

THE PATH UP SINAI

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d spoke all these statements, saying . . . (Shemos 20:1)

To experience the Divine, there is nothing like it. And there is nothing today to let us know what it was like then, the day the world stood still for its Creator to break all the rules and personally address the human race. There wasn't just one representative, but 3,000,000 plus another 3,000,000 from the Erev Rav. That's why there is no way to believe in the Sinai Experience unless you accept the tradition that it happened, because there is nothing to compare it to today at this stage of history.

Well, that is only partially true. Perhaps one of the most unique aspects of the Sinai Experience was that even people who were unworthy to experience it, also experienced it. Today, if you want a taste of the Divine, if you want to have a Sinai Experience, you have to work for it. We may not be able to return to the Divinely-cloaked Sinai physically at this point in time, but we can go to the Sinai that really counts, and that is what the following account is about:

The rabbis taught: Four entered Pardes: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and Rebi Akiva. Rebi Akiva told them, "When you arrive at the Stones of Pure Marble, don't say, 'Water, water,' because it says, 'He who speaks falsehood will not be established before My eyes.' (Tehillim 101:7)." Ben Azzai gazed at the Divine Presence and died, and with respect to him it says, "Difficult in the eyes of G-d is the death of His pious ones." (Tehillim 116:15). Ben Zoma gazed and went mad. To him the following verse may be applied: Have you found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for you, so that you do not consume too much and have to vomit it ... (Mishlei 25:16). Acher "cut off his plantings" (i.e., he became a heretic). Rebi Akiva entered in peace and departed in peace. (Chagigah 14b)

A little obscure, no? It becomes even more difficult to understand when we take into account Tosfos's words:

For example, by way of a Name, they didn't actually go "up," rather it appeared to them as if they went up. (Tosfos)

In other words, Tosfos is explaining, these four rabbis meditated on one of the Names of G-d to intellectually transcend levels of Torah consciousness, to which the word "Pardes" alludes. Indeed, though the word itself means "orchard" (and is the Hebrew source of the English word "paradise" because the original paradise, Gan Aiden, was an orchard), the four letters are in fact the first letters

of four other words: Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod.

As it is well known, Torah can be learned on four distinct levels: Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod (literally: Simple, Hint, Exegetical, and Mystery). This means that a Torah concept, like reality, has many levels of meaning, from the simple to the most sublime.

In fact, these four levels of learning also correspond to four areas of Torah learning: Mikrah (Chumash), Mishnah, Talmud, and Kabbalah, respectively. Thus, "entering" Pardes is also a process of going from one area of Torah learning to a higher one, from Pshat to Remez, to Drush, and finally to Sod.

Another way of looking at these four levels is as layers, concentric spheres that overlap each other like layers of an onion. Pshat represents the most outer, obvious layer, while Sod represents the most hidden, inner, and essential layer. In fact, Sod, being the most inner layer, is said to be enclothed by Drush, which is enclothed by Remez, all of which are enclothed by the most outer layer, Pshat.

And, at the very center of all of them is Ain Sof, the light of G-d that sustains all of existence, and which we are supposed to strive to reach each day of our lives. And, according to Talmud, it is something we can do in degrees without even changing physical locations!

SHABBOS DAY:

In the beginning G-d made the Heaven and the Earth. (Bereishis 1:1)

For example, the first word of the Torah is "Bereishis," which is generally translated as, "in the beginning." This is the simplest explanation of this word, and therefore it is the Pshat of this word.

However, as Rashi points out, the form of the word is actually grammatically incorrect. If one wants to say, "in the beginning," he should instead write, "b'rishonah." Now, since the Torah is perfect and was dictated by G-d to Moshe Rabbeinu letter-by-letter, the fact that "Bereishis" was not spelled grammatically correct, Rashi explains, HINTS to a deeper level of meaning.

Thus, Rashi explains, the word "bereishis" can actually be read as two words: "reishis" with the letter "bais." Thus, on the level of Remez, the first word of the Torah no longer only means "in the beginning," but can also be translated as, "for reishis," which as Rashi proves, is an allusion to Torah and the Jewish people. On this level of explanation, the posuk would read:

For the sake of Torah and the Jewish people, G-d made Heaven and Earth.

However, beyond this, there is nothing more unusual about the word to suggest to the physical eye even deeper layers of understanding. To go beyond the level of Pshat and Remez is a matter for the mind's eye, and usually a function of a known tradition passed down from generation to generation. This is the level of Drush.

Continuing with our example, we know from the Torah that the world was created in six days, and that all the matter for the six days of creation came into being, at least in potential, the moment G-d said, "Bereishis." And, not just for the six days of creation, but for the six millennia that followed as well, like a script that is written and completed in advance of the play. The question is, is there an allusion to this idea in the word itself?

The answer emerges when the word "bereishis" is once again divided into two parts, but this time between the first three and the last three letters of the word. This yields to two smaller words: "bara" and "shis," which mean, "He created six," "shis" being the Aramaic form of the word "shaish," which means "six."

Thus, exegetically, the first word of the Torah reveals a very important philosophical fact: when G-d made the world ex nihilo on Day One of creation, He created the potential for anything and everything that would ever exist in creation at that first moment. Nothing in history, therefore, can ever be considered random.

What about the level of Sod? What Kabbalistic teaching emerges from the word bereishis that reveals to us a secret about creation?

On this level of explanation, the word bereishis is once again divided into two parts as on the level of Drush. However, this time the word "shis" alludes not only to the six days of creation and the subsequent six millennia, but also to the six sefiros of Chesed through YeSod, spiritual emanations into which G-d encoded the script for 6000 years of history:

... This is why so much time must transpire from the time of creation until the time of the tikun (i.e., Moshiach's coming): all the forces of Gevuros are rooted in the six sefiros - Chesed, Gevurah, Tifferes, Netzach, Hod, YeSod - which are the six days of creation, and also the 6000 years of history that the world will exist. And within them (the six sefiros) are the roots of all that will happen from the six days of creation until the Final Rectification. (Drushei Olam HaTohu 2:151b)

The significance of this information may not be obvious to one who is unfamiliar with the Sefiros. However, for our purposes, it is enough to know that within one word, there are four layers of meaning, each one true meaning, but each one more specific and revealing than the previous one. And, even though one level may allude to a deeper level of explanation than itself, that deeper level is only revealed once the "clothing" of the previous level has been "removed," which is necessary if one wants to get to the essence of an idea.

However, the intellectual gap between each of the four levels is not vital. Indeed, the difference in depth of understanding between Pshat and Remez - Mikrah and Mishnah - is less than the difference between Remez and Drush - Mishnah and Talmud. This is easily evident once one has experienced all three areas of Torah learning.

Furthermore, the difference between the level of Drush and Sod is far greater than the difference in

levels of understanding between Remez and Drush, even though Sod is one of four levels of learning. In fact, the first three letters of Pardes spell the word "pered," which means "separation," because they are separate from the realm of Kabbalah.

Thus, the four rabbis who entered Pardes entered an intellectual paradise, so-to-speak, which is what made it so dangerous. For, to go beyond one's intellectual capability is to damaging to oneself, perhaps even fatal.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

No one can see My face because no man can see Me and live! (Shemos 33:20)

This was, in essence, what G-d told Moshe Rabbeinu on top of Har Sinai. As the Kabbalists explain, "face" here refers to a more direct revelation of G- d, which is the end result of successfully entering Pardes to the greatest extent possible.

According to the Zohar, the reason why Rebi Akiva and his colleagues had entered Pardes was to change the course of history. It was just after the Romans had destroyed the Second Temple, and Jewish blood flowed through the streets from massacre after massacre. Rebi Akiva had planned to lead his group into the deepest and most hidden levels of Sod, in order to rectify the sin of Adam HaRishon, and bring history into Yemos HaMoshiach.

However, as the Talmud recounts, he barely escaped with his life, let alone rectify the sin of Adam HaRishon. Along the way, he lost three important and distinguished colleagues, one to death, one to insanity, and one became a quintessential heretic. Who is qualified to even enter Pardes as these rabbis did, if they themselves could not survive the intellectual journey?

Fortunately, even the realm of Sod is multi-layered, and the lowest of levels allows for much safer access, and crucial information for constructing the "Big Picture" of Jewish history and Torah thought. It is said that Rebi Akiva hid the "keys" for penetrating further levels than Sod until Moshiach's time, though he left enough doors open to provide crucial insights for future generations of Jews.

Kabbalistically speaking, these four levels also correspond to the four worlds, or four levels of consciousness: Asiyah, Yetzirah, Beriyah, and Atzilus - that span between the most mundane and the most sublime. Thus, when one penetrates Torah and reaches deeper levels of Torah understanding, they are, in fact, reaching higher worlds and levels of consciousness.

Furthermore, though we possess only one soul, that soul has five parts: Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah, Chiyah, and Yechidah, the latter being closest to G-d, and the first one being the furthest from G-d and existing in the blood of the person (Derech Hashem, 3:1:4). These levels act as a bridge between G-d, whose pure spiritual reality is too great for the human body to experience, and the body that must receive G-d's light to survive.

For all intents and purposes, Yechidah is so abstract and sublime that we don't deal with it or relate to it, but talk about the bottom four levels instead. It will be a level that we will come to know first hand in the uppermost levels of the World-to-Come. As can be surmised, Nefesh corresponds to Mikrah and Asiyah; Ruach corresponds to Mishnah and Yetzirah; Neshamah corresponds to Talmud and Beriyah; Chiyah corresponds to Kabbalah and Atzilus.

Hence, the journey into Torah is a journey into self, from the outer world of physicality into the inner world of spirituality. For, it must be pointed out that as much as the path from Pshat to Sod is viewed as being linear, that is, as if from a lower level to a higher one, that is only one way of looking at it. The other way, and perhaps the most accurate way to express the "ascent" is from a more external (chitzoni) level to a more internal (penimi) level, as in the diagram:

Therefore, like the worlds they correspond to, each level of Torah-learning is an outer "layer" for the one higher than it, so that the most internal level is on the inside - like the soul within the body, and each level after that, like the soul within the soul (Dayah 2:179b; Chelek HaBiurim, Sha'ar HaAkudim, 1:7).

MELAVE MALKAH:

If you want it as you do silver, and search after it like buried treasures, then you will understand fear of G-d - Da'as Elokim you will find. (Mishlei 2:4)

As we have now seen, entering the world of Torah is a process of "entering Pardes," which is a process of intellectually piercing the message of Torah - be it through a mitzvah, a story, or a narration; of going from the simplest understanding (Pshat) to the deepest possible understanding (Sod). This creates the possibility of ascending from the lowest world to the higher worlds, depending upon the spiritual and intellectual ability of the person. Therefore, it is not surprising to hear Kabbalists teach:

Anyone who learns Kabbalah and that which it deals with, then he is completely in Atzilus, where only the light of G-d is. He causes a major rectification in the holy light of His Name, more than when he learns any other section of Torah . . . All the words of the Arizal are in Atzilus . . . (Dayah 1:113b).

If anything, this teaches that one must not be satisfied with lower levels of learning Torah, for they are stepping stones along the path to much higher levels. Any learning of Torah brings rectification of creation, but the deeper the level of learning, the more specific and profound the tikun can be to the person and Creation. One must always strive for more, according to his or her level of ability to grasp concepts and relate to them.

All of this has the effect of unifying the Name of G-d in the minds of men. The direct effect over time, depending on how many Jews are learning Torah and how well Torah is being learned, brings the light of G-d into Creation until His reality is obvious to all. This is what will happen upon the arrival of Moshiach, and it was of this that the prophet spoke when he prophesied:

On that day Hashem will be One and His Name One. (Zechariah 14:9)

Another way of referring to the levels of Pardes is the "seventy faces of Torah" (Bamidbar Rabbah, Naso 13:15). The concept of a face is something that reveals on the outside what is hidden on the inside. The number seventy is called the number of wisdom, as it says:

Anyone who becomes settled through wine has the knowledge of his Creator ... has the knowledge of the Seventy Elders; wine was given with seventy letters (Rashi: the gematria of yaiyin - wine - is 70), and the mystery (of Torah) was given with seventy letters (Sod mystery - also equals 70). When wine goes in, secrets go out. (Eiruvim 65a)

Wherever a revelation of Divine knowledge is meant to occur, the number seventy is bound to be in the vicinity. For example, in the Mishkan itself, the distance from the entrance of the Courtyard until the veil in front of the Holy of Holies was seventy amos. The Holy of Holies was the location of the Aron HaKodesh - the Holy Ark - which is said to have taken up more room than was allotted - a great miracle and revelation of G-d (Megillah 10b).

This is also why the first exile into Babylonia was seventy years, since at the end a great miracle occurred and therefore, a great revelation of G-d and a raising of the national Jewish consciousness.

Ultimately, what is being revealed as one delves into the depths of Torah and penetrates the seventy faces of Torah is something called Da'as Elyon, or Da'as Elokim - G-d's knowledge, at least as much as man is meant to grasp. It is to achieve this that one is supposed to use all of his abilities and energies to pursue, as Shlomo HaMelech wrote:

If you want it as you do silver, and search after it like buried treasures, then you will understand fear of G-d - Da'as Elokim you will find. (Mishlei 2:4)

To reach that, one must pass through gates, fifty gates to be exact. Or, as it is better known, through the Nun Sha'arei Binah - the Fifty Gates of Understanding - something with which Creation was made:

Nun Sha'arei Binah - Fifty Gates of Understanding - were created in the world, and all of them were given to Moshe except for one. (Rosh Hashanah 21b; Nedarim 38a)

The Zohar says it like this:

G-d took Mem-Yud and threw it to Aleph-Lamed-Heh and made Elokim (Aleph- Lamed-Heh-Mem-Yud) ... (The word Mem-Yud, whose gematria is 50, alludes to the Fifty Gates of Understanding). (Zohar 1:4a)

Thus, it seems as if the Fifty Gates represent a certain level of spiritual and intellectual awareness that allows one to see that G-d, Who runs the Upper World, runs the Lower World as well, precisely the same message of the Shema. Exactly why they are called the Fifty Gates is a matter of Kabbalah, but whatever the reason, it is an awareness gained through teshuvah and represented by the letters,

Mem-Yud, whose numerical value is fifty.

The essence of all of this is the search for and experience of the Divine. To enter Pardes is to embark on the climb of the inner Har Sinai, to go within and seek G-d. 3,500 years ago, on the physical mountain itself, Moshe made boundaries so that the people could experience the Shechinah, the Immanent Presence of the Creator, and still remain alive. Today, we too have boundaries for a safe journey; one that is motivated by a sincere desire to come close to G-d, with Torah and our sages as our guides along the path.

Have a great Shabbos,
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Text

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