

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



# Wonders

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of HaRav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

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“When you reach Meron, place these writings on the grave of Rashbi and you will see a sign.” It is traditionally known that when the students reached the Rashbi’s grave in Meron and placed the writing on the tomb, a hand of fire emerged and took the writing. ”

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The Lubavitcher Rebbe to Rav Ginsburgh, Elul 5741

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to publish your classes  
in book form.  
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# Wonders

An anthology from the shiurim and farbrengens  
of Harav **Yitzchak Ginsburgh**

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# FUNDAMENTALS OF CHASIDUT

## THE NINE PRINCIPLES OF FAITH: CONTINUOUS RENEWAL OF CREATION AND DIVINE PROVIDENCE

*One of the best-known concepts in Judaism is Maimonides' 13 Principles of Faith, which originally appear in his commentary on the Mishnah. According to the Zohar, their origin is linked to the 13 Principles of Divine Mercy that were revealed to Moses by God to assist in bringing about God's forgiveness. Less known are the 9 Principles of Divine Mercy found in parashat Shelach, from which stem 9 Principles of Faith of the Torah's inner dimension.*

*In this third installment on this topic, we review the third principle: that not only is reality created from non-being, but it is continually recreated by God, at every single moment.*

*The contents of this series first appeared in Hebrew, in HaRav Ginsburgh's book, Emunah VeMuda'ut (Faith and Consciousness). It is being translated here for the first time.*

**A**ccording to the revealed dimension of the Torah, one must believe and know that God created the world from absolute nothingness and void, as the Torah begins, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,"<sup>1</sup> but there is no necessity to say that this creation is perpetual, re-occurring at every single moment. The Torah's inner dimension, Kabbalah and Chasidut, explains that Creation was not a one-time event, but is a continuous act of the Creator. Reality cannot exist independently of the Creator and therefore sustaining it requires recreating it continuously.

### "THE WORLD WAS BUILT WITH LOVINGKINDNESS"

**T**his principle of faith is connected to the *sefirah* of loving-kindness, of which it is said, "The world was built with loving-kindness"<sup>2</sup> (עולם הִסָּד יִבְנֶה). The conjugation of the verb "built" (יִבְנֶה) in this verse, implies a constantly renewing act of building. Loving-kindness itself is associated with continuity at every moment as in the verse, "the loving-kindness of God is throughout the entire day"<sup>3</sup> as well as "in His goodness, He renews daily, perpetually,

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1. Genesis 1:1.

2. Psalms 89:3.

3. Ibid. 52:3.

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the act of Creation.”<sup>4</sup>

It is explained in Chasidut that the very renewal of existence flows from God’s attribute of loving-kindness. At the same time that Creation is continuously recreated, using His attribute of might (*gevurah*), God conceals Himself from the creatures He created, so that they will feel themselves to be independent, real, and autonomous beings. This concealment of the Creator from creation is known as “contraction” (צמצום). As a result, one who feels only God’s attribute of might—the attribute with which God conceals and hides Himself—is incapable of feeling the renewal of creation at every moment. Experiencing Creation (as well as one’s own) continual renewal is the feeling of divine loving-kindness that brings the world into being.

## JUDGMENT AND LOVING-KINDNESS

**G**od creates the world at every moment out of His wondrous love for every creature He created for His honor (קבוד).<sup>5</sup> The Torah includes more than one account of Creation, each from a different perspective and using different Names of God.

The first account is ordered by days and lasts 7 days. We have already seen that it begins with the famous words, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>6</sup> The second account begins with the verse, “These are the chronicles of

the heavens and the earth when they were created on the day *Havayah Elokim* made the earth and the heavens.”<sup>7</sup> The Sages remark that the Hebrew word that means “when they were created” (בְּהִבְרָאִים) can be permuted to spell “with Abraham” (בְּאַבְרָהָם), meaning, that in some way, Creation was created with Abraham. How can we understand this?

Abraham is described as the man of love and loving-kindness and the idea that the world was created with him means that it was through his soul root—the archetypal soul root of God’s attribute of supernal loving-kindness—that God created the world. The Torah’s first account of Creation only mentions God’s Name *Elokim*, the Name associated with His attribute of judgment. This leads to the realization that the more one experiences God’s judgment in Creation, the more one experiences Creation as a one-time act that occurred in the past. By corollary, the more one feels God’s loving-kindness—Abraham’s archetypal attribute—the more one experiences that Creation is a continuously ongoing act that is occurring even at this very moment.

Indeed, Abraham’s soul root can be found not just in the second account of Creation, but in the first one as well. Before his name was changed by God to Abraham, our first patriarch’s name was Avram; more particularly, he was known in the ancient Land of Canaan as Avram the Hebrew (אַבְרָם הַעִבְרִי), where “the Hebrew” is cognate with “the past” (עֵבֶר). In the Torah’s first verse, “God created” (בָּרָא אֱ-לֹהִים) is an anagram of “the God of Avram” (אֱ-לֹהֵי אַבְרָם). One might say that when Abraham was still called *Avram*, he possessed faith in God as Creator and Guide of the world, but he

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4. Liturgy, blessing of *Yotzer Or*.

5. God’s honor also refers to His attribute of love. One illustration of this is in the commandment to honor one’s parents: “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12). The opposite of love is fear or awe, and indeed we are also commanded to fear our parents—“every man shall fear his mother and his father” (Leviticus 19:3).

6. Genesis 1:1.

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7. Ibid. 2:4.

did not yet have a complete revelation<sup>8</sup> of the continuous coming-into-being of all of Creation, from absolute nothingness. But at the time of his circumcision, when he merited to be called Abraham, he merited the complete revelation of faith in continuous coming-into-being. It was then that he acquired the capacity to proclaim that God was not just the Creator, but God-world, that God and Creation are one in the sense that God brings Creation into-being at every moment anew: “He [Abraham] proclaimed there of *Havayah*, God-world.”<sup>9</sup> This is why “*behibar'am*” is written with a small *heh*, hinting that at the beginning of creation this *heh* was in “potential,” to be revealed when Abraham our forefather was 99 years old at his circumcision.) Furthermore, in the Torah’s first account of Creation, the verb used for creation (אָבַר) is in the past perfect form, stressing that it is something that occurred in the past. But in the second account of Creation, the word “when they were created” (בְּהִבְרָאֵם) is in the infinitive construct and therefore does not carry a tense—it is not past, present, or future; one might say that it is timeless, exactly the manner in which we should understand continuous Creation.

## SPEECH AND GAZE

**G**od perpetually creates the world through the Ten Sayings of Creation. This is alluded to by the verse, “Forever,

8. Abraham’s initial revelation is referred to as, “the mind beyond all conception” (שֵׁךְ הַנְּעִלִים מִכָּל רָעִיוֹן), corresponding to the faculty of super-conscious wisdom. He did not yet have a revelation that that would also engage his faculties of understanding and knowledge.

9. Genesis 21:33.

O’ God, Your word stands in the heavens”<sup>10</sup> which describes God’s saying, “Let there be a firmament,”<sup>11</sup> which stands, as it were, at every moment in the heavens and firms them into the firmament. If for a single moment that creative utterance were to cease, the heavens—and in fact all of Creation—would cease to exist.

Clearly, God does not “speak” in the literal sense, for that would make God corporeal and anthropomorphize the act of Creation, which we know are against Maimonides’ third principle of faith: that God is not corporeal. Chasidic philosophy explains that the Torah describes the act of Creation with speech, “God said, ‘Let there be a firmament’” to imply that even continuous Creation is merely the external dimension of God’s relationship to His world, just as speech is relatively external to thought. In fact, speech is the external expression of thought, revealing that interior to the continuous act of Creation, there is an inner dimension relating God with Creation. This inner relationship is Divine Providence, and it is sometimes described as the loving and caring gaze God has over every one of His creatures. Gaze is another way to express attention. God does not merely bring Creation into existence, He constantly gazes, cares, and pays attention to for all the small and specific events occurring within Creation.

God’s gaze, as it were, His individual Providence, also expresses His wondrous love for the world He created for His glory. Once again, one who experiences only the attribute of judgment in Creation cannot feel individual Divine Providence, only general

10. Psalms 119:89.

11. Genesis 1:6.

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Providence.<sup>12</sup> Faith in individual Divine Providence corresponds to Maimonides' first principle of faith, that the Creator knows all the deeds of humans and all their thoughts, except that according to the Torah's inner dimension, God's knowledge and individual Providence over all He created (with love) unite with His speech that brings it all into existence, at every moment constantly. God's attention, care, and love are thus the inner vitality of all that exists.

### CONTINUAL CREATION AND LOVING-KINDNESS

**W**e have already seen the intimate connection between Creation as an act of love and awareness of continual Creation and Abraham's faith. What is left for us to explore is one additional connection between this principle of faith of the Torah's inner dimension and the sefirah of loving-kindness. Loving-kindness lies on the right axis of the sefirot, above it is wisdom (*khochmah*), and underneath it is eternity, or victory (*netzach*). One of the ways in which the difference between

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12. See Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* 3:17.

the right and left axes can be understood is that the right axis is relatively masculine and the left axis relatively feminine. Whereas the masculine is characterized by a descent from above to below, an extension (התפשטות) into reality, the feminine is characterized by an ascent from below to above and a withdrawal (התלקות).<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, God's extension into reality, which occurs through the act of Creation is most naturally associated with the right axis, which represents God's effluence and love for reality. Above loving-kindness is wisdom, which we have seen corresponds to the principle of faith in the renewal of Torah in the future.<sup>14</sup> These two sefirot—representing the renewal of Torah and continuous recreation of the world—are joined by the Sages' statement that, "God gazed into the Torah and created the world."<sup>15</sup> The gaze is associated with wisdom (the seat of the eyes), while the actual act of Creation is associated with loving-kindness, as we have seen.

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13. See also our article, "When Will the Mashiach Come?" in *Wonders* issue 195 (*Shavu'ot* 5786).

14. See the first installment of this series in *Wonders* issue 198.

15. *Zohar* 1:134a.

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### *continued from page 12*

unrectified animal soul which when left to its own devices leads us into an endless morass of jealousy, anger, selfishness, and the drive for power and control.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately when the soul strives for self-fulfillment and actualization it paradoxically leads to its self-abrogation. A rectified ego

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22. *Mystery of Marriage*, p. 402.

infused with the constant awareness of the soul being an actual part of God above and that there is nothing other than God, is fulfilled in the dictum of the sages: "Make His will, your will, so that He make your will to be as His will. Nullify your will before His will, so that He nullify the will of others before your will."<sup>23</sup>

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23. *Ibid*, p. 378.

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## STORY

# REBBE TZVI HIRSCH OF ZIDITCHOV: THE ZOHAR'S COMPASSION

*Rebbe Tzvi Hirsch of Ziditchov (Zydaczów) was born in 5563 (1803) to Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac of Safrin in Galicia, a descendant of the author of Tosafot Yom Tov, and brother to the great Chasidic masters Rebbe Moshe of Sambor and Rebbe Alexander Sender of Komarno. He married Rachel Perl from the village of Rudka and was renowned as great in Torah, both revealed and hidden, completing the entire Talmud seven times each year. His primary approach centered on disseminating Kabbalistic teachings combined with Chasidic doctrine. He published his work Ateret Tzvi as a commentary on the Zohar and the book Sur MeRa VeAseh Tov to encourage the study of Kabbalah. Despite opposition from some great Chasidic leaders, he distributed the Zohar and the writings of the Arizal in thousands of copies throughout all the study halls of Eastern Europe, and instituted among his chasidim the custom of wearing white garments on Shabbat, following the practice of the Arizal. So great was his influence and renown that when Galician Jews spoke of 'the Rebbe,' they meant the author of Ateret Tzvi. He was also known by the title of the 'Prince of the House of the Zohar' due to his vast knowledge and extensive engagement with the holy Zohar. In 5581 (1821), he was saved from death when his brother, Rebbe Yom Tov Lipa of Sambor, donated years of his own life. He died of cholera on the 11th of Tammuz 5591 (1831), and his legacy continued through the Chasidic dynasty he established.*

Once, two emissaries from the Land of Israel came to Rebbe Tzvi Hirsch of Ziditchov. The custom was that every emissary who traveled abroad would take something from the Land of Israel with him. The *tzaddik* asked them: "What have you brought?" They answered that they had brought two stones from the grave of the Rashbi, the holy Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.

The Ateret Tzvi of Ziditchov was greatly moved and requested the stones. They told him that they had taken them with them as a *segulah* for protection on their journey and needed them. Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch said to them: "I will give you something equivalent to the stones you took from Rashbi's grave." That entire night he sat and wrote a commentary on the *Idra* (one of the most difficult sections of the holy *Zohar* authored by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and discussing the deepest mysteries of Kabbalah). Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch's nephew, Rabbi Isaac

of Ziditchov saw that he concluded the writing: “Please send us word if I have indeed provided a true explanation. Your student, Tzvi son of Hinda.” He gave what he wrote to the emissaries and told them: “When you reach Meron, place these writings on the grave of Rashbi and you will see a sign.” It is traditionally known that when the students reached the Rashbi’s grave in Meron and placed the writing on the tomb, a hand of fire emerged and took the writing.

Once, on Lag BaOmer, Rashbi’s traditional day of passing, Rebbe Tzvi Hirsch sat with his students and spoke in praise of Rashbi. Among other things, he said that Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai has the same numerical value as “*Yedid Nefesh Av HaRachman*” (Beloved of the soul, merciful father). There was one chasid present who quickly calculated and found that the gematria was not precise: Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai (רבי שמעון בן יוחאי) equals 765, while “*Yedid Nefesh Av HaRachman*” (ידיד נפש אב הרחמן) equals 764, one less.

But before he could say anything, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch turned to him: “You are surely a Torah scholar, and you must know that in most instances in the Talmud, Rashbi’s name is written without an *alef* in Yochai (יוחי)! According to this detail, the *gematria* is precise.”

**S**ince Rebbe Tzvi Hirsch is a student of Rashbi, there is certainly great depth in the wondrous *gematria* he innovated. What is the connection between these two phrases, Rashbi’s name and, “Beloved of the soul, merciful father?”

Let us begin with an explanation according to Kabbalah, as befits Rashbi and Rebbe Tzvi, the Prince of the House of the Zohar. The source of the expression “beloved of the soul, merciful father” is from the liturgical poem sung before the Minchah service of Friday, just before Shabbat, known for its two first words, *Yedid Nefesh* (some sing it also during Shabbat). This poem was authored by Rabbi Elazar Azkari and appears at the end of his work, *Sefer Chareidim*. The acrostic formed out of the first letters of the stanzas is God’s essential four-letter Name, *Havayah*, thus the first stanza beginning the letter *yud* in “*Yedid nefesh*” corresponds to

the letter *yud* in God’s Name *Havayah* and to the *sefirah* of wisdom. Although Kabbalah associates the Book of the Zohar with the *sefirah* of understanding (*binah*), and more specifically with the aspect of understanding known as “the radiance of the supernal mother” (זיהרא דאימא עלאה), Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is associated with the intellectual aspect of wisdom, or the intellect of the Father Principle (*mochin deAbba*) and thus with the *yud* of *Havayah*. Shabbat, when this poem is sung or recited, is also associated with wisdom. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s association with wisdom is hinted to in the Zohar’s relatively well-known comment: “Who is ‘the face of the Master *Havayah*?’ This is Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai” (*Zohar* 2:38a). The *sefirah* of wisdom includes the entire Name *Havayah*, as in the verse, “*Havayah* is in wisdom” (Proverbs 3:19) and Rashbi is considered the aspect of wisdom

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known as, “the face of the Master *Havayah*.”

## THE COMPASSION OF RASHBI

**T**here is additional depth to this *gematria*. If we calculate the value of the words in the expression, excluding the word “merciful” (רַחֲמִין), we discover that the value of, “Beloved of the soul father the” (יְדִיד נֶפֶשׁ אָבִה) is “Shimon” (שִׁמְעוֹן), and thus the entire phrase is equivalent to saying “Shimon is merciful” (שִׁמְעוֹן רַחֲמִין). This is particularly surprising, considering that the name Shimon is a name of severity and judgment. Yet, we find that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who led the generation that followed the terrible war against the Jewish people and the self-sacrifice required by his teacher, Rabbi Akiva and his generation, bases his bond with his own disciples and with his entire generation on love and endearment. As he said, “We depend on endearment” (*Zohar* 3:128a), meaning that our survival and our success depend only on love and the connection between our souls.

Therefore, it makes perfect sense that *Rashbi* was told that, “by means of your

composition [i.e., the *Zohar*] they [the Jewish people] will emerge from exile through compassion” (*Ibid.* 3:124b). Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s teachings and approach as handed down to us through the *Zohar*, arouse God’s compassion. Divine service that is based on loving-kindness and endearment between souls and between man and God awakens the revelation of God as the “Beloved of the soul” and as “a merciful Father” who wants to redeem us with compassion.

Though the “Beloved of the soul” is God, the compassion that pours out is also that of *Rashbi* himself. The Sages state<sup>1</sup> that God is called “your friend and your father’s friend.”<sup>2</sup> He is not only a Father or King to whom I relate in awe, but also the beloved of my soul. All these aspects of God are revealed by Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, through the friendship and love he spreads among his followers and throughout the entire Jewish people.

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1. *Sifrei, Beha’alotcha* 78. *Shemot Rabbah* 27:1. *Rashi* on *Shabbat* 31a, s.v. *De’alach sani*.

2. *Proverbs* 27:10.

## PARASHAT CHUKAT PARADOXES OF THE EGO

**O**ur *parashah* begins, This is the statute of the Torah that God commanded, saying, speak to the Children of Israel and have them take for you a perfectly red unblemished heifer, that has no blemish, that no yoke was laid.<sup>1</sup>

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1. *Numbers* 19:2.

The red heifer was slaughtered and burnt along with a mixture of cedar wood, hyssop, and a crimson thread until only ash remained. This ash, when added to pure spring water, was sprinkled on individuals who had become ritually impure through contact with a source of ultimate impurity—usually death. The Hebrew word for “statute” in this verse

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is *chukat* (חֻקָּה), the name of our *parashah*. This word indicates a type of *mitzvah*, a commandment that transcends or even defies normative logic. The *parah adumah*, the ritual of the red heifer, is considered the cardinal statute or *chok* of the Torah as it paradoxically purifies those who are impure because of their contact with death, yet at the same time, it defiles those who were prepared the mixture of the purifying ashes and the spring water. How can the same set of elements purify and defile simultaneously? According to tradition, even Solomon, the wisest of men, was unable to resolve this paradox.<sup>2</sup>

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

**T**he Ba'al Shem Tov offers a deep psychological analysis of this paradoxical ritual in a manner that is relevant to every person, in every generation.<sup>3</sup> Depression, sadness, inaction, low self-esteem, and stagnation are equated spiritually with death. When one is in such a state, the evil inclination whispers in one's ear every reason in the world to make them believe they are not worthy or capable of initiating or accomplishing anything. What can possibly be done in such a situation?

The Ba'al Shem Tov proposes that we employ—self pride—something that is usually looked upon as taboo in Chasidic thought. To lift oneself up with renewed energy and free oneself of despair, a little bit of self-pride is required. One must tell oneself: “the world was created for me.”<sup>4</sup> If I fail to act, who knows what will happen to the entire world. God is counting on me to get up and move, to initiate and be successful. I am the only one capable of

acting right now. Instead of the usual humility, the Ba'al Shem Tov encourages us in these situations to remind ourselves that we are not insignificant but rather created “in the image of God.”<sup>5</sup> In this way we turn the impurity of inaction and despair into an emotional state of energy, strength, and even self-pride.

Yet, here is where the paradox creeps in: by acting with these thoughts in mind, it is inevitable that self-pride and arrogance will creep into our mind and spiritually defile the very positive act being done! The solution to this is to adopt a deep sense of humility, especially when acting with an “uplifted spirit,” and particularly after completing a task successfully. One can achieve this by thinking simply and earnestly that the credit for this good act I just did goes to God, not to me. Without God giving me life, without God giving me the prowess to act, none of this would have happened. This explanation by the Ba'al Shem Tov reveals how this mysterious and paradoxical ritual of the red heifer can be applied to very real situations in life.<sup>6</sup>

## MORE ON THE EGO

**I**n line with the Ba'al Shem Tov's idea of how to make this paradoxical ritual highly relevant to each and every person, let us proceed briefly to explore other Torah insights on the paradoxical nature of the self and ego. This is of course an extensive and profound subject beyond the context of a short article but nevertheless, we will bring a few relevant points worth pondering.

## THE I AND NON-BEING

**E**go literally means “I.” The Hebrew word for “I” is *ani* (אני). It has the same letters

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2. Ecclesiastes 7:23; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:3

3. *Baal Shem Tov Al HaTorah, Chukat*.

4. *Sanhedrin* 37a.

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5. Genesis 1:27.

6. *The Inner Dimension: Insights into the Weekly Torah Portion, Chukat*.

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but permuted differently as the Hebrew word for the seemingly opposite non-being, sometimes translated as “nothingness” (אין), pronounced *ayin*. The ego according to Chasidut is rectified and elevated through a constant process of self-nullification. The goal is not to obliterate the ego, but rather to purify it of selfishness, jealousy, greed, and the desire for honor and power. Ideally one should strive to experience both the rectified “I” and a sense of spiritual nullification at each and every moment.

## RECTIFYING THE EGO

**T**he letters of the word for “wisdom” (חכמה) when permuted can be read as “the power of what” (מה מה) the ability to envision essence.<sup>7</sup> Wisdom is the first conscious level of the intellect but maintains links to higher levels of pure essence within the crown, the highest of the *sefirot*, where there exists a substratum known as *mocha stima'ah* or the “concealed mind.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, wisdom, likened to a flash of insight, a brainstorm, or epiphany, isn't merely drawn from logical deduction but is brought forth from this hidden brain in the superconscious level of the crown.

The word “what” (*mah*) is also a code word for the inner motivational aspect of wisdom—the power of what—known as *bitul*, or self-nullification, as in the statement by Moses, who the Torah itself attests was the humblest of all men: “What are we [Moses and Aaron] that you murmur against us.”<sup>9</sup> Accessing this level of wisdom only comes through *bitul*, self-nullification of the ego.<sup>10</sup> The more we make His will our will and subjugate our animal soul to the

Divine soul within, the more we rectify the ego. *Bitul* involves setting the ego aside, opening the soul to a higher level of wisdom. Self-nullification depends on feeling true appreciation for every moment of life, acknowledging that all is a gift from God.<sup>11</sup>

## THE HUMILITY OF MOSES

**C**losely associated with a rectified ego is humility, as mentioned above. The Midrash states that the Torah was given in the desert – a place symbolizing simplicity and humility. This insight also explains why God gave the Torah to the Jewish people through Moses, for the Torah itself testifies that Moses was the humblest man in the world.<sup>12</sup> Humbleness, entailing a high level of ego clarification, did not diminish Moses' power; paradoxically, it increased it exponentially.

Moses was considered a king, a position connected to the *sefirah* of kingdom. The inner motivating force of kingdom is paradoxically *shiflut*, a deep sense of existential lowliness. Yet, Moses' sense of *shiflut* was actually his source of strength to lead the people for 40 years.<sup>13</sup>

Moses had conquered his ego to such an extent that God spoke to him “face to face,” as no other human being before or since.<sup>14</sup> He received the Torah on behalf of the Jewish people and transmitted it to the nation as an eternal inheritance. Whether or not we merit as individuals the gift and inheritance of the Torah ultimately depends on our own abilities to conquer our egos, pride, and anger and reach genuine levels of self-nullification and humility.

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7. *Anatomy of the Soul*, p. 91.

8. *Mystery of Marriage*, p. 434.

9. Exodus 16:7.

10. *Anatomy of the Soul*, p. 91.

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11. *The Hebrew Letters*, p.69.

12. Numbers 12:3.

13. *What You Need to Know About Kabbalah*, p. 113.

14. Exodus 33:11.

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## MAKING SPACE FOR TORAH

**T**his idea is found metaphorically in *parshat Chukat*: “This is the Torah regarding a man who would die in a tent.”<sup>15</sup> Although, on a literal level, this verse, and the subsequent passage, seems to deal with the ritual purity of a tent and the objects in it after someone dies in the tent, yet, on an allegorical level, the sage, Reish Lakish, applies the verse to a Torah scholar: “From where do we know that Torah is only established by one who kills himself over it? As it says: ‘This is the Torah regarding a man who would die in the tent.’”<sup>16</sup> The tents referred to here are those of Jacob of whom it says, “Jacob was a wholesome man, abiding in tents.”<sup>17</sup> Rashi explains these are the tents of Torah. Obviously, Reish Lakish is not suggesting that a budding Torah scholar must study so hard that he kills himself. Rather he means that in order to reach a deep and fundamental understanding of the Torah one must experience an ego death so that that there is “space” for the true teachings of Torah to enter mind and heart.

It is interesting to note that not only acquisition of Torah is equated with “ego death” but so too is love, as expressed in the Song of Songs: “Place me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm, for love is as strong as death.”<sup>18</sup> True love entails great selflessness and ego rectification in order to make real space for someone else in our thoughts, speech and action.<sup>19</sup>

Before receiving the Torah, Israel proclaimed “we will do and we will hear,” a statement of

trust, faith and love of God. Significantly, at every word God spoke to us at Sinai our souls left our bodies and experienced a type of death. Angels were dispatched to revive the people.<sup>20</sup>

## THE BLESSING AND CURSE OF EGO

**A**nother important insight regarding the ego is based on the Ba’al Shem Tov’s reading of this verse in Deuteronomy: “I was standing between God and you at that time to relate the word of God to you.”<sup>21</sup> He explained that when Moses stated that “I was standing between God and you,” he meant to imply that “the aspect of ‘I’—the ego—stands between you and God.”

In truth, there is a great paradox at work here. In essence, the Divine soul is at one with God and has no real independent status, yet God has fashioned human beings in such a manner that they feel quite independent. (This same paradox obviously shares many similarities with the paradox of human free will and Divine Providence and Omnipotence.)

Inherently, the ego is neither a blessing nor a curse, it all depends on how much we clarify our sense of self. At times the ego truly does stand between us and God, between us and other people, and even between us and our own true natures. Truth be told, most of the time the ego stands between us and everything else. However, this only happens when we allow the ego to go unchecked, when we give our animal impulses full reign over our thought, speech, and action. However, when we channel the ego in the right direction, it becomes a healthy instrument for doing good and aiding us in fulfilling our life goals. When clarifying and purifying the ego through true selflessness, one’s true soul reveals itself. We then realize that the ego, the “I,” is merely the

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15. Numbers 19:14.

16. *Berachot* 43b.

17. Genesis 25:27.

18. Song of Songs 8:6.

19. *Mystery of Marriage* 171-2.

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20. *Ibid.*

21. Deuteronomy 5:5.

*continued on page 6*

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# THE SECRET OF THE COPPER SERPENT

## SWEETENING EVIL AT ITS ROOT

*Parashat Chukat includes the story of the serpents and the copper snake made by Moses to heal those who had been bitten by them. This episode is considered a primary source for the healing principle of “like cures like” and for the general stance we should take for rectifying evil by elevating it to its source.*

*This is an abridged version of a Hebrew recording from Rav Ginsburgh from the early days of Corona, the 29<sup>th</sup> of Adar, 5780. It was first published in the Chukat 5780 issue of Niflaot.*

### ALL IS GOOD

**O**ne of the basic tents appearing in the *Tanya* is that the root of the evil we experience in our lives is in truth the very highest good, but it is a good that cannot be grasped. The Alter Rebbe writes<sup>1</sup>:

When a person contemplates deeply and pictures in his mind his coming into being *ex nihilo* [from nothingness] at every single moment, how could it enter his mind that there is evil for him, or any suffering regarding children, life, or sustenance, or any other worldly sufferings? For the *Ayin*, which is God’s wisdom is the source of life, goodness, and delight. It is the Eden that transcends the World to Come. Only because it is not grasped does it appear to him as evil or suffering. But in truth no evil descends from above, and **everything is good**—only it is not grasped [as such] due to the immense abundance of His goodness...

And he shall believe that in truth [a life dedicated to *mitzvot*] gives life, and all his needs and all his affairs unfold in truth in their finest details, not from the “other side” [evil], for “from God are a man’s steps established... and if so, **everything is absolutely good, only it is not grasped** [as such by man]...

Before we begin looking at the connection between this epistle and the Copper Serpent Moses made to heal, let us note a few *gematriot*. The phrase, “everything is good” (הכל טוב) recurs several times in the epistle and its value is 72, the same as “loving-kindness” (חסד), “The world was built with loving-kindness”<sup>2</sup> (עולם חסד יבנה). The value of the longer phrase, which summarizes the entire epistle, “all is absolutely good, only it is not grasped” (הכל טוב בתכלית רק שאינו מושג) is 1950, the product of 26—the *gematria* of God’s essential Name, *Havayah*, the Name of Divine compassion—and 75—the

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1. *Tanya*, epistle 11.

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2. Psalms 89:3.

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*gematria* of “trust” (יִתְּצֵב), i.e., “Trust in Havayah.”

## "NACHASH NECHOSHET" — THE BEGINNING OF CREATION

**C**ommentaries on this epistle, connect it with what the Alter Rebbe wrote on the Copper Serpent in our *parashah*:

... the people became disheartened because of the journey. The people spoke against God and against Moses; [They said:] “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in this desert, for there is no bread and no water, and we are weary of this light bread [*manna*]. God sent the venomous snakes against the people, and they bit the people, and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against God and against you. Pray to God that He remove the snakes from us.” Moses prayed on behalf of the people.

God said to Moses, “Make for yourself a viper and put it on a pole, and let whoever was bitten look at it and they will live.” Moses made a copper snake and put it on a pole. If a snake had bitten a person and he looked toward the copper snake, he lived.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, the episode of the Copper Serpent is the primary Torah source for the Alter Rebbe’s tenet that the root of apparent evil—the image of the snake itself—is in truth the absolute good.

## SWEETENING EVIL AT ITS ROOT

**W**hat is the secret of the Copper Serpent? How is it that the snake

is what kills and it is the image of the snake that heals? The commentators on the 11<sup>th</sup> epistle in the Tanya refer to the Alter Rebbe’s discourse that it We shall summarize his words. The Alter Rebbe opens with a question. The Mishnah states that it was not gazing at the Copper Serpent that healed the person, rather, “When Israel looks upward and subjugates their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be healed.”<sup>4</sup> If so,

Why was the serpent needed at all? Let it simply say: “If the serpent bit a man, he shall look upward.” And furthermore: what is the meaning of “looking upward”? For it is explained regarding prayer that one’s eyes should be downward while one’s heart is upward.

To answer, the Alter Rebbe explains that the ultimate purpose of the soul’s descent into the body is to transform the bitter experiences of life into sweetness. Before the soul descends it is attached to God through love and awe at a higher level, unimpeded by the body, but once the soul descends, its task is to contemplate during prayer that all evil, including one’s own evil inclination and all the harsh judgments and bitter sufferings that stem from it, have a good root. The Alter Rebbe writes,<sup>5</sup>

The matter is that judgments are sweetened at their root. For all evils and harsh judgments that came into existence in the world — their root and source, which gives them life, is good... but when it descends below through the

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3. Numbers 21:4-8.

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4. *Rosh HaShanah* ch. 3, end of.

5. *Likkutei Torah, Chukat* 64a and ff. S.v. “Vaya’as Moshe Nakhsh Nekhoshet.”

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process of chaining down, it becomes truly evil and truly harsh judgments, both in worldly matters and in heavenly matters. When a person experiences some suffering, he should think: I should not judge that something is evil merely by appearances; in truth its root is good....

This is what is meant by “[You shall love God] with all your might.” The word “might” [literally “very”] here refers as to the teaching that the Angel of Death [the evil inclination] is called “very”: “good” refers to the Angel of Life; “very good” refers to the Angel of Death,<sup>6</sup> for it is exceedingly and boundlessly good, only it has not yet come to revelation and is not grasped...

The Alter Rebbe elaborates at length that this contemplation is the ultimate purpose of the work of prayer, which demands ever greater length and effort from generation to generation, and he explains that when one looks toward the root of reality during prayer, one can actually change reality for the better. He concludes:

This is the matter involved in the Copper Serpent. It had to be placed upon a pole, for it required the elevation of the serpent on high—back to its source. And then when someone gazed upon it, they would have to look upward. In other words, by looking up to the root, one would no longer think of the serpent as separate from its Divine root, because when it is separate, it is truly evil and remains evil. But when one thinks of the serpent in its sublime form above, at its root where

it is not separate from God, the source of its vitality... then no evil descends from Above.

Additionally, it was made of copper, because copper changes to many hues, through the Divine *Ayin*....

## THE COPPER SERPENT AND GENESIS

**L**et us analyze the story of the Copper Serpent a bit more. In it, the root “serpent” (or “snake”) appears a total of seven times—five times as שׁנָּה (snake) and twice as נְחָשֶׁת (copper). The numbers 5 and 2 are the “golden section” of 7 (as explained elsewhere, the Hebrew word for “gold” is בָּהָר, whose letters equal 7, 5, and 2, where 5 and 2 as noted are the golden section of 7).

The Copper Serpent is a primary example in the Torah of wordplay through phonetic similarity (לְשׁוֹן נֹפֵל עַל לְשׁוֹן). Rashi writes<sup>7</sup>:

“A copper snake”: He [Moses] was not told to make it of copper, but Moses said: the Holy Blessed One calls it a “*nachash*” [a snake], so I will make it of *nechoshet* (copper), wordplay through phonetic similarity [*lashon nofel al lashon*].

There is only one other place where Rashi explicitly notes that someone used this same principle of wordplay through phonetic similarity. There it on the verse, “This one will be called a woman, for she was taken from a man”<sup>8</sup> (זֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי (מֵאִישׁ לָקְחָהּ זֹאת). From here, Rashi states, we learn that the world was created in the holy language, Hebrew. These are the two primary examples of this linguistic

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6. *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 9:7.

7. On Numbers 21:9.

8. Genesis 2:23.



principle in the Torah—man-woman and *nakhsh-nechoshet*. Just as man-woman are a male-female pair, so are *nakhsh* and *nechoshet*. Clearly, the male is the snake (*nakhsh*) and the female is the copper (*nechoshet*). We thus see a connection between the act of Creation—in which God creates the world in Hebrew, the holy language, and therefore Moses understands on his own, by his own reasoning, that the snake he is putting on a pole should be made of copper.

This connection is also seen numerically: it is well known that “snake” (נָחֵשׁ) has the same gematria as *Mashiach* (מָשִׁיחַ). Copper (נְחֹשֶׁת) is *Mashiach* with a *tav* (ת) appended. Esau had four hundred (ת) men; they later merited to be reincarnated as the four hundred men that followed David when he was wanted by Saul; ultimately they will reincarnate as the four hundred men of *Mashiach*. The full phrase, “copper snake” (נְחֹשֶׁת נָחֵשׁ) equals 1116, the same as the Torah’s first two words, “In the beginning... created” (בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא). Thus, the very first thing God creates is the copper serpent, meaning that the beginning of all our contemplation and prayer should be to focus on the root-goodness of all things, which appears with the very beginning of God’s creation.

## THE REMEDY: KNOWING THE ROOT OF THE ILLNESS

All of this is the secret of the Copper Serpent. The serpent is the most evil

image that exists. It brought death into the world. And yet, when I make from it a copper snake, suddenly it becomes the very source of healing. The Alter Rebbe’s point in epistle 11 is that apparent evil—what *appears* as evil—is in truth the highest good. In Aramaic, “evil” (רע) means “sick,” so this entire matter is particularly relevant to the subject of illness and healing.

There is a saying that, “knowing the illness is half the remedy.” We can now explain that the true knowledge of the illness is not merely knowing that you are ill, nor just knowing what illness you have, but knowing that the root of the illness is good, only it is not grasped.

## LIKE CURES LIKE

We like to explain that the Torah’s first two words, “In the beginning [God] created,” mean “In the beginning... healthy” (בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא—בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרִיא). To serve God, to fulfill the Torah and its commandments, one must be healthy, strong, and joyful. Moses took all these concepts together and made the snake from copper. He utilized the principle that “from itself, the axe that cuts the tree is made,” otherwise known as “like cures like.” Curing like with like requires seeing that the cure is within the disease itself—that the inner dimension of evil is the very essence of good, the highest good. This is also the secret of the wordplay based on phonetic similarity we saw above.



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