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BaChodesh HaShelishi: Shavuos - Section I

From the teachings of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi; adapted by Eli Touger

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בחדש “In the third month after the exodus of the Jewish people from the land of Egypt, they came to the Sinai desert on this day.” *Shmos* 19:1.

This verse describes the beginning of the final preparations for the Giving of the Torah.

הנה The [above] verse says “on this day” without specifying to which day [it is referring]. It is only through the interpretation of our Sages¹ that it is understood that the intent is Rosh Chodesh, as they state: “It is written here ‘On this day,’ and it is written there:² ‘This month shall be for you [the beginning of months....]’

This verse speaks about the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon on Rosh Chodesh. The Sages derive that concept through the technique of exegesis known as gezeirah shavah — an association made on the basis of the use of a common term, in this instance, the word “this” (הז, in Hebrew), in two different verses — which is one of the Thirteen Principles of Biblical Exegesis detailed by Rabbi Yishmael (the introduction to the Sifra).

[Just as the latter verse refers to Rosh Chodesh, so too, does the verse cited originally].”

ולהבין The reason the Torah refers to Rosh Chodesh[Sivan]as “this day” can be understood by first [explaining] the advantage of receiving the Torah. [Now the Giving of the Torah is considered the defining event in mankind’s relationship to G-d. This requires clarification.] Even before the Giving of the Torah, there were several righteous men [who served G-d in exemplary fashion]. [For example,] the Patriarchs [reached such a high level of closeness to G-d that they are described³ as G-d’s] chariot although the Torah had not yet been given.

I.e., they were totally given over to G-d’s will just as a chariot is given over to the will of its driver. See Tanya, chs. 23 and 34.

[Why then is the Giving of the Torah singled out as being of such consequence?]

To clarify the question: Since the Patriarchs had reached a consummate level of devotion to G-d’s will, one might ask: Why then is the Giving of the Torah considered so important? Seemingly, even if it had not been given, it would be possible to reach a complete bond with G-d, as the Patriarchs did.

אך This question [can be resolved through the following explanation]: The unique characteristic of Avraham's [Divine service is reflected in the description⁴ of him as] "continually proceeding southward." [In spiritual terms,] this means that he was continually advancing until he reached the level described as "the south," i.e., the sublime attribute of love.

I.e., Avraham's journeys on this physical plane corresponded to an inner process of spiritual growth in which his Divine service progressed until he was able to become identified with the Divine attribute of love.

When facing east, the south corresponds to the right side, which is associated with the qualities of chessed and love. Avraham progressed continually in that mode of service.

He was able to proceed from level to level [in this spiritual quest] to the extent that he became an actual chariot for this sublime love and it was revealed within his soul.

והליכה [Avraham's spiritual] advance reflects an upward progression [that lifted him] out of the level described as "Egypt." As it is written:⁵ "And Avraham ascended from Egypt," [i.e., he rose above] the boundaries and limitations

The Hebrew term for Egypt, Mitzrayim, relates to the word meitzarim, meaning "boundaries" or "straits." In our Divine service, the concept of an exodus from Egypt refers to the transcendence of one's personal boundaries and limitations. See Tanya, ch. 47.

that stem from the body and the animal soul which constrain and encase man's G-dly soul [and thus his spiritual progress].

For the basic physical tendencies of the body prevent the spiritual potential of the G-dly soul from expressing itself. Certainly, this applies when a person gives in to material desires and pursues them.

עד A person's G-dly soul may conceive and contemplate the greatness of [G-d's] infinity and [the way] it is drawn down to all the created beings, [that] G-d is "the Vitality of [all] life,"⁶ [as it is said:] "You grant life to them all,"⁷ "I fill the heaven and the earth,"⁸ and "the entire earth is filled with His glory."⁹ Nevertheless, his soul does not have the power to break out of its encasement, its imprisonment in the body, to [carry out the Divine service of] *iskafia* and *is'hap'cha*: subjugating and transforming [the body and the animal soul]. Instead,

I.e., despite the contemplation and comprehension of these spiritual concepts, the body and the animal soul are not shaken from their fundamental self-concern.

the body remains in its natural state, with its inherent strength and power. As our Sages state:¹⁰ “Before breaking in, a thief calls out to the Merciful One.”

The intent is that the person is torn by an inner dichotomy. He obviously believes in G-d, for he prays to Him. Yet his belief is not internalized, as reflected in his willful violation of G-d's commands. As explained in Likkutei Torah, Devarim, p. 7a, the intent is not that his belief is false. On the contrary, it is a genuine expression of the innate G-dliness of his G-dly soul. Nevertheless, his soul is enclosed within his body and his animal soul which rule over his conscious mind and cause his conduct to deviate from G-d's will.

ומעלת Avraham's unique quality is that he overcame [his material] constraints and attached his soul to the sublime love to such an extent that it desired to strip off the garments of [kelipas] *nogah*

Kelipah literally means “shell.” In kabbalistic terms, it refers to the spiritual forces that create an external shield which conceals the G-dly light within all creation. As such, it is understood as referring to the unholy side of the Spiritual Cosmos.

*Within the realm of kelipah, there are two levels: a) the three impure kelipos which cannot be refined and elevated through ordinary means; the G-dly life-force they contain is in a state of exile; and b) kelipas *nogah*, “the shining kelipah,” a level of kelipah that does not veil its G-dly light entirely. On this level, the G-dly light can be revealed through the Divine service of the Jewish people. See Tanya, chs. 6-7.*

stemming from the body, and reached a state of *bittul*

Self-nullification and self-transcendence.

to G-d alone. [He persevered in this service] to the extent that his soul desired to actually leave the body.

In a figurative sense, this spiritual service parallels Avraham's exodus from Egypt.

ונה This love comes from contemplating G-d's infinite light that is *sovev kol almin*,

Lit., “encompassing all the worlds.” This light has no definition whatsoever, but instead is infinite, transcending all the frames of reference that we recognize. The Alter Rebbe is speaking about attaining a love for G-d so great that it causes the soul to seek to leave the body and connect to G-d. Hence, the focus of the person's meditation must be a truly transcendent level of Divine light.

When one contemplates the G-dly light that serves as the life-force for the created beings — or even the more transcendent levels of Divine light that are the source for that life-force — he will not be motivated to yearn to rise above his body, for indeed this Divine light is focused on giving life to the body. When, by contrast, he focuses on G-d's light which is truly transcendent, having no connection to the created beings whatsoever, he will be motivated to cling to that light although it involves rising above the body.

which “no thought can comprehend at all.”¹¹

Thought is bound by a defined structure and is thus only able to comprehend limited entities. Since this Divine light is truly infinite and unbounded, it defies comprehension.

[In general, we are only able to comprehend the Divine light manifest in Creation, of which it is said:]¹² “Your kingship is the kingship over all the worlds.” [The implication is that the source for all existence is only from G-d's attribute of] kingship,

G-d Himself is above all existence. It is His attribute of kingship that brings the worlds into being.

a quality identified with speech, as it is written:¹³ “The word of a king rules,”

Kingship and speech are distinguished from other personal qualities in that they do not relate to the person as he is for himself, but as he relates to others. To explain: Describing a person as characterized by love or wisdom tells us something about his inner nature, who he is. Describing him as a ruler or a speaker, by contrast, does not give us any kind of picture of his internal makeup, only how he can control others or communicate to them.

By saying that Creation relates only to G-d as King or to His speech, the Alter Rebbe is emphasizing how utterly batel Creation is. It has no significance to Him as He is for Himself and becomes important only when He descends to relate outside of Himself, as it were.

and we say [in our prayers]:¹⁴ “Blessed be He Who spoke and the world came into being,” i.e., through speech alone. For vitality is drawn down into all the worlds, and they are maintained and brought into being from nothingness from a level that is merely a ray.

In Kabbalah and Chassidus, the term “ray” is used to refer to an emanation without substance that only conveys an external and insignificant quality from its source, as the maamar proceeds to explain.

וכמ"ש This is indicated by the words [recited in our morning prayers]:¹⁵ “Be blessed... in heaven above and on the earth below for all Your praiseworthy handiwork.” [The implication is that] all of the worlds, heaven, earth, [and the entire realm encompassed by] the 500-year journey from the earth to the heavens,¹⁶ only relate to a level described as [G-d’s] handiwork.

As the Alter Rebbe proceeds to explain that, like — and to an even greater extent than — speech and kingship, deed represents a power of expression that does not affect or express the person himself.

עד"מ [To explain] the analogy: Just as a person’s handiwork involves only his power of deed which is the [most] external garment of his soul, so too, the vitality invested in all the worlds is [described] only [with the analogy of] the power of deed, which is an external power and a mere ray that does not affect the essence and being of one’s soul at all.

I.e., it appears that the G-dly energy invested in Creation is only an external power, separate from His Essence.

ובורא [And our prayers continue:] “...Who creates holy beings, praised be Your name forever.” The term “holy beings” refers to the angels and the souls; they [relate] only to Your name, a ray and a radiance.

A person’s name is relevant only in relation to another person, not in relation to his own self. Thus his name reflects the aspect of his self that projects outward, which figuratively can be described as a ray. The phrase from our prayers implies that even the perception of G-d enjoyed by the angels and the souls in an incorporeal state relates only to G-d’s name and not to Him Himself.

They are not, however, on the level of “Your handiwork,” as are the external dimensions of the worlds.

I.e., as the Alter Rebbe proceeds to explain, G-d’s “handiwork” represents a lower level.

[The difference is that once] the power of deed is invested in a particular article or aspect of man’s handiwork, for example, the power [invested in making that implement] no longer has any connection with the essence and nature of the soul [of the person who made it], for it has become separate and distinct from him.

Once a person performs an act, the energy he used to do so becomes separate from him.

Holding the implement in which the power [of deed] was invested does not draw the essence of the person [who fashioned it] after it. In contrast, when calling a person’s name, his essence is drawn out. For a name is a ray and radiance that affects the essence of the soul and is still connected and united with it.

As such, even when one’s name is pronounced by another person, it has the power to draw

forth his soul's energy.

אך [A name] is, [nevertheless,] merely a radiance. In contrast, [G-d] Himself in His glory is lofty and exalted. He is *sovev kol almin*, and thus the higher realms and the lower realms are equally [insignificant] before Him,

I.e., since He is truly infinite, the highest levels of spiritual existence and the lowest material entities are of equal importance before Him. He transcends both entirely and relates to them only at will.

as it says:¹⁷ “I, G-d, have not changed.”

In this context, the verse is implying that Creation did not bring about any change within G-d because He transcends it entirely. See Tanya, ch. 20.

[Contemplating these concepts should inspire] the soul to pour itself out [in yearning and seek to return] to the bosom of its Father, [to the level that] “my soul yearns, indeed, it pines”¹⁸ to achieve actual *bittul* to Him alone. As it is written:¹⁹ “Who else [is of interest] to me in the heavens?”

ש"ז This is the implication of the verse: “I, G-d, have not changed, and you, the children of Yaakov, have not perished.” [*Kilisem*, translated as “perished,” can also mean “expired.”]

As in the expression, k'los hanefesh, the expiration of the soul in desire for G-d.

The prophet is expressing his wonderment about the Jewish people: Why is it that [the understanding that] “I, G-d, have not changed” did not lead to *kilisem*? Why did your souls not expire [in yearning for G-d]?

Change results from interrelation between two entities. Because they share a point of connection, when one is affected, the other also changes. The concept that G-d does not change relates to His Essence, a level above connection to all existence. Seemingly, awareness of this level should evoke an all-encompassing desire to connect to it.

אך [There is, however,] a factor that prevents and keeps the soul from reaching this *bittul*, as the verse states: “You, the children of Yaakov, have not expired.” Even though [a person] contemplates the greatness of G-d’s infinity and [understands that] “I, G-d, have not changed,” he will not necessarily merit to attain the level and rung of Avraham who, as a result of such meditation, became [G-d’s] chariot, [devoted to Him] with ultimate *bittul* and sublime love.

הנה The reason for this [impediment] is the weakness of the power of the soul; it does not have the

strength to depart from its encasement and imprisonment [in the body and the animal soul]. This is intimated by the verse:²⁰ “My strength has failed due to my sin,” i.e., because of sin, the power of the soul was debilitated and weakened, as implied by the verse:²¹ “Instead, it is your sins that have separated between you and your G-d.”

See Tanya, Iggeres HaTeshuvah, ch. 5, which explains that this verse does not only refer to the relationship between the Jews and G-d Above, but also to the relationship each individual shares with his own personal spark of G-dliness. Sin — and, by extension, as the Alter Rebbe proceeds to explain, any physically oriented activity — separates between a person’s mind and heart and the inner Divine spark vested within him. This separation prevents a person from experiencing the bittul and yearning for G-dliness that his awareness of G-d’s Essence would otherwise evoke.

ולא The intent is not [only] actual sins. Even [conduct that reinforces] the material nature of the body and its physicality becomes a dividing partition [between the person and his inner G-dly nature]. These are the boundaries and limitations that encase the soul and draw it down until it is drawn after them and can no longer ascend and depart from them. Concerning such a state, it is said:²² “I saw the oppression of your ancestors.”

On a simple level, the verse speaks about G-d’s awareness of the oppression the Jewish people suffered during the Egyptian exile. In a personal sense, it speaks about G-d’s sensitivity to the inner struggle every person faces with his personal Egypt: the boundaries and limitations that draw him down to material consciousness and hold back the expression of his spiritual potentials.

[“Your ancestors”] refers to the attributes of love and fear; Avraham is identified with the attribute of love, [Yitzchak, with fear,] etc.

The three Patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, endowed their spiritual legacy, the attributes of love, fear, and mercy respectively, to every Jew (Torah Or, Parshas Va’eira).

Summary

The *maamar* begins by questioning why the verse that begins the introduction to the narrative concerning the Giving of the Torah refers to Rosh Chodesh as “this day.”

It proceeds to explain that this concept will be clarified through understanding the uniqueness of the Giving of the Torah. The significance of that event is questioned, for even before the Giving of the Torah,

the Patriarchs and other righteous men served G-d. Moreover, their Divine service involved an ascent from "Egypt," i.e., the transcendence of the boundaries and limitations of the body and the animal soul which constrain man's G-dly soul.

How is it possible to rise above these constraints? Through the contemplation of G-d's infinite light which is *sovev kol almin*, i.e., through the awareness of a level of G-dly light above the natural order. For the level of G-dliness that brings the worlds into being and maintains their existence is merely an external ray. His essential light, how He is for Himself, by contrast, transcends this entire framework of being.

For most people, the material orientation of the body and the animal soul prevents them from being inspired by the awareness of this essential light. Avraham, by contrast, was not confined by these constraints and was able to attain a full-hearted love of G-d.

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FOOTNOTES

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| 1. <i>Shabbos</i> 86b. | 9. <i>Yeshayahu</i> 6:3. | 16. See <i>Chagigah</i> 13a. |
| 2. <i>Shmos</i> 12:2. | 10. <i>Berachos</i> 63a, according to the version of the <i>Ein Yaakov</i> . | 17. <i>Malachi</i> 3:6. |
| 3. <i>Bereishis Rabbah</i> 47:6. | 11. The Introduction to the <i>Tikkunei Zohar</i> , p. 17a. | 18. <i>Tehillim</i> 84:3. |
| 4. <i>Bereishis</i> 12:9. | 12. <i>Tehillim</i> 145:3. | 19. <i>Ibid.</i> 73:25. |
| 5. <i>Ibid.</i> 13:1. | 13. <i>Koheles</i> 8:4. | 20. <i>Ibid.</i> 31:11. |
| 6. See <i>Yoma</i> 71a. | 14. In our <i>Pesukei DeZimrah</i> prayers. | 21. <i>Yeshayahu</i> 59:2. |
| 7. <i>Nechemiah</i> 9:6, included in the <i>Pesukei DeZimrah</i> prayers. | 15. The blessing <i>Yotzer Or</i> . | 22. <i>Nechemiah</i> 9:9, included in the <i>Pesukei DeZimrah</i> prayers. |
| 8. <i>Yirmeyahu</i> 23:24. | | |

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI; ADAPTED BY ELI TOUGER

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (18 Elul 1745-24 Tevet 1812), known as "the Alter Rebbe," was one of the main disciples of the Maggid of Mezritch, and the founder of the Chabad Chassidism. He is the author of *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* and *Tanya* as well as many other major works in both Jewish law and the mystical teachings.

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