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TOURO TORAH

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The Significance of Symbols

By Malka Svei

In just one week, Jewish families all over the world will be sitting down to the festive *Rosh Ha-Shanah* meal. Each of those families will begin the holiday in the same way by eating the *simanim*, the symbolic *Rosh Ha-Shanah* foods. Although the specific foods may vary across cultures, the *simanim* are a universal tradition. In fact, the apple dipped in honey is probably the most often portrayed image of the New Year.

What is the meaning behind this practice? Is it simply some sort of superstition? Do we truly believe that eating sweets will guarantee us a sweet year? There must be a better explanation.

The *Rosh Ha-Shanah simanim* are not a unique phenomenon. Jewish tradition is full of symbolic objects and actions. Prophecies are often accompanied by symbols; for example, when G-d promised Avraham

that he would merit to father a great nation, He didn't merely tell him so. Instead, He sent Avraham outside and instructed him to, "Look heavenward and count the stars; can you count them? So [numerous] shall be your seed..." (Genesis 15:6). We find many later prophecies similarly accompanied by symbolic actions, from throwing arrows (2 Kings 13:18) to inscribing tablets (Ezekiel 37:16).

Symbols can be connected to prayer. One of the most well recognized Biblical symbols is the serpent wrapped on a pole, which has become a universal symbol of healing.

When the Jewish people were attacked by snakes, G-d instructed Moshe to fashion this copper serpent. All those bitten were to gaze upon the image and thereby be cured (Numbers 21:9). The Sages explain very clearly that the serpent itself had no intrinsic power—the cure was brought about by the prayer it inspired. So one can ask, why was the image necessary at all?

The *Maharal* of Prague explains (in *Gur Aryeh* on Numbers 21:7) that the

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“Empty ritual is not enough. It is mindfulness that brings about the desired result.”

-Malka Svei

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snake served as a visual aid. Gazing at a tangible image of the problem helped the victims focus more intensely on praying for a cure.

Understandably, it is difficult to focus on an abstract concept. If the abstraction can be associated with something concrete, then it becomes easier to mentally deal with that otherwise difficult concept. And in spiritual matters, focus is vital. In fact, while discussing the laws of repentance, Maimonides (in *Mishneh Torah*; "Laws of Offerings" 3:10) writes that "Neither the Day of Atonement nor sin offering nor guilt offering atone [for the sins of any], except those penitent that believe [in their efficacy]..." Empty ritual is not enough. It is mindfulness that brings about the desired result.

The same applies to prophecy and prayer. The listener or speaker must be mindful and truly believe that the desired event will come to pass for a prayer or prophecy to have any effect. Our belief is the energy that creates the anticipated reality.

Symbols in prayer or prophecy help the individual better visualize and focus on the desired result. It is one thing to simply be told that your descendants will be numerous. It is quite another to view the teeming night sky, and know that image represents the future of your children. The tangible image lends the concept reality and immediacy, making it so much easier to grasp and ultimately believe.

Just like the copper snake, the symbolic *Rosh Ha-Shanah* foods do not possess any intrinsic power. Each one, however, is accompanied by a brief prayer about the New Year. I believe that the symbolic foods of *Rosh Ha-Shanah* serve as experiential aids, intended to add credibility to our prayers. It may be difficult to focus on the abstract and unknowable future. There is nothing abstract or hard to grasp, however, about the sweetness of an apple dipped into honey. That sensory experience creates an association we can focus on as we pray for a sweet New Year.

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-Malka Svei

A Guidebook to Teshuvah: דע מאין באת ולאן אתה הולך

By Reena Evans

“ Step one is to be at-
tuned to this distance.
It's a cycle: Set Ha-
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-Reena Evans

It's *'Elul* again, and the *Yamim Nora'im* are fast-approaching. We've heard year in and year out that this is the time of *teshuvah* and we want to become better people; we really do. Yet, inside we all feel a little cold—uninspired and unconnected. In the busy whirlwind of our daily lives, we feel like we've been doing okay, and there's not so much we have to change.

The *shofar* jolts us from our trance, a glaring reality check. The age-old question comes to the forefront of our minds: Why are we here? The *Borei' Olam* told us clearly, as the *Ramchal* writes in *Derech Hashem*, “לא נברא אלא” “להיות מתדבק בבורא”. Our purpose in life is to connect to our Creator. Our instruction book, the *Shulchan Aruch*, tells us right in the beginning: (*Rema* 1:1) “שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד”. I set *Hashem* before me always. In this time of *hester panim*, we don't immediately see the consequences of our actions. If we live a life of *שויתי*, we realize that when we act contrary to His Will, we drive a wedge between Him and ourselves. We intuitively understand that in human relationships, when someone asks you to do something and you do the exact opposite, it causes hurt and distance in the relationship. *Hashem* wants us to realize the purpose of our lives and draw close to Him. Step one is to be at-tuned to this distance. It's a cycle: Set *Hashem* before you and you'll realize your distance. Then, yearn to fix it.

This is where *teshuvah* comes in. The *Sifsei Chayim* writes “כבר בתחילת” “התשובה צריך לדעת את הכיוון” (*Mo'adim A*, p.68). Know where you're headed. Where does repentance take you from and lead you to? It is the path that leads from distance to closeness. The *Mabit* (quoted by the *Sifsei Chayim*) defines *teshuvah* as “קרבה לה' מריחוק החטא”, becoming close to *Hashem* after the distance of sin. The heights that *teshuvah* can cause a person to reach are astounding. The *Sifsei Chayim* quotes the *gemara'* in *Yoma* (86a), “גדולה תשובה” “שמגעת עד כסא הכבוד”. Repentance can get you all the way to the *Kisei' Ha-Kavod*, the Throne of Glory, (continued on page 4...)

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the ultimate closeness to the Presence of G-d. This is derived from many places in *Tanach* where *teshuvah* is described with the expression of 'ad, until. As it says in *Hoshe'a* (14:2), "שׁוּבוּהָ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ". Return Israel until *Hashem* your G-d." Until where? Until the ultimate closeness, the *Kisei' Ha-Kavod*.

However, the basic definition of *teshuvah* is "תשובה היא לחזור למצב שהיה" (Sifsei Chayim); the idea of repentance is to return you to where you were before the sin was committed. However, we already said that *teshuvah* takes you to the *Kisei' Ha-Kavod*! Which is it? In reality, it does both. Way back when, before any sins, that's where you were. Your *neshamah* was pulled out from under *Hashem's* throne. It is a *chelek 'eloak* (as pronounced with the *mapek hei*) *mima'al* that was *davek* to *Hashem*. Except there is one problem; "כי" (Sifsei Chayim). In a way we don't quite understand, the *neshamah* was ashamed, like a beggar, receiving *tzedakah*. Real, full *teshuvah* brings back its original state of *di'veikus ba-Hashem* before the *Kisei' Ha-Kavod*, but, in the even higher state of having earned it. You come from ultimate, indescribable closeness to *Hashem* and that is where you are heading back to. It may seem incredibly lofty and unreachable, but the very concept of repentance is in the realm of the miraculous. You've been there before and it is within your grasp to return there once again.

Teshuvah is like a path; it's aimed to get you somewhere. *Teshuvah* is the steps cut into the side of the mountain, the long and winding road between you, in your state of *richuk*, distance, and your goal, a state of *kirvah*, closeness, until the throne of *Hashem*. The *derash* of the *passuk* in *Yeshayah* (26:4) "כי בקה ה' צור" teaches us that *Hashem* created 'Olam Ha-bah with the *yud* of His Name and 'Olam Ha-zeh with the letter *hei*. The *hei* symbolizes that there is *bechirah* in the world. Based on the structure of the letter "*hei*" with the opening on the bottom and the gap on top, you can fall out the bottom. You can reject or ignore your Divine task in life, but the message is that there is always an opening to climb back in even higher. *Teshuvah* is that semicircular path that leads from the *richuk* below the *hei* back to the *kirvah* inside it, even closer to the Top.

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“ You come from ultimate, indescribable closeness to Hashem and that is where you are heading back to. ”

-Reena Evans

Hadassah, Her Green Complexion, and the Symbolic Meaning Behind the Four Species

By Este Stollman

“*Apart from their botanical qualities, the literal meaning behind each of the Four Species hints to this concept of national unity.*”

-Este Stollman

The Four Species represent four types of Jews: The *'esrog*, which has both a good smell and a good taste, represents a Jew who does *mitzvos* and learns *Torah*. The *haddasim*, with its inherent good smell, but no taste (or rather inedibility) parallels a Jew who does *mitzvos*, but does not learn *Torah*. The *lulav*, possessing no good smell but a good taste, refers to a Jew who doesn't do good deeds but learns *Torah*. And lastly, the *aravos*, which have neither a good smell nor a good taste, symbolize a Jew who doesn't have *mitzvos* or *chochmas ha-Torah*. In effect, by bundling all of these items together and raising them to *Hashem* with a *berachah*, we are uniting all the different kinds of *yiddin* in *Am Yisra'el* in front of *Hashem*, who is the Father of all of us and who very much wants all of His children to get along.

Apart from their botanical qualities, the literal meaning behind each of the Four Species hints to this concept of national unity: The *lulav* comes from the *lashon* of *levavos* or *lev*, heart, the seat of all of our compassionate emotions for one another. (Interestingly, “love” is a relevant cognate of this species' name.) The *'aravos* come from the *lashon* of *'areivus*, the state of belonging to each other and being responsible for one another. The *'esrog* seems to be linked etymologically to the word *Taryag*, as in *taryag mitzvos*, which includes the commandments *bein 'adam le-chavero* that bring us to a greater state of *'ahavas Yisrael*. And, lastly, are the *hadassim*, which through Biblical and Talmudic sources, also points to the concept of *'achdus Yisrael*, as I will explain.

The singular form of *hadassim* is *hadassah*, the alternate name of Esther. Although the *yuntif* at hand is *Sukkos* and not *Purim*, a look at *Megillas Esther* and its protagonist reveals different elements of Israel becoming one: Firstly, the myrtle tree, which is the *hadassah*, is of average height—it is neither tall nor short. **(continued on page 6...)**

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This represents Esther, who was of neither extreme, and therefore she could relate to any nation. Mordechai alludes to this concept when he told her not to reveal her birthplace or nationality, in order that everyone would claim her as his own.

Secondly, Esther had a green complexion, or olive-toned skin, as the *Gemara* says, "*Esther yerakrokes haysah*." It is interesting to note that green is the middle color of the spectrum. As Rebbetzin Tzipporah Heller relates, green is a combination of blue (coldness) and yellow (warmth). As stated before, Esther was of neither extreme; she was moderate and neutral, so to say, and therefore, everyone could relate to her. She had a keen sense of love, *'areivus*, and *'achdus* in terms of her relationship with the world (encapsulated in the *middah* of *ka-vod habriyos*) and more specifically, with *Benei Yisrael*.

Thirdly, through the use of *gematria* (one method of the *remez* level of Biblical exegesis), scholars have found parallels with scientific findings on color. The wavelength of green is 570 nanometers, which is the *gematria* of *teka'*, as in "*Teka' be-shofar gadol le-cherusenu ve-sa' neis le-kabetz galuyoseinu*." The key to our *yeshu'ah* as a nation, the start of our national *ge'ulah*, is our unity, encompassed in the various symbolic dimensions of this color. (Another example pertains to the *passuk*, "*va-hayu la-chem tzitzis u-re'eisem 'oso*." *Rashi* writes that *tzitzis*, which have the *gematria* of 600, along with its 8 strings and 5 knots, compose the numerical value of 613. (continued on page 7...)

"The P'til Techeilet Association states that the average wavelength of this blue is 613 nanometers, clearly no coincidence."
-Este Stollman

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What's the secret path to *teshuvah*? In *Pirkei 'Avos* (3:1), the *Mishneh* writes, "דע מאין באת ולאן אתה הולך". To appropriate this verse from *Pirkei 'Avos*, know that you came from before the *Kisei' Ha-Kavod* and that is where you will return to. *Hashem* is always before you and, in *Elul*, even more so. The King is in the field. Now, during this *Elul*, try to live with a little more *שׂוּי* in your life. See *Hashem* in your life and feel the distance you have created and your *neshamah's* desire to draw close. In doing so, may you merit to once again to stand before the holy Throne of G-d.

~Touro Torah~

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Next, the *mazal* of *Chodesh Adar* is the *dag*. A fish is *pareve*; it can be eaten with either milk-based or meat-based foods because of its neutral status. This insight furthers Esther's '*ahavas Yisrael* and relatability as a person.

In addition, we know that according to Talmudic sources and Biblical commentaries, Esther married Mordechai. In Judaism, a *shidduch* is the unity of two essentially similar people (on a *neshamah* level). Where do we see Mordechai's characteristics of '*achdus Yisrael* and '*areivus*? Mordechai comes from the *lashon* of *mor deror*, or *marya' dachya'* in Aramaic, which refers to a very unpleasant-smelling spice called frankincense. However, combined with eleven other spices, frankincense makes the most beautiful fragrance in the world, namely that of the *ketores*. These united 12 spices can clearly parallel the 12 *shevatim* and the good, pure result of their coming together. This, in turn, brings a pleasurable delight to *Hashem*.

Finally, to tie together all the concepts mentioned above, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov writes that *chibbuk* (hugging) is etymologically related to the word *yarok*. The *passuk* states in *Shir Ha-shirim* (2:6), "*Semolo tachas le-roshi veyemino techabkeini*," "His left hand is below my head and His right hand will hug me." If one takes a look at the dimensions of a hug, it consists of the bending of the upper arm, the forearm, and the hand, which together represent the 2 ½ walls of the *sukkah*. When sitting in the *sukkah*, one feels the "hug" of *Hashem*. Planted onto the holiday of *Sukkos* and the *mitzvah* of the '*arbah minim*, comes the inherent message of the importance of loving each other and coming together before *Hashem*. He will, as a result, *kiv'yachol*, hug us with His love in return, with the coming of *Mashiach*, *bemeherah ve-yameinu*.