

Parshas Yisro

Movement From Above and Movements From Below

A. Aseres Hadibros – The Ten commandments

In this *parsha* Hashem speaks to entire nation of Bnei Yisrael and tells them the *aseres hadibros*, the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments include the entire Torah, as Rashi explains. The Jewish people accepted the whole Torah at Har Sinai, although they only heard the Ten Commandments. The rest of the Torah was taught to them during their 40 years in the desert. By accepting the Ten Commandments, Bnei Yisrael essentially accepted the entire Torah. This is a special topic.

Shem Mishmuel cites a gemara in Shabbos 86b, which records a dispute as to the exact calendar 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 this in our Shabbos prayers, that Moshe received the *luchos* on Shabbos. Apparently this was an important part of *matan* Torah. Why was the Torah specifically given on Shabbos? Somehow, revelation had to do with Shabbos. Why?

The *pasuk* tells us, “*Vayered Hashem.*” Hashem came down on Har Sinai to speak the Ten Commandments. *Vayered* can't be taken literally. God doesn't have a body. Motion is foreign to him. He is everywhere. Targum Onkelos translates *vayered* not as motion, but as a revelation, *isgelei*. According to the *targum*, the Almighty appeared at Sinai. What does this mean?

B. Deep Down Under the Surface

In truth, the world is filled with God's glory. *M'lo chol ha'aretz k'vodo*. Hashem is found everywhere. But there is barrier that blocks our perception of Him. We don't see Him everywhere, even though He *is* 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 always, since 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'isgalei* – 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 back and forth between perception and non-perception 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, *Chata'eichem mavdilim beini u'veineichem*. 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'ltata*, the movement from below. Human beings create the beginning of the movement. Then Hashem responds with an *isarusa d'leila*, a movement from above.

This is like two lovers who had a fight. One of them will have to make the first move towards reconciliation. If the husband comes home with flowers for his wife, then it will be easier for her to also warm up to him again. She could also make the first move to improve their relationship. According to Chassidus, in our relationship with Hashem we people have to make that first move. In *halacha*, the power of *tshuva* also begins from our side, from below. The gemara phrases this as if Hashem says to us, *pitchu li pesach shel machat v'ani eftach lachem k'pishcho shel ulam*. "Open for Me the tiniest crack in your iron armor, which is blinding you and blocking you from Me. 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.

The *pasuk* in Mishlei states, *Mayim amukim eitza blev ish*. "Deep waters are the thoughts of man's heart." Chovos Halevavos explains this *pasuk*. Underground there is a lot of water, which can nurture many people and 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 blev ish*, there is spiritual wisdom in the human soul that is waiting to be tapped. This is where the *isarusa d'l'tata* comes in. Crack open a 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 people off as impossible to reach. *Mayim amukim, eitza blev ish*. The underground water is a tremendous reservoir below the surface. Once you crack that surface, it is revealed. Each person has the ability to uncover his latent spirituality. We must absolutely 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. 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'l'eila*, which is when Hashem comes down in response to us.

C. 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. The father makes *kiddush* and sings Shabbos songs with his children. The mother lights Shabbos candles. The parents bless their children. It is a beautiful, holy day.

The day of Shabbos itself supports the *isarusa d'l'tata*, the movement from below. 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 recluses and true selves on the holy day of Shabbos. It gives us the ability to open up and make the first move towards the Almighty. For women this may be when they light candles, for men when they make *kiddush*, for everyone when we sing *L'cha Dodi*.

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'l'eila*. Shabbos is the day of *matan* Torah, because Shabbos is the day on which we are ready to make the first moves towards Hashem. On Shabbos we connect to Him – and that's why He connects to us.

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

Shem Mishmuel explains a great concept, the problem of *yesh* and *ayin*, existence and non existence. The question is, do I really exist, am I real, or is Hashem the only true existence? 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.

Is Adam a something, a *yesh*, or an *ayin*, nothing? This is a great problem. Chassidus and Torah in general take a dialectic approach to address this issue. On one hand, humankind 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 people 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, people seem to be absolutely worthless. As David wrote in Tehilim 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 they are huge. Someone standing on a planet in another galaxy would barely see our sun, and certainly would never see our 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 God's vastness and infinity, we are truly nothing. This is the other side of the paradox.

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

E. *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 *kochos*. We have great worth. We must serve Hashem with our powers and strengths. On the other hand there is a service to Almighty through *bitul hayesh*, by being an *ayin*, a nothing, and losing oneself 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 to Hashem. This is the level of Avraham, who said *anochi afar va'eifer*. "I am nothing but dust." Hashem calls Avraham *ohavi*, my lover. Moshe Rabeinu also said *nachnu ma*, "Who are Aharon and I? We are nothing." We are just part of God's reality, which is everything in this world. According to *chassidus* this is a higher level of serving Hashem, as an *ayin*, a nothingness, rather than a *yesh*, a something.

All of us are somewhere between this dialectic. We know we have to do great things for Torah and *mitzvos*. We have to use our skills and abilities to achieve great things. 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 for Torah's sake and to make this world a better place. Each person has a responsibility to contribute to the world. We are *yesh*. We are more than anything else God created. According to the verse in Tehillim 8, "*Vatchasreihu me'at me'elokim*," we are just a little lower than God in this world. 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 this power. We must use our great powers for good.

There is a different way of serving Hashem, as *ayin*. The thought process of *ayin* is completely different. I will let Hashem take over, I myself 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 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." Hashem shelters me and protects me.

This is how Hashem treated Bnei Yisrael when he took them out of Mitzrayim, as Hashem told us before He gave us the Torah. *Va'esa eschem al kanfei nesharim v'avi eschem aleiy*. Hashem lifted Bnei Yisrael onto clouds of glory and carried 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 Tehilim says, *k'yonek al shdei imo*. Like a baby who completely identifies with 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 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 do the work. We need to be humble at times.

F. Shabbos and *Yesh* and *Ayin*

During the six days of the week we are a *yesh*. We build the world and finish God's creation. We have responsibilities and work to get done. We are designed to work hard, to build this world into a better place. We may not be passive! Passivity would be criminal, *lo saamod al dam reiecha*. We have to stop the injustice of the world. *Tzedek tzedek tirdof*. We must pursue justice. We cannot just say it is Hashem's job. We were given the Torah which commands us to do good, *v'asisa ha'yashar v'hatov*. We have to fight evil and increase goodness. This is our mission during the six days of the week.

Shabbos, though, is the day of the Almighty. Our labors of the six days cease. The word Shabbos comes from the word *shoveis*, to cease and to quiet down. It is also related to the word *l'hashbis*, which is the command to nullify our *chametz* before Pesach. On Shabbos we make ourselves null and void. We give everything back to Hashem. He gave us the world for six days. On Shabbos we give it back to Him and say, "It's Your world. We are null and void compared to Your greatness and infinite nature."

On Shabbos people are *ayin*, nothing. The spirituality of God Himself overwhelms man and woman. It envelopes us and surrounds us. It places us within His infinite holiness and into His shadow. It is a day

of rest. Rest does not mean laziness, *batala*. It is a day of tranquility and resolution when all conflicts of the week are resolved. Shabbos is pleasant and quiet. On Shabbos all the spiritual barriers that we ourselves created during the six days disappear, whether we had failed our mission and sinned, or lost focus on what we were supposed to do. The walls that separate us from God crumble. We are nothing, *ayin*, nullified in the presence of Hashem. We ask Him to take us back, together with the world that we relinquish to Him again.

At the beginning of Shabbos many people have a custom to sing Yedid Nefesh. Many people sing it at the end of Shabbos too. In this song, we beg Hashem to bring our ailing soul close to Him. We earnestly entreat Him to take us into His holy cloud that envelopes every Jew on the Shabbos day.

Since Shabbos is the day of closeness to Hashem it is the day of Torah. Within Torah as well there is dialectic between the *yesh* and *ayin*, between the I and the not I. Hashem gave us the Torah, and gives us the power to study and understand it. He even gives 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. God gave it to us. Its 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. This is why he can forgive his *kavod* 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 it as God meant. The gemara says that that Hashem said "*nitzchuni banai*." Now that my children have made a decision about halacha, I must also understand the Torah as my children have explained it. The *talmid chacham* is special, the ultimate creation of God.

On other hand, the *gemara* says if someone wants to merit to receive Torah in its fullest sense, he must be like the Jews in the desert. You have to make yourself like a desert with no needs, 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, like Avraham said about himself. Then a person can be *zoche* to Torah. 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 that a person is ultimately 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 Soloveichik zt"l was so humble. These two great giants always had time to answer even the stupidest question of a young student. They made themselves like a *midbar*. They were also able to say "I don't know," even though they had spent many years studying Torah. This is the greatness of *gedolei Yisrael*. They know secret of being like a desert and of losing oneself in the vastness of the Torah. The Torah is the wisdom of Hashem, expressed in a certain way. A person must make his ego null and void. A person cannot learn the Torah with personal interest. We must approach Torah with the question, "What is Hashem teaching me?" We must lose ourselves in His values, goals and teachings as expressed in His Torah.

G. Recognize Your Amazing Abilities

However, someone who wants to be a great student in Torah must also recognize his own abilities. He cannot say, "I'm stupid and limited." *Mayim amukim eitza b'lev ish*. You don't know the extent of your abilities! I am always surprised as a teacher that so many students become great in Torah. Their

amazing abilities lie untapped under the surface. Once tapped they gush forth fountains of water. These are the abilities planted deep within every Jewish person.

Today in Israel we see Jewish children gushing with Torah. Children ages seven or eight know whole *sfarim* of *chumash* by heart, and *mishnayos* too. It is *mayim amukim eitza b'lev ish*. This potential is now being tapped in our Holy Land.

At same time we must realize 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 pride. Like water, the Torah goes down to the lowest point. Torah seeks the humble souls.

We Jews are privileged to have received the Torah from Hashem. We received this lesson from God Almighty, of being at the same time both something and nothing, *isarusa d'l'tata* and *isarusa d'l'eila*. We start as a *yesh*, and God finishes, for we are an *ayin*. God responds to us with an earthquake to help us remove the mask that we ourselves have put over our own eyes.

Let us hope and pray that as we read Parshas Yisro we will be *zoche* to the Torah of the six days of the week and to the Torah of Shabbos *kodesh*. May we study, learn, live and receive the Torah, to know when we are something and when we are nothing, to be humble and great at the same time!

Questions:

1. Why was the Torah given on Shabbos?
2. What is *isarusa d'l'tata* and *isarusa d'leila*?
3. Do people have natural spiritual reservoirs?
4. What does the concept of a *yesh* mean?
5. What does the concept of *ayin* mean?
6. When are we a *yesh*?
7. When are we an *ayin*?

Exercises

1. Make a week's chart. List times when you were a *yesh*. List times when you were an *ayin*.
2. What is easier for you to be – a *yesh* or an *ayin*?
3. For a week focus on one way to behave as a *yesh*. Record your daily successes and failures.
4. For a week focus on one way to behave as an *ayin*. Record your daily successes and failures.