. He continued to “set the world on fire,” knowing that his father would balance his demand and heal it.

The Rebbe explains that the above parable teaches us that after Rabbi Shimon’s passing, Rabbi Elazar delved even deeper into his father’s method and reinforced it until he recognized that God’s love for us overrides our misdeeds. Even when our deeds reek of a foul stench, they remain fragrant from God’s perspective, like the myrtle branches that the old man held. Having learned this powerful lesson from his father, Rabbi Elazar stressed that when the Jewish People is at the lowest possible spiritual condition the Divine Presence continues to accompany them. This teaches us to relate with love and affection towards every single Jew, and to all the Jews as one. Never forget that they are God’s beloved bride.

Notes
1 Adapted from Zohar III, 115b.
2 Genesis 27:27.
3 Malachi 1:6.
4 Torat Menachem: Hitva’aduyot 5744, Bechukotai.
5 Megillah 29a.
6 Shabbat 33b.
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