

The
CHASSIDUS
PERSPECTIVE
with Reb Yoel Kahn



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CHASSIDUS AND THE NUMBER THREE

Sivan and Kislev share a common denominator: Sivan is the third month when counting from Nissan, the first of the months, while Kislev is the third month when counting from Tishrei, the beginning of the year.

The Torah and Gemara both make a point of stating that the Torah was given “in the third month” (Sivan). Similarly, various aspects of *penimiyus hatorah* are related to the third month, Kislev.

This requires an explanation. Why the emphasis on three? Torah is all about revealing that Hashem is *one*. Seemingly, it would have been more appropriate to connect *Matan Torah* with the first month!

A THOROUGH ONENESS

In truth, however, it is specifically the number three that is associated with true oneness.

There is a level of unity where one only knows of one existence to begin with; he doesn't know of anything else. This isn't true unity. True unity is where one is aware of another existence—he realizes there is a world out there—and yet recognizes that Hashem is one.

Even when one is aware of another existence, it is possible to adopt an attitude where the opposing existence (the surrounding world) is insignificant, and doesn't distract him from focusing on Hashem. Although this is a great accomplishment, it is also not true oneness. The deepest level of unity is when one transforms the opposing entity into a vessel for *Elokus*.

INSPIRATION VERSUS CHANGE

At the time of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Jews experienced a major revelation from Hashem, which led them to leave everything behind and follow Hashem into the desert. Yet, Chazal state that they retained a coarseness that endured until *Matan Torah*. What does this mean? Hadn't they been inspired to follow Hashem with perfect faith?

The explanation is simple: The great revelation they had experienced drew them to Hashem, but did not bring about an internal change. The only way one can transform one's actual character is by dealing with it head-on.

For example, we know there are various Heavenly voices that call

out every day. What is their purpose, if we cannot hear them? The Baal Shem Tov explains that sometimes, a person is beset by a sudden urge to repent. This inspiration is the result of these Heavenly announcements. But although the arousal may be powerful, it does not transform our negative character traits.

Negative character traits such as arrogance must be targeted and addressed at the root. One must pinpoint why he holds highly of himself, and then proceed to reflect on why it's not a valid reason to be haughty. If one is

blessed with wealth, he can contemplate on the fact that his riches are not the result of his business acumen but a blessing from Hashem. The same is true if he is arrogant because of his talents. As long as that doesn't happen, no Heavenly awakening will help. A person can study the Gemara that states that Hashem despises the haughty, but as long as the latent motive for arrogance is still present, no inspiration will really help.

The day after leaving Mitzrayim, the Jews began counting the *omer*. *Sefiras ha'omer* is about making real life changes that no inspiration would ever bring. An arrogant person realizes that there is nothing for him to be haughty about; a person who indulges in pleasures recognizes that the things he desires have no value; and so on. From *chesed sheb'chesed* until *malchus sheb'malchus*, we elevate each individual character trait.

TWO TYPES OF STUDENTS

On the other hand, there is an advantage in the inspiration that comes from Above. Let's say a person desires to do *teshuvah*, so he learns about Hashem's greatness and how bitter it is to forsake Him. The feelings of bitterness he arouses within himself are limited, as they are the result of *his* understanding of Hashem's greatness. He will not be inspired to throw everything behind and follow Hashem, as the Jews did when they left Mitzrayim. Such an intense inspiration can only be received from Above.

Chassidus refers to these two competing advantages as *milmaalah lematah* and *milmatah lemaalah*: An inspiration from Above creates a much greater awakening, while a change created from below is more personal and enduring.

A good illustration of this principle is a teacher teaching a student. In one case, the teacher imparts the information and the student

understands it; however, the teacher hasn't trained him to think for himself. If he will be given a new piece of Gemara to study, he will be at loss; similarly, he will be unable to develop independent insights. In a second scenario, the teacher shows the student *how* to learn. His thought-process changes, and he is able to proceed independently.

Which one is better? It depends what you're talking about.

One cannot compare the ideas a student comes up with on his own with those he receives from his teacher. The teacher is much wiser than the student, and his insights are much deeper. However, the student's thoughts are *his own*. This is unlike the first student, who is essentially still an ignoramus. He may appear to be a great scholar, but it's not *his* scholarship—it's the scholarship of his teacher.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos states that R. Eliezer ben Hurcanus outweighed the rest of his colleagues. At the same time, R. Elazar ben Arach outweighed everyone, including R. Eliezer ben Hurcanus. What's going on here?

R. Eliezer is described as "a cemented cistern that doesn't lose a drop," while R. Elazar is defined as "a gushing stream." R. Eliezer was unmatched in his ability to retain everything his teachers taught him, causing his knowledge to be far superior. R. Elazar, on the other hand, was greater in his *personal* level of academic achievement, exceeding even R. Eliezer in this area.

THE THIRD MONTH

This is the difference between the first two months of the year. Nissan is the month of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, representing a Heavenly inspiration that arouses us greatly, but does not cause an actual change. Iyar is unique in that we count the *omer* each day of the month (unlike Nissan and Sivan). It is a time devoted to individual development, yet the extent of our motivation is limited.

Sivan, the third month, is when *Matan Torah* occurred. The Midrash states that *Matan Torah* is when those Above descended below and those below ascended Above, the combination of *milmaalah lematah* and *milmatah lemaalah*. A Heavenly revelation is "one"; an effort from below is "two"; but "three" is when they both come together.

Matan Torah—"three"—is what brings about true unity. When there is only inspiration from Above, the person cannot truly be said to have become united with *Elokus*. Similarly, when there is only human motivation from below, one does not fully connect to Hashem, as the extent of his efforts are limited. It is only through the power of Torah that true unity is achieved; through Torah, Hashem and Yisroel become one.

UNDERSTAND AND BELIEVE!

Chassidus introduced a novel approach to *achdus Hashem*, the concept of Hashem's unity. The Baal Shem Tov explained that *achdus Hashem* doesn't only mean that there is no *ruling entity* other than Hashem, but also that there is no *existence* other than Him.

While the Baal Shem Tov presented this idea without explaining it that much, the Alter Rebbe elaborated upon it so that it could be grasped intellectually. The Alter Rebbe accomplished more than just a new understanding of Hashem's unity. It was a new step, that G-dly ideas need not remain in the realm of belief, but could also be understood.

Emunah means that a person feels a G-dly light from Above, compelling him to believe. Although powerful, it does not permeate the person. Intellect, on the other hand, means that the person *himself* internalizes the idea. However, the extent of his understanding is limited.

When the Alter Rebbe brought concepts of *emunah* into intellect, the *emunah* did not become "watered down" as a result. To the contrary, understanding *Elokus* only strengthens a Jew's *emunah* and *mesiras nefesh*. With Chassidus Chabad, the Alter Rebbe succeeded in harmonizing these two perspectives.

This is the actualization of "three," where *Elokus* is introduced below without being sacrificed in the process, and at the same time, we can grasp these G-dly ideas and internalize them. This serves as a preparation for Moshiach's arrival, when "Hashem will be one, and His name will be one."

For further learning see *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 20, pp. 180ff.

The teacher's insights are much deeper than those of the student. However, the student's thoughts are his *own*.



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