

Ha’azinu

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A synopsis of the Maamar found in Likutei Torah

Summary

In coming into this world, the Jewish soul undergoes four general stages of transformation, in which it becomes progressively more suited to life in a physical body. These are referred to in the prayer Elokai Neshama as “O my G-d, the soul which You gave within me is pure; You created it; You formed it; You blew it into me.”

The spiritual source of the soul, however, transcends all four of these levels. Also, not all of a person’s soul descends through these levels and is enclothed within the body; the main portion of the soul remains on high on the level of its spiritual source. This “heavenly” portion of the soul is referred to as a person’s mazal.

T’shuva, usually translated “repentance” but literally meaning “return,” essentially means a person’s elevation and return of his or her soul to its mazal and spiritual source. We must strive to achieve this every day, through the Shema prayer especially.

However, it is on Shabbos that t’shuva is more comprehensively achieved, since on Shabbos the entire universe is elevated and returns to its spiritual source. That is why the words t’shuva and shabbos are related.

Yom Kippur, the “Shabbos of Shabboses” is the main day of t’shuva, and the Shabboses of the year are but a glimmer of the spiritual level of Yom Kippur.

The second set of Tablets (containing the Ten Commandments) was given on Yom Kippur. This is fitting, since the mitzvos of the Torah, encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, draw down upon the person performing them a manifestation of G-dliness associated with G-d’s very “Essence.” This process of drawing down G-dliness through prior effort on our part is similar to the manner in which t’shuva, particularly on Yom Kippur, means returning to the very source of our souls, in response to which G-d bestows forgiveness and blessing upon us.

This “two-way street” associated with Yom Kippur – our striving to return to G-d and thereby meriting G-d’s revelation and blessings upon us – is symbolized by rain, which falls to earth from clouds that have previously been formed by vapors from the earth. This is the mystical allusion in the phrase “My teaching shall drop like the rain.” On the other hand, there is a level of G-dly revelation which stems from a source far higher than any our mortal worship can reach. This G-dly benevolence is symbolized by dew, as in the phrase “my speech shall flow like the dew,” and is bestowed upon us as G-d’s gift on the holiday of Sukkos.

Virtually all of this week’s Torah portion, *Ha’azinu*, is in the form of a song, in which Moshe charged the heavens and the earth with the task of bearing eternal witness to the teachings which he had transmitted to the Jews in the Torah (see Deuteronomy 31:28-30). Towards the beginning, Moshe states (Deuteronomy 32:2), “My teaching [i.e., the Torah] shall drop like the rain; my speech shall flow like the dew....”

Every word in Torah is meaningful; nothing is simply flowery language or a figure of speech. Concerning the significance of the words “rain” and “dew,” the Talmud states (*Ta’anis* 4a) that the Jews made an inappropriate request of

Hashem, as it says (Hosea 6:3), “He [G-d] shall come to us like the rain”; G-d, however, responded with a more appropriate blessing, namely (Hosea 14:6), “I will be as the dew to Israel.” To understand the reason our sages compared the visitation of G-d’s Presence upon the Jews to rain and dew, and to appreciate the difference between the two, we first need to understand the concept of *t’shuva* (usually translated “repentance” but literally meaning “return”) – in particular the Talmudic dictum (*Shabbos* 153a) that one should engage in *t’shuva* every day.

The main idea of *t’shuva* is as expressed by the verse (Ecclesiastes 12:7), “And the spirit will return [*tashuv*] unto G-d Who gave it.” In this verse, G-d is referred to by the Divine name *Elokim*. Similarly, upon awakening each morning (in the prayer *Elokai Neshama*) we recite, “O my G-d [also using the name *Elokim*], the soul which You gave within me is pure; You created it; You formed it; You blew it into me” The prayer thus uses four expressions (“gave...created...formed...blew”) for the soul’s investiture into the body. This is symbolic of the fact that it is a great descent for the soul, which is literally a “part of G-d,” to dwell within a physical body, and in order for such a radical change to be possible at all, the soul undergoes four broad stages of transformation. Over the course of these stages, the soul’s lofty spiritual nature is progressively “hidden,” so that it can ultimately assume a form compatible with physical existence.

(For example, the expression “You blew it into me” alludes to a relatively separate existence from its G-dly source, just as the wind produced by a person blowing originates within that person but is now separate from him or her. At that point, the wind, which previously had been concealed within the person, is brought out, revealed. On the other hand, the expression “You formed it” hints at the closer and more subtle relationship of a person and his or her thoughts: the thoughts are not identical with the person, but are nevertheless not quite

separate from him or her. They remain hidden to the outside observer.)

These four stages correspond to the four Hebrew letters of the Tetragrammaton (the ineffable Divine name referred to outside the context of prayer as *Havaye*). Each of these letters – *yud*, then *hey*, then *vav*, then another *hey* – symbolizes one broad stage in the progressive concealment or “contraction” of G-dliness necessary for this physical universe to come into existence. The letter *yud*, written as a point or dot, symbolizes that level analogous to the human capacity to conceive new ideas (a capacity known in Hebrew as *chochma*): the idea springs into the person’s consciousness from some nameless and unknowable source, but is not yet quite accessible to the person. One knows one has the “germ of an idea,” but can’t quite put one’s finger on it at this stage.

The next letter of the name *Havaye*, the letter *hey*, is written in the shape of a square (albeit with openings), and has length and breadth. This symbolizes that level analogous to the human capacity of *bina*: the ability to take that unformed “germ” of an idea and expand it, reflecting upon it and considering its implications until one thoroughly understands it – to “flesh it out,” as the expression goes.

The *vav*, written as a vertical line, represents the transmission of the fully formed idea resulting from the above process to a lower level, which could not have attained that comprehension on its own. (This corresponds to those Divine attributes the *Kabbala* refers to collectively as *z’eir anpin*, or “minor countenance,” and which are often abbreviated as *z”a*.)

Finally, the second *hey* in the name *Havaye* represents the dissemination of this transmission outward, to all four corners of even the lowest level. (This corresponds to the Divine attribute of *Malchus*, or Sovereignty.)

This entire process is hinted at by the verse in this week's reading (Deuteronomy 32:9), "For G-d's portion is His nation [i.e., the Jewish People]; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance." The Divine name used for "G-d" in this verse is *Havaye*, and the Hebrew word for "portion," *cheilek*, can also be translated as "part"; the first half of the verse can thus be read with the alternate meaning, "For His nation [the Jewish People] is a part of *Havaye*." In other words, the process by which the Jewish soul descends to the point at which it inhabits a body and may be called "the Jewish people" is one and the same with the process of downward and outward transmission symbolized by the name *Havaye*, as described above.

Now, in truth, only a portion of the soul undergoes this transformation and descent and is enclothed in the physical body. The main portion of the soul actually remains in its lofty spiritual state. This heavenly part of the soul, as it were, is referred to as a person's *mazal*, as in the Talmudic statement (*Shabbos* 53b; *Bava Kama* 2b) "A person possesses a *mazal*" and in the Zohar's teaching (III:289b), "Everything depends upon the *mazal*." The meaning of these statements is that the heavenly, *mazal* portion of the soul is the source of the spiritual influence and life-force which flows (*nozeil* in Hebrew) to a person and his or her soul as it exists within the body

Not only physical life-force is transmitted to a person through the *mazal*, but spiritual influence as well, such as inspiration and thoughts of *t'shuva*. This is possible because, as the Talmud puts it (*Megilla* 3a), "Although he [a mortal person] does not see [spiritual things], his *mazal* sees": the more sublime portion of one's soul known as his or her *mazal* can perceive the spiritual activity in heaven, as it were, and in turn passes on this influence to the person. For the radiation and extension of the soul which descends into the physical body is not separated from its heavenly, *mazal* component, and therefore continues to receive influence from it. (However, those who are punishable

by *kares* (severance, disconnection, being cut off, as in the numerous verses to the effect that “that soul shall be cut off ...”) do experience a disconnection between the *mazal*, their source of spiritual influence, and their bodily soul – may Hashem save us from such things.)

It is written (Song of Songs 4:15), “... and streams [*nozlim* in Hebrew] from Levanon.” This verse may be interpreted in the same sense as (Job 28:12) “From where shall wisdom be found?” Because of the Hebrew usage of the word “from,” the latter is often explained in Chassidic philosophy as though it read, “Wisdom may be found from ‘Where’” – in which the word “Where,” with its connotation of an unfathomable, unreachable place, a place for which one can only search yet will always exclaim, “where is it,” is to be understood as the name of the source of wisdom. In this sense, “*nozlim* from Levanon” means that the stream of spiritual influence which flows to a person comes from “Levanon” – a term referring to the *mazal*, the source of that flow, which is, as mentioned earlier, even higher than the highest level transmitted to us through the name *Havaye*.

This, then, is the essence of *t’shuva*: for one to elevate and “return” one’s soul, by dint of nullification of one’s own desires and of selflessness in the worship of G-d, to the level at which it began, that inconceivable level of “Where” which is one’s *mazal*. Indeed, this is the very reason the soul descended into this world, for its elevation to this level can only come about as a result of our worship here on earth.

And this is the mystical significance of the verse “And the spirit will return [*tashuv*] unto G-d Who gave it.” (Because G-d is infinite, there is no limit to the heights our knowledge of Him, attained through Torah study, can reach. We frequently therefore find the same terms used in one context to describe a certain aspect of G-d, and in another context, a seemingly

different aspect. For example, the word “darkness” can be used to describe a low degree of revelation; in this context, “light” is superior to “darkness.” However, if we learn that light itself proceeds from a place so sublime as to be beyond all human perception, we may also use the word “darkness” to describe this hidden, imperceptible source of the light, in which context “darkness” is superior to “light.”)

The name *Elokim*, signifying concealment and restraint – such as that used by G-d in concealing His overpowering “light” from our perception so that we will not be overwhelmed – is usually used to describe a lesser degree of G-dly revelation than that signified by the name *Havaye*, which, as noted above, is associated with revelation and transmission of G-dly influence into creation. However, we also find the name *Elokim* describing a level of G-dliness superior to the name *Havaye*, similar to the way “dark” may be called superior to “light.” It is in this sense that the verse states “And the spirit will return unto *Elokim* Who gave it.” As explained above, the soul as we know it comes to us by way of four stages, referred to in the prayer *Elokai Neshama*: “My G-d [*Elokim*], the soul which You gave within me ... You created it; You formed it; You blew it into me.” *T’shuva* – return – entails the soul’s return to the level which transcends all of these, even the level of “gave” – the inconceivable level of *Elokim*, the giver.

And one must engage in *t’shuva* every day. For, although the soul “returns” to its Maker each night during sleep, this only brings it to the spiritual level referred to by the expression “You blew it into me,” the level at which the soul “separates,” as it were, from G-d in order to invest itself into the body. By contrast, one must strive each day to return one’s soul to the more comprehensive source discussed above. This is achievable during prayer, specifically the *Shema*.

In the first verse of the *Shema* prayer (Deuteronomy 6:4), “Hear O Israel, G-d is our G-d, G-d is one,” the word for “hear,” *Shema*, may be understood as connoting “gathering together.” The meaning then would be “Gather together, O Israel”: the soul’s various intellectual and emotional faculties (referred to as “Israel”), which have been distracted from G-dly pursuits and gone off in all directions in pursuit of worldly matters, should come together again, refocus, in the service of G-d. The person should realize that, instead of all those worldly pursuits, “G-d is One,” there is nothing else but Him, to the point that one is actually willing to sacrifice one’s very life for Him – thus returning his or her soul to G-d.

The way to achieve this is in accordance with the passage (Deuteronomy 30:15-19), “Behold, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil ... and you should choose life.” Everything has a material and a spiritual aspect to it; the material, non-G-dly, aspect, is compared to death, while the spiritual and the G-dly, to life. When a person reflects at length and achieves a true appreciation of the fact that only G-d counts, he or she will automatically “choose life,” that is, reject all but holy concerns and attach him- or herself to the One G-d. Moreover, from the observation that a great deal of vitality seems to have been granted to worldly pleasures, one can extrapolate and realize that if so much life-force is given (for whatever reason) to that which is in opposition to G-d’s will, how much more spiritual vitality and union with G-d is the lot of those who fulfill His will, by observance of His mitzvos. This will lead a person to radical change: the very realization that he or she is so far from G-d, because he or she is so thoroughly immersed in material concerns, causes a corresponding yearning for G-d and nothing but G-d, and an utter attachment to the true source of all life, G-d Himself.

This “rebound” effect – that one’s very distance from G-d actually stimulates one to a love and yearning for G-d Himself – is the reason why, in one respect, it is said (Talmud *Brochos* 34b), “In the place penitents stand, even complete saints cannot stand.”

Now, *t’shuva* is associated with *Shabbos* (the Sabbath) as evidenced by the fact that the letters of the word *shabbos* are identical, though in a different order, to those of the word *tasbuv* (which can be spelled without a *vav*)(see Midrash, *Bereishis Rabba* chapter 22). After G-d created the world in six days, Scripture tells us (Genesis 2:3), “For on [Shabbos] He rested from all His labor.” What is the meaning of this, in light of the fact that G-d, Who is not a physical being (G-d forbid), obviously had no need of rest? The explanation is as follows:

When one exerts oneself to concentrate all one’s attention on what one is doing, and subsequently stops that activity, he or she experiences a sense of satisfaction and rest resulting from the freeing up of one’s attentions. It is as though one’s attention, which had been totally preoccupied by that task, has now returned to its natural, unfettered state and rejoined the rest of one’s mind. Saying that G-d “rested” does not mean that He was tired (as though such a thing were possible); rather, it is a statement about the life-force G-d channeled into the universe during the six days of creation. It is the Torah’s allegorical way of expressing to us mortals something of the way in which G-d’s creative energy, which had previously been invested into the things being created, experienced an elevation and return to their G-dly source after creation was over, i.e., on the Sabbath. And this source is higher than any manifestation of G-dliness used to create the universe, even the most sublime spiritual aspects thereof. We thus see that the concepts of “return” to one’s ultimate source within G-d – *t’shuva* – and of the Sabbath – *Shabbos* – are related. (This is also the significance of the teaching

that “*t’shuva* preceded the world.” By definition, the level to which the spiritual life-force of the world returns in *t’shuva* is higher than anything in this created universe.)

Every day, a person is presented with the opportunity to achieve something akin to the level of Shabbos – namely, during prayer, as discussed above. Gathering one’s “stray” attentions from the concerns of this world and elevating them back to G-d alone is similar to the real, objective, spiritual elevation which the entire universe experiences in return to its G-dly source on Shabbos. In fact, the former is a preparation for the latter, and that is why it is said that “one who exerts oneself [in preparation during the weekdays] before Shabbos will eat on Shabbos.”

Now, Yom Kippur is called “the Shabbos of Shabboses” (Leviticus 16:31). This means that Yom Kippur stands in the same relation to the Shabboses of the year as Shabbos does to the days of the week. Just as weekdays are a “taste” of Shabbos and one must engage in *t’shuva* every day in preparation for the spiritual elevation – *t’shuva* – of Shabbos, so is each Shabbos of the year only a glimmer of Yom Kippur, which is the main day of *t’shuva*.

To explain in more detail:

The main idea of *t’shuva* is negating one’s will in deference to G-d’s will, even though this surpasses one’s own comprehension. On Yom Kippur, G-d likewise reveals an aspect of His will which surpasses any comprehensible revelation. This is hinted at by the statement (Leviticus 16:30) that on Yom Kippur, “you will be cleansed of all your sins before G-d [*Havaye*].” That is, you will achieve a level which is “before *Havaye*,” which is higher than the entire order of G-d’s manifestation to creation symbolized by the name *Havaye*. This is why, on Yom Kippur, we beseech G-d, “forgive us.” The concept of forgiveness is not the avoidance of punishment.

Rather, if someone has wronged his or her friend, they will ask for forgiveness even if they have no fear at all of retribution: they simply long for the restoration of their friend's favor. Similarly, if we have transgressed G-d's will (G-d forbid) we cannot bear being "out of favor" with G-d and plead for the restoration of that favor.

In fact, as the verse says (Numbers 14:20), "I have forgiven you as you requested." This hints at the fact that the extent of the forgiveness, the extent to which we receive G-d's favor, is commensurate with the extent, the sincerity and the depth, of our request. The greater the degree to which we negate our own will, totally nullifying ourselves in deference to G-d, the greater the revelation of G-d's favor and forgiveness granted us. The highest level of nullifying oneself before G-d is that level at which one realizes that truly, nothing exists but G-d Himself, and therefore he or she sincerely has no desire for anything at all but G-dliness. If one achieves this, then G-d responds to him or her in like measure, as it says (Isaiah 1:18), "Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they will be white as wool." This refers to the exalted spiritual level alluded to in the mystical, allegorical description of G-d in the verse (Daniel 7:9), "the hair of his head was like pure wool," and is in accordance with the principle that the higher the level of *t'shuva*, the greater the level of G-dly revelation. This is the *t'shuva* of Yom Kippur.

The Torah relates that G-d gave the Jewish people two sets of Tablets on Mount Sinai: the first on the holiday of Shavuot, when the Torah was given; then, after these original tablets were smashed by Moshe when the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf, the second set was given when G-d forgave the Jews on Yom Kippur. It is significant that the tablets which endured were given on Yom Kippur. The Ten Commandments engraved upon the Tablets, particularly the first two ("I am G-d

your G-d,” and “You shall have no other gods before Me”) actually encapsulate the entire Torah.

“I am G-d, your G-d” symbolizes the manner in which performance of the Torah’s positive mitzvos draws down upon the person a revelation of G-dliness stemming from a spiritual level transcending even the name *Havaye*: *Havaye* is a “name” of G-d, but names are only useful in relating to another. When one thinks of oneself, one does not think of one’s given name, but uses the pronoun “I.” The Hebrew word “I,” *anochi*, therefore symbolizes a more “inward,” personal, as it were, aspect of G-dliness than the names *Havaye* and *Elokim*. The first commandment, “*Anochi Havaye Elokecha*,” (I am *Havaye*, your G-d [*Elokim*]) alludes to the fact that what is transmitted to the Jews by performing mitzvos is a level of G-dliness originating on the sublime level of *anochi*; from there it proceeds to us by means of the successive levels represented by the name *Havaye* (as explained above), and ends up relating to us on the close, personal level of *Elokecha* (your [own personal] G-d).

“You shall have no other gods before Me” symbolizes the fact that transgression of the Torah’s negative injunctions literally impedes this revelation of G-dliness from reaching us. The Hebrew words for “before Me” literally mean “in front of My face,” and the word *panai* (“my face”) can also be translated “my inner self.” Sins (“other gods”) act as a metaphorical barrier “in front of My inner self,” preventing that transcendent, inner revelation from flowing.

The ability to achieve, through mitzvah observance, this utter communion with G-d Himself could only last when granted on Yom Kippur, for on this day the Jews themselves commit their innermost selves to G-d.

We are now in a position to appreciate the significance of the verse “He [G-d] shall come to us like the rain.” As every

schoolchild knows, rain falls from clouds, which can cover and darken the sky; clouds in turn are formed of vapors that rise from the earth. This is a beautiful allegory: when a person engages in *t'shuva* by taking to heart just how far they have grown from G-d, they are stimulated to a feeling of bitter regret over the manner in which they have blocked the light of G-dly revelation from reaching them. The vapors which rise up from earth to the heavens symbolize a person's heartfelt yearning to return to the spiritual; the resulting clouds represent one's regret over the thick darkness one has drawn over the heavens, blocking G-d's "light" from shining upon him or her. However, as mentioned above, there is a "rebound" effect: contemplation of one's very distance from G-d actually stimulates one to a heartfelt love and yearning for G-d Himself, to which G-d responds from the depths of His own "heart," allegorically speaking. The sincere regret and repentance symbolized by the dark clouds brings G-d to respond in kind, breaking through the cloud and pouring down life-giving rain – spiritual blessing – upon the person.

This is also the meaning of the verse in our Torah portion, "My teaching [the Torah] shall drop like the rain." The Hebrew word for "my teaching," *likchi*, is etymologically related to the word meaning "to take" (perhaps in the sense of "taking" or "drawing" a lesson). The implication is that through observance of mitzvos, one literally "takes" or draws G-d's very essence to oneself (as discussed above). This is in accordance with the Kabbalistic teaching (see *Tikkunei Zohar*) that the 248 positive precepts are the "248 limbs of the King": just as a person's limbs are vehicles for the expression of the person's will (if he or she wishes to pick something up, the arm gives expression to that wish; if he or she wants to go somewhere, the feet do so, etc.), so does each individual mitzvah execute a particular element of G-d's will and carry with it a particular manifestation of His very Self, so to speak.

And although the mitzvos take the form of commands concerning physical things, such as wool for *tzitzis*, leather hide for *tefillin*, and money for charity, this does not contradict the idea that they accomplish a communion with G-d's own Essence: when one takes hold of the king's arm, he or she is grasping even the inner vitality and life-force in that limb, not just the external aspect. This is hinted at by the Hebrew word our verse uses for "shall drop" (*ya'arof*): this word is etymologically related to that meaning "the back of the neck" (*oref*), an expression often used in Chassidic philosophy to indicate an external or outer state – as contrasted from the deeper and more inward state connoted by the dual-meaning word *panim* ("face/inward aspect"). In other words, "My teachings shall drop" implies that, although the means by which we accomplish this communion with G-d is through the relatively superficial or external vehicle of physical mitzvah observance (indicated by the word *oref*), the result is nevertheless *likechi*: "taking" G-d's very Self, which is embodied within those mitzvos as the inner will and life-force is embodied within the limbs, and drawing it upon ourselves

And this is achieved through "rain" ("my teachings shall drop like the rain"): G-d is willing to bestow upon us this manifestation of His inner Essence in response to the prerequisite of our own sincere desire to relate to Him – as symbolized by the rain, which, as in the simile above, descends only after vapors rise up from the earth: our own heartfelt worship.

However, this mode of worship (while absolutely necessary and required of us) has its limitations. It can only succeed if the worshipper possesses knowledge of Torah. This is because this bestowal of G-d's "light" must descend to us through the progressive stages symbolized by the name *Havaye*, and, as explained earlier, the very first of these is a level associated with G-d's attribute of *chochma* (usually translated

“wisdom”). If one does not possess the wisdom of the Torah, the transmission cannot “go through.” That is why the prior verse says (Deuteronomy 32:1), “Listen, O Heavens, and I will speak; Hear, O Earth, the words of my mouth.” “Heaven” refers to the Written Torah, and “Earth” to the Oral Torah. Before there can be the transmission of G-dliness alluded to by “my teachings shall drop like the rain,” there must be Torah knowledge as symbolized by “Listen, O Heavens” and “Hear, O Earth.”

Finally, we are now in a position to understand why the request of the Jews that “[G-d] shall come to us like the rain” was considered by our sages to be “inappropriate.” Although it is true that, from our mortal perspective, the most we can hope to achieve is that revelation of G-dliness which we have been comparing to rain because of its dependence on first being aroused by our worship here below, G-d is not bound by any such restriction. G-d, Who is infinite and omnipotent, can bestow blessings and revelations upon us originating on spiritual planes utterly beyond the capability of our mortal worship to reach. This level, aroused by G-d “from above,” so to speak, as opposed to by us “from below,” is compared to dew. It is bestowed by G-d not in response to our worship – that is, not as something that is “coming to us” as a result of our having merited it through successful worship – but rather, as a gift, totally undeserved and certainly not “owed” to us, but instead bestowed out of G-d’s pleasure, as it were, at the efforts we have made to draw close to Him.

And for that reason, this level of G-dly revelation is associated with the holiday of Sukkos. On Yom Kippur, we work at our relationship with G-d, striving mightily to do *t’shuva* and arouse a response in kind from above. However, there is a limit to how high we can reach in drawing down G-dly response (although, as explained at length above, this level stems from a source superior even to the name *Havaye*). By contrast, after the

worship of Yom Kippur is accomplished, G-d “goes the extra mile” for us, so to speak, and gives us not only more than we “bargained for,” but more than we could possibly have achieved on our own: the free gift of the inexpressibly holy and exalted revelations that flow to us on the holiday of Sukkos.

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