

Awakening the Light

קוּמִי אוֹרִי

*Daily Illuminations Amidst
the Chanukah Lights*

Pre-Publication Edition

מהדורה קמא

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שנת וְשַׁבָּתִי לַפֿ"ק

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A note on how to relate to this sefer:

This volume was born in the quiet glow of the Chanukah light — and it's meant to be read the same way: slowly, warmly, in reflective moments, as if we're sitting together by the neiros and letting their light speak to us. Each chapter is a doorway into a mood, an avodah, a heartbeat of Kislev; take your time with it, chew on the imagery of a Midrash that strikes a chord — and let the ideas settle gently into you.

Each year, I find myself gazing into those dancing flames, longing to uncover the mysteries they bear, yet cautious to disturb their sacred stillness. In my view, the thoughts contained in this volume are unfinished; they are only the first, hesitant steps along a vast shore. My hope is that these words serve only as a window — to something deeper, higher, and far beyond what language can hold.

יְהִי לְרֵצוֹן אֱמֶרִי פִּי וְהִגִּיוֹן לִבִּי לְפָנֶיךָ יְהוָה צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי.

Preparing the Lights

הַטָּבַת הַנֵּרוֹת



Passion From the Depths

The Avodah of Chodesh Kislev

A gut chodesh my dear friends, *A lichtige chodesh*. You know, Rosh Chodesh is always a wonderful time for *chavershaft*, for being together with good friends. In קדוש החדש, when we sanctify the upcoming month on the Shabbos before Rosh Chodesh, we always stress that “חברים כל ישראל”, all of Klal Yisrael are *mamash* close friends.

So it's really a tremendous *zechus* to be together with you here preparing for the month ahead, and *im yirtzeh Hashem* we should each be *zocheh* to experiencing מעשרה למטה, the *Shechina* resting in our midst during this truly marvelous month.

You know, the Alter of Novardok quotes something remarkable he heard from Rav Yisrael Salanter (Madreigas HaAdam, Bakashas HaShleimus Ch. 5) about the power of friendship and being together with other *Yidden*.

“כל מה שמספר בספר תולדות אדם על ר' זעלמן על זצ"ל להפליא אותו הנשגבות אין לי משג בשכל, רק אם יספרו לי על החבורה של השלשה חסידים מראסין, מכל גפלאות שיוכל להיות, אפלו כי המה פרחו באויר, אאמין עליהם, כי גדול כח החבורה שיכולה להגיע לכל דבר!”

Rav Yisrael Salanter used to say: they tell a lot of miracle stories about Rav Zalman of Volozhin, Rav Chaim of

Volozhin's brother. There's a whole *sefer Toldos Adam* describing the miracles and wonders that Rav Zalman of Volozhin used to bring about. But Rav Yisrael Salanter used to say: you can tell me stories from now until tomorrow about the miracles that he did—maybe I believe them, maybe I don't.

Then he said: but if you tell me about three simple *yidden* who are friends in some town, and you tell me about the miracles they could perform—even that they are able to fly through the sky!—I would believe *that* in a heartbeat. Because that's the *koach* of a *chevra*: “גְּדוֹל כַּח הַחֲבוּרָה שִׁיכוֹלָה לְהַגִּיעַ לְכָל” (דברים 33:22). What the *koach* of *chevra* is able to accomplish is far greater than any individual, even if that individual is one of the *tzaddikim* of the generation.

So, the fact that we're here together, making a collective effort towards opening our hearts to try to tap into the essential *avodah* of the month *ahead*, is truly a tremendous *zechus*. Miracles are possible here, *chevra*.

The *Sefer Yetzirah*, attributed back to Avraham Avinu himself, reveals a unique conceptual map for each month of the year. Every month is associated with a letter of the *aleph beis*, with the imagery of one of the *mazalos*, constellations, and also with an aspect of the *nefesh*, an aspect of the human condition. In addition, the Arizal Hakadosh revealed how each month is associated with one of the twelve *shevatim*.

Thus, we have a number of puzzle pieces to put together if we want to see the full picture of any given month.

The Puzzle Pieces of Kislev

So, here's what the *Sefer Yetzirah* (5:9 Nusach HaGra) teaches us about *chodesh* Kislev:

“הַמְלִיךְ אוֹת ס' וְקִשֶּׁר לוֹ כְּתֵר וְצִרְפָּן זֶה בְּזֶה וְצָר בָּהֶם: קֶשֶׁת בְּעוֹלָם, וְכִסְלוֹ בְּשָׁנָה, וְקִבָּה בְּנֶפֶשׁ, וְזָכַר וְנִקְבָּה.”

The *Sefer Yetzirah* tells us that Kislev is associated with: the letter *samech*, the constellation of קֶשֶׁת, *a bow*, and the body's

stomach. These are the puzzle pieces that we have to work with.

Now, it's interesting. We have a *meforash* Gemara about what the stomach represents. The Gemara in Brachos (60a-b) actually lists a number of body parts and tells us the *inyan* of each of these body parts. For the stomach, we learn: “קִיבָּה יִשְׁנָה” — *the stomach causes sleep*. The stomach has *koach* of lulling a person to sleep. Of course, we know the feeling—once we have a nice full stomach, you know that *post-Shabbos seudah* stupor—when a person is drawn into a deep slumber. So the *koach* of the stomach is a draw us towards sleep.

L'maysah, it's no surprise to find this *koach* during this time of the year—the world is getting darker, we spend more hours indoors, and the world's a bit quieter—there's a natural *netiah* in this time of the year to be drawn towards a more relaxed pace, some extra down time, maybe a bit of... laziness? It's certainly it's easier to get away with a longer *shluff* when the nights are longer.

But of course, the *zeh l'umas zeh* counterbalance of this is Chanukah. The Chashmona'im, who brought about the victory of Chanukah, were a prestigious family of kohanim – Yochanan Chashmona'i served as *kohen gadol* for eighty years! And Kohanim are known for their defining characteristic of “כֹּהֲנִים יְרִיזִין הֵן” (Shabbos 20a) – they have an innate *zerizus*, enthusiasm and passion; the perfect type of energy to counterbalance the sleepiness, the laziness and the slowness that can naturally pull us down during Chodesh Kislev.

Shevet Binyamin and the Core of Kislev

But as we mentioned, there is one more puzzle piece to the month: we have the *shevet* that's associated with this month. The Bnei Yissaschar (Cheshvan 1:2) quotes the Arizal that Chodesh Kislev corresponds with *shevet* Binyamin. So that's our final puzzle piece – now let's see how this all fits together.

There's a truly gorgeous *ma'amar* from the Shem MiShmuel, the *heilige* second Sochatchover Rebbe, Rav Shmuel Bornsztain—who, if you don't know, was *mamash* a soaring flame of passion for *Eibishter*—that he delivered for Rosh Chodesh Kislev in 5672. It's a lengthy piece with several different beautiful *nekudos* throughout it. We won't go through the whole thing inside, but sometimes you just have to hear the *leshon hazahav* of our tzaddikim – how they so beautifully express the deepest depths with such clarity.

So in this *ma'amar*, the Shem MiShmuel sets out to address this puzzle of Kislev, and he does so by addressing a key question: what does the name Kislev *mean*? Where does it come from, and what are its implications?

He brings a *pasuk* in Iyov (31:24) that says

”אם שִׁמְתִּי זָהָב בְּסָלִי וְלָפָתָם אֶמְרָתִי מִבְּטָחִי.”

The *pasuk* uses this phrase, “If I make gold into *kisli*, into my *kesel*”. Rashi explains:

”בְּסָלִי – תִּקְוָתִי וּמַחְשָׁבָתִי.”

Kisli means *tikvasi u'machshavti*—my hope, my aspiration, and what I'm focused on.

Then the Shem MiShmuel points out that we find the *lashon* of בְּסָלִים, meaning *loins*, closely connected with בְּלִיּוֹת, the *kidneys*, very often in the context of a *korban*. He then cites the Ibn Ezra in Vayikra (3:4):

”וְנִקְרְאוּ בְּלִיּוֹת בְּעֵבוֹר כַּח תַּאֲוֹת הַמִּשְׁגָּל וְהִיא מְגֹרֶת נִבְסָפָה וְגַם בְּלָתָה נִפְשִׁי.”

The kidneys are called בְּלִיּוֹת because of their association with *taiva*, intimate passion. We know the kidneys are responsible for producing hormones and regulating blood pressure. So the Ibn Ezra sees בְּלִיּוֹת as related to the *lashon* of “נִבְסָפָה וְגַם בְּלָתָה נִפְשִׁי” – how David Hamelech describes yearning and pining for Hashem (Tehillim 84:3).

The Avodah of Binyamin

When we begin looking into Binyamin, we find an amazing pattern surrounding him. And you know—each one of us is connected to each one of the *shvatim* both *b'derech prat* and *b'derech klal*—the *pasuk* says “אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר בְּבִרְכָּתוֹ בְּרַךְ אֹתָם”, Yaakov Avinu gifted each of us all of the *brachos* from all twelve of the *shvatim*. So there's an aspect of Binyamin within each and every one of us as well.

First of all, Chazal point out a number of unique qualities about Binyamin Hatzaddik. The Gemara in Shabbos (55b) says that Binyamin who died “בְּעֶטְיוֹ שָׁל נָחָשׁ”—he was one of the four people in all of history who never sinned their entire life. He was totally *naki*. The only reason why he died is because of the “bite of the *nachash*”, meaning the *chet* of Adam Harishon. The Zohar Hakadosh says that Binyamin is one of the iconic *tzadikim* in the world.

We know that the Gemara describes (Yoma 12a) that although the Beis HaMikdash is situated in the portion of Eretz Yisrael allocated to shevet Yehuda, there was a thin strip of land extending forth from the land of Binyamin into the Beis HaMikdash – and the *mizbe'ach* was situated precisely there. Chazal explain the precedent for this in the bracha that Yaakov gave to Binyamin of “וְזָבַח יִטְרֶה” (see Zevachim 53b), because the *mizbe'ach* “tears and consumes” the offerings brought upon it.

But the Midrash (Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Mesechta d'Bachodesh, Yisro 4:6) asks the question: *why* did Binyamin merit that additional *zechus* of *hashra'as HaShechina*? And it gives two reasons:

מִפְּנֵי מָה שָׂרַת שְׂכִינָה בְּחֻלְקוֹ שְׁלִבְנִימָן? שֶׁכָּל הַשְּׂבָטִים הָיוּ שׂוֹתֵפִין
בְּמִכְרֵתוֹ שְׁלִיטָה, וּבְנִימָן לֹא הָיָה שׂוֹתֵף עִמָּהֶם.

Binyamin was the only one of the *shvatim* that didn't take part in selling Yosef. Binyamin was still a child at that time, so he didn't participate in that primal disintegration of *Klal Yisrael*. So Binyamin was always connected to the *achdus* of *Klal*

Yisrael, —which of course is the key ingredient for a place of *hashra'as ha'shechina*. Even in a Jewish home— when “אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה” – “זָכוּ, שְׂכִינָה בֵּינֵיהֶן” – when there's *shalom bayis* between the husband and wife, then the Shechina may rest amidst them (Sotah 17a). The *Shechina* only resides in a place of *shalom*—as the famous *mishna* at the end of Uktzin (3:12) tells us, “לֹא מָצָא” הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כָּלִי מַחְזִיק בְּרָכָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֶלָּא הַשְּׁלוֹם” there's no receptacle to be *mekabel* Hakadosh Baruch Hu's *bracha* except for *shalom*. Amazingly, this is a criterion of fulfilling the mitzvah of Chanukah which is absolutely unique: the mitzvah may be fulfilled as a family, “יָרַ אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ” (Shabbos 21b).

So Binyamin was able to keep the *shalom* in *Klal Yisrael*, and as a result of that he was *zocheh* to *hashra'as ha'shechina*.

The second reason:

”וְכָל הַשְּׂבָטִים נוֹלְדוּ בְּחוּצָה לָאָרֶץ, וּבְנֵימִין נוֹלַד בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל. אָף עַל פִּי כֵן, (תהלים סח, יז) יְהוָה חָמַד אֱלֹהִים לְשִׁבְתּוֹ, אָף יִי יִשְׁכֵּן לְנֶצַח.”

All the other *shevatim* were born in *chutz la'aretz*, back at Lavan's house; only Binyamin was born in Eretz Yisrael. So Binyamin has a unique *kesher* to Eretz Yisrael in the way that none of the other *shevatim* do. That means Binyamin has a unique connection to *geulah* as well.

Once again, we find a connection to Chanukah: Chazal tell us (Yalkut Shimoni Melachim 184; see also Pesikta Rabbasi 6:5) that in truth the original *hakamas ha'mishkan* was meant to be on the 25th of Kislev. Moshe Rabbeinu finished building the Mishkan on Chanukah! The only reason why they pushed it off was because Moshe wanted to give *kavod* to Yitzchak Avinu—and, since Yitzchak was born in Nissan, so Moshe Rabbeinu delayed the inauguration until then. Clearly, that needs a whole Torah in of itself to understand!

So the Midrash says that *Klal Yisrael* complained to Hashem and said: “But it's not fair to Kislev! Why should Kislev lose out?” Replied *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*:

אמר הקב"ה: "עלי לשלם." מה שלם לו הקב"ה? חנכת חשמונאי.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu said: Don't worry; I'll give Kislev another *chanukah*, another inauguration. When will that occur? In the time of the Chashmona'im. And that's what's going on over here.

So again, Binyamin is connected to Eretz Yisrael and creating a space for the divine presence to rest, and Kislev is the time when Hashem promised a renewed divine presence in the days of the Chashmona'im.

The Strength and Passion of Binyamin

We also find another incredible *midah* in Binyamin: Binyamin has a strong backbone. He's resilient. The Midrash says an amazing thing (Yalkut Shimoni, Esther 1054). The *pasuk* in Megillas Esther describes how לא יכרע ולא ישתחוה, that Mordechai refused to bow down to Haman. So the Midrash records a conversation between Haman and Mordechai.

"אמרו לו: הוי יודע שאתה מפילנו בחרב, מה ראית לבטל קלבסים של מלך? אמר: שאני יהודי. א"ל: והרי מצינו אבותיך שהשתחוו לאבותיו, שנאמר 'וישתחו ארצה שבע פעמים' א"ל: בנימין אבי במעי אמו היה ולא השתחוה, ואני בן בנו, שנאמר 'איש ימיני' – וכשם שלא כרע אבי, כך אני איני כורע ולא משתחוה!"

Haman said to Mordechai: I know what your great-grandparents did when they met Eisav – they all fell flat on their faces and bowed seven times! So why don't you follow suit and bow to me?

Replied Mordechai: "Because I'm an *ish Yemini* – I come from Binyamin. And Binyamin wasn't there—he was still in Rachel Imeinu's womb. So, just as my father never bowed, I will not bow either!

What an awesome story! So there's this *koach* of Binyamin to have this clarity, this resolution, this determination to not bend or bow; to stay strong in his resolution and conviction,

and to stay focused on his values. And going back to the notion of sleep, this is a key part of staying awake! Anyone who's driven overnight on the highway—part of staying awake is staying laser-focused and engaged with the task at hand. Binyamin resists bending to the peer pressures of the world.

Returning to Yaakov's blessing of Binyamin that we mentioned earlier, I want to highlight another facet of that *bracha*. Yaakov Avinu blesses Shevet Binyamin with being a “יֵאֵב יִטְרֶף”—he's a wolf that tears things apart.

The *heilige* Netziv, in his *Ha'amek Davar* makes a fascinating point over here. The Netziv explains that Binyamin is blessed with the strength of a wolf, not a lion as Yehuda was. What's the difference? A lion is “אֲבִיר לֵב וְלֹא יִחַת” —it's simply so powerful that it's not afraid of anything due to its might. But the wolf is not invincible. A wolf can get torn apart by a lion. “אֵלֹא כְּזֶאֱב שֶׁמִּפְחַד מְרוּעָה וּמִקְלוֹ וּמִכָּל מָקוֹם” — the wolf is afraid of the shepherd's staff; it understands the risks it will face as it pursues its target. But nonetheless, the wolf throws itself at whatever challenge comes its way.

This is such an unbelievably delicious *nekudah*, an amazing *he'ara* from the Netziv. Binyamin is not a lion—he's not simply a superhero who can breeze through any challenge. He's a wolf: there are enemies who will be difficult for him to overcome. , But he's so committed, so resolute, with such a strong backbone of conviction and commitment to his values, that Binyamin is willing to throw himself in and even risk self-harm.

The Gemara (Sotah 36b) brings out this precise *nekuda* about *shevet* Binyamin.

“בְּשַׁעֲמָדוֹ יִשְׁרָאֵל עַל הַיָּם הָיוּ שְׂבָטִים מִנְּצָחִים זֶה עִם זֶה, זֶה אוֹמֵר: אֲנִי יוֹרֵד תַּחֲלָה לַיָּם, וְזֶה אוֹמֵר: אֲנִי יוֹרֵד תַּחֲלָה לַיָּם, קִפֵּץ שְׂבָטוֹ שֶׁל בְּנֵימִין וַיֵּרֶד לַיָּם תַּחֲלָה... לְפִיכָּךְ זָכָה בְּנֵימִין הַצַּדִּיק וְנִעְשָׂה אוֹשְׁפִיזָן לַגְּבוּרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: יִבִּין בְּתַפְיוֹ שָׂכָן.”

When Klal Yisrael stood at the edge of the Sea, a debate broke out as to which shevet should enter the sea first. Says the Gemara: *shevet* Binyamin jumped the gun and dove right into the water – and it was this determination, this *mesirus nefesh*, for which they merited the resting place of the Shechina upon the *mizbe'ach*.

Of course, *mesirus nefesh* is a huge *midah* that we find by the Chashmona'im. Their ability to throw themselves into battle—remember, they didn't know that they were going to win! There were plenty of *milchamos* where *Klal Yisrael* lost soldiers. They didn't know for sure that they were going to be victorious. Yet they threw themselves in *al kiddush* Hashem with *mesirus nefesh*, with a commitment that didn't care about the outcome. We're not going to become *Misyavanim*. We're not going to change who we are. We're not going to allow our identity to become hijacked. We're going to stay crystal clear about what we're focused on and remain committed to who we are.

By the way: what part of reinaugurating the Beis HaMikdash do we celebrate on Chanukah? We sing about it each night: “אָז אָגמֹר בְּשִׁיר מְזִמּוֹר חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ” – it's specifically the *chanukas hamizbe'ach*, the aspect of the Beis HaMikdash which is connected to Binyamin, which we celebrate.

One last thing about Binyamin, which is amazing. We reference the Gemara before (Yoma 12a) which describes this strip of Yerushalayim where the *mizbe'ach* rests, which is in the *chelek* of Binyamin. The Gemara says a *mamash* incredible thing.

“רְצוּעָה הִיְתָה יוֹצֵאָה מִחֻלְקוֹ שֶׁל יְהוּדָה וְנִכְנְסָת לְחֻלְקוֹ שֶׁל בְּנֵימִין, וְבָהּ הָיָה מִזְבֵּחַ בְּנוֹי, וּבְנֵימִין הִצְדִּיק הָיָה מַצְטָעֵר עָלֶיהָ לְבָלְעָהּ בְּכָל יוֹם.”

Says the Gemara: every single day, Binyamin *Hatzadik* himself is in pain, in agony. *He wants to swallow up that area*. He wants to consume everything around it. He wants to expand

his dominion, his territory in Yerushalayim, in the Beis Hamikdash.

And here's the clincher, *rabbosai* – get ready! The Gemara brings a *pasuk* as proof to this: “חֲזֹפֶה עָלָיו כָּל הַיּוֹם”. Rashi explains:

”בְּאֲדָם הַמִּתְחַכֵּךְ מִחֶמֶת שְׁאִינוֹ מְשִׁיג תְּאֵאוֹ.”

Unbelievable! Rashi says: Binyamin is like someone agitated due to having an unfulfilled desire. Exactly this idea of the *teshukah*, the passion of Binyamin! Binyamin is screaming out every day: I'm yearning for *more* in *avodas* Hashem! I want a bigger *chelek* of *kedusha*! I want to have a total *shlitah* over this place. I'm not willing to fall asleep, to be lax.

Chevra! It's getting darker, it's getting colder—maybe it's a good time to cut out a *chavrusa* or two, spend more time cozied up on the couch with a snack? Says Binyamin: *Fakert*! Say the Chashmona'im: we're going to push harder than ever before! Because it is *davka* now that we need to fight back against the natural tendency of this time of the year, which is the grips of the קִיבָה יְשָנָה, the sleep of the stomach.

The Keshes: Pulling Back to Shoot Forward

If you're still holding onto your head, then let's be *mamshich vayter*. You know, it's an amazing thing. The Shem MiShmuel brings a beautiful teaching from his father, the Avnei Nezer, the first Sochatchover Rebbe. He says: What's the connection between Kislev and the *keshes*, the bow? Where does that fit into this picture?

How does a bow and arrow work? The more you pull back, the tighter it gets, the higher the friction gets – and then the further the arrow goes. When you release that arrow and express all of that pent-up tension and energy, you get an unbelievably far shot.

Explained the Avnei Nezer: we find that the bow and arrow are associated with *tefillah* – when Yaakov Avinu uses

the words “בְּחַרְבִּי וּבִקְשָׁתִי”, *with my sword and my bow*, the Targum Onkelos translates it as “בְּצִלּוֹתַי וּבִבְעוֹתַי”, *with my prayer and my plea*. This is the *avodah* of Kislev—it's the *avodah* of *tefillah*. You see, *tefillah* works just like a bow and arrow. The further you dig deeper into yourself, and take your heart and soul into your hands and invest everything you have into your *tefillah*, and you *mamash* pull from the deepest, deepest place in yourself—that's the *tefillah* that *mamash* flies to the furthest reaches and *mamash* goes *ad kisei hakavod*, directly to Hashem's throne.

And I think we could add to the Avnei Nezer an additional *nekuda*. If Kislev is the time of sleep, the time of darkness, where Yavan casts her shadow, then our *avodah* is to be like the *keshes*—to draw back, to dig deeper into those places of *choshech*, into the places of *hastarah*, into the places of laziness, and find the deepest level of light in those places that *l'choira* seem furthest away.

I mean, consider: the whole idea of the bow is counterintuitive. You want the arrow to go forward, so why are you pulling backward? Because the whole idea is that you need to create that distance to create the friction so that you could fly forward with a greater energy, with a greater *zerizus* and enthusiasm. The whole idea of Kislev is *davka* in the dark places, אֶפְלוֹ בְּהִסְתָּרָה שְׁבִתוֹךָ הִסְתָּרָה as Rebbe Nachman writes about (Likutei Moharan 56)—it's specifically there where we find the *hisgalus* of the Ribbono Shel Olam in the most profound way, where we find the reservoirs of *zrizus* within ourselves that lie dormant within every single Yid.

The Zohar on Shuckling: The Dancing Flame

My dear friend, there's an amazing Zohar Hakadosh in Parshas Pinchas (III 218b), a beautiful, beautiful teaching that's so full of light. And if you didn't come here for anything else but to hear this amazing Zohar Hakadosh, it's *mamash* worthwhile.

The Zohar Hakadosh describes a conversation between Rebbe Yosi and Rebbe Abba as they travel together – the Zohar is filled with these wonderful escapades traveling the countryside of Eretz Yisrael. Rebbe Yosei and Rebbe Abba end up at this oasis in the middle of the desert. It's boiling hot outside, and there's a tree with a stream flowing under its shade. And they sit down and start to *shmooze* a little bit, and they start to *farbreng*.

”שְׂאִילָנָא לִיָּהּ, מֵאִי הָאִי דְּכָל עֲמִין דְּעֵלְמָא לָא עֲבָדִין גְּנוּעָא, אֶלָּא יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּלַחוּדֵיהּ, דְּכֵד לְעֵאן בְּאוּרֵייתָא, מִתְנַעֲנֵן הָכָא וְהָכָא, בְּלֵא לְמוּדָא דְּבֵר
נֶשׁ בְּעֵלְמָא, וְלֵא יִבְלִין לְמִיקָם בְּקִיּוּמֵיהּ.”

Then Rebbe Yosi asks Rebbe Abba: “You know, I've always had this question. I've always wanted to know what's *pshat* that Jewish people *shuckle*. What's going on with the *shuckling* business? Swaying back and forth while you're learning, while you're *davening*. We didn't learn it from any other culture – the *goyim* don't do anything remotely like it! This definitely isn't a learned behavior. So, what's it all about?”

Just as an aside, there are many fascinating *pshatim* as to why *Yidden shuckle*. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi has a whole *shtickel* about this in the Kuzari. But the Zohar HaKadosh is arguably the earliest source about this.

”אָמַר לִי, אֲדַבְּרָתָן מִלְּתָא עֲלָאָהּ, וּבְנֵי עֵלְמָא לָא יִדְעִין, וְלֵא מִשְׁגִּיחִין. יְתִיב
שְׁעֵתָא וּבָכָה, אָמַר, וְוִי לְבִנֵּי נֶשָׂא דְּאֵלִין כְּבִיעֵרִי חֻקָּא, בְּלֵא סוּבְלֵתָנּוּ.
בְּמִלָּה דָּא בְּלַחוּדֵי אִשְׁתְּמוּדֵן נִשְׁמָתָהוּן קְדִישֵׁין דִּישְׂרָאֵל, בֵּין נִשְׁמָתָהוּן
דְּעֲמִין עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים וּמִזְלֹת.”

Rebbe Abba hears this question, and he begins to cry. *Mamash* bawling right there at the oasis in the middle of the desert. And he says: You reminded me of something so deep, something that nobody pays attention to and no one understands. And he said: Woe is to all of mankind, who travel through this world with *mamash* no *seichel* – the masses are completely blind to what they're seeing right in front of their eyes and the deep truths expressing themselves right before

them. This isn't just a random behavioral tick: it is *the* defining difference that displays the difference between a *Yid* and a *goy*!

And Rebbe Abba proceeds to explain:

"נִשְׁמַתְהוּן דִּישְׂרָאֵל אֲתַגְזֹרוּ, מִגּוּ בּוֹצִינָא קְדִישָׁא דְדָלִיק, דְּכַתִּיב, (משלי כ:כ"ז) יָרָה' נִשְׁמַת אָדָם. וְהָאִי יָרָה בְּשַׁעֲתָא דְאַתְאַחַד (נ"א דַּאֲתַדְלִיק) מִגּוּ אֲוִרִייתָא דְלַעִילָא, לֹא שְׂכִיף נְהוּרָא עֲלֵיהּ אֲפִילוּ רִנְעָא. וְרוּא דָּא, (תהילים פ"ג:ב') אֱלֹהִים אֵל דְּמִי לָךְ. בְּגוּוּנָא דָּא כַּתִּיב, (ישעיהו ס"ב:ו') הַמְּזַכֵּרִים אֶת ה' אֵל דְּמִי לָכֶם, לֹא שְׂכִיכוּ לָכוֹן. נְהוּרָא דְשִׁרְגָא בֵּינוֹן דְאַתְאַחַד גּוּ פְתִילָה, הֵהוּא נְהוּרָא לֹא שְׂכִיף לַעֲלֵמִין, אֲלֹא מִתְנַעֲנֵעָ נְהוּרָא לָכָאן וּלְכָאן, וְלֹא מִשְׁתַּכִּיף לַעֲלֵמִין. בְּגוּוּנָא דָּא, יִשְׂרָאֵל, דְּנִשְׁמַתִּיהוּ מִגּוּ הֵהוּא נְהוּרָא דְשִׁרְגָא, בֵּינוֹן דְאַמֵּר מְלָה חֲדָא דְאֲוִרִייתָא, הָא נְהוּרָא דְלִיק, וְלֹא יִכְלוֹן אֵינוֹן לְאַשְׁתַּכְּבָּא, וּמִתְנַעֲנֵעַן לָכָאן וּלְכָאן, וְלָכֵל סְטָרִין. בְּנְהוּרָא דְשִׁרְגָא, דְהָא (משלי כ:כ"ז) יָרָה' נִשְׁמַת אָדָם כַּתִּיב. וְכַתִּיב, (יחזקאל לד) אָדָם אֲתֵם, אֲתֵם קְרוּיִין אָדָם, וְלֹא אֲוִמִין עוֹבְדֵי כּוֹכְבִּים וּמְזֻלוֹת."

He explained as follow: You have to understand. When it comes to a Yid, a Yid is נִשְׁמַת אָדָם יָרָה ה'. What it means to have a *chelek Eloka mimaal*, to be created in the image of Hashem and and bear within you an aspect of Godlienss, is that you're a flame of the *Eibershter*. You're a *shtick Elokus*! The neshama of a Yid is *mamash* a flame.

And as much as a Yid's a flame, as much as a Yid bears a wick which is thirsty to hold on to that flame, as soon as a Yid comes in contact with a drop of Torah—when that fire of Torah makes even the smallest contact with the wick, with that *pintele Yid* inside—the Yid *mamash* bursts into an incredible bonfire. It's fireworks! And it's impossible to hold the Yid still. We've all seen a flame: flames dance and move and it looks like it's leaping right out off the candle!

"נִשְׁמַתִּין דְּעִמִּין עוֹבְדֵי כּוֹכְבִּים וּמְזֻלוֹת, מְדַעִיכוּ דְקֶשׁ, בְּלֹא נְהוּרָא דְשִׁרְיָ עֲלֵיהּ. וְעַל דָּא מִשְׁתַּכְּבִּין, וְלֹא מִתְנַעֲנֵעַן, דְהָא לִית לוֹן אֲוִרִייתָא, וְלֹא דְלִקִּין בָּהּ, וְלֹא נְהוּרָא שְׂרִייתָ בְּהוֹן, אֵינוֹן קִימִין בְּעֵצִים בְּגוּ נוּרָא דְדָלִיק, בְּלֹא נְהוּרָא דְשִׁרְיָ עֲלֵיהּ, וְעַל דָּא מִשְׁתַּכְּבִּין בְּלֹא נְהוּרָא בְּלָל."

But when it comes to the *goyim*, they don't have this. The *goyim* are like straw: when you light straw on fire, you get that quick burst of energy before it's quickly engulfed in flames. There's that moment of pleasure, there's that quick hit of *chayei sha'ah*, but ultimately there's nothing there to hold on to that flame. There's no wick there. There's no נֶר ה' נִשְׁמַת אָדָם. And as a result, *there's no dance*. There's no inherent energy to the life of the *umos ha'olam* in the way that a Yid inherently possesses.

What a deep, deep vort. Take a deep breath here together, *chevra*. Feel the flame dancing in your heart. Visualize that moment of contact, where the flame binds with the wick and becomes one in a dance upward towards heaven.

This is really what the *neiros* of Chanukah is all about—to start to see within ourselves this internal *zerizus* that lies at the bedrock of our *neshama*. To realize that it's *davka* during this time of the year, when we're in the darkest place, that we have to be *megaleh* within ourselves this *koach* of Binyamin. This *zerizus*, this *mesirus nefesh*, this throwing ourselves against the *nisyonos* of the moment; this uphill battle against *atzlus*, against the negativity, against the darkness, against the cynicism that the entire world becomes engulfed in this time of the year.

And to push back with *teshuka*, with *taiva*—to take those very *kochos* that the *velt* wants to use as the vice of *tumah*, and instead make them part of our *avodas Hashem*. To find within ourselves that internal *zerizus* that's *mamash* burning bright at the heart of every Yid, like Rebbe Abba was saying.

It is flame which we seek to see reflected back at us in the *neiros* of Chanukah.

The Remez of Kislev in the Torah

We're coming to the end, my dear friend. But there's an unbelievable *remez* we must discuss. You know, everyone's looking for *remazim* in the Torah as to where the name of the *chodesh* is connected. We all know about Elul – אֶנִּי לְדוּדֵי יְדוּדֵי

לִי. So where's Kislev hinted at in the Torah? Anyone heard a *roshei teivos* for Kislev?

Baruch Hashem my eyes were opened to this, and only afterwards I found in Likutei Moharan that Rebbe Nachman is *mamash* so close to saying on the same thing. It sounds ridiculous to say this, but I don't know why he doesn't see it the same way I do. He finds a backwards and out-of-order *roshei teivos* for Kislev, in the exact same *pasuk* where's there's an in-order *roshei teivos* for Kislev! It's a *tzorech iyun gadol* on Reb Nachman. You'll see what I mean in a second.

So the *pasuk* describes when Moshe Rabbeinu encounters the *sneh*, the burning bush, that Moshe turned to look at this wonder; to investigate was the bush wasn't being consumed by the flame. The *pasuk* says:

”וַיֵּרָא י.ה.ו.ה בִּי סָר לְרֹאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה
מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי.”

Moshe turned to see the bush, and Hashem called out to him from within the bush, saying “Moshe, Moshe!”

So Rebbe Nachman points out that if you take a look at the first five words of the *pasuk*:

וַיֵּרָא י.ה.ו.ה בִּי סָר לְרֹאוֹת

– You will see the letters of Kislev, כ-ס-ל-י-ו, albeit out of order.

My point is, that if you start *two words later* in the same *pasuk*, you will find:

בִּי סָר לְרֹאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא

– Then you will see the letters of Kislev, spelled perfectly in order! Furthermore, that's really how Kislev is spelled in Tanach, כ-ס-ל-י-ו, without a *yud* (see Zecharia 7:1). I'm sure there's a *pshat* in Rebbe Nachman, of course. Surely he's bringing out a different point related to Kislev.

Either way, so I was thinking: what's *pshat* that this is the place that Kislev is *meramez* in the Torah? Based on what we've been saying up until now, this *pasuk* is *mamash* the whole point.

The whole idea of *ki sar liros* is that you're not on autopilot through life. Moshe Rabbeinu sees a *pela* in front of him and he turns to see; he takes action. He's not just lethargic, he's not lazy, he's not sleeping. *Libi er*. He's connected! He's excited about life! He sees a *pela* and he's drawn towards it.

The Midrash says (Shemos Rabbah 2:6) on these words “כִּי סָר לִרְאוֹת”: what did Moshe turn to see? It wasn't just the bush; it was something he had turned to see earlier in the story. Moshe had gone out to see the *tzaar* of *Klal Yisrael*, back in Mitzrayim. “וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם” – Moshe went out to his brothers, the Jewish people; he went out to see the struggling they were enduring. Rashi's *lashon* over there is “נָתַן עֵינָיו וְלִבּוֹ” – “לְהוֹיֹת מֵצַר עֲלֵיהֶם” – he directed his eyes and his heart towards them, to feel that pain along with *Klal Yisrael*. The whole idea is that Moshe Rabbeinu opens himself up to *experiencing* the emotions—not to be cold, not to be stoic, not to be complacent, but to be on fire, to be connected; to *care*.

So the Medrash says: what is the meaning of Hashem's reply, of “Moshe, Moshe”? “לִשְׁוֹן חֶבֶד לְשׁוֹן יְרוּחוֹ” Hashem sees Moshe's care for *Klal Yisrael*, his *zerizus* to show up for his brothers, and Hashem replies in turn with *chiba*: affection, intimacy, connection, excitement, love. This is the *teshukah*. This is exactly what *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is telling Moshe Rabbeinu—exactly the same thing as Binyamin haTzaddik and the Chashmona'im embody.

And of course, the major *avodah* of the *neiros* Chanukah is *בְּלֶבֶד*, as we sing in *HaNeiros Halalu*—the *avodah* of the Chanukah candles is to look at them, pay attention. Not to just light them and walk away. Be like Moshe, and be *לִרְאוֹת*. Stand there and gaze at the candles. Give yourself permission to open your *neshamah* to experiencing the lights that are

present during this time of year. Experience that dancing flame at the core of every single Yid.

So this *pasuk* contains exactly what the *avodah* of Kislev is all about. To turn towards the fire; to be connected to the dancing passionate flame, like the Zohar Hakadosh described. The light of Chanukah is about experiencing the energy, and fighting back against the laziness. The whole Chodesh Kislev is about tapping into this *zerizus*.

The Power of Chavrusah

We started off talking about the *koach* of *chaverim*, friends. If you take a look at the words “סָר לְרֵאוֹת” – the word סָר is the same *gematria* as the word חִבְרִיּוֹת.

That's what we're doing over here when *chevra* come together. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* sees that you have *chaverim* who come together to try to seek out the light of Chanukah. So then it's וַיִּקְרָא — *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* invites us into Chodesh Kislev with *chibah* and *zerizus*, with affection and excitement.

So, *nu, chevra* – there's no better way to come into the month of Kislev than with the tremendous bond of *chevra* that we are sharing together right now. And *b'ezras Hashem* we should all be *zocheh* to *chap arein*— to hold tight to the the main *avodah* of Kislev, which is to stay awake. To pay attention; to stay animated; to fight back against the pull of *choshech* which seeks to plunge us into complacency and into negativity. And to fight back *zeh l'umas zeh* with the *teshukah* of Binyamin, with the depth of a *keshes*, with shooting forth our *tefillos* with passion and direction..

One final point. There's another *pasuk* in Iyov (8:14) where Kislev appears: “אֲשֶׁר-יָקוּט בְּסֻלּוֹ”. Rashi comments that *kislo* means “מַחְשַׁבַת מְבֻטָּח” a person's thought of *bitachon*; that which he relies upon and trusts. Based on this, Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin writes (Pri Tzaddik, Kislev 2):

“נִרְאֶה שֶׁעֵסֶק חֹדֶשׁ זֶה שָׂכַל אֶחָד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיֶה לוֹ מְבֻטָּח עוֹ בְּה'.”

The avodah of the month is *bitachon*. With this, we can understand how the letter *samech* is connected to Kislev. *Samech* means supported – as in סִמְךָ ה' לְכָל הַנִּפְּלִים —*Hakadosh Baruch Hu* supports us when we stumble and fall, during this time of year. The whole idea of Chodesh Kislev is to fall back on the trust that we have in *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. We can throw ourselves into the struggle, fight back against the *yetzer hara*, fight back against the *nisyonos* of this time – like a wolf who fights at any cost; like Binyamin filled with his *mesiras nefesh*, not being afraid of the consequences – because we know that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* has our back. When we have the Kislev mentality, we are truly unstoppable.

So *im yirtzeh Hashem* we should be *zocheh* to experience the most remarkable and majestic light together, and be *zocheh* this year to see the light of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu*. Amen.

L'chaim!

Punchline:

Kislev teaches us that real light doesn't come from comfort — it comes from pushing past the laziness of the belly and awakening the burning heart of Binyamin. The avodah of this month is to choose passion over passivity and let the hidden flame inside us rise.



Kislev 22

The Light of the Heart

Chanukah & The Oral Torah Pt. 1

Well folks, we are here. We are in the *shloshes yemei hagbalah*, as it were—the three days leading up to Chanukah. We are in the splash zone right now, standing here on the 22nd day of the month of Kislev.

Of course, when I say the term *shloshes yemei hagbalah*, I'm borrowing that term from Shavuot. We know that when the Torah describes when the Jewish people were going to receive the Torah on the sixth day of Sivan, they were instructed to place barriers around Mount Sinai three days before the revelation at Sinai because the Divine Presence was already going to manifest on the mountain three days prior. There are even *halachos* for how a person is supposed to act during those days. For example, we don't say *Tachanun* during the days leading up to Shavuot.

Chanukah: Accepting the Oral Torah

The reason I borrow that term today is because the *sefarim* say something very fascinating: in the same way that we accepted upon ourselves the Torah on Shavuot, there is also a *kabbalas haTorah* which takes place on Chanukah.

In fact, the way that some of the *sefarim* put it is that on Shavuot we received the Written Torah, but on Chanukah we accept upon ourselves the Oral Torah, the *Torah sheb'al peh*.

(See Ya'aros Dvash, Chelek 1 Drush 3: "וְנִתְקַבְּלָה תּוֹרָה שְׂבָעֵל פָּה" "עַל יְדֵי גֵס הַזֶּה"; see also Pri Tzaddik, Chanukah 2.)

Now, of course, we accepted the entire Torah at Sinai—don't misinterpret this. We received the entire Torah at Har Sinai: the written word, the oral transmissions, and the *halachos l'Moshe m'Sinai*. Yet there is something about Chanukah which has a very close relationship with the Oral Torah, and with accepting upon ourselves the *Torah sheb'al peh* anew.

(Many sources also relate the renewed acceptance of the Oral Torah to Purim [see Shevuos 39a]. It is no accident that Chanukah and Purim, our two *moadim mi'd'rabbanan*, are so closely related. Indeed, there is a whole discussion amongst the *mekubalim* as to which of the *sefiros* are connected with Purim and Chanukah—everyone agrees that the options are *Netzach* and *Hod*, yet scholars debate which is which!)

Over the next three days, I'd like to unpack various facets of this concept of *kabbalas haTorah* on Chanukah.

First of all, almost by way of observation: you'll note that Chanukah is the one *yom tov* that has no Written Torah portion of it whatsoever (see Pachad Yitzchak, Chanukah 1:5 and 4:9). Now, part of that is due to the fact that Chanukah was chronologically the final national holiday to occur, and as such it occurred after the codification of the Tanach. We know that the Scroll of Esther was the final book to be written into the Tanach. After that, the *Anshei Knesses HaGedolah* sealed the Tanach and no further works were to be included.

Interestingly, the Gemara (Yoma 29a) points out that Chanukah was *לֹא נִתְּנָה לְכָתוּב*—"It was not *meant* to be written down." On the surface this simply means that there wasn't authority given to add an additional book to the Tanach for Chanukah. And, although it is true that history has preserved various fascinating works written either at the same time as the Chanukah story or in centuries that followed—we have Maccabees I and Maccabees II, written by different authors,

which are not part of Tanach nor bear a part of the official scriptures of the Jewish people, yet offer a written description of the events that happened; of course, we have the copious writings of Josephus. We also have the Megillas Antiochus, which goes back at least to the time of the Geonim; Rav Saadia Gaon even has a commentary on it and a lengthy introduction where he asserts that it goes back to the times of the Chashmona'im.

All that said, we nonetheless don't have a Written Torah aspect of Chanukah. It's the one *yom tov* that does not have a *parsha*, a *megillah*, or any prophetically-inspired writing that recounts the *nisim* of that time.

Furthermore, when you take a look in the foundational text of the Oral Torah—the Mishnah, written by Rebbe Yehuda HaNasi, which constitutes the first codification of the Oral Torah into text—we find that, there too, there is no *masechta* about Chanukah. There are only a small handful of tangential remarks about Chanukah in the entire Mishnah. Chanukah somehow cannot be written down – it escapes the written word.

So, *Chevre*, we need to explore this relationship between the *Torah sheb'al peh* and Chanukah. We'll get our feet wet today and hopefully continue unpacking it over the coming days.

The Covenant on the Oral Torah

There's a Gemara in Gittin (60a) that says an amazing thing: לֹא בְּרִית הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּרִית עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲלָא עַל תּוֹרַה שֶׁבְּעַל פֶּה—"Hakadosh Baruch Hu only sealed the covenant with the Jewish people over the Oral Torah, over the *Torah sheb'al peh*."

It brings a *pasuk* for this. What's the *pasuk*? כִּי עַל פִּי הַדְּבָרִים —"It was on these words that I forged this covenant with you" (Shemos 34:27). The Gemara understands *al pi hadevarim ha'eileh* to mean that it was on *words that live in the mouth* that Hashem forged the *bris* with Klal Yisrael.

This is a fascinating statement to make. Of course, it's clearly meant in a Midrashic sense; the Written Torah is surely also part of our covenant. You can't have one without the other! They're so intricately tied one into the other: much of the Oral Torah is just explaining and unpacking the words of the Written Torah. What does this Gemara mean? What is it describing here?

Written Torah vs. Oral Torah: Two Directions

I want to suggest the following. We know that when *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* gave the Torah, the first words that He spoke at the revelation at Sinai was אֶנֶכִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ—"I am Hashem your God" (Shemos 20:2). These words constitute the first *mitzvah*: accepting *Hakadosh Baruch Hu's* reality and understanding that *ein od milvado*, that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* permeates all of existence and there is nothing but He (Rambam, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 1:6).

The Gemara (Shabbos 105a) makes the most mind-blowing comment on these words. The Gemara says that אֶנֶכִּי is an *notrikun*, an acronym: the four letters of אֶנֶכִּי stand for something. What does it stand for? Says the Gemara: אֶנֶכִּי נָפְשִׁי בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה—"I, Hashem, gave over My soul in writing to you." The Torah itself is Hashem pouring out His heart, so to speak, His very essence, onto parchment, and giving Himself over to the Jewish people.

This is one of the huge *yesodos* of life, to understand that the Torah is a direct expression of HaKadosh Baruch Hu on a level more intimate, more personal than anything else in creation. And this is something that everyone agrees upon—from the Ba'al HaTanya (Likutei Amarim Ch. 5) to the Nefesh HaChaim (Shaar 4 Perek 6) and everyone in between—that Torah consists of a powerful self-expression, if you will, of HaKadosh Baruch Hu's essence. He made His infinite unknowable essence available to be contacted and connected with through the unique medium of Torah.