

Erev Shabbos Kodesh Parshas Va'eira 5770

# D'ei Chochmah L'nafshechah

“Let your soul know wisdom”

Parshas Va'eira

From the discourses of Moreinu v'Rabeinu  
the Gaon and Tzaddik Shlit'a

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*Shalosh Seudos<sup>1</sup> of Parshas Va'eira 5768*

”וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: כִּי יִדְבַר אֲלֵכֶם פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר, תִּנּוּ לָכֶם מוֹפֵת וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, קַח אֶת-מַטֵּךְ וְהִשְׁלַךְ לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה--יְהִי לְתַנִּינִן. וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה, וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן, כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'; וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אַהֲרֹן אֶת-מִטְהוֹ, לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וּלְפָנָי עֲבָדָיו--וַיְהִי לְתַנִּינִן. וַיִּקְרָא, גַּם-פַּרְעֹה, לַחֲכָמָיִם, וּלְמַכְשָׁפִים; וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גַם-הֵם חֲרֻטָּמַי מִצְרַיִם, בְּלִהְטִיהֶם כֵּן. וַיִּשְׁלִיכוּ אִישׁ מִטְהוֹ, וַיְהִיו לְתַנִּינִם; וַיִּבְלַע מִטְהַ אַהֲרֹן, אֶת-מִטְהֵם. וַיַּחֲזֵק יָד פַּרְעֹה, וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה'.”

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: ‘When Pharaoh shall speak to you, saying: Show a wonder for you; then you shall say to Aharon: Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it become a serpent.’ And Moshe and Aharon went in to Pharaoh, and they did so, as Hashem had commanded; and Aharon cast down his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did in the same manner with their secret arts. For they cast down every man his staff, and they became serpents; but Aharon’s staff swallowed up their staves. And Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he hearkened not to them, as Hashem had said.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The lesson was delivered at the third meal of Shabbos.

<sup>2</sup> Shemos 7:8-13

**Rashi explains:** “**And Aharon’s staff swallowed**—After it had returned to its original form of a staff, it swallowed all of them.<sup>3</sup>”

### **Smallness before Greatness**

We need to understand why the sign that was performed before Pharaoh was done specifically through the means of Aharon’s, rather than Moshe’s, staff. Moshe’s staff was the, “staff of G-d,”<sup>4</sup> after all. The *Zohar* teaches: “Why was it the staff of Aharon rather than the staff of Moshe? Because that of Moshe was more holy, and Hashem did not want to sully it with the rods of the sorcerers.”<sup>5</sup>

It is well known that there were many true *tzaddikim* who struggled with all of their might and main to reach Eretz Yisrael, but they were prevented by Divine decree. The Baal Shem Tov himself said that when he wanted to ascend to the land the *Soton* set himself against his plan and would not permit it by any means. The *Soton* knew full well that if the Baal Shem Tov would only attain his goal it would spark the redemption. It is also well known that when Rebbe Nachman of Breslov wanted to reach Eretz Yisrael he had to surmount significant obstacles along the way. When he passed through Istanbul, he had no choice but to lower himself to a state of *katnus* [by literally acting in an unexpectedly childish way], and he said that it was only by virtue of this descent into *katnus* that he was able to reach the holy land.<sup>6</sup>

It is vital that we appreciate what their experiences have to do with us, because the ultimate goal of our personal Divine service is to ascend to the level

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<sup>3</sup> *Shabbos* 97

<sup>4</sup> *Shemos* 4:20

<sup>5</sup> *Zohar* II:28a

<sup>6</sup> *Shivchei HaRan* #12

of Eretz Yisrael, which means living with a vital *emunah* and active connection with Hashem. What, then, is the meaning of the descent to the state of *katnus* that is a necessary prerequisite of boldly striding toward the holy land? Rav Pinchas of Koretz explained that this is at the root of why firstborn sons fast on *erev Pesach* and why *Ta'anis Esther* precedes Purim. Without them, it would be impossible to receive the *mochin d'gadlus* of those holy days. One must first be willing to descend into a state of *katnus* and not try to avoid it in order to later attain a state of *gadlus*.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Staff of Moshe and the Staff of Aharon**

The deeper meaning of this is to be found in the words of the *Zohar*: “The verse says, ‘He is Aharon and Moshe’—should it not have said, ‘They are Aharon and Moshe?’ Rather, the verse refers to them in singular language to indicate they their respective attributes of air and water should be joined together as one.”<sup>8</sup> Moshe and Aharon who are really like a single unit both grasped the staff which symbolizes the spine, because both of them are rooted in the level of *Yesod* within *Abba / Chochmah*—only that Moshe is connected with the right-hand side, and Aharon with the left.<sup>9</sup> It is from *Yesod d'Abba* that the light of the thirty-two pathways of *Chochmah* are drawn down by way of the spine [with its thirty-two pairs of spinal nerves] that supplies a person with all of his life-force. This concept finds expression in the teaching of the sages, that anyone who does not bow during *modim* of *Shemonah Esrei* will have his spine turned into a

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<sup>7</sup> *Imrei Pinchas, Sha'ar #3: Seder HaYom v'Inyanei Tefillah #162*

<sup>8</sup> *Zohar II:26b*

<sup>9</sup> Vilna Gaon, *Pirkei Heichalos; Eitz Chaim 32:6*

serpent, in manner of the staff that was transformed into a serpent.<sup>10</sup> The spine is the root of a person's *bitul*, which is why ego-deflation is expressed in bowing and prostrating oneself during *modim*. We do it in order to submit ourselves completely before the Creator of the universe.

This state of *bitul* has two stages to it—that of Moshe and that of Aharon. The pathway of Moshe Rabbeinu is called that of the “King’s valet” who draws down [Divine influence] from above to below just as water flows from above to below.<sup>11</sup> In terms of *avodah*, this is the process of experiencing a revelation of Hashem’s light within ourselves to a greater and greater extent until we are completely nullified and egoless before the Divine light. When a person contemplates Hashem’s existence and binds himself to it strongly, it draws into his entire being a G-dly vitality which stems from the light of *Chochmah*. This contrasts with the pathway of Aharon HaKohen which is called that of the “Matron’s maid.” This is the process of attaining self-nullification from below to above by way of *gevuros*. This is a manifestation of the *Gevurah* of *Atik* being “hidden within *Mocha Sesima’ah* of *Arich Anpin*”—which is *Chochmah* and *bitul*.<sup>12</sup> Then, as a matter of course, within every drawing down of the light of *Chochmah* is an element of the force of fire of *Gevurah*. This is why Aharon was responsible for the lighting of the menorah; he served his Creator by uplifting the “feminine waters” from below to above in the manner of reflected or returning light. The *Shechinah* dwells in the lower worlds and is hidden within the lower limbs of a person. Through the *avodah* of Moshe that draws down the Divine

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<sup>10</sup> *Bava Kama* 16a; *Shemos* 7:15

<sup>11</sup> *Zohar* III:20a

<sup>12</sup> *Sha’ar Ma’amarei Rashbi*, explanation of the *Idra Zuta*

light, one can then follow the path of Aharon and “light the candles” from below to above with a Divine fire [of enthusiasm and longing]. Then the *Shechinah* can rise again back to her source on high.

### **Subduing the *Klippah* from Near and from Afar**

This is the meaning of the singular language referring to both Moshe and Aharon—that both of their forces have to be grasped together in Hashem’s service. Moshe’s pathway is more internal and Aharon’s is more external. With the “staff of G-d,” Moshe Rabbeinu subdues the *klippah*-serpent that is manifest within a person’s spinal cord by “grabbing it by the tail” which is actually at the base of the skull. The spinal cord is like a coiled serpent whose head is at the base of the spine and whose tail is at the base of the skull.<sup>13</sup> By grabbing hold of the serpent’s tail, which is at the place of the mind—by drawing down the Divine light to the lower places—Moshe Rabbeinu subdues the *klippah*-serpent all the way down to its “head” that is situated in the most impure place, which is the place of *Pe’or* [the site where feces are excreted].

This is why Moshe Rabbeinu was buried “opposite *Baal Pe’or*,” to subdue that *klippah* entirely. And this is a lesson for us—to focus on filling our inner selves with Hashem’s light and achieving a state of *bitul* so that it becomes unnecessary to make special efforts to uproot the lower aspects of impurity in ourselves because they automatically are subdued and fall. This stands in contrast with the *avodah* of Aharon HaKohen, the “Matron’s maid,” who takes

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<sup>13</sup> Vilna Gaon, *Pirkei Heichalos*

the staff in his hand and struggles and yearns in a more externalized way to raise up a holy fire before Hashem.

We have a tradition from the Baal Shem Tov that when a *tzaddik* is occupied with the more external *avodah* of banishing the *klippas* from below by raising up a holy fire from below, even though he is simultaneously occupied with the internal *avodah* of *bitul*, he still must descend to the state of *katnus* or *lo lishmah*. This does not mean that his Divine service is actually not for the sake of heaven, rather, he enters somewhat into the aspect of doing it for his own sake in order to magnify the power of his will and desire, since the external *avodah* of Aharon HaKohen depends on longing and on the will. That *lo lishmah* aspect of desire is harnessed by the *tzaddik* to fire the external *avodah*, even as his internal *avodah* of *bitul* renders the *klippah* powerless to draw him into self-seeking. While he holds onto the “staff of Moshe” within, he is able to grasp onto the “staff of Aharon” which devours all of the serpents and snakes of impure desires that could otherwise occupy the human will. This idea finds expression in a teaching of the Vilna Gaon, that whenever a person sees Torah scholars who seem to have a will and desire that is not *lishmah*, he should understand that it is only a kind of external parallel to the deep longing and desire that a *tzaddik* has to connect with Hashem when he learns His Torah.

For this reason, “A person should always study Torah [even] not *lishmah*...”<sup>14</sup> Even though the *tzaddik* is entirely *l'shem shomayim* in his innermost being, nevertheless he must descend to the state of *katnus* externally in order to magnify his longing and desire, which is an aspect of *lo lishmah*. He

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<sup>14</sup> *Nazir* 23b

refines his desires through the power of his trust in Hashem to make them overcome any desire associated with the *klippah*.

The main power that the serpent and idolatry has over a person is that he should believe that he can have anything [material] that he wants. So Aharon HaKohen grabs hold of the staff that turns into a serpent in his hands—he capitalizes on all of the external forces of desire for the purpose of *avodah*—while filled with trust in Hashem. Then all of the force of the will that might be directed toward impurity is null and void in comparison with the longing that he has to raise up an eternal flame before his Creator. Then, when the serpent has turned back into a staff (as Rashi explains), it completely devours all of the impure serpents that had been in the hands of the sorcerers of Egypt.

### **The Secret of the *Choshen***

Aharon HaKohen bore the *choshen* that housed the *Urim v'Tumim* over his heart, and the letters  $\psi\sigma$  are the same as those that form the word  $\psi\sigma$  or serpent. This is because the sorcerers of Egypt derive their power over people's minds and beliefs because they have the power to delve into the minds and souls of others and exploit this knowledge to give their adherents guidance. The spiritual root of advice is in *Netzach* and *Hod* [even in the realm of impurity], and Hashem made its parallel in holiness to provide guidance for the Jewish people: the *Urim v'Tumim* that sat within the breastplate of judgment which serves as a means for them to draw closer to their Father in heaven. The *Urim v'Tumim* showed each and every Jewish soul its unique path in *avodas Hashem* [and its place was over the heart], which stands in contrast with the place of

*Netzach* and *Hod* [in impurity] and the “head of the snake,” which is at the base of the spine and leads a person by his basest instincts.

Aharon HaKohen subdues the sorcerers by drawing down the Divine light to the place of *Netzach* and *Hod*, just as Yosef HaTzaddik knew to draw down the Divine light and provide guidance: “בִּי-נִחֵשׁ יִנְחֵשׁ אֵישׁ אֲשֶׁר כְּמִנִּי” — “Do you not know that such a man as I am will divine [the truth]?”<sup>15</sup> The *Urim v'Tumim* incorporate the force of the Divine Names ע״ב and מ״ב, which themselves parallel the internal *avodah* of Moshe and the external *avodah* of Aharon, respectively.<sup>16</sup> [The conjoining of *Chochmah* and *yirah* is alluded to by the 72-triad Name which emerges from the verses “וַיֵּט” — “And he traveled,” “and he came,” “and he stretched forth”—that describe the events that immediately preceded the splitting of the *Yam Suf*.<sup>17</sup> This is the 72-Name that is associated with the *avodah* of Moshe Rabbeinu.] At the base of the spine the 42-Name is hidden [just as the *Shechinah* is “hidden within the lower worlds and the lower limbs”], and this is the Divine Name that uplifts all of the worlds from *Asiyah* to *Yetzirah*, and from *Yetzirah* to *Beriyah*, and from *Beriyah* to *Atzilus*.<sup>18</sup> This is the *avodah* of Aharon HaKohen, who raises up the Divine flame from below to above even though the *tzaddik* really has no desire to involve himself in the things of this world. However, because the *Shechinah* is hidden in the lower three worlds, he must do this *avodah* as well. We see this manifest in the way in which the *tzaddikim* provide guidance even in worldly matters for simple people,

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<sup>15</sup> *Bereishis* 44:15

<sup>16</sup> *Sefer Halikutim, Parshas Tetzave*

<sup>17</sup> *Shemos* 14:19-21

<sup>18</sup> *Bris Menuchah, HaDerech HaShevi'is*

and in the way that Aharon HaKohen worked to draw even the simplest Jews closer to Hashem.

The redemption depends on this ability to draw the Divine light down to the place of *Netzach* and *Hod* [which are called the *raglin*, or legs], and Rebbe Nachman of Breslov alluded to this process when he described the final “beggar without legs” in his unfinished story of the Seven Beggars.

### **The Avodah of Shovevim**

From time immemorial, the *avodah* of this period of *Shovevim* involved self-mortification and fasting which is the *avodah* of *katnus*, however now the main element of *avodah* is in taking stock of ourselves and how much effort and time we are expending in our Torah study and prayer. This too has an aspect of *katnus* to it, since it is a means through which a person magnifies his desire to achieve his spiritual goals. Even so, when a *tzaddik* undertakes this *avodah*, he performs it together with the inner *avodah* of *bitul* and absolute trust in Hashem, and in this way he transforms the serpent into a rod that purifies all his desires and devours all negative yearnings.

This is the way in which one can reveal the 42-Name that is situated in the “antechamber/courtyard of the liver,”<sup>19</sup> which parallels Esther who “stood in the courtyard.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, this is the way in which one redeems the *Shechinah* from her exile—and the *tzaddikim* accomplish this by constantly focusing their innermost selves on seeking the *Shechinah* even as they are involved in the external *avodah* of the lower worlds. A person who is willing to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> *Esther* 5:2

really sacrifice himself for the Torah and the *Shechinah* merits to connect with the soul of Moshe Rabbeinu who was the first redeemer, and who will be the final redeemer. That is why we desperately need Hashem to help us during this time to find the right guidance that we need to return to Him and seek after the *Shechinah*. As Rav Yitzchak Aizik Chaver wrote, genuine *teshuvah* means seeking after the true guidance one needs in one's Divine service.

### **The Avodah of the Angels**

The deeper works teach that the lower worlds of *BY" A* are the realm of the angels, and when a person wants to enter into the gates of holiness he needs to contemplate the *avodah* of the angels. Even though human beings are [generally] not privileged to actually see spiritual entities like angels, nevertheless the sages established the regular prayers in accordance with the heavenly paths of *avodah* of the various orders of angels for a purpose. The *avodah* of the *Ofanim* of the world of *Asiyah* is manifest within the *avodah* of the *tzaddikim* who serve Hashem in a rush of sound and prostration and profound acceptance of the yoke of heaven upon themselves. The *avodah* of the *Chayos* of the world of *Yetzirah* is manifest within the *avodah* of the *tzaddikim* who serve the Creator with singing and a powerful love and fear of Hashem. The *avodah* of the *Seraphim* of the world of *Beriyah* is manifest within the *avodah* of the *tzaddikim* who are like burning fires, fervently dedicated to Hashem's service. By examining the ways of the *tzaddikim* of every generation, we too can approach the *avodah* of the angels.

However, it is important to realize that even these lofty *avodos* are “external” and are not the essence of the *avodah* of the *tzaddikim*, just as the lower worlds are not the essence of the revelation of Hashem’s presence. It is for this reason that Moshe Rabbeinu was ordered to “remove your shoe from your foot.”<sup>21</sup> The shoe parallels *MaTaT* [which, along with two other angelic forces, is associated with the lower three worlds of *BY”A*], and it must be “removed”—one must not focus on it—in order to really enter into the essence of holiness, which is the absolute *dveikus* of the world of *Atzilus*. This was the way of all of the *tzaddikim* at the outset of their *avodah*—they did not “turn aside” to examine the external ways of other *tzaddikim* but rather sought the inner point and essence of all *avodah*. Later on in their development, however, they “descended” to contemplate the *avodos* of other *tzaddikim* and learn from them, and in this way they descended to the state of *katnus* and externality in holiness, and then join the inner with the outer to complete their *avodah*.

This is the meaning of the sages’ statement, “Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate [his teacher, the heretic Elisha ben Avuya]. He ate its innards and threw away its husk.”<sup>22</sup> The Arizal taught that he “ate” the innards of the name *MaTaT* and “threw away” the outer letters, which form the word *rimon*, or pomegranate.<sup>23</sup> [מטטרון = רמון + ט”ט] This outer aspect of *MaTaT*, the *avodos* of the lower three worlds, is what the *tzaddikim* know to “throw aside” when they seek the inner essence of *avodah*.

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<sup>21</sup> *Shemos* 3:5

<sup>22</sup> *Chagigah* 15b

<sup>23</sup> *Sefer Halikutim, Parshas Eikev*

### **“Let Your Soul Know Wisdom”**

This is the meaning of: “דעה חכמה לנפשך והיא כתר לראשך”—“Let your soul (*nefesh*) know (*d'ei*) wisdom (*Chochmah*) and it will be a crown (*Kesser*) for your head.”<sup>24</sup> One must learn to draw down the light of *Chochmah* and activate the force of the “staff of G-d” within one’s *nefesh*, which parallels the lower worlds of *BY”A*. All external aspects of *avodah*—the *lo lishmah*—must be bound up together with the inner essence of *avodah*—the *lishmah*. Aharon and Moshe must join together. Then, “it will be a crown to your head.” Then one can enter into the *dveikus* of the world of *Adam Kadmon* associated with *Kesser* upon which the redemption depends.

Now, as we approach Tu B'Shevat, the new year of the trees when all of a person’s spiritual productivity is determined, we must bind ourselves to Queen Esther, to the holy *Shechinah*, so that the “fiery” sap will rise and the “feminine waters” of yearning from the lower worlds will rise to its source. As Dovid HaMelech pleaded, “One thing I asked from Hashem, it is what I sought: Let me dwell in Hashem’s house all the days of my life.” He was asking to exist in a state of *dveikus* with Hashem all the time, and to “see Hashem’s pleasantness and visit His chambers,” to visit all of the chambers of the worlds of *BY”A* and find the holy *Shechinah* to return her to her source. And in this way, he meant to bring the complete redemption, speedily and in our days. Amen.

**Translated and Adapted by Rav Micha Golshevsky.**

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<sup>24</sup> From the *Shabbos zemer* “*D’ror Yikrah*,” based on *Mishlei* 24:14.

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