

# Something and Nothing

On the first day of Shavuot, we read the description of Matan Torah where Hashem speaks to the entire nation of Bnei Yisrael and tells them of the *Aseres Hadibros*, the Ten Commandments. Rashi explains that the Ten Commandments include the entire Torah. The Jewish people accepted the whole Torah at Har Sinai, even though they only heard the Ten Commandments. The rest of the Torah was given to them during their 40 years in the desert. By accepting the Ten Commandments, Bnei Yisrael essentially accepted the entire Torah.

*Shem Mishmuel, Yisro 5671*, cites the Gemara, *Shabbos 86b*, that records a dispute as to the exact date of the giving of the Torah. All opinions agree, however, that Hashem gave the Torah to the Jewish people on the day of Shabbos. We mention in our Shabbos prayers that Moshe received the *luchos* on Shabbos. Apparently this was an important part of Matan Torah. Why was the Torah supposed to be given on Shabbos?

The verse (Shemos 19:20) tells us that Hashem came down (*vayered*) on Har Sinai to teach the Ten Commandments. *Vayered* can't be taken literally. God doesn't have



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a body. Motion is foreign to Him. He is everywhere. Targum Onkelos translates *vayered* not as motion, but as a revelation, *v'isgeli*. According to the Targum, the Almighty appeared at Sinai. What does this mean?

## Inspiration from Above and Below

In truth, the world is filled with God's glory — *M'lo chol ha'aretz k'vodo* (Yeshayahu 6:3). Hashem is found everywhere. But there is a barrier in our perception of Him. We don't see Him everywhere. Our perception is weak. If a blind person is in a room with beautiful paintings, he won't see them because his perception is limited. A person who can see but is wearing a blindfold won't be able to see either. Hashem's presence is everywhere. We should be able to see it because we are spiritual beings. But there is something blocking our sensitivity to this perception. This is

why we think God is hidden. At Har Sinai, Hashem removed the blindfolds that stop the human spirit from seeing Him. God let Himself be perceived. This is what the Targum means — *v'isgeli* — God revealed Himself.

Chassidus teaches a basic rule of the spiritual world about the interplay between man and God. In the human experience, we oscillate between perception and revelation of Hashem. Surprisingly, Hashem does not control this. Rather it is controlled by people. He would reveal Himself, but we are the ones who don the blindfolds. The prophet said, "*Avonoseichem hayu mavdilim beineichem u'vein Elokeichem* — your sins separate you from your Lord" (Yeshayahu 59:2). Our own failings prevent us from seeing the glory of Hashem. He would allow Himself to be seen if only we would remove our masks.

This human influence on the spiritual world is called *isarusa d'l'tata*, the movement from below. Human beings create the beginning of the movement. Then Hashem responds with an *isarusa d'l'eila*, a movement from above.

This is like two spouses who had a fight. One of them will have to make the first move toward reconciliation, either the husband or the wife. According to Chassidus, in our

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relationship with Hashem, we the people have to make that first move. In halacha, the effectiveness of teshuva also begins from our side, from below. The Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 5:2) describes this as if Hashem says to us: Open for me the tiniest crack in your iron armor, which is blinding you and blocking you from me, and I will widen this crack to be as wide as the grand entrance to a huge hall. People must make that first move, then Hashem responds with much more than what people can do themselves. The *isarusa d'l'tata* is the first move. It makes the first crack in the wall that separates us from our Father in Heaven. After we make the first move, Hashem will make the rest of the wall crumble.

מים עמקים עצה בלב איש ואיש תבונה  
 ידלנה.

*Deep waters are the thoughts of man's heart and a wise man will draw them out.*

**Mishlei 20:5**

*Chovos Halevavos*, in his introduction, explains that underground there is a lot of water, which can nurture many people as well as animals and plants. The only problem is that it's not easily accessible. We have to dig deep to find it. Many people have a feeling that they don't have a spiritual capability. This is a mistake. The human being has an amazingly deep reservoir of spirituality. Even if it is covered, it is still there under the surface. This is like an underground well, waiting to be tapped to release its voluminous waters. In the human soul there is a

deep *eitza b'lev ish*, a spiritual wisdom, waiting to be tapped. This is where the *isarusa d'l'tata* comes in. You crack open the passage for those deep waters, and Hashem will widen that crack for you, giving you access to a whole world of spirituality.

As a rebbe in a yeshiva, I see an amazing amount of spirituality sitting in the Jewish soul. We should not write off people as impossible to reach. *Mayim amukim, eitza b'lev ish*. The underground water is a tremendous reservoir below the surface. Once you crack that surface, it is revealed. Each person himself has the ability to uncover his latent spirituality. We must believe that we are able to do this.

I have seen people make such great changes in their lives. They did not discover something new. The power to change and grow already exists deep inside of us. The ability to connect to our Creator is a latent ability within us. *Isarusa d'l'tata* is the first step required to evoke the *isarusa d'leila* when Hashem comes down in response to us.

**Shabbos: The Best Day to Access Your Spiritual Reservoir**

The best day of the week to open our spiritual reservoir is Shabbos. Shabbos is a day dedicated completely to God. We completely abandon our weekday focus and burdens. On Shabbos we don't discuss our financial needs and plans. We don't

discuss *divrei chol*, sports, business, and recreation. It is a day dedicated to prayer and study of Torah. It is a day when families come together. It is a beautiful, holy day.

The day of Shabbos itself supports the *isarusa d'l'tata*. Even this movement from below has a secret guiding hand from above. Hashem gives us the day of Shabbos, a special day to rest from the wearisome, stale atmosphere of the six days of the week. We can find our refuge and true selves on the holy day of Shabbos. It gives us the ability to open up and make the first move toward the Almighty.

The day comes with so much revelation and holiness. The Jew begins the process with *isarusa d'l'tata* and Hashem continues with *isarusa d'leila*. Shabbos is the day of Matan Torah, because Shabbos is the day on which we are ready to make the first move toward Hashem. On Shabbos we connect to Him — and that's why He connects to us.

**Yesh and Ayin, To Be or Not To Be?**

*Shem Mishmuel* explains a great concept, the problem of *yesh* and *ayin*, existence and nonexistence. The question is, do I really exist, am I real, or is the only true existence Hashem? After all, what am I in contrast to Him? *Shem Mishmuel* explains the Chassidic understanding of the philosophical issue of man's worth in the shadow of God.



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Is Adam something, *yesh*, or nothing, *ayin*? Chassidus, and Torah in general, take a dialectical approach to address this issue. On the one hand, man is great. People are like angels, sometimes even greater than angels. The whole world is created for people. The heavens, sun, moon, and stars were all created for man to be able to serve God. God spent six days preparing a gorgeous hotel that we call earth. People are great, so Hashem wanted the world to be great for them. People are the goal and crown of all of creation.

On the other hand, our importance fades when contrasted with the Creator of it all. When faced with God, man seems to be practically worthless. As David wrote in Tehillim 8, “What is man that you pay attention to him?” Our planet Earth is not even a speck in the universe. The stars appear to us as mere specks of light in the skies, but we know how big they really are. Someone standing on a planet in another galaxy would barely see our sun, and certainly would never see Earth. The Milky Way itself is a relatively small galaxy compared to others. Our sun is a relatively small star, and our planet is relatively small in comparison to the rest of the solar system. On our planet, we humans are smaller than the oceans and the mountains, the elephants, whales and trees and many other beings. When compared to Hashem’s vastness and infinity, we are truly nothing.

On the one hand, Adam and Chava are direct creations of God and the whole world is created to serve them. On the other hand, they are meaningless and infinitesimal.

## Yesh and Ayin in Our Avodas Hashem

In Chassidus, there are two ways that we serve Hashem. One way is by being a *yesh*, being something with tremendous spiritual energy. We have great worth. We must serve Hashem with our powers and strengths. On the other hand, there is a service of the Almighty through *bitul hayesh*, by being an *ayin*, a nothing, and losing yourself in the vastness of Hashem’s infinite being. When we lose ourselves in Him, He then takes us as *ayin*.

This is a very high level of service of Hashem. This is the level of Avraham, who said (Bereishis 18:27) *anochi afar va’eifer*, “I am nothing but dust.” Hashem calls Avraham *ohavi*, my beloved (Yeshayahu 41:8). Moshe Rabbeinu also said (Shemos 16:7) *v’nachnu ma*, “Who are Aharon and I, we are nothing,” just part of God’s reality, which is everything in this world. According to Chassidus, this is a higher level of serving Hashem.

All of us live this dialectic. We know we have to do great things to observe Torah and mitzvos. We have to use our skills and abilities to achieve greatness. We must face challenges and overcome them. We are *yesh*. We have an identity; we have responsibility to use our power. We must be active, get up and conquer the world for God’s sake and the Torah’s sake and to make this world a better place. Each person has his unique responsibility that he must contribute to the world. This is all a function of *yesh*. We are more than anything else God created. *Vatchesreihu me’at me’elokim*, we are just a little lower than God (Tehillim 8:6). He charged us to make this world a better place. We must help the poor, make the

world a place of spirituality. We have tremendous power to achieve, and we have great responsibility that comes with the power.

There is a different way of serving Hashem, as *ayin*. The thought process of *ayin* is somewhat different. I will let Hashem take over, I am too weak. If I try too much it is audacious. I will give myself to the Master of the Universe and let Him take me wherever He wants. This is the *mida* of Avraham *ohavi*, who said “I am nothing but dust.” This is also the *mida* of Moshe, who said *v’nachnu ma*. This was also the *mida* of David Hamelech, who said *ani tola’as v’lo ish*, “I am [insignificant as a] worm.” (Tehillim 22:7) Hashem shelters me and protects me.

This is how Hashem treated Bnei Yisrael when He took us out of Mitzrayim. Hashem told us before He gave us the Torah:

אַתָּם רִאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא  
אֶתְכֶם עַל כַּנְּפֵי נְשָׂרִים וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי.

*You saw what I did in Egypt, I carried you on the wings of eagles and I brought you to Me.*

### Shemos 19:4

Hashem took Bnei Yisrael on clouds of glory to carry them to Sinai to receive the Torah. Still today, we are riding on His wings. We are nothing, like little children clinging on to our mother’s bosom, as the verse in Tehillim (131:2) says, *k’gamul alei imo*. Like a baby who completely identifies and clings to his mother, we cling to Hashem, our father and mother. From this perspective, the nothingness of a human being is his greatness because it means he has a complete connection with Hashem.

We are each involved in this paradox between *yesh* and *ayin*. We are powerful and yet we are helpless, we are mature adults and at the same time helpless babies. We confront this paradox all the time. There are things that we should do, and there are things that are beyond our ability to control. We live with this paradox all the time. We have to work to get our jobs done, and we must be willing to step back to let Hashem finish the work sometimes. We need to be humble at times.

## Torah and *Yesh* and *Ayin*

Within Torah as well there is a struggle between the *yesh* and *ayin*, between the me and the not me. Hashem gave us the Torah, and gave us the ability to study and understand it. He even gave us the power to make decisions about Torah, the power to implement the Torah. This starts with the *talmid chacham* who interprets *Torah lishma* as his mind sees it. It is as if He says, “My dear Jewish children, take the Torah and use it. It is yours.” The Gemara says *Torah dilei*, the Torah of a *talmid chacham* is his own (*Kiddushin* 32b). This is why he can forgive his *kavod* (honor) as a *talmid chacham*. He is a partner in Torah with Hashem Himself. The oral Torah was given to the scholars of Israel to interpret and to try to understand what God meant. The Gemara says that that Hashem said “*nitzchuni banai* — My children defeated me,” when the rabbis overruled a heavenly voice. “Now that My children have made a decision about halacha, I have to understand as My children have explained,” concedes Hashem.

On other hand, the midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:7) says that if someone wants to merit receiving

the Torah in its fullest sense, he must make himself like a desert. A desert has nothing, no trees nor flowers. A person who wants to gain Torah must not be interested in a fat bank account, not interested in luxuries. He is like a desert, which doesn't even have rain. There's nothing there but sand and dust. Hashem gave it to us and gave us power to explain and develop it. As special and great as we are, to receive Hashem's special incredible Torah, we must understand still that a person is nothing. Moshe was the most humble of all people. This is why he was *zoche* to Torah. Humble people are the greatest Torah scholars, and the greatest of the Jews.

My *rebbe* Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l was so humble. My *rebbe muvhak* Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt”l was also exceedingly humble. These two great giants always had time to answer even the most elementary questions of a young student. They made themselves like a midbar. They were able to say “I don't know. I spent 75 years studying Torah, I'm a genius and I still say I don't know.” This is the greatness of *gedolei Yisrael*. They know the secret of being like a desert and of losing oneself in the vastness of the Torah. The Torah is the *daas* of Hashem, expressed in this way. A person must make his ego null and void to truly merit Torah knowledge.

We don't learn the Torah with close up personal interest. We must approach it with the question: What is Hashem teaching me? We lose ourselves in His values, goals and teachings.

## Conclusion

Someone who wants to be a great student in Torah must recognize his

own abilities. He cannot say I have limited skills or abilities. *Mayim amukim eitza b'lev ish*. We don't know the extent of our abilities. I am always surprised as a teacher to see how many students become great in Torah. Their abilities lie untapped under the surface. Once tapped they gush forth like fountains of water. These are the abilities planted deep within every Jewish person

Today in Israel we see Jewish children gushing with Torah. Children age 7 or 8 know whole *sforim* of *chumash* by heart, and *mishnayos* too. It is *mayim amukim eitza b'lev ish*. Now this potential is being tapped in front of our very eyes.

At the same time, we must realize that we are dust at the feet of our Torah teachers. It is important to let the Torah teacher take you on his wings up to the Torah. It is important to be humble and not a *baal gaavah*. The Torah does not like haughtiness. Like water, the Torah goes down to the lowest point. Torah seeks those who are humble.

We Jews are privileged to have received the Torah from God. We received this lesson of being at the same time both something and nothing, *isarusa d'l'tata*, our actions when we act as a *yesh*, and *isarusa d'l'eila*, Hashem's actions, and we are *ayin*. God responds to us from Infinity to take away the mask that we ourselves have put over our own eyes.

Let us hope and pray that on Shavuot, we study, learn, live and receive the Torah. May we be *zoche* to know when we are something and when we are nothing, how to be humble and great at the same time!