

## YISRO

# MOVEMENT FROM ABOVE AND MOVEMENT FROM BELOW

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## Aseres Hadibros—The Ten Commandments

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In this *parsha*, Hashem speaks to the entire Jewish nation and tells them the Aseres Hadibros, the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments include the entire Torah, as the commentaries explain. In this sense, the Jewish People accepted the whole Torah at Har Sinai. By accepting the Ten Commandments, Bnei Yisrael essentially accepted the entire Torah. The rest of the Torah was taught to them in detail during their forty years in the desert.

The Shem Mishmuel cites the Gemara (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 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 specifically given on Shabbos?

As a prelude to giving the Torah, the *pasuk* tells us, “*Vayeired Hashem,*” Hashem came down on Har Sinai to speak the Ten Commandments. *Vayeired* can’t be taken literally, since God doesn’t have a body. Motion is foreign to Him; He is everywhere.

Accordingly, Targum Onkelos translates *vayeired* not as motion, but as *isgelei*, a revelation. According to Onkelos, the *pasuk* means that the Almighty appeared at Sinai. What does this mean?

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## B

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### Deep Down Under the Surface

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In truth, the world is filled with God's glory—*melo chol ha'aretz kevodo* (Yeshaya 6:3). Hashem's presence is found everywhere. Since we are essentially spiritual beings, we should be able to see it all the time. However, we don't see Him everywhere, even though He *is*; our weak perception serves as a barrier to block our awareness of Him. If a blind person is in a room with beautiful paintings, he won't see them because his perception is limited. Similarly, a person who can see but is wearing a blindfold won't be able to see the paintings either. At Har Sinai, Hashem removed the blindfolds that stop the human spirit from seeing Him. God let Himself be perceived. This is what Onkelos means—*isgelei*, God revealed Himself.

Chassidus teaches a basic rule of the spiritual world and the interplay between man and God. In the human experience, we oscillate between perception and non-perception of Hashem. Surprisingly, Hashem does not control this—it is controlled by people. He would reveal Himself, but we are the ones who don the blindfolds. The prophet says, "*Avonoseichem hayu mavdilim beineichem l'vein Elokeichem*. Your sins create a barrier between you and Hashem" (Yeshaya 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'letata*, the movement from below. Human beings create the beginning of the movement. Then Hashem responds with an *isarusa d'le'ila*, 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 warm up to him again as well. She could also make the first move to improve their relationship. According to Chassidus, in our relationship with Hashem, we have to make that first move. In *halacha*, the power of *teshuva* also begins from our side, from below. The Midrash (Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:2) phrases this as if Hashem says to us, “*Pischu li pesach echad shel teshuva k'chuda shel machat va'ani posei'ach lachem p'sachim sheyihyu agalos ukroniyos nichnasos bo*. Open for Me the tiniest crack of repentance [in your iron armor that is blinding you and blocking you from Me] and I will widen this crack to be wide enough for wagons and chariots to enter.” People must make that first move, and then Hashem responds with much more than what people can do themselves. The *isarusa d'letata* is the first move. It makes the first crack in the wall separating us from our Father in heaven. After we make the first move, Hashem will make the rest of the wall crumble.

The *pasuk* states, “*Mayim amukim eitza b'lev ish*. Deep waters are the thoughts of man's heart” (Mishlei 20:5). The Chovos Halevavos explains this *pasuk*. Underground, there is a lot of water, which can nurture many people, animals, and plants. The only problem is that it is not easily accessible. We have to dig deep to find it. Many people feel that they don't have 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. It is like an underground well waiting to be tapped to release its ample waters. In the human soul, there is a deep *eitza b'lev ish*, there is spiritual wisdom waiting to be tapped. This is where the *isarusa d'letata* 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 b'lev 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 hidden 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'letata* is the first step required to evoke the *isarusa d'le'eila*.

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### **Shabbos—the Best Day to Access Your Spiritual Reservoir**

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The best day of the week to open our spiritual reservoir is Shabbos, a day dedicated completely to God. We totally abandon our week-day 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'letata*, 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 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*; and for everyone, when we sing Lechah Dodi.

The day comes with so much revelation and holiness. The Jew begins the process with *isarusa d'letata* and Hashem continues with *isarusa d'le'ila*. Shabbos is the day of *matan Torah* because it 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.

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### ***Yeish and Ayin, To Be or Not to Be?***

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The Shem Mishmuel goes on to explain a great concept: the problem of *yeish* 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 compared to Him? The Shem Mishmuel explains the Chassidic understanding of the philosophical issue of man's worth in the shadow of God.

Chassidus and Torah in general take a dialectic approach to this issue. On one hand, humankind is great. People are like—and 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 the 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. As the *pasuk* states, "*Vatechas'reihu me'at mei'Elokim*" (Tehillim 8:6), we are just a little lower than God in this world.

On the other hand, our importance fades in contrast to the Creator of it all. When faced with God, people seem absolutely worthless. As the *pasuk* says, "What is man that you pay attention to him" (Tehillim 8:5). Our planet is not even a speck in the universe. The stars appear to us as mere pinpoints 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 would certainly

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, 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.

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### *Yeish and Ayin in Our Avodas Hashem*

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In Chassidus, there are two ways that we serve Hashem. One way is by being a *yeish*, 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 hayeish*, by being an *ayin*, a nothing, and losing oneself in the vastness of Hashem's infinite existence. 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 and ashes" (Bereishis 18:27). Hashem calls Avraham "*Ohavi*, my lover (Yeshaya 41:8)." Moshe Rabbeinu also said "*nachnu mah*, who are Aharon and I? We are nothing" (Shemos 16:7). 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 *yeish*, a something.

All of us experience 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 *yeish*. 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 *yeish*. We are more than anything else God created. He charged us with making this world a better place. We must help the poor and 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, since I myself am too weak. If I try too much, it is audacious. I will give myself over to the Master of the universe and let Him take me wherever He wants. This is the *midda* that Avraham expressed when he said, "I am nothing but dust," that Moshe expressed when he said *v'nachnu mah*. Dovid Hamelech similarly said, "*Anochi tola'as v'lo ish*, I am [insignificant as a] worm and not a man," Hashem shelters me and protects me (Tehillim 22:7).

This is how Hashem treated Bnei Yisrael when He took them out of Mitzrayim, as the *pasuk* says, "*Va'esa eschem al kanfei nesharim va'avi eschem eilay*" (Shemos 19:4). Hashem lifted Bnei Yisrael onto clouds of glory and carried them to Sinai to receive the Torah. Today, too, we are riding on His wings. We are nothing, like little children clinging to our mother's bosom, as the *pasuk* (Tehillim 131:2) describes, *k'gamul alay 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 all involved in this paradox between *yeish* 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 have to work to get our jobs done, and we must be willing to step back to let Hashem do the work.

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### Shabbos and *Yeish* and *Ayin*

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During the six days of the week, we are a *yeish*. 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 sa'amod al dam rei'echa* (Vayikra 19:16). We have to stop the injustice of the world. *Tzedek tzedek tirdof* (Devarim 16:20). 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* (Devarim 6:18). 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 also is 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 great and infinite nature."

On Shabbos, people are *ayin*, nothing. The spirituality of God Himself overwhelms a person. It envelopes 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 the conflicts of the week are resolved. Shabbos is pleasant and quiet. All the spiritual barriers that we ourselves created during the six days disappear, whether we had failed in 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 souls 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 a dialectic between the *yeish* and the *ayin*, between the I and the not-I. Hashem gave us the Torah, and He gives us the power to study and understand it. He even gives us the power to make decisions about Torah, the power to implement it. This starts with the *talmid chocham*, who interprets Torah *lishma* as his mind understands it. God gave it to us. It is as if He says, “My dear Jewish children, take the Torah and use it. It is yours.” As the Gemara says (Kiddushin 32b), *Torah dilei*, the Torah of a *talmid chocham* is his own. This is why he can forgo his *kavod* as a *talmid chocham*. 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. Elsewhere (Bava Metzia 59b), the Gemara says that Hashem said, “*nitzchuni banaiy*.” Now that My children have made a decision about *halacha*, I must also understand the Torah as my children have explained it. The *talmid chocham* is special, the ultimate creation of God.

On other hand, the Gemara says (Nedarim 55a), if someone wants to merit to receive Torah in its fullest sense, he must be like the desert. You have to make yourself like a desert with no needs, no trees or flowers. A person who wants to gain Torah must not be interested in a fat bank account or luxuries. He is like a desert, which doesn't even have rain. There is nothing there but sand and dust, like Avraham said about himself. Then a person

can be *zocheh* to Torah. Hashem gave it to us and gave us power to explain and develop it. As special and great as we are, though, to receive Hashem's special, incredible Torah, we must understand that a person is ultimately nothing. Moshe was the humblest of all people. This is why he was *zocheh* to Torah. Humble people are the greatest Torah scholars and the greatest Jews.

My Rebbe, Rav Moshe Feinstein *zt"l*, was so humble. My Rebbe Muvhak, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *zt"l*, was so humble. These two great giants always had time to answer even the silliest question of a young student. They made themselves like a *midbar*. They were 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 the 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.

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### Recognize Your Amazing Abilities

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However, someone who wants to be a great student of Torah also must 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! As a teacher, I am constantly surprised that so many students become great in Torah. Their amazing abilities lie untapped beneath the surface. Once tapped, they gush forth great 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 seven or eight know whole *sefarim* 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 the same time, we must realize we are dust at the feet of our Torah teachers. It is important to let the teacher take you on his wings up to the Torah. It is important to be humble, not a *ba'al ga'ava*. The Torah abhors 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'letata* and *isarusa d'le'ila*. We start as a *yeish*, and God finishes, for we are also an *ayin*. God responds to us 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 *zocheh* to the Torah of the six days of the week and 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!

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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

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## EXERCISES

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1. Make a week's chart. List times when you were a *yeish*. List times when you were an *ayin*.
2. What is easier for you to be—a *yeish* or an *ayin*?
3. For a week, focus on one way to behave as a *yeish*. 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.



# *Answers and Exercises*

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