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U'Sfartem Lachem: Sefiras HaOmer - Section I

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

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וספרתם “And you shall count for yourselves, from the day after the Sabbath,

In this verse, the “the Sabbath” does not refer to the Shabbos of the weekday cycle, but to the first day of Pesach, as explained in Menachos 65b-66a.

from the day when you bring the omer that is waved, seven weeks.” Vayikra 23:15.

As the maamar proceeds to explain, both of the actions mentioned in the verse, the counting and the waving, have parallels in our Divine service.

[The root of] the term *u'sfartem*, [translated as “and you shall count,”] also has the meaning of luminance, as in the phrase,¹ *even sapir*, “a [luminous] sapphire stone.” Similarly, the ten *Sefiros* are given that name (*sefirah*) because they shine forth [Divine light]. This is the [mystic implication of the phrase]: “And you shall count for yourselves,”² [i.e., you shall make yourselves luminous,] so that you draw down the ten *Sefiros* so that they shine for you within this lowly realm.¹

Rav Hillel of Paritch (in his notes in Pelach HaRimon, Vayikra, p. 255) saw this concept intimated by the wording of the prayer Ribbono Shel Olam recited after the Counting of the Omer: “to purify us and sanctify us with Your sublime holiness,” that the holiness of the ten Sefiros should rest within the powers of our souls and shine forth from us.

ולהבין To understand the above, [it is necessary to explain the sequence of Divine service beginning on the holiday of Pesach and continuing until the holiday of Shavuot]. Pesach commemorates the exodus from Egypt; Shavuot, the Giving of the Torah. Before receiving the Torah, it was necessary to count seven full weeks;

Identifying all of the qualities and subqualities within our emotional makeup with their parallels in the sublime Sefiros.

To explain: There are seven middos — Divine qualities that parallel and are the source for our emotions — for example, Chesed (“lovingkindness”) and Gevurah (“might”). Each of these seven Sefiros interacts with every other sefirah, resulting in combinations such as Chesed

within Gevurah, Gevurah within Chesed, and so on. Each of the forty-nine days of the Counting of the Omer — Sefiras HaOmer — corresponds to a particular such compound of two Sefiros. As reflected in the prayer Ribbono Shel Olam recited every day after the Counting of the Omer, we should refine the emotive attribute in our spiritual personalities that parallels the sefirah counted on that day and identify it with its sublime source.

afterwards, [the Jews] were able to receive the Torah.ⁱⁱ

Although the mitzvah of Counting the Omer was not given to the Jewish people directly after the Exodus, they carried out a similar process of spiritual refinement in their Divine service (Maamarei Admur HaZakein, Hanachos HaRav Pinchas, p. 40; see also the comments of Rabbeinu Nissim at the conclusion of tractate Pesachim that the Jews counted the days until the Giving of the Torah). As the Alter Rebbe proceeds to explain, at the time of their redemption on Pesach, the Jews were on a low spiritual level and it was necessary for them to refine themselves to make themselves fit to receive the Torah.

כ״י [The phases of this sequence reflect the kabbalistic motifs of *ratzo* and *shov*, as in] the verse:³
vehachayos ratzo veshov.

Literally, the verse is translated as “the beasts ran to and fro.” The “beasts” referred to are the angels which are described as chayos (lit., beasts), because their connection with G-d is bestial, i.e., impulsive and emotionally charged, rather than intellectual. See sec. 3 which explains this concept in greater depth.

*These angels are continually in a flux between *ratzo*, a state of yearning for G-d and a desire to be close to Him, and *shov*, withdrawal out of fear and awe of Him. Our Divine service mirrors this motif. There is an initial stage of yearning and desire to rise above the limitations of material existence and cling to G-d, and then a willingness to return to this plane and carry out His will, making this material realm a dwelling for Him (the maamar entitled *VehaChayos Ratzo VeShov*, 5704). As the maamar proceeds to explain, a similar sequence is reflected in the spiritual service of the holidays of Pesach and Shavuos.*

For in the spiritual realms, everything follows the dynamic of *ratzo* and *shov*.

Both the Divine revelations from Above and the response of the different beings within the Spiritual Cosmos follow this motif.

Similarly, Pesach is identified with *ratzo*, while Shavuos is identified with *shov*. For Pesach

[commemorates] the exodus from Egypt that was characterized by haste,

Ratzo, “yearning,” also relates to the word ratz, meaning “run.” There is a connection between the two, because the yearning to come close to G-d is characterized by frenetic activity (ibid.).

as it is written:⁴ “And you shall partake of it with haste,”

This refers to the commandment to partake of the Paschal sacrifice in Egypt.

and it is written:⁵ “With haste you departed [Egypt].” [This came as a result of] the revelation of G-dliness from Above, as it is said:⁶ “the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed to them and redeemed them.” This led to haste.

I.e., the revelation came from Above and not as a result of the Jews’ own Divine service; this revelation motivated them to flee from their immediate spiritual circumstances and seek to connect to Him (see Tanya, ch. 31).

Concerning the Ultimate Future, by contrast, it is written:⁷ “And you shall not depart in haste, nor will you proceed fleeing.”

Since the Redemption will come after the Jewish people and the material substance of the world have been refined, there will be no need to flee towards G-dliness. On the contrary, the world itself will be prepared to receive the Divine revelations (Tanya, ch. 36).

For at that time, there will be no haste. At the time of the exodus from Egypt, by contrast, there was haste,ⁱⁱⁱ i.e., a yearning [to ascend] from below upwards.

The Jews felt their distance from G-d and desired to bond with Him.

מִשָּׁא"כ Shavuot, however, is characterized by the motif of *shov* and is thus identified with the Giving of the Torah, the revelation of [G-d’s] will on this lowly plane, as it is written:⁸ “And G-d descended on Sinai,” drawing down G-dliness from Above.

For the Torah is the medium that brings G-dly light into this world, bonding material existence with its Divine intent and purpose.

וְהִנֵּה Behold it is written:⁹ “So that you remember the day of your exodus from Egypt all the days of your life.”

As the Alter Rebbe proceeds to explain, the ratzo that characterized the exodus from Egypt should be mirrored in one’s daily Divine service.

And our Sages said:¹⁰ “In every generation, [a person is obligated to see himself as if he departed from Egypt].” Every day, there must be an exodus from Egypt. [In our individual Divine service, this is reflected in] the recitation of the *Shema*, [where we declare]: “And you shall love G-d,”¹¹ and conclude: “I am G-d, your L-rd Who took you out [of the land of Egypt].”¹²

As explained in Tanya, ch. 47, the mitzvah of recalling the Exodus each day should not be merely an intellectual exercise, but rather a spiritual experience. The very Hebrew term for Egypt, Mitzrayim, relates to the word meitzarim, meaning “boundaries” or “straits.” And, in our Divine service, the concept of an exodus from Egypt refers to the transcendence of the boundaries and limitations we face. During the recitation of the Shema, a person should experience such transcendence. To highlight this concept, the Shema includes a passage that concludes with mention of the exodus from Egypt.

ובפרט In particular, [the recitation of the prayers] from *Baruch SheAmar* until the *Shema* are preparatory stages, [enabling] a person to achieve a [personal] exodus and [an expression of] love.

In Tanya (ch. 49), the Alter Rebbe explains that Birchos Kerias Shema (lit., “the blessings of the recitation of the Shema”) are given that name because the awareness they inspire enables one to recite the Shema with the proper intent. Here he explains that the entire prayer service has that goal: to evoke the feelings of love similar to those that should accompany the recitation of the Shema. The first blessing that precedes the Shema highlights the service of the angels and their love and fear.

[This comes as a result of] a person’s contemplation of how: “the entire hosts of heaven bow down to You”;¹³ and “the *ofanim* and the holy *chayos* with a mighty sound rise”;¹⁴ how “the *chayos* break out in sweat from their service of [His] throne”;¹⁵ “they carry and are lifted up with [His] throne”;¹⁶ “thousands upon thousands and myriads upon myriads were serving Him”¹⁷ and all of these [lofty celestial beings] are in a continuous state of *bittul*.

The angels are:

a) the source of our bodies and our animal souls; and

b) on a loftier and more exalted plane of existence than humans.

As such, when we meditate on how the angels are totally absorbed in love and fear of G-d, this exerts influence on our bodies and animal souls to align themselves with their spiritual

source and be motivated with similar emotions. Moreover, following a process of a fortiori reasoning, contemplation of the manner in which these lofty beings are consumed with love and fear of G-d should impress our animal souls with the need to emulate “the angels’ strivings” to unite with G-d (Likkutei Torah, Devarim, pp. 19d, 34b).

וזהו [On this basis, we can understand the intent of the verse:]¹⁸ “To make known His mighty acts to men and the glory of the magnificence of His kingdom.” “The magnificence of His kingdom” is that all [the created beings, including those of the spiritual realms,] are nullified unto Him. [The inspiration for] their self-nullification is evoked by their realization that “Your kingship is kingship over all the worlds.”¹⁹

פי' [To explain] what is meant by “Your kingship...”:

Kingship refers to the attribute of Malchus. As the Alter Rebbe proceeds to explain, the celestial beings’ awareness that the vitality and existence of the Spiritual Cosmos stems from the attribute of Malchus evokes a state of intense yearning (ratzo).

Why? Because, by definition, kingship involves distance. A king is regarded by his subjects with awe and reverence. This in turn comes as a result of the difference between Malchus (kingship) and the other emotional qualities. When the other emotional qualities are expressed, the recipient feels the emotion — the love or the fear — that the person is expressing. This corresponds to the example given in this maamar: the manner in which the soul conveys life to the body. In that instance, it is the essence of the soul’s vitality that is conveyed.

Malchus, by contrast, does not express who the person is — his thoughts or his feelings — but his ability to lead and motivate others. Who he is for himself, his true self, is not manifest. Only a ray of his personality, i.e., how he shows himself to others, is visible.

G-d’s attribute of Malchus is manifest in a similar way. The essence of Malchus is withdrawn and the created beings derive their vitality from only a ray of G-dliness. The celestial beings’ appreciation of their distance from G-d evokes a thirst and yearning to bond with Him (ratzo).

The vitality of all the worlds stems solely from [G-d’s] attribute of kingship, which is merely a ray of His name. It is not like the manner in which the soul endows the body with vitality, in which instance, the essence of the vitality of the soul is actually encloded in the body. Instead, [when G-d grants vitality to the Spiritual Cosmos], His Essence and His Being remained lofty and exalted.

I.e., as the soul grants vitality to the body, G-d grants vitality to the created beings. Nevertheless, there is a difference in the way that vitality is granted. The soul's very substance enclothes itself in the body, while G-d remains withdrawn from existence even as He grants its life. The difference between the two states is evident from the fact that the soul is affected by the physical conditions in which the body is found, while G-d remains unchanged despite bringing about the Creation.

There is nothing that can enclothe Him at all. He exists in the past, present, and future without any change at all, as it is written:²⁰ "I, G-d, have not changed." [And we say in our prayers:] "You existed before the world was created and You exist after the world was created" without any change at all.

Change stems from involvement. A person changes because the events that occur or the people with whom he interacts are meaningful to Him. G-d transcends all existence and is above being affected by it. Were this not so, He would not be G-d.

There is nothing that brings about concealment and hiddenness before Him. It is only a ray of the name of His glorious kingdom that endows all the worlds with life and existence.

Although He is the source of all existence, He is not directly involved in bringing existence into being. Instead, all existence derives from His light, which emanates from Him effortlessly, without bringing about change.

וזהו This is the intent of the verse: "Your kingship is kingship over all the worlds." "There are thousands upon thousands and myriads upon myriads²¹ of worlds," as it is written:²² "Is there a number to His legions?" and [even the physical world is vast, as our Sages say]:²³ "It is a 500-year journey from the earth to the heavens." Nevertheless, [this entire framework of existence] is of no consequence with regard to His light, which is actually infinite.

I.e., not only are they of no consequence with regard to G-d Himself, they are of no consequence with regard to His light. For His light reflects His infinity.

For, as is well known, even [the number] one has some value when compared to a myriad of myriads, for it is a small portion [of the larger sum].

I.e., the myriad of myriads is ultimately a sum of individual units and each one of those units constitutes a proportion, however minimal, of that greater whole.

Even a myriad of myriads, by contrast, cannot be compared to [an entity] that is unlimited and [truly] infinite. Since the spiritual beings comprehend all of this, they are always in a state of *bittul*.

וע"י As a result of the contemplation of all of this while deepening one's knowledge,

I.e., when a person takes to heart the intense ratzo felt by the celestial beings, he will experience a similar yearning and desire for G-d.

as a direct consequence, one will come to a state of *ratzo* when reciting the *Shema*, causing him to “love G-d your L-rd with all your heart,”²⁴ [i.e., to seek] to transcend all boundaries and limitations, for they all involve constraints, for example, the “500-year journey” mentioned above.

Understanding the infinite G-dly truth that permeates all existence inspires one with a will and a desire to unite with that G-dliness.

Whether [these constraints] be material or spiritual, they are boundaries and limitations that cover and conceal [G-dly truth] and [cause existence] to appear as a significant and independent entity (a *yesh*). Instead, [the soul's desire] will be only to cling to Him, and He is unlimited; truly infinite.

Since the person's meditation involves the awareness of how G-d's true nature transcends the Spiritual Cosmos, he develops a connection with the name Havayah, i.e., G-d as He exists above the limitations of creation.

ודה Transcending these boundaries and limitations is [one's personal] exodus from Egypt. Thus, in the Egyptian exile, it was said by Pharaoh:²⁵ “I do not know G-d,” [using] the name *Havayah*. [This aspect of G-dliness] which is past, present, and future as one was unknown to him. He was only aware of [the aspect of G-dliness identified] with the name *Elokim* [which involves] the covering and concealment [of G-d's creative life-energy].

This is reflected by the numerical equivalence between G-d's name Elokim (א-להים) and the word hateva (הטבע), meaning nature. G-d's name Havayah (י-ה-ו-ה) refers to the transcendent dimensions of G-dliness that surpass the natural order. Elokim, by contrast, refers to the dimension of G-dliness that brings into being and maintains that natural order.

Now, the root word teva also has the connotation “sunk.” Like an article that is sunk in the sea and unperceivable to an onlooker, G-d's creative life-energy is sunk within the natural order and unperceivable without deep contemplation. Pharaoh appreciated that there was a G-dly vitality enfolded within nature, but he felt that nature was dominant; that G-d had “abandoned the world to nature.” Moreover, he was totally unaware of the G-dliness above nature (Pelach HaRimon, p. 257).

ודה This is [the implication of Pharaoh's statement]: “I do not know *Havayah*,” [that during the Egyptian

exile,] the knowledge [of *Havayah*] was in exile.

A person in exile is alive and physically able to function, but his ability to express himself is restricted by an outside force. Similarly, the potential for knowledge of Havayah existed at the time of the Egyptian exile. Nevertheless, that awareness could not be achieved by humanity because of the concealment created by the spiritual milieu of that time. The spiritual climate of the time prevented mankind from entering into the deep contemplation necessary to internalize the awareness of the name Havayah (ibid.).

This is why the recitation of the *Shema* concludes with the statement: "I am *Havayah* Who took you out [of Egypt]," placing the emphasis on the name *Havayah*.

The Alter Rebbe is thus clarifying the nature of the experience of transcendence associated with the recitation of the Shema; that one come to the recognition of the name Havayah.

Summary

"And you shall count (*u'sfartem*) for yourselves, from the day after the Sabbath, from the day when you bring the *omer* that is waved, seven weeks." The term *u'sfartem* also implies luminance. Similarly, the root letters of *u'sfartem* (ספר in Hebrew) are shared by the term *sefirah* (ספירה). Thus, the ten *Sefiros* (ספירות) are given that name because they shine forth Divine light. The Counting of the *Omer* is a spiritual endeavor intended to make ourselves luminous by drawing down the ten *Sefiros* within this lowly realm.

The above concepts relate to the sequence of Divine service beginning on the holiday of Pesach and concluding on the holiday of Shavuot. Pesach commemorates the exodus from Egypt; Shavuot, the Giving of the Torah. The seven weeks of Counting the *Omer* represent an intermediate phase, preparing the Jews to receive the Torah.

The phases of this sequence follow the kabbalistic motifs of *ratzo*, yearning to bond with G-d, and *shov*, returning to this material framework. Pesach is identified with *ratzo*, while Shavuot is identified with *shov*.

The Exodus is not merely an historical event, but is relived every day in our Divine service, as expressed in the recitation of the *Shema*. The prayers recited before the *Shema* are preparatory steps, enabling a person to reach that personal experience of exodus.

One of the concepts emphasized in those prayers is G-d's kingship. Saying that the vitality of all the worlds stems from G-d's attribute of kingship implies that He Himself is removed and distant, unaffected and unchanged by His Creation. Because the spiritual beings comprehend this, they are always in a state

of *bittul* and *ratzo*.

Similarly, every person can come to a similar realization and experience of *bittul* in his Divine service. The attainment of such a state represents the individual's personal exodus from Egypt. He leaves the constraints of nature brought into being by G-d's name *Elokim* and establishes a bond with *Havayah*, the G-dliness that transcends nature.

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FOOTNOTES

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| 1. <i>Yechezkel</i> 1:26. | 12. <i>Bamidbar</i> 15:41. | 17. <i>Daniel</i> 7:10. |
| 2. See <i>HaYom Yom</i> , entry for Iyar 10. | 13. <i>Nechemiah</i> 9:6, included in the <i>Pesukei D'Zimra</i> prayers. | 18. <i>Tehillim</i> 145:12, included in the <i>Ashrei</i> prayer. |
| 3. <i>Yechezkel</i> 1:14. | 14. Part of the blessing <i>Yotzer Or</i> recited in preparation for the <i>Shema</i> . | 19. <i>Tehillim</i> 145:13. |
| 4. <i>Shmos</i> 12:11. | 15. The <i>piyut</i> beginning <i>VehaChayos</i> in the <i>Mussaf</i> service of Rosh HaShanah according to <i>Nusach Ashkenaz</i> . | 20. <i>Malachi</i> 3:6. |
| 5. <i>Devarim</i> 16:3. | 16. The commentary of Rabbeinu Bachaye to <i>Shmos</i> 25:10. | 21. <i>Daniel</i> , <i>loc. cit.</i> |
| 6. The text of the <i>Haggadah</i> . | | 22. <i>Iyov</i> 25:3. |
| 7. <i>Yeshayahu</i> 52:12. | | 23. <i>Chagigah</i> 13a. |
| 8. <i>Shmos</i> 19:20. | | 24. <i>Devarim</i> 6:5. |
| 9. <i>Devarim</i> 16:3. | | 25. <i>Shmos</i> 5:3. |
| 10. <i>Pesachim</i> 116b. | | |
| 11. <i>Devarim</i> 6:5. | | |

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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