

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



Wonders

בי"ד

Issue 185

Weekly Magazine of the Shiurim and Farbrengens
of HaRav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Shabbat Ki Tissa-Parah 5786 🌿 March 6-7, 2026

שַׁבַּת כִּי תִּשָּׂא-פָרָה 🌿 יז-יח אָדָר תשפ"ו



“ The holy rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk began to cry and said, “Perhaps you think that fear means ‘a broom?!’ Not so, fear means ‘awe!’ Understand this.” ”

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PERSONAL EXCURSUS:

WHAT DID MOSES LEARN WITH GOD?

One of the customs passed down to us from the Chabad Rebbe's is to learn the weekly parashah with a different commentary every year, in a repeating cycle. One of the commentaries included in this multi-year cycle is the Ibn Ezra. Following this custom, in 5784 (2024), HaRav Ginsburgh chose to focus on the Ibn Ezra and dedicated parts of his classes to reviewing one or more particular sections of his commentary on the weekly parashah.

In most cases, the Rav wrote his insights in personal notes, only a small fraction of which found their way into publicly taught classes.

In this note, the Rav delves into the Ibn Ezra's question of what exactly did Moses do on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights. In what might seem like a surprising answer for many, the Ibn Ezra delves into the importance of incorporating love of God into the performance of the commandments.

The Rav's original note from the 16th of 1 Adar 5784 was edited in Hebrew by R. Yosef Pelee. It was subsequently published in Hebrew in the Ki Tissa 5784 issue of Nifla'ot.

MOSES ON THE MOUNTAIN

When He had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two Tablets of the Covenant, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.¹

On this verse, the Ibn Ezra wrote the following:

Empty-headed people might wonder what Moses was doing on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. They do not realize that even if he were to stand there with God for that amount of time, or even twice that many years, he could not know even one part in a thousand

of God's actions, His ways, and the secrets of all the commandments He commanded him. Such people erroneously believe that the physical performance [of the *mitzvot*] is all that matters. It does not. Rather, it is the heart with the action [that matters], and the heart and the tongue both are a means for habituating [this connection]. As it is written: "In your mouth and in your heart, to perform it." Our sages of old said: "God desires the heart." The root of all the commandments is for a person to love God with all his soul and cleave to Him. This cannot be perfected unless

1. Exodus 31:18.

one recognizes God's actions in the supernal and the mundane worlds and knows His ways... and one cannot know God if he does not know his own soul, spirit, and body, for if one does not know the essence of his own soul, what wisdom does he possess?

Indeed, even Moses, who prophesied for forty years in the wilderness and was engaged with the many secrets that God revealed to him on Mount Sinai, said before his death, "You have *begun* to show Your servant Your greatness." Even then, he had merely "begun" to see God's greatness. This is indeed the case, for "His [God's] greatness is unfathomable."

The Ibn Ezra uses surprisingly harsh language—"empty-headed"—to describe those individuals who surmise that since the physical performance of a *mitzvah* is what matters, that is what God instructed Moses on during his 40 days and nights on the mountain. With that assumption in mind, they wonder why it took so long. To counter this assumption, the Ibn Ezra argues that physical performance must go together with the Torah's inner dimension, which he described as knowing "God's actions and His ways and the secret of all the commandments." These are the secrets of Creation (*Ma'aseh Bereishit*) and the secrets of the Chariot (*Ma'aseh Merkavah*), the knowledge of God which is infinite, for "His greatness is unfathomable."

One might counter that the sages state that Moses also learned the Oral Torah, which if we consider only the Talmud and the Midrashim would be no small feat to

cover in just forty days and nights, even if your teacher is God Himself. However, the sages² clarify that this does not refer to every specific detail that would actually manifest throughout all generations (which would require much more than forty days). Rather, he learned the general principles (*Klalim*) from which all potential details can be derived. Thus, the Ibn Ezra's thesis that Moses was learning the Torah's inner dimension stands firm. He was engaging in the study of the secrets of creation and the knowledge of God—all of which are ultimately alluded to within the Torah text itself.

THE BRIDE AND THE LAW

On the word translated as "when He had finished" (כִּכְלִיתוֹ), Rashi comments that, "it is written deficiently [missing the letter *Vav*], suggesting that the Torah was handed over to him as if it were a bride being handed over to a groom (כִּכְלִי, i.e., as if it were his bride), for he could not have learned it all in such a short time." It would seem that Rashi too is referring to the secrets alluded to in the Torah, which cannot be learned in a short time. Numerically, the value of the irregularly spelled word, "when He had finished" (כִּכְלִיתוֹ) is 476, which is 2 times

2. *Shemot Rabbah* 41:6. Based on this *midrash*, the Tzemach Tzedek writes, "He did not teach him all the specific derivative laws, but rather principles through which one can derive the specific from the general" (*Or HaTorah, Yitro*, p. 893). See also *Sefer HaChinuch*, "Our sages received the explanation of the Torah from Moses our teacher... who received it from God... Although God could have taught it in less than forty days, He wanted to hint to us that we should learn slowly and deliberately" (Author's Preface).

“Rachel” (רחל). Two “Rachels” implies that there are two aspects of the Torah as a bride that was handed over to Moses.

We shall refer to them as the Small Bride and the Great Bride, following the sages’ statement that the Torah contains aspects, “A great thing is the Secrets of the Chariot [*Ma’aseh Merkavah*] and a small thing is the discussions of Abayei and Rava [i.e., the Talmudic dialogue, the Torah’s revealed dimension].”³ The first aspect, the great thing can be described as the “Great Bride,” and the second aspect, the small thing, can be described as the “Small Bride.”

The Great Bride is the Torah’s hidden dimension, the secret of the Great Rachel, referring to the Supernal Mother (*Imma Ila’ah*) and the concealed reality (*Alma deItkasia*), the secrets of Creation and the Chariot.

The Small Bride is the Torah’s revealed dimension (*nigleh*). In this vein, the word for “the bride” (הכלה) can be permuted to spell “Halachah” (הלכה). The revealed dimension is directly referenced in the verse, “the name of the younger [literally, “the smaller”] was Rachel,” the secret of the sefirah of kingdom and the revealed reality (*Alma deItgalia*). Regarding this aspect, Moses was given the general principles from which the details can be derived. These details are described as “maidens without number,” the bride’s consorts that accompany her on her wedding day.

3. The sages said about Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai that he did not neglect... a great matter and a small matter: A great matter refers to the Workings of the Chariot, a small matter refers to the disputes of Abayei and Rava” (*Sukkah* 28a).

THE WHOLENESS OF THE TORAH

A second point we should stress is the Torah’s scope, as the Ibn Ezra describes it. He says that even Moses standing with God for forty days, could not know even one part in a thousand of the Torah, and that even after forty years of talking to God, Moses says, “You have [merely] *begun* to show Your servant.” Meaning, all that the greatest prophet, the father of all prophets, knew was comparable to “a drop in the great ocean.” This is the simile the Ba’al Shem Tov uses to interpret the verse, “The Torah of God is whole (*temimah*), it restores the soul.”⁴ Says the Ba’al Shem Tov: Despite however much an individual studies the Torah, the Torah remains whole or pristine, i.e., the Torah is forever completely untouched; no one has yet touched it. Only when the individual, even the greatest, most knowledgeable scholar, views the Torah in this way, does it restore the soul.⁵

Describing the Torah as “whole” or “pristine” (*temimah*) also refers to the completeness of the Torah in all its parts, both revealed and hidden. As the Rebbe Rashab⁶ explained regarding the choice of “Tomchei Temimim” (lit., Supporters of the Whole Ones) for the Lubavitch *yeshivah* he founded:

The goal of the *yeshivah* is for God’s Torah—the revealed Torah and the teachings of Chasidut—to be perfect or whole (*temimah*), and then it restores the soul.

4. Psalms 19:8.

5. *Sefer HaSichot* 5703, p. 180.

6. Discourse from the Eve of *Simchat Torah* 5659 in *Torat Shalom*, addendums, p. 258.

These two interpretations are linked: It is through studying the Torah's hidden dimension—Chasidut, the Torah's soul (נשמתא דאורייתא)—that we come to recognize and feel that we have not yet even touched the Torah. Not only its concealed dimension, but even in its revealed dimension. If one does not seek the Torah's inner dimension, one might come to the false conclusion that the Torah is not pristine, it is not whole and perfect, etc. with all the terrible consequences that this approach has led to in the past couple of centuries. The sense of the Torah's pristine nature, its perfection, is described metaphorically as the feeling that a groom has towards his bride. When we seriously engage the Torah's concealed dimension, we feel that the entire Torah is like a bride being handed to a groom.

THE MERCIFUL ONE DESIRES THE HEART

In the Ibn Ezra's view, the ultimate purpose of the commandments is to reach the heart, in accordance with the famous statement, "God desires the heart" (רַחֵם לֵבָא בְּעֵי).

God seeks the intention of the heart, that we come to love God and cleave to Him when performing the commandments. Actions, including speech, serve to habituate the heart, to normalize our love of God. Furthermore, love of God and cleaving to Him are achieved through knowing God—knowing the essence of Divinity through His works, His ways, and the secrets of His commandments.

In all, the Ibn Ezra counts three domains of knowledge. These three domains correspond to the division of the *sefirot* into 3 groups of three each, also known as the intellectual, the emotional, and the behavioral. Knowing God's works or actions corresponds to the behavioral group of *sefirot*: victory, acknowledgement, and foundation (נצח הוד יסוד), also referred to as *Nehi*. Knowing God's Ways corresponds to the emotional *sefirot*: loving-kindness, might, and beauty (חסד גבורה תפארת), the primary attributes of the heart, also referred to as *Chagat*. Knowledge of the secrets of the *mitzvot* corresponds to the three intellectual *sefirot*: wisdom, understanding, and knowledge (חכמה בינה דעת) and referred to as *Chabad*.

KNOWING YOURSELF TO KNOW GOD

The Ibn Ezra states that it is impossible to know God without knowing oneself. To fulfill King David's dictum, "Know the God of your father"⁷ and to recognize (i.e., understand) before Whom you stand, one must first know himself and then one can recognize "He who spoke and the world came into being."⁸ This self-knowledge that leads to knowing God includes three components: knowledge of the soul, the spirit, and the body. Thus, we have here a clear four level model of knowledge of self, leading to knowledge of God whose components correspond to the four letters of God's essential Name,

7. 1 Chronicles 28:9.

8. A common connotation for God in the Midrash.

<i>yud</i> (י)	Knowledge of God Himself, which requires self-nullification
<i>hei</i> (ה)	The soul is a source for knowing the secrets of the Torah
<i>vav</i> (ו)	The psyche or anima, which animates the body relates to knowledge of God's ways or proclivities, as it were, whether through love, sternness, or compassion
<i>hei</i> (ה)	One's body, which corresponds to the <i>sefirah</i> of kingdom and to knowledge of God's actions

The lower *hei* in *Havayah* also corresponds to the *sefirah* of kingdom and is considered the realm of the object, just as the body is the objective component in every self.

The notion that the psyche or anima—the *nefesh*, as it is known in Hebrew—corresponds to the six emotive attributes (from loving-kindness to foundation). The anima is identified by the Torah with the blood in one's body, "And the blood is the anima."⁹ There are seven fluids that transfer impurity and blood corresponds to the *sefirah* of victory (*netzach*), one of the six emotive attributes included in the *vav* of *Havayah*.

The soul, which corresponds to the first *hei* of *Havayah*, is considered by the Ba'al Shem Tov an important source for knowing God, as per the verse, "the soul of God shall instruct them."¹⁰ The individual should strive to communicate with their soul, which is a more trusted source for knowing the Torah's secrets than angels or other luminous beings.¹¹

These four levels are not meant to be an end in themselves but are to act as a

foundation for the fourth level which is knowledge of God, just as the three lower worlds—Creation, Formation, and Action—are transcended by the World of Emanation, where all of consciousness is permeated by God's Presence alone. Knowledge of God as is the consciousness of the World of Emanation depends on wisdom, whose inner experience is one of self-nullification alluded to by the letter *yud*, which is a tiny point. The ascent through these three levels of self-knowledge is a ladder that leads to knowledge of God only when the ladder itself can be nullified; only when the knowledge of the self that has been gained does not lead to an self-centered view of reality.

Finally, returning to the great principle the Ibn Ezra quotes from the sages, that "God desires the heart" (רָחֵמָא לְבָא בְעֵי); its numerical value is 414, famously the value of "You shall love [*Havayah* your God]"¹² (וְאַהֲבָתָ). Everything leads us back to his main point: that Moses was on the mountain for forty days and nights not to learn the commandments alone, but to integrate the necessary knowledge so that he could instruct us on how to perform them with love of God!

9. Deuteronomy 12:23 and Leviticus 17:11.

10. Job 32:8

11. See also Rabbi Chaim Vital's Introduction to *Sha'arei Kedushah*, "there is one whose psyche itself, when it is greatly purified will reveal itself to him and will guide him in all his ways."

12. Deuteronomy 6:5.

THE FIVE DYNAMICS OF LEADERSHIP – PART 1

*In 2001, Gal Einai published HaRav Ginsburgh's third book in English: *Awakening the Spark Within: Five Dynamics of Leadership that Can Change the World*.*

In that volume, HaRav Ginsburgh analyzes the concept of leadership from a Jewish point of view and how each person can tap into the soul qualities of a leader to affect their own lives, the community around them, and ultimately, the entire world. Along with a general overview of leadership in the context of Jewish history and contemporary realities, five specific qualities of leadership are explained in depth. This article is the first in a series exploring these important ideas that speak to the situation today and the rectifications needed to bring redemption to the world.

In the 600th year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the 17th day of the month, on that day, all the foundations of the great abyss burst forth and the windows of the heavens were opened. And the rain was on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights."¹

Commenting on these verses, the *Zohar* states that in the 600th year of the sixth millennium, both the waters from below—symbolizing mundane knowledge, knowledge that is discovered through human contemplation of reality—and the waters from above—symbolizing the Torah's wisdom, knowledge that is revealed by God from above—will burst forth and flood the world in preparation for the Messianic era.² Thus, the lower waters symbolize mundane wisdom and the higher waters represent Torah wisdom.

The 600th year of the sixth millennium (5600 in the Jewish calendar) was 1840. During the years 1760-1840 virtually every field of human endeavor underwent radical change. 1760 is usually referred to as the start of the first Industrial Revolution. During those years, the United States of America and the modern nation-state of France were born, having transformed the old-world order of monarchical rule through political revolutions that ultimately changed the entire world. The changes initiated during that period gathered momentum and were followed by revolutions in science, transportation, communications, medicine, media, economics, politics, and art. True to the *Zohar's* prediction, these advances in mundane, secular knowledge have literally flooded the earth, changing forever the world in which we live.

The period from 1760-1840 was also blessed with a parallel deluge of Torah

1. Genesis 7:11.
2. *Zohar* 117a.

wisdom. The Chasidic movement was born, and Kabbalah's closely guarded, esoteric and mystical traditions spread to the masses for the first time. Today these teachings are freely available, and as the *Zohar* predicted, the higher waters of Torah wisdom have begun to flood the world.

As is true with all things, the radical changes engendered by the industrial and technological revolutions has both positive and negative consequences. One result of such rapid change has seen a crisis and loss of faith and respect for institutions and leadership universally. At every level of society, we see greed, distrust, scandal, dysfunction, instability, turmoil and confusion, especially in the areas of moral and ethical standards.

The only thing that can change this reality is positive leadership based on honest, healthy, holy, and inspired vision. This in fact is the reason that should motivate us to search for the Torah's original blueprint for proper leadership. Of course, knowing the Torah's prescription for leadership is meant to not only inform, but to inspire us to develop these qualities in ourselves and to seek true leadership that embodies them as character traits.

A NATIONS OF LEADERS

At Mount Sinai God spoke to Moses with this message:

And now, if you hearken well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all peoples, for Mine is the entire world. You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words

that you shall speak to the Israelites.³

To be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is understood to mean that Israel's role is to be a nation of leaders, to lead the world morally, ethically and spiritually towards universal redemption and rectification; to be in Isaiah's words, "a light unto the nations."⁴

The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that every Jew contains a Messianic spark deep within their soul.⁵ This spark is each person's leadership potential. When enough people have activated and rectified that holy spark it will create a critical mass of redemptive energy which will in turn draw the figure of Mashiach into reality.

JEWISH INFLUENCE

One of the greatest contributions the Jewish People have made to the world is the vision of the universal brotherhood of man. The first all-encompassing vision of worldwide redemption, universal peace, and true harmony among nations is attributed to the great prophet Isaiah. God chose him and the other prophets recorded in the Tanach to reveal a Divine message regarding the ultimate potential and destiny of mankind. These words give voice to the loftiest dreams and aspirations of all people and have profoundly influenced thinkers, writers and leaders in every generation. In fact, the words of Isaiah "And they shall beat

3. Exodus 19:3-6.

4. Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 60:3.

5. First appearing in the Ba'al Shem Tov's name in *Me'or Einayim*, a collection of homiletic teachings by Rebbe Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, a disciple of both the Ba'al Shem Tov and his successor, the Maggid of Mezritch.

their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore,”⁶ are prominently inscribed near the entrance of the United Nations.

Despite Israel’s long history of persecution and oppression there is no doubt that the Jewish people exerted a tremendous influence on virtually every area of human thought and practice. This stems in great measure from the profound influence Judaism had on both Christianity and Islam in their inception and as they spread to encompass much of the planet. Due to these historical realities, Torah ideas have spread literally throughout the world.⁷

LEADERSHIP AND SPEECH

One of the hallmarks of leadership is speech. It is written in the Book of Ecclesiastes: “For the word of the king is authority.”⁸ The ultimate authority is of course God, the King of kings, who created the world through speech as stated by the sages in *Pirkei Avot*: “With ten utterances the world was created.”⁹ This is based directly on the Torah’s account of Creation which records ten Divine utterances. God’s speech immediately creates the object referred to. The first explicit instance is

6. Isaiah 2:4.

7. See *Hilchot Melachim* 11:7, “Nevertheless, the intent of the Creator is not within the power of man to comprehend.... Ultimately, all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for Mashiach’s coming and the improvement of the entire world, motivating the nations to serve God together....”

8. Isaiah 8:4.

9. Ibid. 5:1

on the first day: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”¹⁰ Divine speech, as it were, is quite literally the instrument of creation.

There is a teaching of the sages that speaks in God’s name and declares, “Just as I create worlds, so too you can create worlds.”¹¹ This amazing statement reflects the idea that humankind is created in the image of God and thus is a recipient of the ability to create. Since God is described as having created reality with speech, the implication is that our human faculty of speech, wields incredible power to fashion and mold reality.

In fact, according to Onkolos, the words, “a living soul,” in the verse describing man’s creation, “God formed man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul”¹² mean “speaking soul,” clearly implying that what defines a human being is the faculty of speech.

The Mashiach, the ultimate leader, will show the indisputable and celestial power of speech. The Hebrew word Mashiach (משיח) can also be pronounced to mean “speaker” (מְשִׁיחַ). Through his speech, he will bring all of humanity together into a new, more expanded level of consciousness, which will ultimately unite the world in peace and harmony.

SILENCE AND SPEECH

Knowing when to speak and when to be silent represents a lofty level of wisdom. King Solomon, in the Book

10. Genesis 1:3.

11. Based upon *Bereishit Rabbah* 98:3.

12. Genesis 2:4

of Ecclesiastes, lists fourteen pairs of seemingly opposite activities beginning with: “Everything has an appointed season, and there is a time for every matter under the heavens.”¹³ “A time to be silent and a time to speak” is included in this archetypal list of the human psyche.¹⁴

Note that King Solomon mentions silence before speech. Similarly, silence precedes speech when Ezekiel describes a particular feature in his vision of the Divine Chariot. There he uses what is perhaps the Bible’s most mysterious word, *chashmal*. The word *chashmal* does not have a clear meaning in Hebrew. In an effort to decipher its meaning, the sages describe it as a composite word whose two syllables mean “silence” (*chash*) and “speech” (*mal*).¹⁵ They further explain that the word is also a *notarikon* for the phrase, “living beings of fire” (חיות אש), who at times are silent and at times speak.¹⁶ These living beings are a type of angel, who separate silence and speech temporally, like King Solomon’s “a time to be silent, a time to speak.” Yet, because God transcends time, *chashmal* when attributed to its Divine source, represents a paradoxical state in which silence and speech can be found simultaneously. Experiencing God is therefore associated with the experience of silence and speech concurrently.

One image that can help us better appreciate the Divine interplay between silence and speech can be found in the wilderness—an area uninhabited to any

significant extent by humans. Modern city dwellers and even people living in rural areas visit the wilderness only on special occasions. However, life in the wilderness was the norm during the entire period of Jewish history described in the Torah. The patriarchs spent their lives tending to their flocks in the wilderness, far from civilization. Moses received his mission to redeem the Israelites from Egypt in the wilderness. That is where the Torah was given,¹⁷ and that is where the generation that made the Exodus from Egypt lived and died, before the people were led by Joshua into the Land of Israel.

The Hebrew word for “wilderness” (מדבר) is pronounced *meedbar* (it also means “desert”). Silence is a thick presence that permeates the wilderness. And yet, the Hebrew word for “wilderness” derives from the root meaning “speak” (דבר), thus giving the Divine paradox of simultaneous silence and speech an address, so to speak. To experience the paradox, the patriarchs and matriarchs, the twelve sons of Jacob, and the prophets of old, all spent time in the wilderness where in the physical silence, they could silence the din of their ego, and hear first the voice of their Divine soul, and ultimately, God’s speech. By hearing God’s words in the silence of the wilderness and aligning their own inner being with it, the prophets found the strength needed to speak what were oftentimes unpopular messages to the people.

One of the most detailed descriptions of this experience was passed down from the prophet Elijah. When he was in the Sinai

13. Ecclesiastes 3.1.

14. Ibid 3:7.

15. Ezekiel 1:4.

16. *Chagigah* 13b.

17. One of the Five Books of Moses, the Book of Numbers, in Hebrew, is named after the wilderness.

wilderness, the word of God came to him, and he relates,

And behold God passed by and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before God; but God was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but God was not in the fire and after the fire *the sound of still silence*. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave.¹⁸

The sound of still silence mirrors the speaking silence of the *chashmal*.

Because *mal*, the second half of *chashmal*, means both separation and speech, the Ba'al Shem Tov derived a three-stage model from the complete word.¹⁹ According to the Ba'al Shem Tov's model, the three stages corresponding to *chash mal mal* are silence, separation, and speech. Cited by many of his disciples, this three-stage model was an essential teaching of the Ba'al Shem Tov with which he guided the spiritual and creative growth of his followers, especially those whom he judged would go on to positions of leadership. In his own terminology, these stages are known as (1) submission (*hachna'ah*), corresponding to *chash*, silence, (2) separation (*havdalah*)

corresponding to the first *mal*, and (3) sweetening (*hamtakah*) corresponding to the second *chash*.²⁰

Submission entails the diminishment or silencing of the ego required to allow our Divine soul to emerge. Separation both severs our connection and identification with the extraneous and the false and binds our identity with the essential and the true thereby clarifying for us an orderly path towards the fulfillment of our heavenly mission in life. Finally, sweetening allows us to speak (or express in other ways) our authentic Divine soul, its inner thoughts and directives, thereby ensuring that its goals are fully developed and realized in reality.

THE FIVE DYNAMICS

Now that we have hopefully awakened the reader's interest and curiosity, we introduce here the five soul dynamics of leadership that we will be exploring in the upcoming articles in this series:

1. The Art of Compromise
2. The Drive for Wholeness
3. The Power of Compassion to Inspire
4. The Drive for Integration
5. A Sense of Folly

As stated in the beginning of *Awakening the Spark Within*: "Our sincere desire in this exploration is not merely to bring certain ideas to light but to inspire the reader to search for and find the sparks of leadership within himself or herself."

18. 1 Kings 19:11-13.

19. In doing so, he also followed the Arizal who had already created a 4-part model from the word: *chash chash mal mal*.

20. *Keter Shem Tov* (ed. Kehot), §28.

STORY

REBBE ELIMELCH OF LIZHENSK: FEAR OF GOD

Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk was the youngest brother of Rebbe Zusha of Anipoli. He was born around 5477 (1717) to his father Eliezer Lippa and his mother Mirel and became one of the greatest disciples of the Maggid of Mezritch, to whom he drew close following his brother, Rebbe Zusha. His book of collected teachings, Noam Elimelech, was also known as "The Book of Tzaddikim" and he himself was called "the little Baal Shem Tov." He introduced Chasidut to Poland and in many ways, determined its development in that country's Jewish communities, defining the figure and role of the tzaddik and the manner in which disciples connect to him. His students became the great Chasidic leaders of the next generation and they included the Maggid of Kozhnitz, the Seer of Lublin, the Ohev Yisrael of Apta, and the Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Riminov. He passed away on the 21st of Adar 5547 (1787) in Lizhensk, where he had served as the Rebbe and his son, Elazar succeeded him as rabbi (though not as rebbe).

I heard a story that happened with the holy Rebbe, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, of blessed memory. In his days, there was a man who served God, who sat in his room for 22 years, closed and secluded, devoted to Torah study and Divine service. He did not go outside for all those 22 years, until he imagined himself to be a complete person. He said: "I will go outside and see the inhabitants of the land and their ways, for I no longer fear the vanities of the world." He went out and heard a great commotion, for hundreds of people were traveling to the holy Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk. He was very surprised and asked himself: What do they see in the holy Rebbe of Lizhensk that they run to him? Why do they not come to me? After all, I have not seen the outside world for 22 years and have sat secluded in my room all that time, constantly devoted to Torah and Divine service.

He decided to travel to the holy Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk to see for himself what he was about. He travelled to Lizhensk for the last days of *Sukkot*. On the eve of *Hoshana Rabbah*, it was the custom of the holy rebbe to recite the book of Deuteronomy, Mishneh Torah. This man also recited Mishneh Torah with the tzaddik and his chasidim.

When the holy rebbe reached the verse: "And now, Israel, what does your God ask of you but to fear," the holy rebbe began to cry out to the chasidim in a loud voice: "Perhaps you think that fear (*yirah*) means 'a broom?!' Not so, fear means

‘awe!’ Understand this.” Immediately, a great fear fell upon the chasidim who were there, and they fell on their faces to the ground. The man also fell on his face to the ground from the greatness of the fear and awe that was there.

The chasidim immediately stood up, while this man remained lying on the ground from the greatness of the fear and awe that had fallen upon him. He had no strength to rise and stand on his feet. He remained lying on the ground as if in a faint, and when the *chasidim* saw this, they lifted him from the ground and laid him on a bed. He did not move a limb, and lay all night and all day of Hoshana Rabbah and also the night of Shemini Atzeret until the morning of Shemini Atzeret without change.

When the chasidim saw that much time had passed and he had not improved, they became very frightened. Rabbi Elazar, Rebbe Elimelech’s son, entered his holy father’s room and told him about the misfortune of this man. The holy rebbe said to his son: “Take my staff and place it on him.” The son of the holy rebbe took the staff, went to the man and placed it on him, saying, “My father and teacher has decreed that you should stand!” And he stood immediately.

After the man arose from his faint, he entered into the inner sanctum and wept bitterly before the holy rebbe, saying: “If you saw a single page from a book lying on the ground, you would surely lift it up. Why should I be worse than a page torn from a book? After all, I engaged in Torah study and Divine service for 22 years, lift me up.” The holy Rebbe Elimelech said to him: “Go in peace, may God be your help.”

From this we can learn that there is no purpose for a person other than to connect to true tzaddikim, and from this one can also understand what true fear is.

(from *Zichronam Livracha*)

THE BOOK OF TZADDIKIM

The point around which the story revolves is the need for connection to a tzaddik. The man who visited Rebbe Elimelech’s court thought there was no greater virtue than his own, but when he was exposed to the depth of the tzaddik’s Divine service, he fell weakly to the ground, and left as a changed man. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the man came specifically to Rebbe Elimelech.

Rebbe Elimelech is the quintessential

figure of the *tzaddik* in Chasidut, and in his book *Noam Elimelech*, the figure of the tzaddik takes a central place, so much so that the book is affectionately called by chasidim, “the Book of *Tzaddikim*” (based on the Talmudic description, “Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah, of *tzaddikim*, of intermediates, and of the wicked”). The *Noam Elimelech* can be seen as a veritable guidebook for *tzaddikim*; almost everywhere one opens the book, it speaks about the Divine service of the

tzaddik, how he cleaves to the Creator, and how he influences goodness and blessing for the Jewish people in all respects.

What does the simple Jew do when he learns a bit of *Noam Elimelech* at the Shabbat table? And what did the Jew in our story gain when he realized the gap between his service and that of the *tzaddikim*?

INTENTION, NOT PASSIVITY

When studying *Noam Elimelech*, the general feeling is that Rabbi

Elimelech isn't really speaking to us directly. Rather, the *tzaddikim* sit and enjoy the radiance of the Divine Presence, and we merit to observe them and are drawn after them. But if this was the extent of all connection to the *tzaddik*—that it is something of a spectator sport, as it were—why does Chasidut make such a commotion about the *tzaddik* and the connection to him?

Let's look at the words of one of Rebbe Elimelech's disciples, Rabbi Yehuda Leib of Zhelikov:

When a person wants to serve the blessed Creator, he needs to go to a *tzaddik* who will show him the way... But when he does not go to the *tzaddik*, then he knows nothing. Even if he constantly studies and prays and performs all the commandments, he still does not know how to perform them with feelings of love and fear of God. As a result, his *mitzvot* do not ascend, because, as is known [his service does not rise above, because love and fear of the Almighty are the wings that carry the *mitzvah* and bring it before God].”

This is the meaning of the Elder Hillel's saying, “If I am not for myself, who then will be for me?” In other words, if I myself do not perform good deeds and serve the blessed Creator, who is for me, who will do good deeds for me? Hillel continues, “And when I am for myself, what am I?” Meaning, when you act on your own and do not cleave to *tzaddikim*, then “what am I?” You do not know what to do and how to do good deeds.”

In other words, the *tzaddik* does not exempt one from work (as some mistakenly think), but rather guides it. Indeed, Rebbe Elimelech instilled tremendous fear of Heaven in those who came to him, but they themselves were required to act and to bring the lights they received from the *tzaddik* into their own vessels. On the other hand, without the *tzaddik*, all the Divine service may be performed without true feeling or proper direction.

What did Rebbe Elimelech mean when

he said that fear of God is not like the fear of a broom? A broom is a fitting metaphor for a person who, like an inanimate object, cannot move out of his own space—neither physically nor spiritually. Perhaps this is the interpretation of the conversation that Rabbi Elimelech and the Jew had at the end of the story. The newly minted *chasid*, who now realized how great Rebbe Elimelech's influence was, begs to be “lifted up.” He does not mean to be lifted off the bed where he was lying, for Rebbe Elimelech



had already lifted him from there. He wants to elevate, to be elevated from his original state.

Just as he spent his years of self-elevation passively, sitting for long periods in his room, now too he wants to be lifted out of that self-inflicted confinement and helped to serve God. But Rebbe Elimelech gently refuses: “Go in peace,” he tells him. “God will help you, but you will have to make the journey yourself.”

Why did Rebbe Elimelech choose a broom and not any other inanimate object that would have done just as well? There is a particular secret associated with the broom. In the context of domestic life, we are familiar with the idea that someone, perhaps the husband, is being chased around the house, perhaps by the wife, with a broom, ostensibly to be “punished.” In the Bible too, the broom appears in the context of administering punishment, “I will sweep her [Babylon] with the broom of destruction”¹ (יִטְאָטֵא הָאָרְצָה).

(בְּמִטְאָטֵא הַשָּׁמַיִם). It follows then that “fear of a broom” is a metaphor for “fear of punishment,” not fear of God who wields the broom, but fear of the broom itself. Like a person that fears the sword but does not fear the hand that wields the sword. But unlike the sword, the broom is the lowest instrument in the house. In fact, the value of “broom” (מִטְאָטֵא) is the same as “vessel” (כֵּלִי).

Still, for all its lowliness, unlike the sword, the broom is used for cleaning and can represent a cleansing of the soul, like the strong cleansing the Jew in our story underwent in Rabbi Elimelech's house. Indeed, the value of broom is also the same as the Biblical “basket” (סָבָא), whose letters are the initials of the three parts of the Torah text: cantillation marks, vowels, and letters (סְעָמִים נְקֻדּוֹת אֲוִתִּיּוֹת). The broom is thus also capable of cleansing the soul, just as the Torah's letters, the vessels that contain the Divine light and meaning in the Torah, cleanse the soul of man.

1. Isaiah 14:23.



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