



RABBI AARON

GOLDSCHIEDER

Editor, Torah Tidbits

# An Enhanced Soul in the Land

*'In Eretz Yisrael the letters of our souls enlarge, expose the light, draw nourishment from the splendor of life of Knesset Yisrael.'*  
(Eretz Chefetz 2:3)

The topic of the holy letters is one of the deepest subjects of the “secrets of Torah” and enjoys a special place in the writings of Rav Kook. In 1917, while he was stranded in London during the First World War, Rav Kook wrote a volume entitled *Reish Millin* on the letters of the *Aleph-Beit*. It is known as one Rav Kook’s most esoteric works. It is overtly Kabbalistic in nature. It is a treatment of deeper meanings within the Hebrew letters.<sup>1</sup>

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1 One example from this volume is the analysis of the meaning of the letter *chet*. It is made up of two *zayins* (weapons). These two letters symbolize a face off with one another. However, the letter *chet* also consists of a bridge that connects the two. The letter *chet* is equal to the number eight. In the world of perfection (eight) competing values and perspectives are synthesized and connected as a unified whole. (See *Rosh Milin*, Samson, pp. 50-51)

Perhaps the following citation from the Talmud can help us elucidate the obscure idea of “letters”: ‘When I [Rav Meir] came to Rabbi Yishmael, he said to me, ‘My son, what is your occupation?’ ‘I told him, ‘I am a scribe’, and he said to me, ‘Be meticulous in your work, for your work is the work of heaven - perhaps you will omit one letter or add one letter; you would thereby destroy the entire world’ (Eruvin 13a).

Rashi elucidates the meaning of this passage above. Rashi explains that if one were, for example, to leave off the letter *aleph* in the phrase, “The Lord our God is true (*emet*)” - rendering it as *met*, dead, - this would be a blasphemous statement like no other.”

With the aforementioned teaching in mind perhaps, Rav Kook is asserting that the soul of the Jew living in the Land is suited to perceive more perfect and all encompassing truths. “Letters” symbolize the basic structure and underpinnings of an elaborate system.

The notion that the letters represent the very composition of the Torah is conveyed in a penetrating teaching in the Talmud. The episode of Moshe smashing the tablets is generally understood as a deliberate, premeditated act on the part of Moshe. However, the Talmud Yerushalmi offers an alternative explanation. It was not Moshe’s will to throw down the tablets. We are told that the letters engraved upon the tablets miraculously vivified and flew up into the

air. Unable to support the deadweight of the stones, Moshe dropped them, causing them to shatter:

“Rabbi Ezra in the name of Rabbi Judah of the house of Rabbi Simon: The tablets weighed forty *se'ah* and the writing supported them. Once the writing flew off, the tablets became heavy upon the hands of Moshe, and fell and shattered.” (*Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 4:5)

Apparently, the letters represent the essence of Torah. When the Jewish people had turned aside, the letters, so to speak, had no place to reside on earth and therefore ventured back to heaven.

Rav Kook may also be alluding to another facet regarding the notion of “letters of the soul.” Namely the notion of simplicity. In Chassidus the letters of the *Aleph-Beit* symbolize purity and innocent faith. The following tale is a beautiful example of this: Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk spent his younger years in the town of *Gorah* and *Tomoshav* before settling in Kotzk. Once, after he had already achieved a level of renown, the Rebbe had occasion to return to his hometown. Many of the town’s scholars and saints, as well as its simple folk, came out to greet the revered Kotzker Rebbe. Much to the chagrin of some of the older scholars, upon his arrival, the Kotzker decided to take up lodging with his cheider rebbe. Feeling slighted, one of the rabbis who had taught Talmud to Reb Menachem Mendel asked in a derogatory tone why the tzadik had chosen to stay “at his kindergarten teacher.” Kotzker answered: “Everything I learned from my Talmud teacher is but one possible reading of a given passage.

בס"ד

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The only thing I am absolutely certain about is that the letters of the Aleph-Beit are indeed the letters of the Aleph-Beit.” (Oros HaTorah, Vol. 1, Weinberg pp. 375-376)

Rav Kook writes in Orot HaTorah (5:2): “The joy that Torah study engenders in a person derives from the abundant light contained within the letters of the Torah...”

The midrash on *Shir Hashirim* associates the letters of the *Aleph-Beit* with joy:

“Rabbi Avin began, “This is the day that the Lord made, we exult and rejoice in it (*bo*) (Tehillim 118:24). We did not know over what to rejoice...until Shlomo Hamel-ech came and specified, “Let us exult and rejoice in You (*bach*)” (*Shir Hashirim* 1:4)... Rabbi Yitzchak said, “In You (*bach*) refers to the twenty two letters of the *Aleph-Beit* that You wrote for in the Torah: *beit*=2, *kaf*=20 , this is *bach*.”

To encounter the letters is to encounter Hashem. Perhaps the midrash above is accentuating complimentary ideas regarding our relationship with Hashem. The simplicity of a child who can only read the letters and the one who descends into the depths of the mysteries of God’s existence. For Rav Kook, the Land of Israel has the singular qualities that are most beneficial for such sacred encounters.

An “enlarged soul” is apt term to describe the soaring spirit and aliveness of Rav Kook’s essence. The following story

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accentuates this quality. Rabbi Charlop, his trusted friend related this experience: “In the summer of 1921, the Rav went to rest in Har Tov. I visited him there and our private conversation extended to the wee hours. The next morning I noticed that the Rav did not arrive immediately to *Shacharit*. What’s more, totally out of character of the Rav (who was punctilious not to engage in any activity before prayer), I saw him approach the innkeeper and begin to discuss with him botanical matters, such as which trees to plant in the vicinity. Only after concluding the conversation, did he proceed to pray.

The delay and the incongruous conversation made me wonder, and I plucked up the courage to ask the Rav to explain the curious behavior.

This was his response: “This morning there burnt in my mind such a thirst for the Living God, I feared that in prayer my soul would be consumed (“*kelot ha-nefesh*”). I was forced to dampen my enthusiasm by lowering my thought to practical, mundane matters. (Rabbi Moshe Zevi Neriya, Orot ha-Tefillah (Jerusalem, 2004), The Koren Rav Kook Siddur pp. 28-29) ■



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