

*Sh'mos*

**Zeh Sh'mi L'Olam**

*A synopsis of the Maamar found in Torah Or*

Summary

*The positive mitzvos of the Torah are associated with the Hebrew letters vav and hay, which are the latter two letters of G-d's four-letter name. The Torah's negative mitzvos are associated with the letters yud and hay, the first two letters of G-d's name, which represent a higher spiritual level.*

*This is because the positive mitzvos – mitzvos which, like putting on Tefillin or giving charity, can be physically performed – are able to “contain” within them an aspect of G-d's holiness, and draw it down to earth. Negative mitzvos, observed by simply refraining from performing prohibited acts (e.g., “do not murder”), stem from a level of G-dliness so lofty that it cannot be contained, in the manner in which the holiness of positive mitzvos is, by any physical deed. The linking of the negative mitzvos with the first letters of G-d's name and the positive mitzvos with the last reflects this.*

*The same applies to the Written and Oral portions of the Torah. The Written Torah is G-d's own wisdom and will miraculously be contained within words, but the Oral Torah, which was handed down in unwritten form throughout the generations, stems from a spiritual level so sublime that it cannot be expressed in words.*

REGARDING THE verse (Exodus 3:15), “This is My name forever and this is my memorial to all generations,” in which G-d instructs Moshe (Moses) to inform the Jews in His name that they are about to be redeemed from Egypt, the Kabbalistic text *Tikunei Zohar* makes an interesting point. The Hebrew word for “My name” (*sh’mi*), together with the Hebrew letters *yud* and *hay* (which are the initial letters of the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable four-letter name of G-d), is numerically equivalent, by the rules of Hebrew grammar, to 365 – the number of negative injunctions in the Torah. On the other hand, the word for “My memorial” (*zichri*) combines with *vav* and *hay* (the latter two letters of G-d’s name) to equal 248 – the number of positive mitzvos.

This requires explanation. Intuitively, we tend to think of the positive precepts – mitzvos which are affirmatively performed, like putting on *Tefillin* and wearing *Tzitzis* – as somehow more important, on a higher spiritual level, as it were, than the negative mitzvos, which are observed by refraining from action (such as by not eating non-kosher food, or by not committing murder). Indeed, there is even a general rule of Jewish practice that in applicable circumstances, “a positive mitzvah takes precedence over a negative mitzvah.” Nevertheless, since Torah tradition teaches that the first two letters of the Divine name represent a higher spiritual level than the latter two, *Tikunei Zohar’s* linking the negative injunctions to the first two letters and the positive precepts to the last actually implies that it is the negative mitzvos which are more sublime.

The explanation of this is related to the fact that the Torah has both written and oral components. The expression “the Written Torah” refers to all of Scripture: the 24 books of the Pentateuch, Prophets and Hagiographa. “The Oral Torah” refers to the entire corpus of Jewish knowledge: the explanations and commentaries on the written verses without which the

Written Torah cannot be correctly understood. An understanding of the different spiritual levels associated with the Torah will clarify why the former was put into writing by G-d, while the latter was intended to be transmitted orally from generation to generation.

The Torah may be thought of as the “bridge” between G-d and humanity. Through its study and practice, we draw ourselves closer to G-d; more fundamentally, it is the vehicle through which G-d Himself relates to mankind at all. G-d’s very “self,” so to speak, is utterly transcendent, unknowable and beyond the grasp of any being; mankind is simply ... mankind, with all its failings and flaws. Although seemingly separated by an unbridgeable gap, G-d, out of His great love for us, allows us Jews to bridge this gap and connect with His very self anyway – and this is accomplished through study of Torah and performance of its mitzvos.

Each time someone does a mitzvah, he or she causes an element of spirituality to become associated with his or her soul – a particular aspect of G-dliness that he or she draws upon him- or herself, and, through him or her, upon the world in general. Each individual mitzvah carries with it a particular aspect of G-dliness; the spiritual qualities of one are not identical with those of another. That is, G-d deliberately formulated each mitzvah so as to bring out a certain spiritual idea, much as a master storyteller might compose one parable to express one concept and a second to symbolize a different idea. And, just as each story or play is the brainchild of the same author, yet some are born of deep personal feelings in the author him- or herself – who really “put his or her heart into them” – so are some of the mitzvos “closer to G-d’s heart” (allegorically speaking) than others, and represent loftier spiritual levels.

With this in mind, we may appreciate a mystical interpretation of the verse (Isaiah 33:18), “Where is the scribe?”

The Hebrew word for “where,” *ayei*, is made up of three letters: *aleph*, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and the letters *yud* and *hay*, which, as mentioned above, are the initial two letters of the Tetragrammaton. This is significant in light of the fact that the word “where” can also be read as a noun in the verse in question: “‘where’ is the scribe” would then mean the same as “the scribe is [called] ‘where.’”

This in turn requires us to understand what is meant by the “scribe,” which the verse is identifying with the spiritual concept termed “where,” spelled by the letters *aleph*, *yud*, and *hay*.

It is written in *Sefer Yetzirah* (one of the most ancient of mystical texts, attributed to our forefather Abraham), that G-d created the universe by means of three things: “with a scribe, with a book, and with a story.” Each of these terms alludes to a particular spiritual idea. The “book,” of course, is the Torah, holiest of all books; the term “scribe” refers to the source of that book. For, as mentioned above, the Torah is the means by which G-d, the Infinite, relates to us Jews: each time a person performs a mitzvah, he or she literally unites with G-d in a manner determined by the particular mitzvah.

Now, if a human king were to desire to communicate with his subjects in this fashion (i.e., by giving them a set of autobiographical parables to study and act out, like the playwright in our previous example, knowing that by devoting themselves to every individual parable in his royal book, they would be able to form a composite conception the king himself), he would first have to devote a great deal of thought to composing the book and the parables, an effort he would not make were he not motivated by a strong desire to enable his subjects to relate to him. We can allegorically use the same terms to describe G-d’s giving us the Torah. The mitzvos are like the parables that reflect various aspects of G-d. The Torah itself stems from the “wisdom” of G-d, in the sense that, since

wisdom is the most refined human faculty, we use the term to refer to that most sublime spiritual level at which the Torah originates. This parallels the king in our example applying his mind, his wisdom, to composing the parables.

Finally, just as the human king was motivated to apply his mind by an even deeper level of his personality – his will, his desire that his subjects be able to “reach” or relate to him, which desire stems from a basic level of the personality, defying rational justification and transcending mere “wisdom” – we may also speak of a level of G-d’s “personality” (to use expressions familiar to us) that transcends even G-d’s “wisdom”: that is, the will of G-d to communicate the Torah to the Jews. It is this exalted level of G-d’s will that is meant by the term “scribe,” since it is the ultimate source of and motivation for the “book,” the Torah.

And this spiritual quality is also known as “where,” as in the verse “‘where’ is the scribe.” This concept is expressed by the spelling of the word *ayei*, “where.” The Hebrew letter *yud* is often found in Jewish mysticism as a symbol for G-d’s wisdom, since the written form of this letter is a single point placed at the top of the line of writing; this represents the fact that ideas first spring into the mind as single, unformed points that have yet to be developed and expanded. The letter *hay*, square-shaped and thus possessing both depth and breadth, symbolizes that development and expansion of the *yud*: the fleshing out and understanding of the unformed germ of an idea. Together, these two letters symbolize G-d’s formulation of His own “wisdom” into the Torah, as discussed above. However, the letter *aleph*, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, comes before the letters *yud* and *hay* in the word for “where” – which are also the initial letters of the Tetragrammaton – to symbolize that very first level of motivation, the will that precedes intellect – the “scribe” that writes the “book.”

Now, the end result of all this – of G-d first desiring to give us the Torah as a means of understanding Him, then putting His wisdom into the formulation of it, and finally, actually giving us the Torah and mitzvos – is that we now have the means to literally unite with G-d. This is symbolized by the letter *vav*, used in the latter half of the name of G-d, since this letter's written form is that of a vertical line, whose upper portion resembles a *yud*, extending from top to bottom. The isolated point of the *yud* at the top of the line may represent abstract conceptions at the highest level of intellect, but the extension of that point into a vertical line – the letter *vav* of the Tetragrammaton – symbolizes bringing that rarified level “down to earth.”

This, then, is why the positive mitzvos of the Torah are linked to the last two letters – *vav* and *hay* – of G-d's name: the mitzvos are the actual conduits or vessels for the transmission of holiness into this world; they bring G-dliness down to earth. When a Jew actively performs one of the positive precepts (such as putting on *Tefillin* or lighting Shabbos candles), he or she is in effect illuminating the world with a bit more holiness, the holiness “contained” within that particular mitzvah.

The negative injunctions in the Torah, by contrast, are associated with the first two letters of the Tetragrammaton, which precede the transmission down to our level symbolized by the letter *vav*. While positive precepts, things that can actually be performed, represent G-dliness “contained,” as it were, within that particular action, the negative mitzvos represent a level of spirituality so high that it cannot be contained within any vessel, cannot be expressed by any act. All we can do to help express this sublime level of G-dliness is to refrain from actions that would impede a particular aspect of G-dliness from being revealed: do not eat non-kosher food, for to do so would impede a certain aspect of G-dliness, do not murder, for to do so would impede a different aspect of G-dliness. That is why the negative mitzvos, which are observed not by doing something but by refraining from doing something, are associated with the first two letters of G-d's name, that represent a higher spiritual level: just like the *yud*, an inaccessible point, the negative mitzvos represent a level of spirituality too high to be “contained.”

This idea is related to the concept of the Written and Oral Torah generally. For the Torah is the very wisdom and will of G-d Himself, and only He could miraculously “condense” it into written form. The Written Torah, which is spirituality put into words and letters, is thus associated with the letters *vav* and *hay* of G-d's name, since, as explained above, this

symbolizes bringing G-d's wisdom down to earth. (This is appropriate, since in general, the Written Torah speaks about fulfilling positive precepts, also associated, for the same reason, with *vav* and *hey*.) On the other hand, the Oral Torah stems from a spiritual level so sublime as to defy written expression, and is therefore considered superior in this respect to the Written Torah, as expressed by the Midrashic comment to Song of Songs 1:2, "The words of the Scribes [a reference to the Oral Torah and its association with the spiritual level of "scribe"] are sweeter to Me [G-d] than the wine of Torah."

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*© 2001. Please note that the foregoing is an informal synopsis by a private person, and that, therefore, errors are possible. Please contact Yitzchok Wagshul (718-771-2528) with corrections or comments. Also, the Hebrew original contains much more than could possibly be presented here, and constitutes a much more direct transmission of the Alter Rebbe's teachings. Thus, for those with the ability to learn in the original, this synopsis should not be considered a substitute for the maamar. Good Shabbos!*