

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



Issue 218

Wonders

בס"ד

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“Rebbe Naftali of Ropschitz entered the kitchen suddenly and vigorously threw a potato into the water-filled pot there. Water splashed everywhere and Rebbe Naftali said to them, “And I will throw upon you pure waters and you will be purified.” From that time on, a spirit of purity dwelled upon them.”

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The Lubavitcher Rebbe to Rav Ginsburgh, Elul 5741

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to publish your classes
in book form.
With blessings for success..."

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Wonders

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

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STORY

REBBE SHALOM OF KAMINKA: PEELING POTATOES

Rebbe Shalom Rosenfeld, the rebbe of Kaminka and the founding father of the Chassidut of Kaminka, was born to the philanthropist Yaakov Yosef, and Yenta, the daughter of Rabbi Yehoshua Tzvi Heschel of Behr. He finished the entire Talmud at the age of 9. In his youth, he studied under the tutelage of Rebbe Tzvi Hirsch Harif and Rebbe Shlomo Kluger and later became a chasid and disciple of Rebbe Naftoli of Ropschitz. Rebbe Shalom, who never officially served as a chasidic rebbe, was known as a great and brilliant tzaddik. Many of his teachings are intertwined with witticisms that conceal supernal secrets. He passed away on the 20th of Cheshvan, 5612 (1851). His only son, Rebbe Yehoshua, succeeded him in Kaminka. His Torah teachings and stories about him were printed in the book, Ohev Shalom.

After the passing of his Rebbe and teacher, Rebbe Naftoli of Ropschitz, Rebbe Shalom of Kaminka learned under the tutelage of Rebbe Sar Shalom of Belz. Once Rebbe Sar Shalom told Rebbe Shalom to prepare himself well to study a special unification for the time when a soul is departing this world. When he exited Rebbe Sar Shalom's room after learning the unification, Rebbe Shalom was confronted by Rebbe Sar Shalom's famously righteous wife, Malkah. "Did you ever learn such amazing revelations with your previous Rebbe?" she asked. Rebbe Shalom attempted to avoid answering her, but ultimately replied:

"Once I was sitting in the kitchen in Ropschitz with Rebbe Chaim of Sanz, peeling potatoes for everyone's meal. Suddenly, the holy Rebbe Naftali entered, put his hand on my shoulder and his other hand on Rebbe Chaim's shoulder and taught us the unification for peeling potatoes. This is the same unification that I now learned from Rebbe Sar Shalom."

What does the departure of the soul from the body have to do with peeling potatoes? We can imagine that the number of potatoes that needed to be peeled in Ropschitz was enough to make anyone's soul depart from their body, but that is not the only connection.

The departure of the soul from the

body is the separation of the internal soul from the external body. This can be compared to separating the fruit from its peel. This is the secret of the verse (from which this unification is learned), "And you will go to your fathers in peace, you will be buried at a good old age" (Genesis 15:15), which God said to Abraham.

“And you will go to your fathers in peace” refers to the soul, i.e., to the fruit in the analogy, which departs the body, while “you will be buried at a good old age” refers to the burial of the body, i.e., the peel in the analogy. The numerical value of this entire verse (ואתה תבוא אל) is 2706, or

the product of “pleasure” (ענג), 123 and “good” (טובה), 22, which is also the last word in this verse.

Another story about the two friends, Rebbe Shalom of Kaminka and Rebbe Chaim of Sanz in the Ropschitz kitchen:

Once, Rebbe Shalom and Rebbe Chaim were peeling potatoes in Rebbe Naftali of Ropschitz’s kitchen. The Rebbe entered the kitchen suddenly and vigorously threw a potato into the water-filled pot there. Water splashed everywhere and Rebbe Naftali said to them, “And I will throw upon you pure waters and you will be purified” (Ezekiel 36:25). From that time on, a spirit of purity dwelled upon them.

Since the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, we lack the purification of the ritual purifying waters prepared with the ashes of the red heifer. Only in the future will the verse that the Ropschitzer quoted from Ezekiel be fulfilled. True *tzaddikim* find allusions to objects of great holiness and unique value in everyday affairs. In this case, the potato the Ropschitzer threw into the pot is called an *Erdepl* meaning “earth

apple” in Yiddish and other Germanic languages (*Erdapfel*). The Hebrew version, which is apparently based on the Yiddish, is a *tapu’ach adamah* (תפוח אדמה), but the Hebrew word for “earth” (אדמה), *adamah* is cognate with “red” (אדום), *adumah*. Thus, for the true *tzaddik*, a potato can take the place of the red heifer and monotonous kitchen work can vicariously represent the service performed in the Holy Temple.

WONDERS OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

WONDERS, MEDICINE, GIANTS, AND LAUGHTER

WONDERS IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT

In this week’s *parashah*, we find the first instance of “wonder,” the namesake of our publication. After hearing that she, a 90-year-old woman, would give birth, Sarah laughed, but then denied it. God insisted that she had laughed and added, “Is

anything hidden from God?”¹ (היפלא מִיְהוָה) (דבר). The Hebrew word for hidden (פלא) is oftentimes translated as “wonder” and this translation could work in this verse too: “Is anything too wondrous for God.” In either case, the root is פלא and it appears in the

1. Genesis 18:14.

verse in third person inquisitive form, הִיפְלָא, *hiyfla*.

Perhaps the most wondrous thing is a paradox. Indeed, there are several roots in Hebrew that denote a thing and its opposite. One of them is our root: פִּלָּא.

On the one hand, the common meaning of this root is something that is hidden, covered, and concealed from intellectual grasp as in the verse, “If a matter is too baffling for you”² (כִּי יִפְלֵא מִמֶּךָ דָּבָר). On the other hand, the root appears in the Torah also in the sense of an explicit and clear utterance, as in “when one explicitly utters a vow”³ (אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה כִּי יִפְלֵא לַנָּדָר)—to specify the vow.

But apart from these two meanings, which are opposites, there is another close three-letter-root פִּלָּא, which means “distinction” or “difference,” which lends its meaning to פִּלָּא. Wondrous then becomes a source of separation and distinction. For instance, in the words spoken by Moses to God, “Let Your people and me be distinct [וְנִפְלִינוּ] from every nation on the face of the earth”⁴ and then God’s response, “I hereby make a covenant; Before all your people I will perform wonders [וְנִפְלְאֵת] such as have not been performed on all the earth or for any nation.”⁵

On the one hand, the common meaning of *pele* is a thing that is hidden, covered, and concealed from intellectual grasp as in the verse, “If a matter is too baffling for you”⁶ (כִּי יִפְלֵא מִמֶּךָ דָּבָר). On the other hand, the root appears in the Torah also in the

sense of an explicit and clear utterance, as in “when one explicitly utters a vow”⁷ (אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה כִּי יִפְלֵא לַנָּדָר)—to specify the vow.

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In all, we have three meanings of פִּלָּא, which follow the foundational model of development from the Ba’al Shem Tov known as submission, separation, and sweetening (הַכְנָעָה הַבְדָּלָה הַמְתָּקָה). This model is also represented by the three terms: silence (שָׁמ), separation (מַל), and speech (מַל).¹⁰

The first meaning where פִּלָּא refers to something that is covered or concealed because the mind cannot fathom or grasp it corresponds to the submission, which is also described as “silence” (*chash*).

The second, intermediate meaning, which connects פִּלָּא with the root פִּלָּא

2. Deuteronomy 17:8.

3. Numbers 6:2.

4. Exodus 33:17.

5. Ibid. 34:10.

6. Deuteronomy 17:8.

7. Numbers 6:2.

8. Exodus 33:17.

9. Ibid. 34:10.

10. Initially, the Ba’al Shem Tov introduced this model to provide a guide for how to rectify our speech. Human speech is the breath of life God breathed into Adam. Speech is natural for humans, but it is also weighed down by the coarseness of our ego. By first silencing ourselves, then separating out our ego’s influence, our speech can reflect its Divine origin (see *Keter Shem Tov* [Kehot edition], 28).

and distinction obviously corresponds to separation (*mal*, מל). In Jewish philosophy, we find this meaning used in the Ra'avad's identification of the 32nd pathway of wisdom as "wondrous intellect" (שכל חפלא), a logic that is separate and set apart from common sense.

Finally, the third meaning of מל, as that which is open and explicit, corresponds with sweetening (*mal*, מל). This meaning suggests that the goal of the ungraspable wonders is to ultimately be revealed. This idea is captured beautifully in the verse chosen by Rav Ginsburgh to name the organization that publishes his teachings, "Open my eyes [גל עיני, Gal Einai], that I may behold the wonders of your Torah."¹¹ Not only is the Torah's wondrous inner dimension meant to be revealed, but it also has the power to truly heal and sweeten reality.

You may have noticed that the letters of מל are the same letters as the name of the letter *alef* (א, אלף). The Lubavitcher Rebbe connected these two words with the idea that the wonders of the crown and the superconscious dimension of Torah, which are both above reason and knowledge, are described as "wonder" (מל). When the supernal wonder seeks to be revealed in the conscious mind, it turns from wonder (מל) to *alef* (אלף). The letter *alef* means "to teach" or "train," for example "I will teach you wisdom" (אאלפך חכמה). Another well-known connection between *alef* and teaching is the word *Ulpan* (אולפן), indicating a study hall, or in modern times, a place where one studies Hebrew, which understandably seems both wondrous and baffling to the uninitiated.

One of the more interesting occurrences

of this root מל in the Bible is in the verse describing the Mashiach, "For a child has been born to us...he will be named, 'wondrous advisor...'"¹² The wondrous advisor is actually a doctor (specifically a healer of the spirit, what today would be called a psychologist). Every time we visit the restroom to relive ourselves, we recite the blessing known as *Asher Yatzar*, thanking God for giving our bodies health. The final words of the blessing are, "He who heels all flesh and acts wondrously" (רופא כל בשר ומפליא לעשות), revealing that health and healing cannot be taken for granted because they are an act of wonder. Amazingly, the value of "wondrous advisor" (פלא יועץ) is the same as the value of "doctor" (רופא), 287.

This leads us directly to our next topic.

MEDICINE, DOCTORS, AND HEALING

One of the densest and richest topics in Torah and in life in general is medicine, healing, and the role of doctors.¹³ How do you say doctor in Hebrew? *Rofe* (רופא). How do you say medicine? *Terufah* (תרופה) if you mean the substance taken to heal, or *Refuah* (רפואה) if you mean the practice of medicine. It is easy to see that these all come from the same root, רפא. This root first appears in *parashat Vayeira* in the verse, "Abraham prayed to God and God healed Avimelech, his wife and bondwomen so that they relived themselves"¹⁴ (ויחללו אברהם אל האלהים וירפא אלהים את אבימלך ואת אשתו ואת אמהותיו וילדו).

In the entire Penateuch, the Five Books

12. Isaiah 9:5.

13. See our volume *Body, Mind, and Soul*.

14. Genesis 20:17.

11. Psalms 119:18.

of Moses, this root appears 14 times, alluding to the word “hand” (יָד) whose value is 14. Thus, we have an idiom of sorts, “the physician’s hand” (יָד הַרופֵּא)—suggesting that there is healing power in the physician’s hand.¹⁵ There is even a direct reference to this in the story of Na’aman, the commander of the army of Aram, who was stricken with leprosy. He came to the prophet Elisha who told him to immerse seven times in the Jordan River. Na’aman initially walked away with anger saying, “I thought he [Elisha] would come out to me and would stand and invoke God, his God, by Name, and wave his hand toward the place and cure the affected part.”¹⁶ Incidentally, the value of “hand” (יָד), 14, is an allusion to the 14 phalanges or finger bones in the hand.

The letters of the Hebrew word for “healing” (רְפוּאָה) permute to spell the phrase, “the light of the mouth” (אֹרֶךְ פֶּה). The sympathetic words that come out of the physician’s mouth provide reassurance to the patient by radiating healing light and energy. It should come as no surprise that the angel associated with healing is called Rephael (רְפָאֵל), as its root is also רָפָא.

As we saw in our exploration of the Torah’s first word¹⁷ “In the beginning, God created,” we saw that there are indeed two stages of creation: first, creation *ex nihilo*, and then, a “healing” of the ailments inherent in the initial state of creation; both are derivatives of the Torah’s first word, which is related to both “creation”

(בְּרִיאָה) and “healthy” (בְּרִיא). God created/healed the world with Ten Sayings that, as it were, came out of His mouth. The first explicit utterance is recorded in the Torah’s third verse “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God’s very words, “Let there be light,” became light. Light was the first phonetic element in reality emerging His mouth, as it were, healing the previous “ill” state of reality. With the goodly light of His mouth, God healed all of reality. And so is every man, and the physician in particular, instructed, “Open your mouth, and let your words shine light.”¹⁸

When we consult Rabbi David Kimchi’s medieval work on the Hebrew roots, we find that under this root רָפָא, he includes two additional meanings: giants and the deceased. Regarding the giants he quotes, “For only King Og of Bashan was left from the remnant of the Rephaim; behold, his bed was of iron and indeed was preserved in Rabbah of the Ammonites, it is nine cubits long and four cubits wide, according to the cubit of a [normal] man”¹⁹ which would make his bed about 4.3 meters long and 1.9 meters wide (14.2 feet by 6.3 feet). He also quotes the verse, “Sibbecai the Hushathite killed Sippai a descendant of the Rephaim....”²⁰

However, the very same word, Rephaim, also means those that are deceased, as in the verse, “Do you work wonders for the dead; will the Rephaim [dead] rise to

15. See *Body, Mind, and Soul* for the healing that is found in the doctor’s eyes and in his selflessness.

16. 2 Kings 5:11.

17. *Wonders* issue 215 (*Bereishit* 5787), p. 5.

18. *Berachot* 22a. Words that shine light are the words of Torah for they cannot be defiled. Just like God’s shining of light, our words of Torah shine in any environment or psychological state.

19. Deuteronomy 3:11.

20. 1 Chronicles 20:4 see also the rest of the chapter in Chronicles.

praise You?”²¹ (note the appearance of the first root we discussed, רפא, in the verse!).

Now we need to inquire: what is the connection between healing, giants, and the deceased? The answer is that the use of Rephaim (רפאים) to describe the deceased stems from a surprising connection between medicine (רפואה), stemming from the root רפא, and the notion that healing is related to relaxation (הרפיה), which in Hebrew stems from a related root, רפה. However, if relaxation goes too far, it leads to the opposite of life. Thus, Rephaim in the sense of the deceased are those who are relaxing without end, unable to serve God anymore.

GIANTS, COMPASSION, AND CRUELTY

What about Rephaim in the sense of giants. One explanation is that Rephaim was the name of the tribe of giants who all died (the last of their kind was Og, who was also the fugitive who came to Abraham the Hebrew, one of the words we looked at last week²²). Because this tribe had all been wiped out, they were named Rephaim, as in “deceased.” The Chasidic explanation is based on a seminal section in the Zohar.

The Ba’al Shem Tov says that a physician (רופא) is one who transforms a sickbed (ערש) into wealth (עשר), distress (צרה) into a window [of light and hope] (צהר), and an affliction (נגע) into pleasure (ענג). This underscores the fact that our root רפא means both health and death—it is one of the Hebrew roots with paradoxical meanings. Some people mistakenly think that *Erev*

Rav refers to specific individuals—evil people who have infiltrated Judaism with the purpose of destroying it. However, Chasidut, particularly the Ba’al Shem Tov, rejects this idea and explains that the *Erev Rav*, true to its name is a psychological confusion or affliction that has entered the minds of all Jews. This confusion or affliction needs to be healed.

The Zohar explains that there are five types of *Erev Rav*, five types of psychological confusion in the mind and their acronym is “evil affliction” (נגערע), the letters of which are the initials of Nefilim, Gibborim, Anakim, Rephaim, and Amalekim. The value of *Erev Rav* (ערב רב) is the same as “knowledge” or “consciousness” (דעת), indicating that these afflictions exist within every psychological illness as negative emotional character traits that stem from consciousness, just as the emotive *sefirot* stem from the *sefirah* of knowledge. The correspondence here is a bit irregular, as there are only five negative character traits and 7 emotive *sefirot*, but the point is that the entire right axis is treated as one and the entire left axis is counted together as one. Thus, we have: the right axis, the left axis, and the three *sefirot* of the middle axis: beauty (whose inner experience is compassion), foundation (fulfillment), and kingdom (lowliness). The Anakim correspond to the right axis, the Gibborim to the left axis, Rephaim correspond to beauty (*tiferet*) whose grammatical root is פאר, —a permutation of the root of medicine, רפא. Clearly then, we have now added that practicing medicine is one of the greatest acts of compassion we can do for our fellow humans. All healing

21. Psalms 88:11.

22. *Wonders* issue 216 for *parashat Lech Lecha* 5787.

begins with an awakening of compassion and concludes with the actual, practical application of compassion. The Rephaim, the giants who battled the Israelites on many occasions thus represent the unholy counterpart of the Jewish attribute of compassion. Evidently, the Rephaim, whose lineage ends with Og, King of Bashan, represent the exact opposite of compassion: cruelty in the soul.

Just to complete the model, the Nefilim correspond to foundation and the Amalekim to kingdom.

ISAAC, LAUGHTER, AND THE LAND OF ISRAEL

At the end of *parashat Lech Lecha*, God revealed to Abraham that Sarah would give birth to a son. Abraham immediately threw himself on his face before God and laughed with joy.²³ God then instructs him to name the child “Isaac,” which literally means “he will laugh.” This is incidentally the very first time the root of laughter, צחק, appears in the Torah. In our *parashah*, Sarah also hears of her upcoming pregnancy and responds with laughter.²⁴ Abraham indeed names his son Isaac, or Yitzchak (יִצְחָק) in Hebrew,²⁵ which Sarah then supplements by exclaiming: “God has brought laughter for me; whoever hears will laugh for me.”²⁶ Isaac’s name and his very identity are intimately bound to his parents’ experience. Later, in the Prophets and in the Writings,²⁷ Isaac’s name also appears

in another form, which is closer to the English pronunciation: יִשְׁחָק (pronounced: Yischak). Note that the letter *tzaddik* (צ) has been replaced with the left-sided *shin* (ש). Indeed, these two letters share the same origin of speech in the vocal organs, a great opportunity to introduce this important topic.

Already *Sefer Yetzirah*, the earliest work on the Hebrew language and the first book of Kabbalah, provides us with five origins of speech (ה מוצאות הפה), which, to use the English terms, can be identified as: glottal (throat), palatal (mouth), alveolar (tongue), dental (teeth), and bilabial (lips). Modern phonetics refers to these as “places of articulation,” and as is prevalent, divides the five into 11 or more sub-locations, but in principle the same structure is retained. The letters *tzaddik* and *shin* both belong to the dental origin—the letters formed primarily by the teeth. Letters that share the same origin are commonly found to interchange. This is one of the principles behind the phonetic analysis of language.

A rabbinic tradition regarding the four letters of Isaac’s Hebrew name (יִצְחָק) is discussed in the Midrash.²⁸ The *yud*, whose value is 10, represents the ten trials endured by Abraham.²⁹ The *tzaddik*, whose value is 90, represents Sarah’s age when she gave birth to Isaac. The *chet*, whose value is 8, symbolizes Isaac’s circumcision on the eighth day. Isaac, in fact, was the first person to be circumcised on the eighth

23. Genesis 17:17.

24. Ibid. 18:12.

25. Ibid. 21:3.

26. Ibid. 21:6.

27. Jeremiah 33:26, Amos 7:16, and Psalms 105:9.

28. *Bereishit Rabbah* 53:7.

29. *The Hebrew Letters*, p. 291.

day, as God had commanded Abraham.³⁰ The final letter of Isaac's name, *kuf*, whose value is 100, alludes Abraham's age when Isaac was born.³¹ Thus, we see in Isaac's name that he was truly a son of Abraham and Sarah in every way.

ISAAC AND THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Of the three patriarchs, only Isaac (יִצְחָק) never left the Land of Israel, *Eretz Yisrael*. In fact, God specifically commanded him not to leave the land.³² A beautiful hint to his special affinity to the Holy Land is that the four letters of his name are also the first letters of four different terms by which the land is known.

The first letter of his name, *yud*, stands for "Israel" (יִשְׂרָאֵל), the common name for the Land of Israel for thousands of years. The second letter *tzaddik* is the initial of "deer" (צִבִּי), one of the Biblical connotations for the Land of Israel.³³ One

of the reasons for this connotation is that after removal, the skin of a deer shrinks and can no longer cover it. Likewise, when the Jewish people live in the land it expands to contain them all, but if they are exiled, the land as it were shrinks and cannot contain those who try to replace the Jews. Another reason is that the deer is considered one of the most beautiful animals, just like the land of Israel is beautiful. Finally, the deer is considered the lightest (i.e., fastest) of all the animals and the Land of Israel is quickest to ripen its fruit.

The third letter *chet* stands for "life" (חַיִּים), referring to the connotation "Land of Life" for the Land of Israel.³⁴ The final letter, a *kuf*, is the initial letter of "holy" (קֹדֶשׁ) and the Land of Israel is well-known as the Holy Land (אֶרֶץ הַקֹּדֶשׁ). All four of the letters in Isaac's Hebrew name thus demonstrate his deep attachment to the Land of Israel.

30. Genesis 21:4.

31. *The Hebrew Letters*, loc. cit.

32. Genesis 26:2-3.

33. Ezekiel 26:15 and 20. See also Daniel 11:16 and 41, where it is called "the Land of the Deer."

34. Isaiah 53:8, Jeremiah 11:19, Ezekiel 32:23, Psalms 27:13, and more.

FOURTH REVOLUTION

ARE WE ENCOURAGING NON-JEWS TO CONVERT?

A somewhat theoretical discussion turns into a very practical one regarding the state of a non-Jew who wishes to convert prior to their actual conversion and proposes that the “point of Jewishness” that exists within them has halachic/legal significance. This conclusion sheds new light on the question many have asked: Is HaRav Ginsburgh’s Fourth Revolution in Torah Learning meant to promote conversion? The full class, delivered on the 9th of Cheshvan 5785, was first published in Niflaot for Lech Lecha 5785.

WHO DETERMINES WHAT REALITY IS?

Arguably, Torah grants a great deal of weight to human being’s relations with objects to determine their legal status. In that sense, Torah does not conform with a naïve objectivism about the world around us—objects do not exist fully and wholly independently from the human perception of those objects. On the other hand, we (the subjects) might treat certain objects as meaningless, but from the legal perspective, it is not always our prerogative to decide on what is significant and what is not. In that sense, Torah is also not fully humanistic. What is true about an “object” or *cheftza* (חפץ) is also true about the “subject” or *gavra* (גברא)—Torah can render significance and reality to both through its *mitzvot* and prohibitions.

One of the legal principles that is based on this understanding is known as “its prohibited status renders it significant” (אסורו חושבו). One example of this is in regard to leftover dough in a trough. The Rambam rules¹ that throughout the year,

the question whether dough is subordinate to a trough (and is considered part of a trough, and therefore cannot act as a barrier against impurity) or whether the leftover dough is considered separate from the trough (and thus does act as a barrier against impurity) depends on the owner’s intent. But on Pesach, the prohibition of *chametz* applies to the dough; the prohibition makes the dough significant and a barrier against impurity, even if the owner considers the dough subordinate in his mind. This principle has three variants: a prohibition makes it significant, impurity makes it significant, and a *mitzvah* makes it significant.²

Regarding the significance imparted by a *mitzvah*, the Ba’al Shem Tov taught that the *mitzvah*, by its very commandment, connects the person commanded with God’s essence. The *mitzvah* is what gives those who are commanded their being. This is likened to a wise man who requests a simple man to do something for him.

1. *Hilchot Kelim* 20:9.

2. And see at length the *Talmudic Encyclopedia* s.v. *Issuro Choshvo*.

Through that request, he solidifies his connection with the simple man and gives him a sense of being and significance that he could not have achieved otherwise.³

Thus, as much as the “object” needs to gain significance and standing through the commandments, this is even more pronounced regarding the “subject,” the person himself, whose normal state is one of “nothingness” (*ayin*), which needs to be confirmed. Indeed, on the verse “Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel”⁴ it is explained in Chasidut⁵ that precisely when God looks upon reality “from heaven,” from the perspective of “Torah from heaven,”⁶ Israel appears as something important and is blessed. It is the Torah that determines the significance of Israel who engage in Torah learning and fulfill its commandments.

A TORAH OF LOVING-KINDNESS

In abstraction, the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains,⁷ that the concept that significance is determined by Torah is not only in exceptional cases, but rather in relation to all of reality since, “all is considered as nothing before Him.”⁸

3. See *Hayom Yom* for the 8th of Cheshvan: “A *mitzvah* also means “togetherness” (*tzavta*) and connection. One who performs a *mitzvah* connects with the blessed Essence—He who commands that command. And this is [the meaning of] “the reward of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*”: that this which he became connected with the essence of the *Infinite Light*, who commands the command—this is his reward.” See also *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 7, p. 30.

4. Deuteronomy 26:15.

5. The essay “*Ita BeMidrash Tehillim*” 5653 (the essay that is customarily repeated at a bar mitzvah).

6. *Sanhedrin* 10:1.

7. *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 38, *Shavu'ot* (and see there in particular ch. 3 onward).

8. Based on *Zohar* 1:11b.

A created being has no existence at all relative to the Creator, and only the fact that the Torah relates to reality gives reality a state of being, also called *yesh* in Hebrew, or a *cheftza*. That is why the Sages explain that just before the Torah was given, “the earth feared and was calm,”⁹ all of reality was shaky (with “fear”) until the Jewish people received the Torah on the sixth of Sivan, and only then did the world receive substantial reality (“and was calm”).¹⁰

The Lubavitcher Rebbe goes further and emphasizes that the dependence of reality on Torah is not a dependency on a person fulfilling the *mitzvah* in practice, but on the very fact that the Torah relates to something—obligates or prohibits it—which gives it reality. That is, the entire Torah—both in its *mitzvot* and in its prohibitions—is “a Torah of kindness”¹¹, a Torah through which God, who “delights in kindness,”¹² gives reality its being and turn it into a *cheftza*—an object.

In this kindness, there is also the power to bring close and elevate the existence of the *yesh* to holiness. A *mitzvah* brings close and elevates a spark in the way of drawing near, whereas a prohibition accomplishes the same effect by way of rejection: “the left rejects and the right draws near,”¹³ but with regard to the Torah of kindness, both the rejection and the drawing near—both the prohibition and the *mitzvah*—are included in “the right draws near” and gives reality to being.

9. Psalms 76:9.

10. *Shabbat* 88a.

11. Proverbs 31:26.

12. Micah 7:18.

13. *Sotah* 47a; *Sanhedrin* 107b; *Zohar* 3:177b.

THE REALITY OF THE DAYS OF THE OMER

This mindset is applicable to certain well-known legal questions that have been discussed for centuries. One of them is whether a minor (a child before *bar mitzvah*) who came of age in the middle of the Counting of the Omer can continue to count with a blessing?

At first the Rebbe says that it appears that one who became obligated within the days of the counting cannot continue to count, because his initial counting, which is not considered a *mitzvah* from the Torah, did not create a “reality” of the days of the counting (and accordingly one cannot continue to say “today is such-and-such a number of days of the Omer,” indicating a cumulative continuity in the count).¹⁴ But afterward the Rebbe says that since the reality (the *cheftza*) of the days is not determined by their actual counting by the *gavra*, the subject, but by the Torah commanding us to count the days, the opposite is true; the moment the Torah commands us to count the days, even if they were counted by one who is not obligated, they possess reality and one can continue to refer to their cumulative total and count them as such with a blessing.

APPLICATION FOR THE CONVERT

However, the Lubavitcher Rebbe demonstrates less certainty regarding a convert who converted during

the days of the Omer. Can he continue to count after his conversion?¹⁵ Since “a convert who converted is like a newborn child,”¹⁶ the reality of the days he counted before his conversion—even if they, in and of themselves, have become a reality—belongs to someone else. Furthermore, even if his *mitzvot* prior to conversion are credited in his name (in accordance with the opinion that children he had prior to conversion are considered his even after the conversion, for the purpose of fulfilling the *mitzvah* to have children¹⁷), it may be that this includes only cases in which Torah grants the reality of being even for a non-Jew, such as with respect to children; a convert’s offspring are attributed to him and he fulfills through them the *mitzvah* of inhabiting the Earth (known as *shevet*¹⁸). But counting the days of the Omer before the conversion is not attributed to the convert in any way, and so the count before conversion will not combine with the convert’s new reality post-conversion.

LEVELS OF DA’AT

Since the continuity of the Torah-based reality surrounding conversion remains uncertain, let us apply the principle of the Fourth Revolution¹⁹—spreading the holy Torah to all people, revealing the potential of non-Jews to be drawn to the light of truth as potential

14. See note 27 in the talk. In the *Minchat Chinuch* (*mitzvah* 306) the discussion is regarding obligation or exemption, but the essential question is about the counting itself—whether there is here a reality of days that can be counted, or whether, since there is no reality to the days that have passed until now, there is no act of counting.

15. See note 36 in the talk and the marginal notes on this note.

16. *Yevamot* 22a.

17. *Ibid.* 62a (and see *Tosafot* s.v. “Rabbi Yochanan” there for the reason for this).

18. *Bechorot* 47a.

19. As was discussed beginning from 24 Tevet 5775 (and recently printed in the book *HaMahapectah HaRevi’it*).

converts. We will argue that even a convert who converted during the days of the Omer can continue to count, because even before he converted his counting had a degree of significance from the Torah's perspective, as we will explain.

We have already seen that the Torah gives the days of the counting—the objective part, the *cheftza* of the *mitzvah*—their reality. But to ensure continuity, the subject—the *gavra*—performing the count must be the same subject. As explained, the fact that the Torah obliges a person with a *mitzvah* grants him being. Likewise, the Torah's demand that man choose the good, by his free choice, reveals that this choice is the expression of the “image of God”²⁰ that is within man²¹—it is what gives man being, similar to the true and absolute reality of God, as it were.

In general, the *mitzvot* of the Torah obligate the adult individual, one who possesses *da'at*, i.e., consciousness and agency, for will is expressed through *da'at*²²—this is the *gavra*, the subject that Torah addresses. But *da'at* is not monolithic. There are clearly levels of *da'at*. We see that even a minor, who does not yet possess complete *da'at*, has a certain dimension of choice expressed in the *mitzvot* in which he is obligated by virtue of *chinuch*,²³ or

education/habituation to perform *mitzvot*. Therefore, the day the child reaches adulthood (the *bar* or *bat mitzvah*) is “the completion and primary entry of the holy soul,”²⁴ but it begins to enter already from birth and becomes more and more pronounced as their *da'at* develops²⁵.

Regarding the question of whether non-Jews who do not have a complete Divine soul have free will, it is explained²⁶ that the moment the Torah imposed upon them the seven Noahide commandments, it gave them free will regarding those commandments and gave them “subject” (*gavra*) status regarding those areas where they are obligated.

In light of this, we say that so too regarding a convert who converted—the Torah gave the non-Jew the choice, the potential to convert, and the moment he or she makes the decision to do so, it is revealed that they have a “subject” (*gavra*) status and free will regarding their choice to become Jewish. The convert is a Jew-in-potential even before he converted; the precise term used by the Sages, “a convert who converted” and not “a non-Jew who converted.”²⁷

(the *cheftza*) and it is tied to him as the one who inflicted the damage. Therefore, it is fitting for him to repent for having caused the damage when he grows up and even to compensate the party affected. See *Rema* on *Orach Chaim* 343 and the *Mishnah Berurah* there.

24. *Shulchan Aruch* of the Alter Rebbe, *Orach Chaim* 4:2 (second edition).

25. See the class of 3 Adar 5778 and especially the class of 9 Nissan 5784.

26. *Iggrot Kodesh*, vol. 16, letter 5871.

27. Responsa of Maharam of Rothenburg in the name of Rabbi Yehudah HeChasid (cited in *Sefer Teshuvot Ba'alei HaTosafot*, from manuscript [New York 5714, p. 286, sec. 19]); *Midbar Kadmut* (the

20. Genesis 1:27.

21. See *Derech Chaim* by the Mitteler Rebbe, ch. 12.

22. See *HaNefesh*, ch. 7, under the heading “The Power of Choice.”

23. Both on the side of the obligation and on the side of the prohibition—the two sides of free choice—as above. Case in point: a minor who caused damage, although he is legally exempt, even when he reaches adulthood—because he is not considered a “subject (*gavra*) who is obligated”—still, the damage is real from the side of the “object”

A CONVERT WHO CIRCUMCISED HIMSELF

We can apply the same principle in relation to another issue, pertaining to circumcision. Valid circumcision can only be (ideally) performed by one who is obligated to circumcise and is circumcised himself.²⁸ This is gleaned from the wording in *parashat Lech Lecha*²⁹ —הַמּוֹלִי יְמוּל. Some authorities learnt from this that it may not be possible for a convert to circumcise himself.³⁰

However, some³¹ have challenged this opinion on the grounds that we find explicit examples of converts who circumcised themselves—beginning of course with Abraham³² himself, as well as Jethro³³,

Chida), section 3, letter 3; *Yosher Levav* (by the author of *Mishnat Chassidim*), first house, fourth room, ch. 3.

28. *Avodah Zarah* 27a. See also *Hilchot Milah* 2:1.

29. Genesis 17:13.

30. *Minchat Chinuch*, *mitzvah* 2, letter 14 (and so too in the *Meiri* on *Yevamot* 45b). His exact words are, “and it seems simple that a convert who comes to convert is not permitted to circumcise himself, for he is still a non-Jew as long as he has not immersed.” He also questions what the ruling would be if the convert first immersed and then circumcised himself (not in the proper order, but there is a view that it is effective). Would the circumcision be ideal (*lechatchilah*), or would it be valid after the fact (*bedi’eved*) making it unnecessary to draw a drop of blood, and whether in such a case it is fitting to recite a blessing after the circumcision (as with immersion).

31. *Avnei Tzedek*, *Yoreh De’ah* 106; *She’erit Yaakov*, *Yoreh De’ah* §18; *Hagahot Pri Yosef* on *Avodah Zarah*; *Divrei Sofrim* §123.

32. Genesis 17:26 and in the *Ibn Ezra* and *Ramban* there. See also *Chiddushei Maharil Diskin*, end of *Parashat Lech Lecha*, who distinguishes Abraham from all other converts.

33. *Sanhedrin* 94a (and the *Maharsha* there brought that he was from the sons of Keturah, who were

Antoninus,³⁴ and Ketia bar Shalom³⁵—and therefore they wrote³⁶ that since after the convert circumcises he is among the circumcised, he is qualified to circumcise himself.³⁷ The reasoning here—which is difficult to follow—is basing a present status on a future status, i.e., considering the convert a Jew because he is destined to be a Jew (even though circumcision alone will not complete the conversion, as he still

commanded about circumcision, since he came from Midian—and apparently he was already circumcised, and therefore he explained that the intent in the Talmud there is that he added *peri’ah* to the circumcision—and some say that they are qualified even to circumcise a Jew).

34. Jerusalem Talmud *Megillah* 1:11 (in a dispute).

35. *Avodah Zarah* 10b, there Ketia (bar Shalom) is written with a ה (קטיעה), but in many places it is written with an כ (קטיעא), as in *Ein Yaakov ad loc.*, in *Nedarim* 50b in the version of *Yalkut Shimoni*, and elsewhere. Numerically, the values of the names of the two converts in the Torah—Abraham (אַבְרָהָם) and Jethro (יִתְרוֹ)—together equal 864, which is also the value of “Serve *Havayah* with joy” (עֲבֹדוּ אֶת הוִי בְשִׂמְחָה) and the product of 4 and 216, where 216 is the value of “awe” (יִרְאָה). 864 is also the value of the filling of “joy” (שִׂין מִן חַיִּת הָא). The two unique converts in the Talmud—Antoninus (אַנְטוֹנוֹיְנוּס) and Ketia (קַטִּיעָא)—together equal 432, which is the value of “ben Partzi” (בֶּן פֶּרְצִי), a connotation for the Mashiach. 432 is 2 times 216, exactly half of 864, a relationship of “a whole and a half.” The sum of all four converts is 1296, or 36 squared and 6 to the fourth power. 6 is the value of the letter vav (ו), which corresponds to the *sefirah* of foundation, the sixth of the attributes of the heart and the location of the covenant of circumcision.

36. *She’erit Yaakov* there; *Hagahot Pri Yosef* there; *Beit Yitzchak*, *Orach Chaim* 13:11. See also the *Rashba* on *Yevamot* 76a.

37. See the marginal notes on *Shulei HaMinchah* on *Minchat Chinuch*, *loc. cit.*, particularly note 204 for the *Acharonim* who write this, that the post-factum ruling, the circumcision of these great giants was done *lechatchilah*.



need to immerse in the *mikveh*³⁸).

But according to what was said above, that when the Torah enables a convert to choose to convert, a certain point of Jewishness is also revealed within him, we will say that this is not merely a decision based on the future. Rather, already at the moment of the convert's choice to circumcise, he becomes "circumcised" ("in the place of the thought and will of a person there he is truly found,"³⁹ and the moment the "convert [even before] he converted" wants to circumcise, he is already "there"). Put another way: Abraham is the father of all converts,⁴⁰ and when the convert comes to convert, the spirit of Abraham rests upon him—just as God told Abraham that he must circumcise (and the *Tzemach Tzedek* explained that this stemmed from his feeling that he was uncircumcised and must circumcise,⁴¹ just as every convert who comes to convert feels), and thereby made him obligated to circumcise, thus

fulfilling the requirement that the one circumcising be obligated himself,⁴² so too the convert who chooses to circumcise in order to convert is considered obligated and is permitted to circumcise himself!

ARE WE ENCOURAGING CONVERSION?

The core of this discussion is relevant to the pressing question regarding conversion when considering the Fourth Revolution: do we encourage conversion? Is this the way of the Jewish people? The answer is that by conversion it is revealed retroactively that the individual was always a "convert who converted," one who belonged to the Jewish people inwardly always.

The question of conversion therefore depends on the convert himself, and not on the one who teaches him Torah, who can only illuminate for him and thereby help him find the point of Jewishness that already exists within him. The purpose of the Fourth Revolution is to shine light upon all who come into the world in order to draw them near to the way of God, but there is no attempt in it to persuade anyone to convert—only one who always truly belonged to Judaism of his own accord will be drawn to the light and truth of the Torah and pursue a proper conversion.

38. As the *Minchat Chinuch* writes regarding one who immersed and afterward circumcised, that through the circumcision itself he becomes a Jew (according to the view brought in *Yoreh De'ah* 268:1).

39. See also *Keter Shem Tov (Kehot)*, 56, 208, 230, 275, and 283.

40. Based on Jerusalem Talmud *Bikkurim* 1:4; *Hilchot Bikkurim* 4:3.

41. See *Hayom Yom* for the 9th of Cheshvan.

42. As above, note 44.



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