

The Mitzvah of Sanctifying the New Moon

From Sefer Ta'amei HaMitzvot by Rabbi Haim Vital

*Introduction, translation and commentary
By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok*

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“This month shall be to you the head of the months, it will be for you the first of the months of the year.” (Ex. 12:2)

Many people seek to study the secrets of the Torah. Yet, the secrets of the holy Mekubalim defy rational explanation. Even when today there is such a proliferation of texts and commentaries, the majority of true Kabbalah remains a mystery even to many Mekubalim who write the commentaries.

There are those who believe that translations of the works of the Zohar and the Ari'zal will help to make these secrets more accessible. Yet, this in and of itself is not so true. For even in translation, while the words of the Kabbalah may be understood, the secret meaning that they relate remains as hidden as ever.

The purpose of a commentary on mystical writings should not be only to scholarly elucidation of source material and comparative readings. The best commentaries need also to endeavor to explain what a text means, not just according to metaphysical speculations, but rather also offering practical advise and explanations that help us better understand our world and ourselves.

In Exodus 12, we read about the mitzvah of the sanctification of the New Moon. The Jewish calendar has always been a lunar one. The Jewish year consists of twelve lunar months, each of thirty days. Yet, when we add up the days, we find their number to be only 360, five and one-quarter days short than the solar year (the time it takes for the earth to revolve around the sun). Unless the two calendars are somehow balanced, the Jewish year will begin five days earlier each year. If this were to continue for, let us say, 36 years, we would be celebrating Pesah in the fall and not the spring and Rosh HaShana would be in March!

In order to avoid this total disassociation of Torah holidays with the times and realities to which they relate, our holy Sages have devised a calendar in which an entire month is doubled (Adar, at the end of the Jewish year). This is done a specific amount of times in a specific cycle of years. In this way, all the months and holidays, while still remaining fluid and “floating” a bit in comparison to the rigidly set solar year, will still nonetheless each fall in its season. This procedure however practical and well thought out, still has its origins in mysticism.

In the following section, Rabbi Haim Vital, the faithful redactor of the teachings of his Rabbi the Ari'zal, explains in brief the mystical meanings of the sanctification of the New Moon. Herein he explains the profound relationship between the dimensions of time, mind and spirit. Yet, however as much as he reveals here with his words, at the same time, he is concealing even more. First, I will first provide for you Rabbi Haim's words, without elucidation, to give you an appreciation of what it is like to read directly from a mystical text. I have translated his words precisely, with the least amount of additions, to make his words flow smoothly in English. As to what they mean, for this I will provide for you a commentary, but only after you have pondered the text for yourselves.

The Mitzvah of Sanctifying the New Moon
From Sefer Ta'amei HaMitzvot by Rabbi Haim Vital

"Know now that all months are in Malkhut (1). There are two aspects of this, one from its own side and one from the side of the Male (2), as will be explained with G-d's help. Now, we start with the month of Nisan. Know, that all the months are called "Rosh Hodesh" (heads of the months), for all of them are aspects of the "head"(3). Therefore, each month has a maximum of thirty days.

This then is their order (4): Nisan is the skull, Iyar and Sivan are the two ears, and Tamuz and Av are the two eyes (5). This is the why the Holy Temple was destroyed in Tamuz and Av in accordance to the secret of [the verse] "my eye, my eye [continuously] runs with water" (Eicha 1:16), these are the two eyes referred to (6). When we understand that the essence of these eyes is the secret of Yesod and Hod (7), [we come to understand] that the essential destruction [of the Holy Temple] was [with] the "left eye," the month of Av. Thus, it says, "sick throughout the day" (Eicha 1:13) and [thus] retrospectively [includes] Hod. Ellul is the nose. What remains is the mouth, which is not herein included in the count because it is concealed (8).

This order is also followed by the [side of the] Male (9). Tishrei is the skull of the Male. Heshvan and Kislev are the two ears. Tevet and Shevat are the two eyes. Adar is the nose. Also here the mouth is concealed. This then is the secret of the sanctification of the Month, that the Judges need to sanctify the month [according to the] mouths of the Judges (10). Since there is that which is lacking from the mouth of the Male, we have no authority to double any month with the exception of Adar (11). This is where King Hezekiah (obm) was mistaken that he doubled the month of Nisan in Nisan (ref. San. 12a). He was mistaken because the only month that can be added is Adar Bet. This is the mouth of the Male and belongs to the previous year. [This addition of a month] is to complete the mouth (12), because, Nisan is of the New Year.

Concerning the months [themselves], we have already explained in the [section on the] prayers for Rosh HaShana that from Tishrei until Adar is the VaK (six sefirot) of the Male (13). For Adar is the nose, and Nisan is the mouth of the Male and also [becomes] the skull for the Female. [Now], the breath of the mouth of the Male comes forth to the skull of the female. We thus find that Nisan assists both Him and Her. Therefore, is Adar doubled and no other month, so that the month would correspond to the mouth of the Male. Therefore does the month need to be sanctified and be made holy, as it says, "that you shall call them." For it is from the breath of the Mouth [of the Male] that Her skull is made. [There are] also six, from Nisan through Tishrei. Thus Ellul is the nose [of the Male] and Tishrei is his Mouth and his skull. It appears to me Haim that the Mouth is only related to Nisan where the Mouth becomes the skull. However, in Tishrei it is only the skull and not a mouth. For his skull is not made from her mouth [as it is the other way around]. The proof of this is that we do not double Ellul, but only Adar (14)."

Commentary by HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

1. “Know now that all months are in Malkhut.” - The months of the year are the measurements we use to measure the passage of time. We human beings exist in both time and space. We measure movement in space by miles or kilometers. Months, years, days and hours are how we measure time. Nonetheless, all these measurements are the measures of the movements of physical things. We have traveled a mile or so. We have “moved forward” in time a month or so. While the cycles in nature will happen in and of themselves according to the Divine design, it is we mankind who attribute to them and receive from them meaning. This is because we are spiritual souls; we are entities from a higher dimensional existence above time and space. Thus in order to live and understand life in our physical bodies, we need these measurements. The world of the physical, in which we live, is a manifestation of one of the levels of the sefirat Malkhut. As such anything of this physical universe, including time itself is a manifestation of one of the levels of the sefirat Malkhut. Thus, as Rabbi Haim says, “Know now that all months are in Malkhut.”

2. “There are two aspects of this, one from its own side and one from the side of the Male.” - The sefirat Malkhut in relationship to the other sefirot is referred to as “Feminine.” This is based upon the Kabbalistic metaphor that anything that gives is called Male and everything that receives is called Female. The sefirat Malkhut, being the lowest of the sefirot only receives and has no other sefirah below it to give to. Therefore, as the ultimate receiver, Malkhut is called Feminine. Yet, this is not all-inclusive, for as is known each sefirah has within it multiple layers of sub-sefirot. Thus within Malkhut there are ten subjective sefirot (each with ten with it, each with ten within it onto infinity). Malkhut, having ten subjective sefirot within it thus includes within itself the powers of giving and receiving. The upper sefirot within Malkhut give to the lower sefirot therein. Malkhut, while generally Feminine in relationship to the other sefirot is both Masculine and Feminine unto itself. Thus everything emanating from Malkhut (and thus into the physical universe), while ultimately Feminine can be better understood as containing the Masculine within the Feminine and the Feminine within the Feminine.

3. “For all of them are aspects of the “head.” - The dimensions of space itself are the Malkhut within the Malkhut. The dimensions of time are the six sefirot (Hesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Netzah, Hod, Yesod) of the Malkhut. These six together are always called Z.A. (Zeir Anpin, the Small Face). Z.A. is the “Male Face”, while Malkhut is the “Female Face.” Z.A., the “Male Face” channels the supernal lights below to Malkhut, the “Female Face.” As such, “he” stands above “her.” The months of the year, which are the dimensions of time, therefore, are on a higher plane than mere physical space itself. Physical space contains the three dimensions of height, depth and width. Time is the fourth dimension. Thus, time is “male” to space being “female.” As such the months of the year stand over and influence space. Thus the months of the year are all said to be “aspects of the head” in that they are the influential power of all that happens in the physical world. This is the source of the wisdom we call Mazalot and Tekufot (ref. Shab. 75a).

4. “This then is their order . . .” - This is the order of the influence of the “Female” months. Although the dimensions of time and thus all the months are the “Male” within the general “Female” of Malkhut, like everything else in creation, they are subdivided between the givers (Male) and receivers (Female). The spring and summer months are called Female in that during these months the Earth, which has been nourished by the winter rains now gives forth life. Thus, the Earth is called “mother Earth” in that during the spring and summer months, like a fruitful woman, the Earth gives forth “her” seed.

5. “The skull, ... the two ears, and ... the two eyes.” - These terms are not original to Rabbi Haim Vital. Their origins are in the fourth chapter of the Sefer Yetzirah. Therein the months of the year are found to coordinate to the various parts of the human body as well as to many other things including specific letters of the Hebrew alef-bet. Each month in time therefore manifests a

different influence (mazel) over various matters in physical space. Although the correspondences mentioned in the Sefer Yetzirah are different from those mentioned here, the concepts are the same.

6. “The Holy Temple was destroyed in Tamuz and Av.” - These two months correspond to the right and left “eyes” of the Female aspect of the months. In the system of the Ari’zal, the fallen vessels have their origins in the light that emanates from the “eyes” (Orot HaNikudim M’eynei D’A.K.). Thus evil has its source in what the eye sees (ref. Sotah 8a). When the children of Israel sinned before HaShem, evil was seen before G-d’s “eyes.” This led to punishment. The “left” side is the “Female” side, corresponding to the forces of severity. The “Male, right” side contrarily emanates mercy. Thus, the children of Israel were punished when the influence of the “Left Eye” became dominant. In other words, destruction became manifest when the powers of the universe aligned to manifest severity. Even when there was a small amount of mercy (the “Right Eye”) of the month of Tamuz, destruction did not occur, but once it passed, fate was sealed.

7. “The essence of these eyes is the secret of Yesod and Hod.” - The original light of the eyes, which emanated from Adam Kadmon, did not manifest until they were beneath His “waste” (the Tiferet of A.K.). Thus, the original lights of the “eyes” manifested in Netzah and Hod, which are the sefirot directly below the Tiferet. Netzah and Hod manifest the spirit of prophecy, which explains why prophecy either relates to us a sublime picture of a future world (from Netzah) or of impending punishments (from Hod). Blessings when we merit it or a curse when we deserve it; this is what the “eyes” see.

8. “What remains is the mouth, which is not herein included in the count because it is concealed.” -The mouth is the place from where the breath emanates. Breath is life, the essence of light. All living things in one form or another breath. Time itself is said to be a living organism and not some mere benign force of nature. As time is alive, it too must breath, yet it can have only one “mouth.” The “mouth” in time is the month that becomes the source of all the others and thus is called “the first.” At this point in time (Tishrei), the mouth is concealed for although we call the New Moon of Tishrei, Rosh HaShana, the beginning of the New Year, it is still six months earlier in Nisan that we number the beginning. Rabbi Haim explains this in his introductory lectures to Rosh HaShana. Therein he discusses a famous Gemara argument whether the universe was created in either Nisan or Tishrei. After a long discourse, he concludes that the universe was created at both times. The universe was first created spiritually in Tishrei, which is why it is Rosh HaShana (the “head” of years). The physical universe was manifest from the spiritual in Nisan, which is why we count time from then.

9. “This order is also followed by the [side of the] Male.” - The “Male” months are the months of rain, snow and cold. Rain and snow replenish the earth and the cold enables the earth to rest. Thus, the function of the winter months is active. They give to the Earth its recuperation and revival.

10. “That the Judges need to sanctify the month [according to the] mouths...” - In Torah and Talmudic times, when the Sanhedrin ruled, the New Months were proclaimed by the word of the Court. The sanctification of the month came forth from their mouths (i.e., their speech or words). This was to correspond to the supernal pattern of how the “breath” from Above breathes life into the dimensions of time.

11. “Since there is that which is lacking from the mouth of the Male” - We live in a time and place which has been blemished by the sin of Adam. Therefore, the “mouth” of the “Male” is said to be lacking. This means that the fullness of spiritual light that can possibly fill the dimensional planes of time and space does not do so. All of Kabbalistic practice and prayer is directed towards rectifying this state of affairs. This is referred to throughout mystical literature as the spiritual unification of the holy Names YKVK (how G-d’s Name is written) and the Name ADNY (Adonai, how

G-d's Name is pronounced). The fullness of G-d's holy Name is thus not manifest in the dimensions of time. It is still mostly concealed. Nisan is thus both the final month of the "Male" months, and the first month of the "Female" months. Yet, Nisan cannot perform both functions simultaneously. Therefore the month prior, Adar, is doubled and thus performs the role of the "mouth" so that Nisan can then perform its proper role as the skull (crown) of the "Female." For once the new year has begun, it has begun. We can always double the last number or last month, but never can there be two number ones.

12. "[This addition of a month] is to complete the Mouth" - In order to balance the times so that each holiday will fall in its season, the extra month is added to the year. The "mouth" month (Nisan) is both "Male" and "Female." As such, it is the source of life within the "Female" months of spring and summer. If and when time becomes imbalanced by the cycles not falling in their proper places, then it is only by the power of the "mouth" that things can be rectified. If the "Mouth" were concealed within the "skull" of the "Female," meaning if Nisan was doubled and not Adar, then the blessings of the New Year would not be able to properly flow down into our universe.

13. "From Tishrei until Adar is the Vak (six sefirot) of the Male" - As mentioned above, this is the "Male" aspect or the Z.A. aspect (the six sefirot: Hesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Netzah, Hod, Yesod) within the Malkhut, which is predominantly "Female."

14. "The proof of this is that we do not double Ellul, but only Adar." - The rest of this passage should be clear, given the notes that we have now added. Being that Nisan is the "mouth" even though the same overlap between "Male" and "Female" occurs again in Ellul, the results are not the same. For in Nisan, the Male" is giving to the "Female" as is appropriate. In Ellul, it would be the other way around, with the "Female" giving to the "Male." This is not the working order of the universe.

Conclusions

This passage from the writings of Rabbi Haim Vital enables us to understand the underlying spiritual meaning of one of the commandments. We also learn about the relationship between the laws of physics and the laws of metaphysics, shedding light on how the dimensions of time operate. What we learn is that just as in man, there is need for nourishment and a means to receive that nourishment, so is this pattern an integral form throughout creation. Even the fabric of space-time needs to receive nourishment. This comes in the form of spiritual radiance and is received in the "mouth" of time from the "fifth" dimension, as we have explained.

Another point that is clear from this section is that time, similar to space is cyclical and revolves in a circle. Just as in space, if you travel far enough in one direction you end up going around in a circle and coming back to where you began so is this true with travels in time. The more forward one moves in time, the closer to the beginning of time (and to G-d) we come. Everything that G-d has created He created spherically. This is the underlying secret of the original creation of space known as the Tzimtzum.

Aside from cosmology and metaphysics, there is a very practical and personal message here for all of us. As King Solomon said in Kohelet (3:1), there is a time and a purpose for everything under Heaven. G-d has ordained for all things to have their time and for all things to have their place. When everything is in their Divinely ordained right time and right place, then the universe operates perfectly and abundant blessings are received by all. When, however, someone performs sinful behavior, such as mistaken thoughts, feelings or actions cause the mechanics of creation to shift into a punishment mode. In other words, when one does not align oneself with the forces of good and blessing, natural "negative" forces are set into operation to manifest in one's life whatever force is necessary to turn that one around. This was the case of Benei Yisrael, who sinned before HaShem with the results that the Holy Temple was destroyed.

We must understand that the concepts of good and evil, reward and punishment are ingrained into the fabric of the universe. Somehow, somewhere, they is an "eye" watching us and an "ear" that hears all. Our actions ascend above to the supernal "nose" either as a pleasant fragrance or as a foul odor. The "mouth" above speaks to us either words of blessings or admonishments of correction. What all these metaphors mean is that we human beings are very much an integral part of a greater scenario of life in our universe than what we are aware of. Torah has been given to us as our guide, through both space and time. When we follow its lessons, we align universal forces in our favor. This is how G-d ordained things to be. Non-belief or denials will not change the outcomes. Our acceptance and surrender to the Hand On High will only lead us to the proverbial "Promised Land."

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