

Yisro

Vechol Ha’am Ro’im Es Hakolos

A synopsis of the Maamar found in Torah Or

G-D GAVE the Torah to the Jewish People on Mount Sinai amid awesome lightning and thunder; smoke and tremors (see Exodus 19:16-19). To a certain extent, this seems only natural; we would expect such an awesome event as the giving of the Torah to be attended by such things. There was, however, also something we might not have expected: the mighty blast of a shofar (a ram’s horn such as that sounded on *Rosh Hashbanah*). What was the purpose of this? Surely, G-d did not need musical accompaniment. And if, for some reason, He did, why a humble shofar over some more melodious or exquisite instrument?

The answer, on one level, lies in the fact that the shofar’s simple and unadorned cry resonates in the deepest and most primitive depths of a person’s soul and arouses fear and awe, as the prophet says (Amos 3:6), “Shall a shofar be sounded in the city and the people not tremble with fear?” Indeed, we are told regarding the giving of the Torah (Exodus 19:16), “And there were thunderclaps and lightnings ... and the sound of the shofar exceeding loud, and all the people trembled.” On a deeper level, however, the shofar represents a spiritual concept necessary for the occasion, in the sense of the Midrashic expression (*Vayikra Rabba* 29) *shapru* [a play on the word *shofar* in

Psalms 81:4, the subject of this Midrash] *ma'aseichem*, “make your ways pleasing [to G-d].”

In Jewish mysticism, “pleasure” or “delight” (*ta'anug* in Hebrew) symbolizes one of the very highest levels we can refer to about G-d (although in truth, since G-d is infinite, there can be no “highest” level of G-dliness). This is so because, whereas all other human faculties (all considered symbolic of particular levels of Divine manifestation) have their unique functions and are associated with particular parts of the body, “pleasure” is viewed as a supreme and transcendent sensation which is superior even to “wisdom” – the highest human faculty. The association of “shofar” with “make pleasing” is because the shofar – the ram’s horn – elicits from above the revelation of that degree of spirituality which makes pleasing, i.e., that level of G-dliness which is itself the source of the level we allegorically identify with “pleasure.” (This sublime level of the shofar is that referred to in the verse (Psalms 36:10), “For with You is the source of life”: G-d as the ultimate source of all life – even spiritual life, including the lofty spiritual level of *ta'anug*, pleasure.) This spiritual accomplishment – the elicitation of the level of “the source of pleasure” (*m'kor bata'anugim*) was a necessary prerequisite for the giving of the Torah, as will be explained below.

In order to understand this, however, we must first come to understand why the giving of the Torah was necessary to begin with. After all, even before the Torah was given there were saints and prophets, such as Adam, Enoch and Methuselah. Furthermore, our forefather Abraham was so attuned to the spiritual dynamics of creation that he understood on his own all the mitzvos of the Torah and observed them, as G-d Himself noted about him (Genesis 26:5), “Abraham ... kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.” (See *Kidushin* chapter 4, *Mishna* 14.)

All this, however, was in a spiritual sense. By giving us the Torah on Mount Sinai, G-d enabled us to observe the mitzvos in the real-world, physical sense as well. What was added by this? Why weren't things good enough as they had been?

Abraham's mode of worship is characterized by the verse (Genesis 12:9), "And Abram journeyed on and on toward the Negev." (The Hebrew words idiomatically translated here as "on and on" are actually *haloch v'nasoa*.) The "Negev" is here symbolic of the ultimate degree of love for G-d, and the verse is telling us that Abram (whose name would later be changed by G-d to "Abraham") pressed on and on, reaching ever higher in his worship, to the point at which he finally attained the ultimate degree of love for G-d: it permeated him so thoroughly that every aspect of his being became simply a vehicle (*merkava* in Hebrew) for its expression.

Until he reached that point, however, Abraham "journeyed on and on," that is, he went from one level to the next (*haloch v'nasoa*) in his spiritual pursuits. What is meant by this is the same thing as is usually referred to as the spiritual dynamic of *ratzoh vashov*, "running and returning" or "ebb and flow." (This expression is derived from the verse (Ezekiel 1:14), "And the [heavenly] creatures ran and returned [*ratzoh vashov*].") However, since Abraham's spiritual level was superior to that of the heavenly creatures (*chayos*), the expression *haloch v'nasoa* is used instead.)

What, then, is the spiritual dynamic of *ratzoh vashov*?

It is written (Job 25:2), "[G-d] makes peace in His high places." Our sages comment that in heaven, there are spiritual forces whose natures are as contrary as fire and water, yet the water does not extinguish the fire: G-d's awesome presence overwhelms them all and peace and harmony rule (see *Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabba* 17; *Avos D'Rabi Nasan* 12). What is the

meaning of this strange idea, that in heaven there are fire and water, and that the water does not extinguish the fire?

The answer is that “fire” and “water” symbolize *ratzoh* and *shov*. *Ratzoh* – running – refers to the love of G-d one arouses through contemplation of G-d’s greatness. G-d is infinite; He has no end and no beginning, and indeed, all that we can perceive of Him in this world is only a reflection of His glory but not G-d Himself at all. This is alluded to in the verse (Psalms 145:13), “Your sovereignty is a sovereignty [over] all worlds.” Just as a king’s sovereignty extends throughout his kingdom, where the people revere him and do his bidding, but the king himself sits in splendid isolation, utterly inaccessible, in his throne room, so does G-d bring the entire universe – from the highest spiritual levels of heaven to this lowest physical world – into being merely by His attribute of *malchus* (sovereignty), which is not a part of G-d Himself – Who utterly transcends all relation to creation – at all.

When a person reflects at length on these things, a burning love for G-d and yearning to unite with His transcendent and “inaccessible” Self is aroused in his or her heart. This burning love and thirst for G-d is associated with fire, and is said to reside in one’s heart. (The heart, in addition to being the seat of the emotions, is also associated with the attribute of *bina*, understanding. Intellectual contemplation of the above concepts thus engenders this emotion in the heart.) It causes one to long for union with G-d to the point that they would, if they could, simply break free of their physical body and become absorbed in G-d’s all-encompassing Self. For this reason, it is referred to by the term *ratzoh*, running forth, as in the desire to leave one’s independent existence behind and run to G-d. This is what is meant by the Kabbalistic expression (Introduction to *Tikunei Zohar* 7a), “If your heart races....”

The *chayos*, or heavenly “creatures,” are described as “running” for this reason as well. Unlike mortals, they openly perceive the Divine life force flowing constantly among them, and thus “burn” with love for G-d. This is symbolically hinted also in the verse (Genesis 3:16), “and your desire shall be for your husband” – i.e., in this context, G-d.

Now, one might think that such constant yearning to break one’s physical bonds and dissolve into G-dliness would leave one in a perpetual state of unrequited love. However, as the above-quoted statement of the Kabbalah advises, “If your heart races, return to one.” *Ratzoh* is the running or racing of the heart; the “antidote” is to “return” – *shov* – to One, i.e., to a realization that G-d’s perfect and all-encompassing Oneness includes even this physical realm. A person is no more separate from G-d when he or she is in physical form than if he or she were to be the loftiest, most ethereal angel, for G-d’s very Self is omnipresent; He is to be found just as much in this world as in the highest heavens.

This realization of G-d’s omnipresence flows from the intellectual faculty of *chochma*, the indefinable capacity to conceive new ideas, which seem to spring into one’s mind from nowhere. “*Chochma*” – the Hebrew word for this mysterious capacity – can therefore be separated into the components *choach ma*, which connote “an indefinable power or faculty.” *Chochma* is characterized by *bitul* – complete absence of “self” – in deference to G-d, the “source” of what springs, seemingly from nowhere, into consciousness. Since it has no “self” to get in the way, *chochma* is a fitting “receiver” for G-dly “transmissions.” As applied to a person, the above means that when one realizes that one is himself or herself utterly insignificant in comparison with G-d, and that the only true existence is G-d’s existence, one achieves a sort of equilibrium in the ebb and flow of G-dly yearning: even though one cannot in practice escape one’s physical bounds and be absorbed within

G-d's unity (*ratzoh*), one is satisfied in the realization that one is already absorbed within G-d's unity (*shov*).

This aspect of *shov* is associated with water (which in turn is identified with the cool reason of the brain (*chochma*) as opposed to the fiery passion of the heart (*bina*), which is the characteristic of *ratzoh*). This, then, is the meaning of the teaching that there are spiritual forces corresponding to fire and water, yet the water does not extinguish the fire.

For there is, in fact, no limit to how high one can reach in one's drawing closer to G-d, Who is infinite. The "water" of *shov* does not actually satisfy one's longing and thirst for G-d (*ratzoh*), extinguishing its "fire" completely. Rather, the *shov* stage is like a resting point, a way-station on the never-ending journey to union with G-d. *Shov* consolidates and integrates within the person the gains made through their *ratzoh*, so that the person can then pick up where they left off and continue the journey with an even higher degree of *ratzoh*. It is, perhaps, like the equilibrium at the end of a pendulum swing: the ball is not in repose, but will shortly reassert its latent energy and begin the cycle again. Each swing of this spiritual pendulum brings one to an even higher level of G-dliness.

Abraham's worship of G-d epitomized this concept. He went from one level to the next – *haloch v'nasoa* – until he literally became the embodiment of love for G-d, referred to by the term *hanegba* ("to the Negev").

As noted above, Abraham achieved this through purely spiritual, abstract worship: contemplation of G-d's greatness and love for Him. However, not every person is capable of this. Most of us need some tangible connection to G-d, some reminder of His presence and concrete "link" to Him – something more than abstract contemplation – for successful worship. That is why G-d gave us the Torah.

The Torah's mitzvos also contain elements of "water" and "fire." The Torah is compared to water, for just as water flows from high point to low, G-d took His own wisdom and will, as it were – the highest spiritual levels – and bestowed them upon us – down in the lowest physical world – in the form of the Torah. Specifically, each time we perform one of the 248 positive mitzvos of the Torah we draw down upon ourselves a measure of G-dliness from the highest spiritual level. This "flow" stems from G-d's attribute of *chesed* – kindness. Yet the mitzvos also have a "fire," or restrictive (for "fire" is associated within G-d's attribute of *gevurah* – restraint) component, in that each one is subject to specific rules and limits within which that spiritual flow is contained. These are the individual laws defining when a mitzvah is valid, how it is to be performed, and so on.

Thus, by engaging in the "fire and water" dynamic of practical mitzvah observance, we connect ourselves with spirituality and draw down upon ourselves the spiritual capacities which enable us ordinary people to relate to G-d similar to the way Abraham did. The fact that physical objects in this world, such as the materials for constructing a *succah* or wool for *tzitzis*, when used for those mitzvos, should serve to bring G-d's own Self, as it were, into the world – the concept, in other words, that our mortal actions can draw G-dliness upon us at all – is precisely what was "given" to us on Mount Sinai.

This raises another question. If the giving of the Torah enabled G-dliness to be imbued within even the physical objects of this lowest world, why could Abraham, too, not achieve this desirable result? Why the delay in giving the Torah until much later?

The reason is that most mitzvos are performed using physical objects of the animal, vegetable or mineral kingdoms. For example, sacrifices involve animals, together with flour as an accompaniment. As explained elsewhere (see the synopsis of the

discourse *L'Havin Inyan Lechem Mishne* found in the Torah portion *B'shalach*), the spiritual root of the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms is in the realm of *tohu*, which is superior to the spiritual root of mankind in the realm of *tikun*. That is the inner, mystical reason why humans depend upon the lower forms for sustenance and not the other way around.

Nevertheless, having “fallen” from the great spiritual heights of the realm of *tohu* and become embodied in physical form, these animal, vegetable, etc. substances as they exist in this physical world are inferior to mankind. Indeed, they pose the danger of pulling one down even lower, as one who eats meat merely to enjoy physical pleasure, for example – instead of to extract the energy they need to worship G-d – is thereby engaging in a base, “animal” act. To be able to withstand this spiritual danger, the Jewish People needed to be refined and purified before taking on the challenge of engaging the physical world and elevating it into holiness.

Our exile in Egypt served this spiritual purpose. Indeed, we find Egypt referred to as the “iron furnace,” in the sense that a furnace refines and purifies precious metals – as it is written (Proverbs 17:3), “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace is for gold.” It was not until the Jews had undergone the spiritually refining and purifying experience of their suffering in Egypt that they were fit to withstand the potentially corrupting influence of intimate contact with physical things as a means of serving G-d. (This is also the purpose of our present exile, as a preparation for our worship in the Messianic era; on a personal level too, whatever suffering a given individual experiences (may G-d protect us from such things) serves to refine his or her worship through mitzvos.)

Now, to return to our topic, we said that the elements of “fire” and “water” in our worship do not cancel one another out; instead, the water merely serves to cool off the fire until it

can gain even greater strength. This harmony between water and fire is because G-d “makes peace in His high places”: His awesome presence overwhelms them all and peace and harmony rule. It is this spiritual level – that which transcends all revelation – that is symbolized by the shofar blast. For the shofar is shaped with a small opening at one end, which expands into a larger opening at the other end. The mouthpiece of the shofar, which is just a small point, represents the transcendent, unknowable level of G-d. The symbolism of the sound proceeding through the expansion of the shofar and emerging from the large end is that all revelation and manifestation of Divinity ultimately proceeds from an essential point which cannot be grasped by any being. This is the level we refer to as *m'kor bata'anugim*, “the source of [all] pleasures,” as in the expression *shapru ma'aseichem*, “make your ways pleasing.”

It is only from here that even the loftiest spiritual levels such as *chochmah* and *bina*, referred to above and symbolized by the conceptual faculty and the faculty of understanding, can originate. As explained elsewhere, the spiritual level of *chochmah* is symbolized by the Hebrew letter *yud*, which is written as a single point; *bina* is symbolized by the letter *hey*, whose square shape represents the expansion of *chochma's* tenuous concept into a fully understood idea. Both of these, however, have their source in that unknowable spiritual level at the other end of the shofar's pinpoint opening, the *m'kor bata'anugim*. This is alluded to by the mystical interpretation of the verse (Psalms 118:5), “From the straights I called out to G-d; G-d answered me with expanse.” “The straights” is a reference to the narrow opening of the shofar. It is from there that “I called out to G-d,” in which phrase the Hebrew name for G-d is spelled by the letters *yud* and *hey*. That is, *chochmah* and *bina*, the very beginning of the process of Divine manifestation and symbolized by the letters *yud* and *hey* respectively, both proceed from none other than “the straights,” that unknowable point which is the narrow end of the

shofar. However, “G-d [again the name spelled by *yud* and *hey*] answered me with expanse”: at the other end of the shofar, the wide expanse of the opening issues forth the levels of *chochmah* and *bina* manifested as the “water” – *bitul* of the intellect – of *shov* and the “fire” – yearning of the heart – of *ratzoh*. All of these flow from the exalted and mysterious “source of all pleasures.”

We can now appreciate the awesome effects at the giving of the Torah. The verse states (Exodus 20:15), “And all the people saw the sounds [of thunder] and the flashes [of lightening], and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking; and the people saw and were shaken, and they stood far away.” The sounds of thunder symbolized the concept of *shov* and water, since sound, like the revelations elicited through mitzvah observance, is also a “calling forth.” (Indeed, we find (*Brachos* 6b) that the Torah, which, as explained earlier, is compared to water which flows from above, was given “with five sounds.”) The flashes of lightening represented the fiery love of G-d associated with *ratzoh*. And the people were able to see what is ordinarily only heard (“And all the people saw the sounds...”), because all these revelations, as explained above, flowed from the spiritual level of the shofar, which transcends both water and fire and allows them, although opposites, to co-exist.

“And the mountain smoking”: “smoke” is what results when a physical substance catches fire. In fact, the smoke precedes the fire, so that one first notices the object smoking and only afterwards, the fire springs forth from the smoking place. A Jewish person has two souls: the “animal soul” (*nefesh habahamis*), whose function is to animate the body and supply its basic instincts and urges, and the “G-dly soul” (*nefesh HaE lokis*), which is literally a part of G-d and yearns to worship Him. The sincere worshipper is expected to work at transforming even their “animal soul,” which relates to physical substances and

pleasures, into something holy as well. (That is, all a person's natural human drives should be used, not in pursuit of worldly pleasures, but for G-dly purposes, such as when one eats not simply to enjoy a gourmet meal, but to obtain energy for serving G-d, or to honor the Shabbos with delectable foods.) This transformation of the animal soul is symbolized by smoke, for smoke, as noted, is the effect of a physical substance being consumed. At Mount Sinai, it was the Jews' commitment of their animal souls to spiritual pursuits – the physical substance of the mountain smoking – that elicited the thunder and lightening – the ability to engage in *ratzoh* and *shov* – to begin with, just as smoke precedes fire.

“And the people saw ... and they stood far away”: While the first reference in this verse to “the people” (“and all the people saw the sounds, etc.”) refers to the Jews, this latter reference, describing the people as distancing themselves from the great revelations of Mount Sinai, can be understood as meaning the “mixed multitude” (*erev rav*) of Egyptian converts who accompanied the Jews out of Egypt. These people were not entirely sincere in embracing Judaism; they had simply been overwhelmed by the awesome miracles G-d had performed in Egypt. The Jews themselves recognized G-d's utter transcendence over creation and could, by contemplating this, bring themselves to a state of total devotion (*bitul*) to Him. Just as a vacuum draws things in, this total selflessness in deference to G-d is what elicits from G-d, in response, the manifestations and capacity for ever-increasing closeness to His very Self (through *ratzoh* and *shov*, lightening and thunder) we have been discussing. The *erev rav*, however, did not have this ability to totally humble and abnegate themselves before the transcendent G-d. Their inspiration was from awe over physical things: the majesty of the planets and similar grand phenomena, which are all truly nothing in comparison with G-d's own Self. Thus, the

erev rav were not privy to the spiritual revelations at Mount Sinai, and they “stood far away.”

(This need of the *erev rav* for tangible signs of G-d, this inability to relate to His transcendent Self, explains why later, it was they who precipitated the sin of the Golden Calf by their demand for a G-d they could see (see Exodus 32:1).)

Finally, the above concept – the advantage of relating to G-d from the standpoint of *bitul* – is expressed by the following:

The verse quoted earlier reads in full, “Your sovereignty is a sovereignty [over] all worlds, and your dominion is in every generation.” The difference between “sovereignty” and “dominion” is that sovereignty is a term which only applies to a king, who has been crowned, inaugurated, accepted by the people as their sovereign. Absent that acceptance by the people, the ruler is not truly a “king,” but a “ruler” or “dictator” – in which case the term “dominion” is applied. Since “all worlds” – the spiritual realms of heaven – openly perceive G-d and willingly defer to Him with total *bitul*, He relates to them as a “sovereign,” a king. By contrast, “every generation” refers to the nations of this physical world. Since, like the *erev rav*, their perception of G-d is not as He is in Himself, utterly transcending all creation, but merely as the mighty Diety Who created their world, they lack *bitul* and can only relate to G-d’s “dominion.”

And this is the significance of the expression (recited in the Grace After Meals), “we bless You; may Your name be blessed by the mouth of every living being.” The Hebrew word for “bless” connotes elicitation, a drawing down of spirituality. Through our worship carried out in total *bitul* to G-d, we Jews “draw down” none other than “You” – G-d Himself. “Every living being,” however – the nations of the world – merely blesses “Your name”: that is, not G-d’s very Self, so to speak,

but merely His manifestation in the world – just as a person’s name represents that person to others, but is not at all a part of the person themself.

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