

Zeh Hakadosh Baruch Hu¹

Rabbi Zevulun Charlop

Special Advisor to the President on Yeshiva Matters

Probably the most popular and well known midrash relating to the *daled minim*, the four species that we take on Sukkos is the one that defines and distinguishes the wholeness of the Jewish people in its distinct and possibly at times disparate parts: even as the esrog has taste and fragrance, *taam vareyach*, so too are there Jews who combine Torah, identified with taste and *maasim tovim*, good works, identified with fragrance. The lulav refers to those Jews who have taste, Torah, but want for *maasim tovim*, fragrance. Others are likened to hadasim, to myrtles. They have *maasim tovim* but are not necessarily learned in Torah. Finally, we have the willows, the aravos, which have neither taste nor fragrance.

And the midrash wonders, how does *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* relate to these human willows, without taste or fragrance?

What does the Holy One Blessed Be He do with or to them? He can't destroy them! Instead, He 'ties them all together into one congregation and they atone for each other.' And if you do this, at that very moment, I am uplifted!

Vayikra Rabbah 30:9

ומה הקב"ה עושה להם לאבדן אי אפשר אלא
אמר הקב"ה יוקשרו כולם אגודה אחת והן
מכפרין אלו על אלו ואם עשיתם כך אותה
שעה אני מתעלה.
ויקרא רבה ל:ט

But the question remains, how and why do we need the aravos altogether? They have no Torah, they have no *maasim tovim*. What do they add or contribute? On the contrary, they may diminish from the wholesomeness and sanctity of the others, separate or united.

The answer, it seems to me, is provided two midrashim earlier, in anticipation almost, which astonishingly denominates each of the four species and each on its own as the Holy One Blessed Be He, even the lowly and undistinguished aravos.

What in the world does the midrash mean when it proclaims of each of the *minim*, including the aravos, individually, *Zeh Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, this is the Holy One Blessed Be He.

For me, this midrash is a startling articulation of one of the loftiest and essential teachings of Torah, of Yiddishkeit, that all Jews - and in a real sense all humanity - in different ways, whatever their station and whoever they be, share at bottom the breath of Hashem, the *tzelem Elokim*, the

¹ Reprinted with permission from RIETS Rabbinic Alumni's CHAVRUSA Magazine, Tishrei 5771, September 2010

image of God, that He infused into *Adam Harishon* at the very inception of Creation. And, it is this truth which was self evident to the Founding Founders of these United States and speaks to the overriding splendor of the American democracy and sets it altogether apart from the French Revolution that followed.

The American Revolution was defined and took its strength from the Declaration of Independence which proclaims in that elegant and vaulting cadence that “We are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights.” With their invoking of the *Borei Olam Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, the Creator, these giants who “brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” projected the ultimate truth about all of us, that the *tzelem Elokim* — the irrepressible and undying spirit of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* — reposes securely, inextricably and eternally in us and our descendants.

Murbiyos

Near the end of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when literally and miraculously, victory was snatched from the jaws of defeat but which unfortunately brought in its wake massive casualties, my father, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Charlop *zt'l* shared with me on the Hoshanah Rabbah of that year, as the war was winding down and our enemies were on the run, that he now understood more fully the mishnah in *Sukkah* (*Sukkah* 45a).

How was the mitzvah of aravah accomplished? There was a place below Yerushalayim called motza. The agents of the beis din would descend there and collect murbiyos of aravah and would erect them at the sides of the altar, with their tops bent over the altar...

מצות ערבה כיצד מקום היה למטה מירושלים
ונקרא מוצא יורדין לשם ומלקטין משם
מורביות של ערבה ובאין וזוקפין אותן בצדי
המזבח וראשיהן כפופין על גבי המזבח.

The Gemara (*Sukkah* 45a) describes these *murbiyos*, as very tall willows, which surrounded the *mizbeyach* on Hoshanah Rabbah and around which seven *hakafos* were made.

My father asked, why did they particularly choose aravos? They should have surrounded the *mizbeyach* with the beautiful esrogim or the imposing lulavim, or the sweet smelling and comely hadasim instead.

It was in the context of the heavy and heartbreaking casualty reports that he sensed a new understanding of *murbiyos* — the aravos of Hoshanah Rabbah. While it is true that the talmidim of the Yeshivot Hesder who served in *Tzahal* sustained, early on, possibly the greatest losses certainly in relative proportion to their numbers. This was owing to the fact that they chose to stay at their posts, to man the border on Yom Kippur, so that their less observant comrades could go home for the Holy Day.

Nonetheless, it was clear that the vast majority of those who died *al Kiddush Hashem*, protecting and defending Eretz Yisrael against the sneak, brutal and sweeping onslaught of the enemy, were the less lettered and less devout Israeli soldiers. My father noted that they may have been perceived in some quarters as the aravos of our people — no taste and no fragrance. However, the truth of the matter was that in all likelihood without their sacrifices, we could not have emerged victorious in those dark days. Without them, heaven forefend, there may not have been a State of Israel today.

On Hoshanah Rabbah, a day likened to Yom Kippur, it was the aravos which adorned the *mizbeyach*, because their human representations were closest to the *mizbeyach*. They proved to be the *korbanos*, the sacrifices, which saved the day. In the conglomerate of the Jewish people they were surely not an unimportant component. Therefore, no less of them do we declare *zeh HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

Having said all this, however, as *bnei Torah* and *maaminim b'nei maaminim*, we must know that no less than the heroic soldier on the battlefield, in different and possibly in profounder ways, *Talmud Torah* and *yiras Shamayim* cannot be trumped. This truth should never be lost on us.

One of the premier commentaries, the *Atzei Yosef* found in editions of the midrash, understood the inclusion of the aravos among the *daled minim* from a different vantage point. With their failings and all — without *taam* and *reyach* — it was the aravos who surprisingly wanted to be at one with the esrogim, the lulavim and the hadassim. That in itself is a mighty saving grace.

Avaryanim

The authors of the Yom Kippur machzor deemed it appropriate to open the Kol Nidrei service with a special plea to the *beis din shel maalah*, the tribunal above and the *beis din shel matah*, the tribunal here on earth, to allow the *avaryanim*, loosely translated as sinners, to pray with the congregation. Indeed it can and should be construed as a call of welcome to them.

I often wondered why the word *avaryan* for sinner was chosen and not the more common *posh'im* and *chof'im*, words or forms of these words which abound in the machzor? It seemed to me that *avaryan* was deliberately selected over its more familiar synonyms because it also resonates the word *ivri*, which is a highlight of *Maftir Yonah*, which we read as prelude to *Neilah*. Most of us are familiar with the story of Jonah the prophet who was fleeing from the Almighty who put upon him an urgent, awesome, charge to preach teshuvah to the forsaken metropolis of Nineveh, which otherwise stood imminently to be destroyed. Jonah apparently for some reason not altogether clear to us, took flight on a ship which in time was met by a furious storm which threatened to break his ship apart, burying crew and passengers in the deep oblivion of the sea.

When his fellow voyagers asked Jonah, the stranger among them, who they properly suspected is the cause of their impending misfortune, “who are you and where do you come from?” Unafraid he says *Ivri Anochi*, I am a Hebrew, even as he is running away from G-d.

Avaryanim was the word chosen for sinners because of its cognitive similarity to *ivri*. We don't force the aravah to be bound up with the other more committed kinds. In fact, the aravah, as distanced as he is from the many hallowed perspectives of our faith, nonetheless wants to be part and parcel of the Jewish people and to show himself before the Almighty at least once a year. His Jewish *tzelem Elokim* is still alive and pulsating and is witnessed to the fact that he is not, heaven forefend, sundered from his roots, from klal Yisrael. And in this sense, it can be said of this aravah *zeh Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. He is a *posheya* or a *choteih* perhaps, but he proclaims *ivri anochi*, and therefore he is called an *avaryan*.

Vat'chasreihu me'at m'Elokim, v'chavod v'hadar te'atreihu

But there is another concept, certainly no less majestic than *tzelem Elokim*, and probably another understanding of *tzelem Elokim*, that *tzelem Elokim* not only applies to the moral and ethical imperatives which ought to distinguish him from other inhabitants of the universe, but gives nearly literal meaning to David's soaring conception of who man is when he proclaims,

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars which You established. What is man that You are mindful of him and the son of man that You think of him? You have made him slightly lower than Elokim and have crowned him with glory and honor.

Tehillim 8:4-6

כִּי אֶרְאֶה שָׁמַיִךְ מַעֲשֵׂי אֲצַבְעֹתֶיךָ יָרַח וְכּוֹכָבִים
אֲשֶׁר כּוֹנְנָתָהּ. מָה אֲנוֹשׁ כִּי תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ וּבֶן אָדָם כִּי
תִּפְקְדֶנּוּ. וַתַּחֲסֶרְהוּ מְעַט מֵאֱלֹהִים וְכָבוֹד וְהָדָר
תַּעֲטֶרְהוּ.

תהלים ח:ד-ו

I don't believe that ever before in human history has this psalm been more understood and felt as in the last 25 years, and increasingly in the last five to ten years. The psalm introduces the notion of *va'tchasreihu me'at me'Elokim*, of man being slightly less than Elokim, with *ki er'eh shamecha, ma'aseh etzb'osecha, yareyach v'chochavim asher konantah, When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars which You established ...*

Buckminster Fuller, the noted architect and iconoclast who died several years ago observed, "Until I was 28, we knew only about our own galaxy. In 1923, Hubble discovered another galaxy. Since then we have discovered 2 billion beyond that." And I might add that in the years since, even millions and possibly billions more. Amazing! But that is exactly what Chazal told us nearly two millennia ago in *Brachos* (32b) and specifically in the explanatory note that appears in the Artscroll edition of the Talmud (note 23), which invokes Chazal's understanding centuries ago of the vastness of the universe.

The Gemara, undoubtedly taken from some ancient *Mesorah* that was handed down from generation to generation, pictures for us a hierarchy of galaxies with the names *ligyon, rahaton, karton* and *gostera*, telling us the precise number of stars attached to each of these galaxies. Artscroll computes or attempts to compute their total number: "*Ligyon, rahaton, karton* and *gostera* are titles for different officers [taken apparently from Roman military parlance] (Rashi), proceeding in a hierarchy from the higher to the lower levels (Ben Yehoyada). Each "officer," representing a system of stars or other heavenly bodies, controls numerous lower-level "officers" and their "divisions" beneath them, and so on. The lowest level "officers," the *gosteras*, numbering in the hundreds of millions (12x30x30x30x30x30), each has attached to it several billion stars (365 thousand myriad). This amounts to quadrillions of stars."

A talmid of mine through a strange happenstance was in the same car with Garrett Reisman, the only Jew to have lived on a space station for 90 days. He returned to earth a little over two years ago. And our talmid, upon learning that he was Jewish, asked if he had placed a mezuzah on the space station, not really expecting a positive answer. He was surprised when Reisman told him, "I did in fact affix a mezuzah on one of the posts of the space station."

At the same time, only in the last few years, the GPS has become part of us, it goes wherever we go. It can direct billions of people to billions of destinations instantaneously. It can tell a billion people at the same time all around the globe with absolute precision, how they can get to their destinations. And if any of them or all of them, for that matter, make a wrong turn, it will immediately change directions in a second for those billion people. Wherever you are, whether in China or Timbuktu or the Bronx, the itinerary will be changed; it knows exactly where you are.

In the last few years we have seen the Hadron Collider, which hopes for the first time to move at speeds faster than the speed of light. Theoretically it would take us back in time. We have reached a pass in history when we can think of going back in time. It is axiomatic in Judaism that the closer one gets to the past, the closer you come to *ma'amad har Sinai*, the closer you come to Hashem. *Chadesh ya'meinu k'kedem*. It's uncanny that the word Hadron, which is an acronym of scientific terms and parts that comprise this collider, is *hadron*, which means returning or going back.

Only a short while back, in the August 11, 2010, New York Times Blog Opinionator exclusive online commentary from the Times, Garry Gutting, a noted philosopher of our day, wrote a biting critique entitled, "On Dawkins' Atheism: A Response," and attempted to demonstrate that the scientific assertions that Dawkins made and the so called proofs that he conjured, were actually vulnerable and indeed could not stand the test of rigorous philosophical analysis. Without going into the itinerary of his thinking, Dawkins rejects Hashem's omniscience, and, not least of all, His ability to manage billions of people all at once.

Today the GPS can do it, so can the Almighty. We have reached an age where before things could only be ascribed to Elokim. Today, we are *me'at me'Elokim*.

Science, it has been recently reported, stands on the threshold of penetrating man's mind and the dreams of man as well to know what he is thinking – day or night, awake or asleep.

Arim Gedolos U'Vetzuros BaShamayim: The Vilna Gaon and the Torah Temimah

The recent advance of science can also complicate or clarify biblical exegesis. The Torah tells us in Parshas Devarim (1:28) and then repeats word for word in Parshat Eikev (9:1) that in the upcoming battle against the seven nations who then held sway in Canaan-Eretz Yisrael, they would come against a formidable opponent whose cities are fortified to the heavens, *arim g'dolos uvetzuros bashamayim*. Rebbe Ami (*Chullin* 90b) wondered: How can there be cities in the heavens? The whole idea is preposterous! Therefore we derive from these pesukim that *dibra Torah b'lashon havai - b'lashon guzma* - that the Torah from time to time uses exaggeration to make a point. The *Sifrei*, interestingly enough makes a similar comment about hyperbole, but uses the verse in Eikev, not that of Devarim, as its proof.

The Vilna Gaon notices this anomaly and wonders why the authors of the *Sifrei* would use Eikev as the proof verse, when the pasuk first appeared earlier in Devarim? As a general principle, Chazal cite the first time the proof verse appears. Why in this instance does the *Sifrei* pass over the verse in Parshas Devarim and goes to Eikev? The Gaon therefore emends this midrash and leaves it with a

different text, *girsā*, altogether, whereby the *Sifrei* mentions first the pasuk in Devarim and then adds “that it can also be found in Eikev.”

However, the *Torah Temimah* (Devarim 1:28) demurred from the Gaon’s revision and said that Chazal, purposely cites the verse in Eikev deliberately skipping over its first mention because in Devarim the words were uttered by the *meraglim*, the notorious spies who searched the land of Canaan and brought back an altogether depressing and evil report about that land and are explicitly called liars by our Sages. How can you derive a teaching, says the *Torah Temimah*, from liars? So therefore, they skipped over that verse, went to Eikev, for there it was Moshe Rabbeinu who proclaimed *arim gedolos u’vetzuros BaShamayim*.

On the surface the *Torah Temimah*’s answer seems to be a brilliant reposte to the Gaon’s concerns.

However, in light of recent discoveries, how can we say that the pasuk in Devarim originally emanated from Moshe obviously speaking in Hashem’s name? Hashem is simultaneously *haya, hoveh v’yihiyeh* at once and knows that there would be *arim betzuros bashamayim*. Unless the pasuk refers specifically to cities on earth whose towers rise literally into the endless expanse of heaven, precisely because they are endless, the Gaon’s fixing of the text would not be problematic.

Having said all this, it is still only *me’at m’Elokim*. But *me’at* is hardly less than before and He remains approachable yet unbridgeable.