

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XLIV: Devarim (Deut. 1:1–3:22)

Essay 2. The esoteric secret of prostration

מדרש רבה על פסוק "ה' אלהיכם הרבה אתכם", זה שאמר הכתוב, "אשתחווה אלהיכילקדשך ביראתך" עכ"ל. והוא תימה.

Midrash Deut. Rabbah 1:11 on the verse “The L-rd, your G-d has multiplied you; and behold, you are today as the stars in the sky in abundance,”¹ said: “This is why Scripture said: ‘I will bow down toward Your holy Temple in awe of You.’”² This is strange. What is the connection between prostration and an increase in population?

ויוכן במאי דאיתא במדרש על פסוק "ונשתחווה ונשוכה אליכם", אומר ר' יצחק הכל בזכות השתחווה, אברהם לא חזר מהר המוריה אלא בזכות השתחווה, "ונשתחווה ונשוכה אליכם". ישראל לא נגאלו אלא בזכות השתחווה, דכתיב "ויאמן העם" וכו' "ויקדו וישתחוו". התורה לא ניתנה אלא בזכות השתחווה, שנאמר "והשתחוויתם מרחק" וכו'. הגליות אינם מתכנסות אלא בזכות השתחווה, שנאמר "יתקע בשופר גדול . . . והשתחווו לה' בהר הקדש" וכו'. בית המקדש לא נבנה אלא בזכות השתחווה, שנאמר "רוממו ה' אלהינו והשתחווו" וכו'. המתים אינם חיים אלא בזכות השתחווה, שנאמר "באו גשתחווה ונכרעה" עכ"ל.

This will be understood from what is stated in the Midrash on the verse, “We will prostrate ourselves, and we will return to you.”³

Rabbi Yitzchak said: Everything is due to the merit of prostration. Abraham returned from Mount Moriah [with Isaac] due only to the merit of prostrating: “we will prostrate ourselves, and we will return to you.” Israel was redeemed [from Egypt] due only to the merit of prostration, as it is written, “The people believed . . . and they bowed down and prostrated.”⁴ The Torah was given due only to the merit of prostration, as it is said, “and they prostrated themselves from afar.”⁵ The exiles will be gathered in due only to the merit of prostration, as it is said, “And in that day, a great ram’s horn shall

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¹ Deut. 1:10.

² Ps. 5:8.

³ Gen. 22:5.

⁴ Ex. 4:31.

⁵ Ex. 24:1.

be sounded; and the strayed who are in the land of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come **and prostrate before the L-rd on the holy mount, in Jerusalem.**⁶ **The Temple will be built due only to the merit of prostration, as it is said: “Exalt the L-rd our G-d and prostrate yourself . . .”**⁷ **The dead will be revived due only to the merit of prostration, as it is said, “Come, let us prostrate ourselves and bow.”**⁸

- Gen. Rabbah 56:2

Thus, we see from this Midrash the importance and positive effects associated with prostration, and while an increase in population is not specifically listed, the Midrash begins with the general statement that “Everything is due to the merit of prostration.”

ומצינו בהנהגה שלחן ערוך ארח חיים (סימן קל"א), אסור לכל אדם ליפול על פניהם בפישוט ידים ורגלים, אפילו אם אין שם אבן משפית וכו'. וכתב הש"ך בפרשת משפטים שעיקר ההשתחויה היא לשם המיוחד, ולזה ההשתחויה היתה בתוך ירושלים בבית המקדש, ועתה שאין לנו בית המקדש ואנו מזכירים את השם בכינויו, אין אנו עושים השתחויה עכ"ל.

We find in the Rama’s gloss to the Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim (siman 131, se’if 8): It is forbidden for anyone to fall on their face with arms and legs outstretched, even if there is no stone floor, etc. The Shach wrote (on Parshat Mishpatim) that the essence of the prostration is for the explicit Name, i.e., the Tetragrammaton, and for this reason the prostration was done in Jerusalem, in the Temple. Now that we do not have the Temple and we refer to the Name indirectly, we do not perform such prostration.

ועוד מצינו במדרש רבה על פסוק "ה' אלהיכם הרבה אתכם" וכו', אמר להם היום אתם ככוכבים, אכל לעתיד לבא, לרב, אתם עתידים להיות דומים לרבכם, כיצד פתיב "פי ה' אלהיך אש אכלה הוא", וכתוב בישׂראל לעתיד לבא "והיה אור-ישׂראל לאש וקדושו ללהבה" עכ"ל.

Furthermore, we find in Midrash Rabbah on the verse, “The L-rd, your G-d has multiplied you; and behold, you are today as the stars in the sky in abundance [לרב] [la’rov]”:

Today you are like the stars, but in the future, “in abundance” [לרב] [la’rov], you are destined to be similar to your Master [לרבכם] [le’rabchem]. How so? Here it is written, “For the L-rd your G-d is a consuming fire,”⁹ and regarding Israel in the future it is written, “And the light of Israel will be a fire and its Holy One a flame.”¹⁰

- Deut. Rabbah 1:12

⁶ Isaiah 27:13.

⁷ Ps. 99:5; Ps. 99:9.

⁸ Deut. 4:24.

⁹ Ps. 95:6.

¹⁰ Isaiah 10:17.

ובנדאי שמהדרש הנה הרגיש קושא בפיסוק זה, דהנה לו לומר "והנכם היום ככוכבי השמים" ותו לא, ומהו "לרב". אלא נדאי צריך לומר "לרב", שלעתיד לבא יהיו דומים לרבן דהיינו הקב"ה. אבל מפל מקום קשה דלא שייך לומר זה הרמז של "לרב" אתם עתידים וכו', סמוך ל"והנכם היום" שהרי באותו היום לא היו כף.

Certainly, this Midrash sensed a difficulty in this verse, for it could have said, “The L-rd, your G-d has multiplied you; and behold, you are today as the stars in the sky,” and nothing more, and what is this need to add, *la’rov*, if it only means “in abundance”? Rather, certainly it was necessary to add *la’rov*, instead meaning “as your Master,” for in the future they will be similar to their Master, that is, the Holy One, Blessed be He. Nevertheless, it is difficult to understand this in such a way, for it does not seem appropriate to state this hint of *la’rov*, i.e., “similar to your Master, you are destined to be” coming immediately after it said, “and behold, you are today,” for on that very day they were not yet like that.

ונש לומר שדבר ידוע אצל המקובלים שהריבוי הוא מצד הקדושה, והמיעוט הוא מצד הקליפה, וכשיש הריבוי הוא סימן לשליטת הקדושה ולביטול הקליפה, ולפי זה פשט הכתוב הוא כף, "ה' אלהיכם הרבה אתכם", דהיינו שהרחיק מכם אחיות החצונים. וזה גרם שהיום אתם ככוכבים בלבד, לפי שעדיין לא הגיע הזמן שיתבטלו לגמרי הקליפות מן העולם, אבל עוד תהיו "לרב", לעתיד לבא כשתתבטל הקליפות לגמרי תהיו דומים לרבכם.

One can say, as is known among the Kabbalists, that increase is on the side of holiness, and decrease is on the side of the *klipah*. When there is increase, it is a sign of the dominance of holiness and the nullification of the *klipah*. According to this, the simple meaning of the verse is thus: “The L-rd your G-d has multiplied you,” that is, He has distanced from you the grasp of the external forces [*chitzonim*], that is, from elements of Creation that act as a spiritual barrier between us and G-d. The result is that you are today only as the stars in the sky, for the time had not yet arrived for the complete nullification of the *klipot* from the world. But you will yet be *la’rov*. In the future, when the *klipot* will be entirely nullified, then you will resemble your Master.

ומעתה המדרש הנאמר לעיל הרגיש קושיא גדולה על פסוק "ה' אלהיכם הרבה אתכם", שהלא לנפות למעלה פזו הנה מן הראוי שיהיו ישראל צדיקים גמורים, ובנדאי באותו הזמן לא היו כף, שאדרבא היו טרחנים וסרבנים, שקודם זה אמר "לא-אוכל לבדי שאת אתכם", ואחר זה "איכה אשא לבדי טרחכם ומשאכם" כדאיתא במדרש, ועיין לקמן בסמוך, ואם כן איך אפשר שיזכו לריבוי הנה, דהיינו שהקליפה תתרחק מהם ויהיו נדבקים בקדושה, אם מעשיהם מוכיחים עליהם להפך.

Now, the Midrash cited above sensed a great difficulty with the verse, “The L-rd your G-d has multiplied you,” for to merit such a lofty level, it would have been fitting for Israel to be completely righteous. Certainly, at that time, they were not so; on the contrary — they were “troublesome people and stubborn,”¹¹ for in the preceding verse it said, quoting Moses,

¹¹ Rashi on Num. 11:17.

“I cannot bear the burden of you by myself,”¹² and after this he said, “How can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering,”¹³ as it is said in the Midrash, and see further below, in Essay 3. If so, how is it possible that they merited this increase, namely, that the *klipah* was distanced from them and they were connected to holiness, if their actions testified to the opposite?

אֵלָא נִדְאֵי צָרִיךְ לִזְמַר שְׁנֵה הַזְכוּת שֶׁל הַרִיבּוּי כְּבָר זָכוּ בּוֹ מִחֵמַת הַהִשְׁתַּחֲוּיָה שֶׁעָשׂוּ בְּסִינֵי, דְּכַתִּיב "וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם מֵרַחֵק", וְסוּד הַהִשְׁתַּחֲוּיָה הוּא, לְבַטֵּל הַקְּלִיפָה וּלְהוֹרִיד אֹר מִקִּיּוֹף מְעוֹלָם לְעוֹלָם עַד סִיּוּם ד' עוֹלָמוֹת, וְנִדְוַע שֶׁהַקְּדוּשָׁה הִיא פְּרָה וְרַבָּה הַפֶּה הַקְּלִיפָה, דָּאֵל אַחַר אִיסְתֵּרַס וְלֹא עֲבִיד פִּירִין. וּמִשּׁוּם הַכִּי כְּשֶׁחֲזַר אַבְרָהָם מֵהַר הַמּוֹרִיָּה, שֶׁשָּׁם כְּתִיב "וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנִשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם", גִּתְּבִשֵׁר "הַרְבֵּה אַרְבֵּה אֶת־נִרְעָדָה" וְכו'.

Rather, it must be said that this merit of the increase had already been attained through the prostration that they performed at Sinai, as it is written, “and they prostrated themselves from afar.” The esoteric secret of prostration is to nullify the *klipah* and to draw down encompassing light, *Ohr Makif*, from world to world until the end of the four worlds, referring to ABiYA (אבי"ע).¹⁴ It is known that holiness is “fruitful and multiplies,”¹⁵ the opposite of the *klipah*, for “the other god [the principle of evil] is emasculated and has no desire to procreate, and does not multiply or bear fruit.”¹⁶ Therefore, when Abraham returned from Mount Moriah, where it is written, “we will prostrate ourselves, and we will return to you,” he received the news, “I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore.”¹⁷

וְכוּ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲמָרוּ בְּפֶרֶק ט' דְּשִׁבְתָּ, שֶׁהָרַסִינִי נִקְרָא מִדְּבַר פְּאָרוֹן שֶׁפָּרוּ וּרְבוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל עָלָיו, וּפְרַשׁ רַש"י שֶׁכָּל אֶהָד נִתְעַבְּרָה אֲשֵׁתוֹ וְנִלְדָה זָכָר, שֶׁבְּזָכוּת הַהִשְׁתַּחֲוּיָה זָכוּ לְרִיבּוּי בְּנִים, וְאָף עַל פִּי שְׁאַחַר כֶּה חֲטָאוּ, בְּרַבָּה רֵאשׁוּנָה לֹא זָנָה מִמְקוֹמָהּ, וּמִשּׁוּם הַכִּי אָמַר הַמְּדַרְשׁ, "ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַרְבֵּה אֶתְכֶם" זֶהוּ שֶׁאָמַר הַכָּתוּב "אֲשִׁשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לְקִדְשׁךָ" וְכו'.

So too with Israel, as it says in Tractate Shabbat (89b), that Mount Sinai is called the Wilderness of Paran [פָּאָרָן],¹⁸ because Israel were fruitful [פָּרוּ] [*p'ru*] upon it. Rashi explains:

¹² Deut. 1:9.

¹³ Deut. 1:12.

¹⁴ ABiYA is a Kabbalistic concept, an acronym for the four central worlds: Atzilut (“the world of emanation”), Beriah (“the world of creation”), Yetzirah (“the world of formation”), and Asiyah (“the world of action”). The last three terms appear (in verb form) in Isaiah 43:7, “Every one that is called by My name, and for My glory, I have created him, I have formed him, indeed, I have made him.” Atzilut emerges directly from G-d’s infinite light (revelation); this world is all good. Atzilut is the soul and the source of life to Beriah, the first world created from nothing, where Seraphim are created. Beriah is mostly good, with some bad. Beriah is the soul and the source of life to Yetzirah, where angels are created, forces entrusted with performing tasks without any free choice. Yetzirah is half good and half bad. Yetzirah is the soul and the source of life to Asiyah, our finite world in which created beings have a strong sense of independence. Asiyah is mostly bad, though there is some good. Therefore, the worlds are all linked, and all have a connection to G-d’s infinite light.

¹⁵ Cf. Gen. 35:11.

¹⁶ Zohar II:103a.

¹⁷ Gen. 22:17.

¹⁸ Num. 13:26.

each wife conceived and gave birth to a male child, that by the merit of bowing down, they merited the increase of children. Even though they later sinned, the first blessing did not depart from its place. Therefore, the Midrash said on the verse, “The L-rd, your G-d has multiplied you,” “this is why Scripture said: ‘I will bow down toward Your holy Temple in awe of You.’ ”

ובזה הקשר בא לתרץ נמי קושיא אחרת על פסוק זה, שהיה לו לומר "אשתמנה בהיכל קדשא", שהרי ההשתחוויה אינה מותרת אלא בבית המקדש דוקא, ולמה אמר "אלהיכיל-קדשא". אלא לפי שאמר הכתוב "נה' בהיכל קדשו", ופירשו המקובלים שהשם אינו שלם כביכול אלא בהיכל קדשו, שפשיש הקדושה בשליטתה אז נתבטלו החצונים, ומשום הכי אשתמנה, דהיינו אכונן בהשתחוויתי שיתבטלו החצונים, כדי שיתקנים תמיד היכל קדשא, שהתפלה תהיה אל קיום ההיכל בזכות ההשתחוויה.

With this connection, it also comes to answer another difficulty with this verse, that it should have said, “I will bow down in Your holy temple,” since prostration is only permitted specifically in the Temple, so why does it say, “toward Your holy Temple”? Rather, it is because the verse says, “The Lord is in His holy Temple,”¹⁹ and the Kabbalists interpret that the Divine Name is not complete, so to speak, except in His holy Temple, for when holiness is in control, the external forces [*chitzonim*], the elements of Creation that act as a spiritual barrier between us and G-d, are nullified. Because of this, “I will bow down,” meaning: I intend, by my prostration, that the *chitzonim* be nullified, so that “Your holy Temple” will endure always, that the prayer be directed toward the preservation of the Temple through the merit of prostration.

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¹⁹ Habakuk 2:20.