

*Bamidbar – Shavuos***Vay’daber Hashem El Moshe B’Midbar Sinai***An adaptation of the Maamar found in Likutei Torah*

A PROMINENT event in this week’s Torah portion is the census which G-d instructed Moshe (Moses) to take of the Jews in the Wilderness of Sinai. The Divine instruction to conduct this census, read literally, is worded most unusually (Numbers 1:1-2): “and G-d spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting ... raise up the head[s of the Jews] ... unto their skulls.” The census in the desert was thus the original “head count.” The peculiar language, however, as well as the connection with the Tent of Meeting, hints at a deeper concept, one which is relevant to the upcoming holiday of Shavuos.

As with many concepts in Chassidic philosophy, we can understand this better by comparison with the human body, since G-d deliberately created man in His image (Genesis 1:26) in order to facilitate such comparison. In this case, it should be noted that in the physical body, the brain is encompassed by the skull. Moreover, there are three main parts of the brain, each corresponding to one of the three spiritual faculties of the intellect – *chochma*, the conceptual faculty; *bina*, the ability to understand what one has conceived; and *da’as*, concentration upon and internalization of the concept.

As a general rule, one develops an interest in, or a desire for – or conversely, an aversion to – a thing that his or her intellect tells him or her is interesting, desirable, etc. For example, one who doesn't know the difference between a Rembrandt and the work of a sidewalk artist is probably not the sort of person who would long to own a Rembrandt, for the simple reason that he or she does not possess enough knowledge to know why a Rembrandt is desirable. Only as one learns about use of light and color, brush technique, perspective, choice of medium, historical context, and similar matters, does one begin to appreciate why one painter is considered a master and the other, just a hobbyist. At that point, the budding connoisseur may find that he or she genuinely wants to add a Rembrandt to his or her collection, but doesn't really care about the amateur's work. Or, to use another example, the vast majority of people would be bored to tears counting the serrations on the edge of a postage stamp. Yet to someone knowledgeable about stamp collecting and how, due to a rare production error, a certain stamp was made with one more or one less serration than is usual, that activity might be downright exciting. The point is that, at least on one level, what one wants is driven by what one knows.

However, that is only on one level. Surely, there are interests and preferences that have nothing to do with intellect; one does not, for example like chocolate and dislike vanilla because of the facts one knows about their molecular structure. Things like that may be said to stem from a deeper level within the person than their intellect; they are intrinsic to the person, almost functions of their very soul.

That level of desire which is a function of one's intellect is termed "lower-level desire," or *ratzon batachton* in Hebrew, while the type of desire which transcends intellect is known as "higher-level desire," *ratzon ba'elyon*.

Now, as mentioned above, these human qualities have their counterparts in the spiritual arena. It is written (Proverbs 31:23), “Her husband is known at the gates.” This is kabbalistically interpreted as a comment about G-d, Who is called the “Husband” of the Jewish People (*Ba'alab d'matronisab*). The Zohar (I, 103) plays on the fact that the Hebrew word for “at the gates,” *ba'she'arim*, is similar to that for “estimates, allocations.” In that light, the verse can be interpreted to mean that the Husband – G-d – is known “to each according to his own allocation.” That is to say, each person attains a degree of knowledge of G-d commensurate with that person’s own spiritual capacity to absorb such things, as well as with the amount of time and effort the person allocates to contemplating and reflecting upon G-d’s greatness.

When one considers, utilizing one’s three intellectual faculties, that G-d is the Creator of countless worlds, higher and lower in the spiritual order of the universe, and that He provides them all with sustenance, and in fact, in His goodness He renews their creation out of absolute nothingness every day and at every moment, there will be aroused within that person a true, heartfelt desire to attach him- or herself to G-d and to cleave to Him. This desire, born as it of intellectual contemplation, will be commensurate with the person’s own intellectual ability and with the amount of time and effort he or she devoted to “taking the ideas to heart” and making them the basis for emotional attachment to G-d.

Now, here is an awesome truth: no matter how much one understands about G-d, one can never begin to approach a real knowledge of G-d – knowledge of G-d, not as the Creator of the universe, but as He is in Himself – because such knowledge is simply beyond human grasp. Indeed, not even the highest angels can grasp G-d’s true “Self,” as it were. Still, it is not an exercise in futility to engage in the attempt; on the contrary, G-d Himself wants and expects us to do so. He deliberately

“compressed” Himself, so to speak, into intellectually “bite-sized” pieces, as it were, so that, through Torah study and contemplation, we could achieve whatever degree of Divine knowledge He saw fit for us to be able to grasp. That is the implication of the wording in the verse, “her Husband is known at the gates”: the Hebrew word for “is known,” *noda*, is in the passive form, indicating that, although we may not be able to actively say “we know G-d” – which would imply achievement on our part of an actual knowledge of G-d – we can still say “G-d is known,” because, to whatever degree He saw fit, G-d made Himself knowable to us.

When one attains that knowledge of G-d, he or she will also develop a resulting desire for Him, as explained above. This in turn is the basis of one’s love and reverence for G-d: one loves that which accords with one’s will, with one’s desires. Still, it follows that all the above stems from *ratzon batachton*, lower-level desire.

There is also a spiritual counterpart to what was described above as higher-level desire, *ratzon ba’elyon*.

Again, all that one can grasp on one’s own of G-d is some conception of G-d as He manifests Himself within the universe. This is an aspect of G-d’s sovereignty (*malchus* in Hebrew), which, as explained elsewhere, is a metaphor used to indicate an aspect of G-d that does not involve His very Self, so to speak. This is similar to the way in which a king rules by his word, his command, in that when he expresses his command that, say, a bridge be built in some distant province, the bridge is built even though the king did not personally travel there and participate in the work. The physical body of the king was in his palace, yet the building of the bridge is nevertheless attributed to him. Similarly, G-d’s creation of the entire universe, from the highest spiritual levels to this lowest physical world, is nothing more than a function of this quality of sovereignty: G-d’s actual “self”

as it were, is not “personally” involved. Thus, nothing one can possibly perceive about G-d has any connection whatsoever to G-d Himself, but only to His attribute of *malchus*, and the love and fear of G-d aroused through *ratzon batachton* likewise are directed towards this aspect of G-d.

Yet a Jewish person’s soul is not just another creation. A Jewish soul is literally a “part” of G-d Himself, and therefore, in His love for us, He makes it possible for us to relate to Him on this level as well. When a person contemplates how everything in the universe is utterly insignificant in relation to G-d, having no independent existence whatsoever, and that, indeed, his or her own self is as nothing next to G-d, that person can achieve a level of absolute nullity (*bitul*) in deference to G-d that allows the natural yearning of his or her soul to be expressed, that is, the longing to be reabsorbed into its source as a “part” of G-d’s very “Self.” This desire of the soul is not a product of intellectual comprehension; rather, it is the innate and natural wish of the soul known as *ratzon ha’elyon*.

The problem is, we cannot achieve this higher-level longing for G-d on our own. It must be bestowed upon us from above, usually as a reward for our own sincere efforts to achieve the absolute maximum we are capable of by ourselves. It is granted to us on the holiday of Shavuos, which is the time of the giving of the Torah. Specifically, it is transmitted to us through the Ten Commandments, which are read in the synagogue as the Torah reading for that holiday. (Perhaps this is one reason the Lubavitcher Rebbe urged so strongly that every single Jewish person in the world, men, women and children – even newborn infants – attend the synagogue to hear the Ten Commandments being read on the first morning of Shavuos.)

That is the meaning of the Talmud’s teaching (*Shabbos* 88b) that, when G-d gave the Torah to the Jews at Mount Sinai, “at each utterance [in the Ten Commandments], their souls flew

[heavenwards].” The Commandments themselves were transmissions to us, revelations, of G-d’s very Essence. This is hinted in the wording of the first Commandment (Exodus 20:2): “I am G-d, your G-d” (*Anochi Havaye Elokecha* in Hebrew). The word “I,” in either language, signifies a level of oneself which is inaccessible to anyone but the speaker. That is, although a person may be known to others by various descriptions (e.g., “the kind individual,” “the tall person”), and even by a proper name which denotes the entirety of that person and everything about them (“Jack”), these are labels that can be used by others in identifying the person in question. There is, however, a level of self which is utterly unknowable and unreachable by anyone external to the person, and cannot even be referred to by anyone other than the speaker. This is conveyed by the word “I,” which in fact cannot be said by anyone other than the person it refers to.

G-d is known to us by many descriptive names, such as Almighty and All-Merciful. He also has what is mystically likened to His “personal” name, so to speak, a name that expresses G-d’s own self and all its ramifications. This is the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of G-d which is too holy to be pronounced, and which is therefore spoken (unless in the context of prayer or formal Torah reading) as “*Havaye*.” But even this is an expression of G-d to others; it does not implicate that “core, essential” level which can only be related to by G-d Himself, the level referred to as “I” (*Anochi*). The expression “I am *Havaye*, your G-d” therefore indicates that in giving the Torah to the Jews, specifically in the form of the Ten Commandments, G-d conveyed to us a link with the very deepest level of His “Self,” so to speak, the level of *Anochi*, which He “embedded” within the Torah and its commandments (this embedding is mystically represented by the Divine name *Havaye*) in such a way that when we study and perform them, we actually take this exalted level and relate to it on a level “up close

and personal” to us, that is, we relate to *Anochi* as *Elokecha*: we relate to the “I” of G-d Himself as our very own G-d.

When this inconceivable revelation was bestowed upon the Jews during the Ten Commandments – with each Divine utterance – their souls flew out of their bodies and soared back to G-d in absolute rapture. This is because of the state of pure *bitul*, self-nullity, described above: the *ratzon ha’elyon*, higher-level desire of a Jewish soul to G-d, was tapped into and the souls simply expired. (They needed to be miraculously resurrected by G-d before each next Commandment could be uttered.)

The distinction between *ratzon batachton* and *ratzon ha’elyon* is expressed by comparison of two similar teachings of our sages. The Mishna (*Avos* 2:4) states, “Make His [G-d’s] will, your will,” and then goes on to advise, “nullify your will before His will.” The difference is that “Make G-d’s will, your will” implies that you exist and have a will of your own; you simply desire the same things that G-d desires. This is *ratzon batachton*. On the other hand, “nullify your will before His will” is *ratzon ha’elyon*, for it means that you have completely nullified yourself and it is as though you no longer exist. The only will you possess at all is G-d’s.

Now, in truth, a person’s soul is not completely invested within his or her body. To be sure, a part of the soul is, and this is what empowers functions such as the ability to love G-d, fear Him, etc. However, the essence of the soul itself never parts from G-d Above, and is always attached to Him in unchanging unity. This essential aspect of the soul does relate to the person, but only in a transcendent way; it is not affected by worldly existence. This is the source of *ratzon ha’elyon*: that aspect of the soul which completely transcends those individual faculties that can be aroused through intellect, but is instead united with G-d Above.

We are now in a position to understand the significance of the instruction, “Raise up the head[s of the Jews] ... unto their skulls.” “Heads” represent the intellectual faculties of a person and the lower-level desire for G-d that flows from them. “Skulls,” since they surround and encompass the brain from above, symbolize that transcendent quality of higher-level desire for G-d that is a function of the soul’s very essence, which itself transcends investiture within the body. “Lift up the heads unto the skulls,” then, means that we should elevate our souls and the *ratzon batachton* that relate to bodily existence, and unite them with their transcendent source, so that the superior level of *ratzon ba’elyon* will be able to illuminate and affect even one’s emotions and physical body.

This can only be done successfully if there is something in which to “contain” the powerful desire of *ratzon ba’elyon*. This level of longing for G-d is of another world, so to speak, and would not remain in ours without something to keep it here; it would just dissipate and return to its natural habitat. This “container” is the Torah.

The quality of *ratzon ba’elyon* is enfolded within the various laws and mitzvos of the Torah, and when a person engages in them, he or she thereby draws upon him- or herself the spiritual benefit of *ratzon ba’elyon*, which can then openly illuminate and affect his or her soul. This is why the verse dealing with connecting the head with the skull – *ratzon batachton* with *ratzon ba’elyon* – specifies that this instruction was issued “in the Tent of Meeting.” The Tent of Meeting, or *Ohel Moed*, symbolized the Torah, because a tent surrounds and contains what is within it, much as the Torah acts as a “container” for spirituality. Furthermore, the *Ohel Moed* was called that because, as G-d said (Exodus 29:43), “I will meet with the Jews there.” The Hebrew word for “I will meet” (*ve-no’adti*) is similar to the word for “I will be known” (*ve-nodati*): each word uses the identical letters. They actually signify the same idea, which is

attachment to G-d. The difference is that *ve-nodati*, I will be known, indicates the attachment to G-d which results from intellectual contemplation, as in “her Husband is known (*noda*) at the gates.” *Ve-no’adti*, on the other hand, means the kind of “meeting,” or union between the Jews and G-d’s very “Self,” that only comes as a result of *ratzon ha’elyon*.

Finally, even though one draws upon oneself *ratzon ha’elyon* through Torah and mitzvos, one must seek ways to keep it from remaining in the mundane world; one must strive to use that newfound spiritual ability to rise instead, even higher than otherwise possible. To this end, one should engage in the type of soul-searching symbolized by the *Cobanim* (priests) and *Levi'im* (Levites). Specifically, the Levites were divisible into the three sons of Levi: Gershon, Kehos and Merari. Gershon, whose name implies “expulsion” symbolizes the need to expel all trace of evil from one’s personality. Merari, whose name is related to the word for “bitterness,” symbolizes one’s bitter remorse and sincere repentance for any sins one may have committed. If one does these things, one will achieve that which is symbolized by Kehos, a name that symbolizes gathering together as one integrated whole and uniting with G-d. These three are Levite functions, characterized by raising up what was below.

The function of the *Cobanim*, by contrast, involves drawing down from above. In this case, it was the *Cobanim* whose job it was to put the coverings on the physical *Ohel Moed*; it was the spiritual function of the *Cobanim* to invest the quality of *ratzon ha’elyon* into the Torah to begin with. A person should always remember that, even when studying Torah, his or her objective should not be simply to gain Torah knowledge, but should be attachment to G-d Himself, Who is “contained” within the Torah.

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