



Exploring a Fascinating Teaching in the Zohar HaKadosh

If Yisrael Serve Hashem Ideally “Hashem Goes before Them” but if They Are Not Deserving “He Goes behind Them”

The upcoming Shabbas Kodesh is known as “**Shabbas Shirah**,” because the weekly parsha contains **Shiras HaYam**—the heartfelt song Moshe Rabeinu and Bnei Yisrael sang to memorialize the incredible miracle of Krias Yam Suf. It is fitting to begin with the memorable way HKB”H revealed Himself to our ancestors at that time, when Bnei Yisrael proclaimed (Shemos 15, 2): “זה אלי ואנוהו אלקי אבי וארוממנהו”—**this is my G-d, and I will glorify Him; the G-d of my father and I will exalt Him.**

Rashi comments in the name of the Mechilta: **He revealed Himself to them in His glory, and they would point to Him with a finger.** Furthermore, even a mere **slave-woman saw at the sea that which the prophets did not see.** On the words, “the G-d of my father,” Rashi comments: **I am not the source of the kedushah; rather, the kedushah stands established for me, and His godliness is over me, since the days of my forefathers.**

A similar explanation is provided by the Zohar hakadosh (Beshalach 55b), but it notes a significant nuance in the text. In the “Shirah,” Bnei Yisrael referred to Hashem as “אלקי אבי” in the singular—the G-d of their “father” rather than the G-d of their “fathers.” It asserts that they were referring specifically to **Avraham Avinu.** Here is a loose translation of the excerpt from the Zohar: **All of Yisrael saw at the sea what Yechezkel HaNavi was unable to see. Even those fetuses in their mothers’ wombs were able to see and praised HKB”H. And they all proclaimed, “This is My G-d, and I will glorify Him; the G-d of my father and I will exalt Him”—referring to the G-d of Avraham.** Clearly, we must endeavor to comprehend the association of Avraham Avinu with the

miraculous revelation of HKB”H at Yam Suf, memorialized by the proclamation: “זה אלי ואנוהו”.

The Pillar of Cloud Moved from in front of Them to behind Them

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by noting an intriguing change that took place during the occurrence of Krias Yam Suf. At the beginning of the passage, it says (ibid. 13, 21): “זה הולך לפניו יומם בעמוד ענן ולילה בבעמוד אש”—**“He went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to have them led along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel day and night. He would not remove the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night before the people.** It states explicitly that HKB”H chose to go ahead of Yisrael as a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night.

Yet, prior to the incredible miracle of Krias Yam Suf, when Pharaoh and his Egyptian legions began their pursuit of Yisrael, the divine guidance was modified as follows (ibid. 14, 19): “ויסע מלאך האלקים ההולך לפני מחנה ישראל וילך מאחריהם, ויסע עמוד הענן מפניהם ויעמוד מאחריהם, ויבא בין מחנה מצרים ובין מחנה ישראל ויהי הענן והחושך ויאר את הלילה ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה.” **The malach of G-d who had been going in front of the camp of Yisrael moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and stood behind them. It came between the camp of Mitzrayim and the camp of Yisrael, and there were the cloud and the darkness—and it (the pillar of fire) lit up the night; and one did not approach the other throughout the night.** Why was it necessary for

the pillar of G-d to change positions—moving from in front of Yisrael to behind them?

Sensing this question, Rashi explains: **He** (the malach of Hashem) **went behind them to separate between the camp of Mitzrayim and the camp of Yisrael and to intercept the arrows and catapult stones of Mitzrayim.** He notes that **everywhere it says “the malach of Hashem”** (using the divine name of mercy), **but here it says “the malach of Elokim.”** “Elokim” always connotes “din” (divine judgment); **this teaches that Yisrael was placed in judgment at that time—whether to be saved or whether to be destroyed along with Mitzrayim.**

This is corroborated by Rashi’s own comments in parshas Yisro on the passuk (ibid. 19, 4): **“אתם ראיתם אשר עשיתי למצרים—ואשא אתכם על כנפי נשרים ואביא אתכם אלי”**—**you have seen what I did to Mitzrayim, and that I carried you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me.** Rashi comments: **The eagle is different from the other birds for it is only afraid of man—that perhaps man will shoot an arrow at it. For no bird soars higher than the eagle, and therefore he places his young on top of him when he flies and says, “Better that the arrow should enter Me and not My children.” I too did so** (said Hashem when the Egyptians attacked Bnei Yisrael, as it says ibid. 14, 19): **“And the malach of Elokim travelled, etc., and came between the camp of Mitzrayim, etc.” And the Egyptians would shoot arrows and catapult stones, and the cloud would intercept them.**

Clarification of the Assertion of the Zohar HaKadosh that HKB”H Went behind Yisrael at Krias Yam Suf

With immense pleasure, we will elaborate on this phenomenon. According to the Zohar hakadosh (Shelach 166a), when Yisrael are deserving, HKB”H guides them from in front. This is apparent from that which is written (ibid. 23, 20): **“הנה אנכי שולח מלאך לפניך לשמורך בדרך”**—**behold! I am sending a malach before you to protect you on the way.** It is also written (ibid. 33, 2): **“ושלחתי לפניך מלאך”**—**and I will send a malach before you.** Yet, when they are not deserving, HKB”H guides them from behind.

In this light, the Zohar hakadosh interprets the text related to when Avraham Avinu was instructed to perform the mitzvah

of milah (Bereishis 17, 1): **“התהלך לפני והיה תמים”**—**walk before Me and be “tamim”** (complete, perfect, wholehearted). Analyzing this passuk, seemingly, it would have been more correct, if it said: **“Be ‘tamim’ and walk before Me.”** We can explain the matter as follows: Before Avraham was circumcised, he had not yet reached the lofty madreigah of HKB”H walking ahead of him. Hence, it specifically says: **“התהלך לפני”**—Avraham walked ahead, and HKB”H walked behind him. Therefore, HKB”H commanded him to perform the mitzvah of milah and become complete—**“והיה תמים”**. Then, Avraham would be privileged to have HKB”H walk, so to speak, in front of him.

Then the Zohar hakadosh returns to interpret the events depicted in this week’s parsha. Initially, Hashem went before Yisrael by day and by night—as a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, respectively. But when they complained (Shemos 14, 11): **“Is it because there are not enough graves in Mitzrayim . . . It is preferable for us to serve Mitzrayim than to die in the wilderness.”** Seemingly, this attitude and these remarks were offensive to the Almighty prompting the change in circumstances. Instead: **“The malach of Elokim who had been going in front of the camp of Yisrael moved and went behind them.”**

This still does not explain why when Yisrael are deserving, HKB”H goes in front of them, but when they are not, He goes behind them. We find a wonderful explanation in Ateret Tzvi (Vayeira 103a), a commentary on the Zohar hakadosh authored by the divine kabbalist the Mahartza of Zidichov, zy”a, citing the great Rabbi Moshe of Pshevorsk, zy”a. He presents an analogy:

If a person owns a slave whom he does not trust, and he is concerned that the slave may run away, he must, perforce, have the slave walk in front of him; for, he fears that if the slave were to walk behind him, he would definitely run away. On the other hand, if the slave is considered loyal and trustworthy, and he is certain that the slave will not run away, it is certainly more proper for the slave to follow and walk behind his master. It should be clear how this applies to the relationship between man and the Omnipresent. Then the Ateret Tzvi adds that in his humble opinion, this is the implication of the passuk (Devarim 13, 5): **“You shall follow Hashem, your G-d.”**

We can support this explanation of the esteemed Rabbi of Pshevorsk based on a teaching in the Gemara (A.Z. 5a): **כל העושה מצוה אחת בעולם הזה מקדמתו והולכת לפניו לעולם הבא, שנאמר והלך לפניך צדקך וכבוד ה' יאספך, וכל העובר עבירה אחת מלפפתו ומוליכתו ליום הדין.** **Anyone who performs a single mitzvah in this world, it precedes him and goes before him into the next world, as it is stated (Yeshayah 58, 8): "And your righteous deeds will precede you . . .," and anyone who commits a single aveirah, it envelops him and leads him to the Day of Judgment.**

In Chiddushei Aggados (ibid.), the Maharsha notes the difference in the phraseology used between the mitzvah and the aveirah. Concerning the mitzvah, they state: **"It precedes him and goes before him into Olam HaBa";** whereas concerning the aveirah, they state: **"It envelops him and leads him to the Day of Judgment."** He explains the difference in his own inimitable way:

When a person performs a particular deed, a spiritual creature, a malach, is generated. Depending on the nature of the act, **it can be an advocate or a prosecutor.** Therefore, **the text modifies its phraseology** regarding a mitzvah versus an aveirah. **It is analogous to taking someone to a happy and good place. The person accompanying him does not need to hold onto his hand or coerce him; for he will surely follow and will not attempt to escape. This is the case regarding a mitzvah. On the other hand, if the person is being led to his execution (gallows), the person accompanying him must guard him and hold onto him and prevent him from trying to escape; he will surely not follow on his own. This is the case regarding an aveirah.**

Returning to the remarks of the Ateret Tzvi, he applies this concept to the interpretation of the Zohar hakadosh (Vayeira 103a) of the passuk (Bereishis 18, 10): **"Now Sarah heard at the entrance of the tent, and it was behind him."** **"Behind Him" refers to Avraham, who sat behind the Shechinah.** For, this occurred after Avraham had performed the mitzvah of milah; hence, he was permitted to sit behind the Shechinah, since he had been deemed to be deserving and trustworthy, as it says of him (Nechemiah 9, 8): **"ומצאת את לבבו נאמן לפניך"—and You found his heart loyal to You."**

Simply Call Her and She Will Come Running

I would now like to introduce what the Tiferes Shlomo (Vayeichi) comments on the passuk (Bereishis 49, 1): **"ויקרא יעקב אל בניו ויאמר, האספו ואגידה לכם את אשר יקרא אתכם באחרית הימים"—then Yaakov called for his sons and said, "Gather together and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days."** He begins by expounding on the passuk (Shir HaShirim 1, 4): **"משכני אחריך נרוצה..."—draw me, we will run after you . . .** He refers to the Gemara (Kiddushin 22b) that teaches how an animal is acquired by means of "meshichah" (drawing it near): **"כיצד במשיכה, קורא לה והיא באה או שהכניסה במקל ורצתה לפניו, כיצד במשיכה, קורא לה והיא באה או שהכניסה במקל ורצתה לפניו, כיון שעקרה יד ורגל קנאה"—how is an animal acquired by means of "meshichah"? If he calls it and it comes to him, or he strikes it with a stick, and it runs before him; as soon as it lifts a foreleg and a hindleg, he has acquired it.**

Let us explain the difference between these two methods of "meshichah": With the first method, the person acquiring the animal simply calls to it; the animal is not subjected to any discomfort; the purchaser stands in front of it not behind it. With the second method, the animal is struck with an instrument; it suffers some discomfort; and the purchaser stands behind the animal not in front of it.

We can posit that when HKB"H wished to acquire Yisrael by means of "meshichah," He had these two options. **He could call her and she would come** by means of a "bat kol" arousing every Jew, every day, to perform complete, sincere teshuvah. If the people of Yisrael respond willingly to this stimulus and come (return) to HKB"H, no pain or suffering is involved, and HKB"H stands in front of us, so to speak.

Conversely, if we lack the good sense, chas v'shalom, to come to HKB"H of our own volition, He must resort to the second option—**striking us with a stick to encourage us to come running**—to induce us to perform teshuvah. This might involve being subjected to a wicked foe like Haman. This method, however, involves discomfort and duress, chas v'shalom, and requires that HKB"H position Himself behind us, so to speak.

Based on this understanding, the Tiferes Shlomo interprets the passuk above from Shir HaShirim. The people of Yisrael request of HKB"H: **"משכני"—acquire me by means of the first**

method of “meshichah”; so that we will run to you eagerly when you call out to us without necessitating any punishment or suffering, chas v’shalom. We wish for HKB”H to be positioned before us and not behind us.

This then is the implication of Yaakov’s parting remarks to his children: “האספו ואגידה לכם את אשר יקרא אתכם באחרית הימים”. He was praying and pleading with them on how to behave “**in the end of days**,” during the difficult, unbearable times that would precede the coming of the redeemer. He says to them: “אשר יקרא אתכם”—HKB”H will call out to you, my children, the people of Yisrael. Respond like the first type of “meshichah”: “קורא לה והיא באה”—come running to Him when He calls; do not make Him strike you with a proverbial “stick,” chas v’shalom. This is an expanded version of his sacred insight.

Combining the comments of the Tiferes Shlomo with those of the esteemed Rabbi Moshe of Pshevorsk illuminates for us the two ways a master might lead a slave. He may proceed ahead of the slave, if he is not concerned that the slave will run away from him. This reflects the first method of “meshichah”: “קורא לה והיא באה”—she is attentive to his call. If, however, the slave is not trustworthy, and the master fears that he will flee from him, the master must follow behind him. This reflects the second method of “meshichah”: “הכיתה במקל”—the master must impose disciplinary measures and keep an eye on the slave. Thus, we see that the comments of our two distinguished luminaries complement each other beautifully.

“It came between the camp of Mitzrayim and the camp of Yisrael” to Enhance the Merit of Yisrael by Comparing Them to the Egyptians

Continuing on this sacred journey, we can now explain why HKB”H changed His location during Krias Yam Suf from in front of the camp of Yisrael to behind it. We will begin with the interpretation of the Keren David of the passuk: “ויבא בין מרחנה מצרים ובין מרחנה ישראל”. We know that when judged, Yisrael can be exonerated in one of two ways: **(1)** in their own merit related to the study of Torah and the service of Hashem or **(2)** by being compared to the other nations of the world who behave corruptly; in comparison to them, the people of Yisrael are deemed virtuous. In this latter situation, Yisrael are exonerated even though their own behavior might not merit it, chas v’shalom.

Now, **the malach Elokim who had been going in front of the camp of Yisrael** is the very same malach that usually advocates on behalf of Yisrael when they are being judged and scrutinized by the name **Elokim**. When the people of Yisrael are in a state of perfection and deserve to be exonerated in their own merit, this malach of Elokim walks ahead of them advocating on their behalf and extolling their virtues. Yet, when they do not deserve to be exonerated in their own merit, chas v’shalom, and this malach is unable to advocate on their behalf, it must abandon its post in front of them and stand behind them.

As we know, at the time of the exodus, the guardian angel of Mitzrayim protested that the people of Yisrael were no better than the Egyptians; they were both guilty of worshipping avodah-zarah. Thus, Yisrael did not merit being exonerated based on their own behavior alone. This prompted **the malach Elokim who had been going in front of the camp of Yisrael to move and go behind them**.

Nevertheless, in His infinite mercy and favor, HKB”H strives to exonerate Yisrael even if they are not truly worthy based on their own merit. Therefore: “ויבא בין מרחנה מצרים ובין מרחנה ישראל”—the pillar of cloud moved to a location between the camp of Mitzrayim and the camp of Yisrael, so that the two could be evaluated against each other. It turned out that in comparison to the Egyptians, the people of Yisrael were found to be virtuous. Therefore: **“There were the cloud and the darkness (over the Egyptians), and it (the pillar of fire) lit up the night (for Yisrael).”** The narrative goes on to explain why: **“And one did not approach the other throughout the night”**—although the characters and behaviors of both were dark as night, there was still no comparison between them (“they did not approach each other”); compared to the Egyptians and all of the goyim, Yisrael are considered meritorious and perfect.

In this light, let us now explain the teaching of the Zohar hakadosh above. It stated that Yisrael sinned by lamenting: **“Is it because there are not enough graves in Mitzrayim, you took us to die in the wilderness? . . . It is preferable for us to serve Mitzrayim than to die in the wilderness.”** As a consequence, the malach of Elokim that had previously travelled ahead of them to advocate on their behalf, vacated that position and followed behind them. Therefore, to rescue

them from the force of “din”: **וַיִּסַּע עַמּוּד הָעָנָן מִפְּנֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲמֹד מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם**—**וַיָּבֹא בֵּין מַחֲנֵה מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל**—the cloud positioned itself between the two camps, so that Yisrael would be evaluated in comparison to the Egyptians. Based on that comparison, Yisrael were deemed meritorious and were exonerated by the force of “din.”

Surprisingly the Name of Heaven Was Sanctified by the Egyptians

Based on what we have learned, it appears that we can reconcile an extremely perplexing issue raised by the commentaries. Chazal teach us a fundamental principle (Shabbas 32a): **“מַגְלֵגְלִין זְכוּת עַל יְדֵי זֵכָא וְחֻבָּה עַל יְדֵי חַיִּיב”**—**benefit is imparted through one who is meritorious and harm through one who is guilty**. If that is so, then how did the Egyptians qualify to be a vessel with which the name of Heaven was sanctified so gloriously throughout the world? As it states in the first of the Aseres HaDibros (Shemos 20, 2): **“אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ—I am Hashem, your G-d, וְיָצָאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים—Who took you out of the land of Mitzrayim, from the house of slaves.**

If we consider the wonderful insight of the Kedushas Levi (Shemos), this question becomes even stronger. He explains why Makkas Bechoros was performed by HKB”H Himself rather than by one of His agents. Here is an abbreviated version of his explanation:

In reality, nothing bad comes from the Blessed One, only good. When our eyes will be opened sufficiently, we will recognize the tremendous benefit that accrues to the wicked themselves as a result of the blow G-d strikes them with. The punishments inflicted on Mitzrayim exalted and sanctified His great and holy name in the world. Likewise, whenever the wicked are punished, His great and holy name is exalted and sanctified. Since this is so, the wicked should desire and yearn for this privilege. They should be grateful and appreciate that as a result of all their punishments and suffering, His name is exalted and sanctified throughout the world. Unfortunately, the nations are impervious; their eyes are shut and their hearts are sealed. As such, they are unable to appreciate the benefits they might receive as a result of these punishments.

In this week’s parsha, the Kedushas Levi (Beshalach) adds the following in relation to the passuk (ibid. 14, 31): **וַיֵּרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל—Yisrael saw the great hand that Hashem inflicted upon Mitzrayim**. If we examine the precise language employed by the passuk, we find the term **“יָד הַגְּדוֹלָה”** employed—literally **“the great hand”**—which connotes the attribute of “chesed,” as opposed to **“יָד הַחֲזָקָה”**—literally **“the mighty hand”**—which connotes the attribute of “din,” as is evident from the passuk (ibid. 6, 1): **כִּי בְיַד חֲזָקָה—for by (My) strong hand, he will send them out**. That being the case, why does this passuk employ a term connoting “chesed” when the Egyptians were strewn dead along the seashore? Here is his answer:

It was a tremendous “chesed” to the Egyptians that they served as instruments for Hashem’s miracles. His divine name was sanctified due to them, causing the people of Yisrael to revere Hashem, as indicated by the passuk above. Thus, by employing the term **“יָד הַגְּדוֹלָה”**, the passuk indicates that Hashem performed an act of “chesed” on behalf of the Egyptians; then the passuk explains the nature of the “chesed”: **“וַיֵּרָאוּ הָעָם אֶת ה' וַיֹּאמְרוּ בָהֶם”**—they were the vehicles that caused the people of Yisrael to revere Hashem and to acquire “emunah” in Hashem.

It was a great “chesed” for the Egyptians that they served as the instrument for Hashem’s miracles through which His great name was sanctified, and the (Jewish) nation then revered Hashem upon witnessing His awe and glorious majesty. This then is what is conveyed by the passuk: “Yisrael saw the great hand that Hashem inflicted upon Mitzrayim.” In other words, they witnessed the “chesed” that Hashem performed for the Egyptians. It goes on to explain the nature of the “chesed” done for the Egyptians—that they served as the instrument through which the Jewish people came to fear Hashem and believe in Hashem. That is, they served as the means to instill the emunah in Hashem.

So, once again, why were the Egyptians afforded the admirable “chesed” and privilege of being the instrument to sanctify “shem shamayim” in the world? After all, we learned from the Gemara above that **benefit is imparted through one who is meritorious**, not through one who is guilty. The answer lies in our explanation above related to the passuk:

"ויבא בין מחנה מצרים ובין מחנה ישראל". We learned that Yisrael did not possess enough merit in their own right to leave Mitzrayim. Nevertheless, they were privileged to exit Mitzrayim, because HKB"H evaluated them against the Egyptians. Thus, the Egyptians performed a tremendous favor for Yisrael indirectly and inadvertently. And since HKB"H does not neglect to reward any creature, He rewarded them in Olam HaZeh in this manner—they were privileged to be the instrument to sanctify "shem shamayim."

We can also apply this notion to achieve a better understanding of the passuk (ibid. 14, 30): "ויושע ה' ביום ההוא את ישראל מיד מצרים"—on that day, Hashem saved Yisrael from the hand of Mitzrayim. In other words, the salvation of Yisrael was attributable to the "hand of Mitzrayim"—because HKB"H evaluated them in comparison to the Egyptians. Since Yisrael's exodus from Mitzrayim was facilitated by the Egyptians, the Egyptians were rewarded, as explained.

We have learned that, surprisingly, prior to Krias Yam Suf, the malach of Elokim changed positions; it moved from in front

of Yisrael to behind them. According to the Zohar kadosh, this change was put into effect because Yisrael began to complain when confronted by the daunting sea and the pursuing Egyptians. Yet, at Krias Yam Suf itself, HKB"H revealed Himself to them once again. This is evident from their declaration in the Shirah: "זה אלי ואנוהו"—they pointed with their fingers at the phenomenal revelation.

In this manner, we can explain why they added the words "אלקי אבי וארוממנהו" to this declaration. According to the Zohar hakadosh, this was a reference to Avraham Avinu. After performing the mitzvah of milah, Avraham Avinu became the first person to have HKB"H walk ahead of him, so to speak, instead of behind him. In his merit, Yisrael were privileged at Krias Yam Suf to have HKB"H reveal Himself to them in His full splendor and glory. In the merit of reciting Shiras HaYam with the utmost focus, may we also be privileged to the incredible revelation of "זה אלי ואנוהו" with the future geulah, as it is written (Yeshayah 52, 8): "כי עין בעין יראו בשוב ה' ציון"—with their own eyes, they will see that Hashem returns to Tziyon—swiftly, in our times! Amen.



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