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# Speaking Torah



Spiritual  
Teachings  
from  
around

the Maggid's Table

Volume  
1

Genesis • Exodus • Leviticus

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with Ebn Leader, Ariel Evan Mayse  
and Or N. Rose

*For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds*

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### NO'AM ELIMELEKH

Moses said: "We will all go, young and old; we will go with our sons and daughters, flocks and herds; for we must observe the festival of Y-H-W-H."  
(Ex. 10:9)

The Gemara says: At the celebration of water drawing [the elders] used to say: "Happy is our youth that did not shame our old age" (b. Sukkah 53a). This implies that they followed the right and holy path even when they were young. Thus, in their old age they were not ashamed of the deeds of their youth. But if your youthful behavior is not holy you may be ashamed of your actions when you mature. Then you will have to break your old habits, so it is better to act with sanctity now.

Thus we understand the verse: "Teach a youth according to his way, and he will not leave it even when he ages" (Prov. 22:6). If you educate your children in this way [of holiness] they will not have to change paths in midlife. Rather they will be able to continue on the path of their youth throughout their whole life. It will be much easier for them to serve the blessed Holy One.

Thus the verse says: **We will all go, young and old**, meaning we will act and walk in holiness in both our youth and in our old age. **Our sons and daughters**, we will also guide on holy paths. **Our flocks and herds**, even our material occupations—business, eating, drinking and the like will all be part of our path toward the blessed One. **For we must observe the festival**

of Y-H-W-H, meaning a fire of enthusiasm for God's service burns in us. This is easy to understand.

וְאֵלֶיךָ

Indeed, this is easy to understand. What parent does not appreciate the good habits acquired in childhood and strive to share them with children? Yet this teaching also reflects a world in which children following the paths of their parents is a primary value. What carries over from this teaching in a world where so many of us have broken radically with the way of our parents? Is shame in "the deeds of youth" the only possible result of midlife change?

### OR HA-ME'IR

Moses raised his hand toward heaven and there was a great darkness in all the Land of Egypt ... people did not see their brothers and no person could rise from where he was seated.

(Ex. 10:22-23)

Here we derive a moral teaching. People have eyes, yet they do not see the good qualities of the enlightened. They are too busy justifying their own ways, whether good or ill. This keeps them from rising to a higher rung. Thus I have explained the Mishnah (Avot 1:17) "All my days I grew up among the sages" to mean that I was capable of growing, rising from one level to the next, not just standing still, because I was "among the sages." I was able to see how small I was, not yet having learned a single one of my masters' ways.

One who wants to attain a high rung needs to fulfill "I have learned from all my teachers" (Ps. 119:99), as explained by the sages (b. Ta'anit 7a): "I learned much from my teachers, [and more from my companions,] but from my students most of all." This is especially true of all the good qualities each person can learn from a friend or companion (*haver*).

But our generation is filled with lots of ignorant people who do not know their right from their left. Nevertheless they burst forth to take God's name and glory for themselves, while seeking to insult others and to gain glory by deriding them. This leads to baseless hatred, due to our many sins....

This is the **great darkness in all the Land of Egypt**. Where awareness is lacking, there is great darkness. You then fall into the narrow places

(mitsrayim/metsar yam). But Scripture then tells us what this darkness is: **people did not see their brothers.** "See" means that they didn't consider them ... they didn't take to heart how much they could learn from the goodness of the people around them. On the contrary, they kept finding fault and lack in others, glorifying their own deeds. This led them to walk about in darkness and to see no light. People like that cannot progress from one rung to the next; **no person could rise from where he was seated.** They stood about rather than walking forward, as a Jew is always supposed to do.



Spiritual friendship, seeking to live in a community of like-minded companions and learning from their ways, is among the most precious teachings of Hasidism. While the movement is often seen as built upon the "vertical" relationship of master and disciples, the "horizontal" glance, considering and learning from the practice and goodness of "brothers," is no less important.

### ***ORAH LE-HAYYIM***

Our possessions [lit. "cattle"] too will go along with us; not a portion [lit. "hoof"] of them will remain, for we will take of them to serve Y-H-W-H our God.  
(Ex. 10:26)

... "A mixed multitude went up with them" (Ex. 12:38). Those were the ones in whom holy sparks had become admixed in Egypt. This is why Moses wanted to bring them forth. But the blessed Holy One saw that they were not ready and did not want to bring them out yet.

Before Abraham our Father brought forth either Ishmael or Isaac, he was active in bringing to birth the souls of proselytes. These, his disciples, would convert, and they were considered his children. When Moses addressed the wise elders of Israel saying, "Draw forth and take unto yourselves of the locks [tson] for your families" (Ex. 12:21) ... he was telling them to take those who were coming out (tson/tsenah), the mixed multitude of fallen souls, and draw them close, raise them up, and bring them near to the service of Y-H-W-H. Onkelos translates "for your families" to read "as our seed," meaning that you should teach them and draw them near to God's service so that you consider them your own children....

This is what Moses meant when he said: **Our possessions too**—this refers to the mixed multitude, those we have acquired and brought near to ourselves, **will go along with us; not a portion of them will remain behind.** The word *parsah* can mean [either "hoof" or] "portion"; *peres* alone, however, could mean "portion," so that these are "the portion of the letter *heh*," referring to the *shekhinah*, the latter *heh* of Y-H-W-H. It is known from the *Zohar* and other books that proselytes are rooted in that place, and no spark of them was to be left behind in Egypt....

**For we will take of them to serve Y-H-W-H our God.** It was for the sake of these holy sparks that we came into Egypt, in order to raise them up. We became enslaved in bricks and mortar ... and suffered our own exile in order to do so. It was for the sake of this that we came near to God's service. Therefore **we will take of them to serve Y-H-W-H our God:** it is for this purpose that we ourselves have been drawn near to the service of Y-H-W-H.



There is no stronger statement anywhere of "the mission of Israel." The Jewish people has been called as a "kingdom of priests" in order to serve God by finding holy souls and sparks throughout the world, beyond their own borders, and drawing them close to the single God who is the source of all. This is why we were sent into Egypt, and this is why God brought us forth. Even if we have to convince God that they are ready to come forth with us, that is part of our role. Is this why we were sent into our present diaspora as well?

### ***KEDUSHAT LEVI***

This month will be the first of the months for you.  
(Ex. 12:2)

RaSHI notes that Moses had difficulty with [calculating] the birth moment of the new moon. Why did Moses have this "difficulty"? Because he wanted full redemption to happen within his lifetime. That would mean an end to the waning of the moon, that "the light of the moon be like that of the sun" (Is. 30:26), as it will be in the days of our righteous redeemer, speedily in our time. Amen.



This fragment of a teaching shows Levi Yitshak at his most audacious. Moses's "difficulty" is really an objection. Why should the moon have to wane and then have to undergo rebirth every month? The homily was a comment on the Talmudic tale (b. Hullin 60b) about the competition between the "two great lights," in which the moon oversteps her bounds and is punished by the decree of the monthly cycle. God realizes this to be an injustice and seeks atonement for having wronged the moon.

Since the moon is a well-established female symbol in Kabbalah, might it be possible to see Levi Yitshak as protesting the diminished status of women as well as that of the moon? Or is that just wishful thinking?

### HAYYIM VA-HESED (FROM VA-ERA)

This month [*hodesh*] is the first [*rosh*] of months for you.

(Ex. 12:2)

Change and renewal (*hithadshut/hodesh*) do not apply to the blessed Holy One, who is beyond time. The renewal that God sends us is in fact **for you**, that is, for our sake.... It becomes part of our nature, something we are used to. That is the meaning of "nature" [*teva'*]; the renewal of light is imprinted (*nitba'*) upon us, bringing about a human need.

The time will come in the future when "He will sate your soul with resplendence" (*tsahtsehot*; Is. 58:11) will be fulfilled in us. The light will be so brilliant that we will ever be thirsting for it; [we will be sated with greater thirst]. The word *tsahtsehot* comes from *tsah*, meaning "dry" or "thirsty." But meanwhile the blessed Holy One sends us renewal, so that we are able to raise ourselves up to God.

This is the meaning of **This month [*hodesh*] is the first [*rosh*] ... for you.** It is through [paying attention to] the heads of things (*rosh*) that we are renewed and raise ourselves up to God. That is why the verse is introduced by "Speak to all the community of the Children of Israel...." The whole community can come to behave in such a way because of this renewal.

But "nature" is in fact a lie. The truth is that the blessed Holy One conducts everything: God changes the times, varies the seasons, and orders the stars. The stars and constellations that seem so natural are changed according to God's will. If we were always at the level of clarity to realize

that God conducts everything, we would have no need for renewal. But our nature causes us to need it.

When God sends us miracles and the force of renewal, we become able to uplift ourselves above everything in nature so that we come to know that God conducts everything, including nature itself. That is why Scripture refers to *nes le-hitnoses*, "a banner-flying miracle" (Ps. 60:6). God sends us the miracle so that we can fly like a banner, lifting ourselves up to God....



Plays on *hodesh*, *hiddush*, and *hithadshut*, "month," "innovation," especially in Torah interpretation, and personal "renewal" abound in the early literature of Hasidism, probably reaching back to wordplays and aphorisms of the Ba'al Shem Tov himself. Note that the ideal future is not a time of comfortable satiety, but a time of constant thirst. "The light will be so brilliant that we will be ever thirsting for it."

The illusion of "nature" is a key villain of the Hasidic imagination. The natural quickly descends into become "ordinary" or "habitual." To see life this way is fully as bad as observing Torah as mere habit. World and teaching are both in need of constant renewal, a gift given us by God, if only we open our eyes to it.

**Bo**

## Round Two

- AG: Most of these teachings seem to reach out to one or another broader community, whether toward the convert, across generations, or to one's "brother" within the Hasidic community. That's appropriate for the Exodus, such a communal event.
- EL: The sense of being there for others is very strong; the passage on the "mixed multitude" is especially impressive. But is there a price to pay here? We are very critical of a Jewish life that is lived "for somebody else"—whether one's kids, one's parents, or one's congregants!
- OR: But this is the moment when the people itself is forged. They had to ask (as we do!): "Who are my people? Where are its borders? Who's in and who's out?"
- AG: In Egypt they were a forced community, defined as such by their oppressors (think of Jews in the bad old days of the Soviet Union).

Now that they're free, they have to choose the contours of their community.

OR: But they want to take the sparks out of Egypt; that means carrying something of that memory with them.

AM: When you go to a new place (whether physical or psychological) you always have to ask: How much of my past do I want to bring along? And how about the next generation? How much of my past do I want or need to pass on to them?

EL: Remember, not every generation has to rebel. Some generations accept the legacy of the past as a gift. That's what the *No'am Elimelekh* is aiming for here.

OR: We have teachers and students here, parents and children, Israel and the proselytes. Is it always clear who the "giver" is in these relationships, or does each side receive as well as give?

AM: The teachers and friends we really care about are those who see our unique spark. That means they are receiving from us, not just pouring the tradition into us.

EL: Yes, I'm always wary of pious people who love Jews in the abstract but have no room for the real differences between people and their needs.

OR: That somehow is what the Exodus experience is for me. Being out of Egypt, being free, but also being among and surrounded by all those varied people.



## Be-Shalah

### *KEDUSHAT LEVI*

Toward morning, the sea returned to its course.  
(Ex. 14:27)

The sea beheld the great pleasure its splitting had brought to God, since it caused Israel to sing. It did not want to return to its normal course. "Let me remain dry land and let Israel go on singing forever!" That is why Scripture had to tell us that it returned to its course (*etano*); it followed the condition (*tena'o*) set for it, that it split only for Moses, but afterwards returned to being an ordinary sea.

This also settles a question raised by the *Or ha-Hayyim*, who asked what was so extraordinary about the sea's splitting. Didn't the Jordan also split [for Joshua], and the River Ginai for Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair (b. Hullin 7a)? But now we understand the difference. Those rivers had already seen the great pleasure God derived from the splitting of the Reed Sea. They therefore lovingly *desired* to split. But the sea hadn't yet seen the joy that was to come to its Creator. That was the difference.



This is Levi Yitshak's vision of the world. All creatures are as filled as he is with the desire to bring pleasure and joy to God! Even the sea wants only that Israel keep on singing.