



A Fantastic Interpretation of the Sacred Insight of the Ba'al Shem Tov HaKadosh Yaakov Avinu Peeled Rods to Segregate the 600,000 Neshamos of Yisrael from Lavan's Flocks

This week we read parshas Vayeitzei. It describes an intriguing maneuver performed Yaakov Avinu when he was shepherding Lavan's flocks. Here are the pertinent pesukim (Bereishis 30, 37):

”וַיִּשָׂא לוֹ יַעֲקֹב מִקֵּל לְבָנָה לַח וְלֹזֵז וְעֲרֻמוֹן וַיַּפְצֵל בָּהֶן פְּצֻלוֹת לְבָנוֹת מִחֹשֶׁךְ הַלָּבָן אֲשֶׁר עַל הַמִּקְלוֹת. וַיִּצַּג אֶת הַמִּקְלוֹת אֲשֶׁר פָּצַל בְּרֶהֱטִים בְּשִׁקְתוֹת הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר תִּבְאֵן הַצֹּאן לְשִׁתוֹת לִנְכַח הַצֹּאן וַיַּחֲמֶנָה בְּבִאֵן לְשִׁתוֹת. וַיַּחֲמוּ הַצֹּאן אֶל הַמִּקְלוֹת וַתִּלְדְּן הַצֹּאן עֵקְדִים וְקָדִים וְטָלָאִים... וְהָיָה כָּכָל יָחַם הַצֹּאן הַמִּקְשָׁרוֹת וְשֵׁם יַעֲקֹב אֶת הַמִּקְלוֹת לְעֵינֵי הַצֹּאן בְּרֶהֱטִים לִיחְמֶנָה בַּמִּקְלוֹת... וַיִּפְרֹץ הָאִישׁ מְאֹד מְאֹד וַיְהִי לוֹ צֹאן רַבּוֹת וּשְׁפָחוֹת וְעֶבְדִים וְגַמְלִים וְחֲמֹרִים.”

And Yaakov took a moist rod for himself of poplar, hazelnut, and chestnut; he peeled white streaks in them, baring the white of the rods. He thrust the rods that he had peeled into the runnels of the watering troughs, to which the flocks would come to drink facing the flocks, so they would become heated when they came to drink. Then the flocks became heated by the rods, and the flocks gave birth to ringed ones, speckled ones, and dappled ones . . . Whenever it was mating time for the early-bearing flocks, Yaakov would place the rods in the runnels in full view of the flock to stimulate them with the rods . . . The man became exceedingly prosperous, and he had prolific flocks, maidservants and slaves, and camels and donkeys.

With this cryptic maneuver, Yaakov Avinu acted in accordance with the lesson taught by David HaMelech (Tehillim 18, 26): ”עִם חָסִיד תִּתְחַסֵּד, עִם גִּבּוֹר תִּמְיִם תִּתְמַם, עִם נָבוֹר תִּתְבַּר; וְעִם עֵיקֶשׁ תִּתְפַּתֵּל”—with the devout, you act devoutly; with the wholehearted man, you act wholeheartedly; with the

trustworthy, you act trustingly, and with the crooked, you act perversely. As we know, Lavan HaArami had cheated him repeatedly and extensively. In order to receive his just compensation and his portion of the flocks he shepherded, Yaakov performed this clever maneuver with the rods.

In his opening words to his commentary on this week's parsha, the divine kabbalist, Rabbi Menachem Recanati, ztz"l, explains that these stories do not appear in the Torah for naught. Hence, we recite a berachah when we study them just as we do for the "Aseres HaDibros" and all of the mitzvos of the Torah. For, all of these stories teach us valuable life-lessons and contain profound, esoteric messages.

A Wonderful Insight from the Ba'al Shem Tov HaKadosh

Thus, it gives me immense pleasure to delve into and share with my brothers the sacred words of the Ba'al Shem Tov hakadosh, zy"a. He addresses this episode involving Yaakov Avinu and explains Yaakov's intent in the sefer Keser Shem Tov (352) and in Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov (Vayeitzei 17). He interprets the runnels and troughs of water as the conduits of divine sustenance and influence flowing from the supreme light; the flocks are Yisrael, who are referred to as sheep (Yechezkel 34, 31), who are rooted in the letters of the alphabet, and whose neshamos emanate from the cantillations and vowels. He asserts that the term צא"ן is an acronym for צ"ר ו"ף א' ו"תיות נ'קודות—combination of letters and vowels. The flocks came "to drink facing the flocks" means that they

were aligned with the neshamos above in the heavenly realm. In this manner, the white was revealed—"הלבו"—an acronym for **ה'חכמות ה'לבו**—**the 32 paths of wisdom**.

Clearly, the explanation of the Ba'al Shem Tov hakadosh regarding the stripping of the rods in the troughs by Yaakov Avinu alludes to profound, mystical matters that are beyond our comprehension. Nevertheless, we will focus on the parts that we can comprehend based on concepts we have learned from our reliable early and late Rabbis. They will illuminate the way for us to arrive at a correct understanding. We will see that Yaakov Avinu's mysterious maneuver with the rods was designed to release from the control and domain of Lavan HaArami neshamos of Yisrael—G-d's holy flock that had reincarnated into the sheep of Lavan. We pray to HKB"H, Who kindly imparts wisdom to mankind, to guide us to the truth.

The Neshamos of the Shevatim Were Concealed within the Domain of Lavan HaArami

To begin with, we know that everything is orchestrated from above by HKB"H. While in his parents' home, Yaakov Avinu studied Torah day and night in the Beis Midrash of Shem and Eiver. Nevertheless, it was ordained from above that he leave that safe and sacred environment and journey to the home of Lavan HaArami. For, it was essential that he marry Rachel and Leah; together they built the house of Yisrael by giving birth to the fathers of the twelve shevatim, from whom all the neshamos of Yisrael until the end of time would come forth.

Thus, it is evident that all the neshamos of Yisrael were stored and concealed in the domain of Lavan HaArami. Therefore, HKB"H arranged for the mothers of the original shevatim, Rachel and Leah, to be born from Lavan. Then, Yaakov Avinu would come and marry them to extract the precious neshamos of Yisrael from the domain of tumah. This is consistent with the concept presented in the following Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 19, 1):

"זאת חוקת התורה, זה שאמר הכתוב מי יתן טהור מטמא לא אחד, כגון אברהם מתרח, חזקיה מאחז, יאשיה מאמון, מרדכי משמע, ישראל מעובדי כוכבים, העולם הבא מעולם הזה. מי עשה כן, מי צוה כן, מי גזר כן, לא יחידו של עולם."

"This is the statute of the Torah": This is the implication of the passuk (Iyov 14, 4): "Who can produce purity from impurity? Is it not One?!" Such as Avraham from Terach,

Chizkiyah from Achaz, Yoshiyah from Amon, Mordechai from Shimi, Yisrael from idolaters, the Olam HaBa from Olam HaZeh. Who did this? Who commanded this? Who decreed this? Was it not the One and Only of the world?!

The brilliant author of the Avnei Neizer, zy"a, in the sefer Neos HaDesheh, explains the matter magnificently. Everything is ordained and decreed by the One and Only of the world. Seeing as the Blessed One created everything, it is impossible for anything to come from Him that opposes Him. Perforce, all of creation honors Him. Ultimately, even that which is "tamei" produces that which is "tahor." Hence, the elements of tumah do not prevent the emergence of the elements of taharah from them. After all, the elements of tumah exist solely for this purpose.

Accordingly, we can comprehend Yaakov Avinu's tremendous apprehension prior to leaving for Charan. He was fully aware that he would be required to battle the forces of tumah to extract the neshamos of Yisrael stealthily and cleverly from their possession. To pacify and encourage him, HKB"H reassured him in his dream (Bereishis 28, 15): **"והנה אנכי—עמך ושמרתיך בכל אשר תלך—behold, I am with you; and I will guard you wherever you go.** Nevertheless, Yaakov persisted and added the following entreaty (ibid. 20): **אם יהיה אלקים עמדי—if G-d will be with me, and He will guard me on this way that I am going . . . and I will return in peace to my father's house.**

The Neshamos of Yisrael that Reincarnated into Mitzrayim Had Reincarnated Previously into Lavan's Sheep

At this point, it behooves us to present to our esteemed readership another fascinating fact regarding Lavan's flocks. Not only were the neshamos of the twelve fathers of the shevatim concealed in the possession of Lavan, but so were all the 600,000 neshamos of Yisrael that ultimately landed in Mitzrayim via the process of gilgul. Before ending up in Mitzrayim, they had reincarnated into Lavan's sheep. Those precious neshamos were rescued and released from Lavan by Yaakov Avinu. In his merit and due to his kedushah, those neshamos were afforded their initial tikun. After reincarnating into Bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim, they achieved their ultimate tikun when they received the Torah.

The source for this explanation is found in the Neizer Kodesh, authored by the divine kabbalist Rabbi Yechiel Michel of Galona, ztz"l, in his commentary on the Midrash (B.R. 73, 6), where he elucidates Yaakov's remark to Lavan (ibid. 30, 6): "כי מעט אשר היה לך לפני ויפרוץ לרוב ויברך ה' אותך לרגלי"—**for the little you had before I came has multiplied substantially as Hashem has blessed you with my coming.** The Midrash teaches us just how meager Lavan's flock was prior to Yaakov's arrival: "שבעים נפש, נאמר כאן מעט ונאמר להלן מעט [ויגר שם] במתי מעט, מה להלן שבעים בשבעים נפש [ירדו אבותיך מצרימה], אף כאן שבעים"—**seventy souls; the text employs the term "מעט" here, and it also employs the term "מעט" further on** (Devarim 26, 5) . . . **just as it means seventy there . . . so too here, it means seventy.** In other words, prior to Yaakov's arrival, Lavan's flock numbered a mere seventy sheep.

Afterwards, the Midrash (ibid. 73, 11) teaches us the degree of Yaakov's success (Bereishis 30, 43): "**The man became exceedingly prosperous** ('במאד מאד')." The Midrash asks: **How many sheep did he have?** It answers: **Six hundred thousand flocks of sheep.** According to the Yifeh To'ar, we learn this from a "gezeirah shavah." Here, the passuk says "מאד מאד", and with regards to Bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim, it says (Shemos 1, 7): "ויעצמו במאד מאד". So, just as Bnei Yisrael numbered six hundred thousand there; so, too, the number of sheep here numbered six hundred thousand.

At first glance, since nothing happens by mere coincidence, we can only wonder: What is the connection between the seventy souls that went down to Mitzrayim and increased to six hundred thousand and the number of Lavan's sheep that also initially numbered seventy and increased to six hundred thousand under Yaakov's supervision?

The Neizer Kodesh explains that HKB"H arranged for Yaakov Avinu to shepherd Lavan's flocks, because the neshamos of Yisrael that were tarnished by the "cheit Eitz HaDa'as" had reincarnated into them. Now, we learn in the Gemara that Yaakov Avinu was a gilgul and tikun of Adam HaRishon (B.M. 84a): "שופריה דיעקב אבינו מעין שופריה דאדם הראשון"—**the radiance of Yaakov Avinu resembled the radiance of Adam HaRishon.** Therefore, it was Yaakov's task to care for and rectify these precious neshamos that were among Lavan's flocks. He enabled them to rise from the lowly level of sheep

to the level of human beings, who reincarnated into the Bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim.

Based on this premise, the Neizer Kodesh asserts that Yaakov devised numerous tricks and strategies to heal those neshamos, such as the intricate maneuver with the rods in the sheep's troughs. Thus, the sheep came into his possession. He was truly a tzaddik; he did not perform these acts for monetary gain, chas v'shalom; on the contrary, his sole aim was to return those sheep to the realm of kedushah. Ultimately, they were elevated to the status of "adam"—as members of the nation of Yisrael.

This explains very nicely why the Midrash compares the number of Lavan's sheep to the number of Bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim. As we know, when Yaakov and his family descended into galus in Mitzrayim, they numbered seventy souls. Subsequently, they proliferated to six hundred thousand. Similarly, Lavan's flocks, into whom the neshamos of Yisrael had reincarnated, initially numbered a mere seventy sheep. Subsequently, under Yaakov's supervision, they proliferated to six hundred thousand.

The White Wood Represents the 600,000 Neshamos of Yisrael

Following this line of reasoning, we will proceed to clarify the insight of the Ba'al Shem Tov hakadosh concerning the passuk: "**He peeled white streaks in them, baring the white of the rods.**" By means of this maneuver Yaakov managed to release all the neshamos of Yisrael that were trapped in the possession of Lavan HaArami among his flocks. To explain the matter, we will refer to a concept taught by the Rishonim that there are 600,000 letters in the Torah corresponding to the 600,000 original (roots of) neshamos of Yisrael. In other words, every neshamah is associated with a letter of the Torah. Here is what the Shela hakadosh writes on this subject (Korach 1):

"ודע כי מספר בני ישראל היו ששים רבוא, ואמרו המקובלים שהם שישים ריבוא נשמות היוצאות משישים ריבוא אותיות התורה, שרוחניות התורה הם נשמות ישראל, והדור שקיבלו את התורה הם היו שישים ריבוא הנשמות, ואחר כך הדורות הבאות אחריהם הם כולם ענפים מהם."

Know that the number of Bnei Yisrael was 600,000. The kabbalists explain that they are 600,000 neshamos that emanate from the 600,000 letters of the Torah. The

spirituality of the Torah is the neshamos of Yisrael. The generation that received the Torah numbered 600,000. Afterwards, the generations that followed them, were all branches from them.

The Megaleh Amukos (186) adds a wonderful allusion: The name **י"ש ש"שים ר'בוא א'ותיות ל'תורה** is an acronym for **ל'תורה**—**there are 600,000 letters in the Torah.** This teaches us that every Jew is associated with a letter of the Torah. We can propose that this is the implication of the following passuk related to Matan Torah (Shemos 19, 2): **”וַיַּחֲנוּ שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֹגַד הָהָר”**—**and Yisrael encamped there opposite the mountain.** Rashi comments in the name of the Mechilta: **As one man with one heart.** This teaches us that Yisrael received the Torah, comprised of 600,000 letters, in the merit of the unity of the 600,000 neshamos of Yisrael.

Additionally, let us introduce a teaching in the Midrash (D.R. 3, 12): **”אמר ריש לקיש התורה שניתנה למשה עורה של אש לבנה וכתובה”**—**Reish Lakish said: The Torah that was given to Moshe, its skin was of white fire, and it was written with black fire.** A similar teaching is found in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Shekalim 1, 1): **”התורה שנתן לו הקב”ה למשה, נתנה לו אש לבנה חרותה”**—**באש שחורה.** For this reason, our sefer Torahs have black letters inscribed on white parchment, alluding to the foundation of the Torah given to Moshe of black fire on top of white fire.

This phenomenon is explained by the great Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, zy”a, in Kedushas Levi (Likutim). The black letters visible to all represent the black fire that every human being is capable of perceiving based on his individual acumen and abilities. The white parchment, on the other hand, representing the white fire, contains no visible letters. It represents the light of the Torah that is beyond human comprehension—esoteric concepts that cannot be represented by letters and words.

With this understanding, he interprets the passuk (Yeshayah 51, 4): **”כי תורה מאתי תצא”**—**for Torah will come forth from Me.** Our blessed sages expound in the Midrash (V.R. 13, 3): **”אמר הקב”ה תורה חדשה מאתי תצא, חידוש תורה מאתי תצא”**—**HKB”H said: “A new Torah will come forth from Me”—novel aspects of the Torah will come forth from Me.** This is seemingly difficult to comprehend, because it contradicts one of the thirteen principles of emunah: **שזאת התורה לא תהא מוחלפת**

—this Torah will not be replaced and there will not be another Torah from the Creator, blessed is His name. So, how is it possible to say: **“A new Torah will come forth from Me”?**

Based on what we have discussed, he explains: It is referring to all of the hidden meanings of the Torah that are stored in the white parchment that HKB”H will reveal to us in the future. As we learn from the Midrash, at Har Sinai, the Torah was already given as black fire on top of white fire. However, we have not yet been privileged to attain all of its esoteric, hidden meanings; that will only happen le’asid la’vo. Thus, it will truly be a new Torah with regards to the novel interpretations and meanings that will be revealed; even though, it was already given to us at Har Sinai. These are his sacred words.

The White Light Is the Source of the Torah in the Heavens before It Has Been Distilled into Letters

Let us expand on this idea based on the well-known fact that the heavenly source of the Torah is infinite and unfathomable; it exceeds the capabilities of the human intellect. After all, it represents the wisdom of HKB”H. So, just as HKB”H is infinite, so, too, is His “chochmah.” Nevertheless, due to His infinite kindness and mercy, He diminished His “chochmah” step by step until it took the form of the letters of the Torah as we see it today. This concept is discussed by the author of the Tanya in Likutei Amarim (Chapter 4):

”ואף דהקב”ה נקרא אין סוף ולגדולתו אין חקר ולית מחשבה תפיסה ביה כלל... הנה על זה אמרו במקום שאתה מוצא גדולתו של הקב”ה שם אתה מוצא ענוותנותו, וצמצם הקב”ה רצונו וחכמתו בתרי”ג מצוות התורה ובהלכותיהן, ובצירופי אותיות תנ”ך ודרשותיהן שבאגדות ומדרשי חכמינו ז”ל, בכדי שכל הנשמה או רוח ונפש שבגוף האדם תוכל להשיגן בדעתה, ולקיימן כל מה שאפשר לקיים מהן במעשה דבור ומחשבה...”

ולכן נמשלה התורה למים, מה מים יורדים ממקום גבוה למקום נמוך, כך התורה ירדה ממקום כבודה שהיא רצונו וחכמתו יתברך... ומשם נסעה וירדה בסתר המדרגות ממדרגה למדרגה בהשתלשלות העולמות, עד שנתלבשה בדברים גשמיים וענייני עולם הזה שהן רוב מצוות התורה ככולם והלכותיהן, ובצירופי אותיות גשמיות בדיו על הספר עשרים וארבעה ספרים שבתורה נביאים וכתובים, כדי שתהא כל מחשבה תפיסא בהן.”

HKB”H is referred to as “Ein Sof”—His greatness is unfathomable, and He is beyond human comprehension . . . Regarding this fact, they said (Megillah 31a): “Where

you find HKB”H’s greatness, there you find His humility.” HKB”H condensed His will and His chochmah into the 613 mitzvos of the Torah and their associated halachos, and into the combinations of the letters of the Tanach and their elucidations in the Aggados and Midrashim of Chazal; so that man’s neshamah, spirit and physical being would be able to comprehend them and fulfill them as much as humanly possible in action, speech and thought . . .

Therefore, the Torah is compared to water. Just as water travels downward from the higher ground to the lower ground, so, too, did the Torah come down from her place of glory—the blessed Almighty’s will and chochmah . . . From there, she travelled and descended systematically from level to level, and from world to world until she took on the physical, material form of Olam HaZeh—which are the majority of the mitzvos of the Torah and their halachos, and the combinations of physical letters inscribed with ink on parchment—the twenty-four books of the Torah, Neviim and Ketuvim—so that every mind should be able to grasp them.

This explains very nicely the insight of the Kedushas Levi concerning the black fire on top of white fire. The white fire of the Torah alludes to the source of the Torah before it descended downward and underwent progressive, sequential diminution until taking the form of the black letters of the Torah, which are visible to the human eye. Therefore, in Olam HaZeh, it is impossible for us to perceive the white fire; it is a type of surrounding light—“ohr meikif”—above the process of diminution and restriction, which is beyond human comprehension.

This, however, is in direct contrast to the visible, black letters of the Torah that represent the portions of the Torah that have already been diminished and restricted, so that we can comprehend them. This then is the meaning of the Midrash: **HKB”H said: “A new Torah will come forth from Me”—novel aspects of the Torah will come forth from Me.** As the Kedushas Levi asserts, le’asid la’vo, HKB”H will reveal to us even the portions of the Torah that are represented by white fire that have not been modified or restricted.

This provides us with a magnificent understanding of what Rabeinu Chaim Vital writes in Sha’ar HaKavanos in the name of his

mentor the Arizal. He asserts that gazing at the letters in a sefer Torah is a fantastic segulah—auspicious and a good omen:

”מנהג מורי ז”ל שהיה נוהג לנשק הספר תורה, וללוותו לילך אחריו כשמוליכין אותו מן ההיכל אל התיבה לקרות בו, ואחר כך היה נשאר שם סמוך אל התיבה, עד שהיו פותחין הספר תורה ומראין אותו לקהל כנודע, ואז היה מסתכל באותיות הספר תורה ממש, והיה אומר שעל ידי הסתכלות האדם מקרוב כל כך שיוכל לקרוא האותיות היטב, על ידי זה נמשך אור גדול אל האדם.”

My master of blessed memory had the custom of kissing the sefer Torah and accompanying it as it was transported from the sanctuary to the ark to be read from. He would then linger near the ark until they opened the sefer Torah and showed it to the congregation, as is customary. Then he would actually gaze at the letters of the sefer Torah, and he would claim that by a person gazing from such close proximity that he is able to read the letters clearly, the person draws an exquisite (intense) light to himself.

In keeping with this discussion, let us explain. By gazing at the letters in the sefer Torah that are inscribed on the whiteness of the parchment—simulating black fire upon white fire—a phenomenal, exquisite light is drawn from the white portion of the text, where all the secret, unrevealed meanings of the Torah are concealed. This clarifies for us the allusion pointed out by the Ba’al Shem Tov—that “מחשוף הלבן”—the baring of the whiteness of the rods alludes to the **ל’ ב’ נתיבות ה’ חכמה**—**32 paths of chochmah**—the acronym of **הלכ”ן**. For, the source of the Torah, from the divine wisdom before it takes the form of the letters of the Torah, emanates from the white fire.

Yaakov Avinu Took Steps to Draw the Neshamos of Yisrael into His Flocks

We now have cause to rejoice. We have illuminated to some, small degree Yaakov Avinu’s profound intent in stripping the rods. We have a fundamental principle taught by the Ramban (Bereishis 12, 6): Prior to any heavenly decree, it is necessary for man to perform a corresponding symbolic gesture down below. In kabbalistic terms, this is referred to as “an awakening below.” Here is a translation of what he writes: **Know that all decisions of the guardian angels, when they proceed from a potential decree to a symbolic act, the decree will be effected in any case. It is for this reason**

that the prophets often perform some act in conjunction with the prophecies.

In a similar vein, the Sforno writes (Bamidbar 20, 8): **הַנִּישִׁים** "יעשהו האל יתברך על ידי עבדיו, עם הקדמת איזו תנועה מסודרת מאתו, כענין (שמות ד-ג) השליכהו ארצה, (שם יד-טז) הרם את מטך, (שם יז-י) והכית בצור". As examples of this principle, he cites acts that Moshe Rabeinu was instructed to perform prior to the occurrence of certain miraculous feats—such as throwing his staff to the ground, raising his staff, and striking the rock.

Now, Yaakov wanted to attract the neshamos of Yisrael that had been corrupted in the generations of the mabul and the dispersion, so that they would reincarnate into Lavan's flocks. Thus, they could gravitate to Yaakov's portion of the flocks, and he could begin the process of their tikun. To accomplish this, he performed a symbolic gesture, as it states: **"Yaakov took a moist rod for himself of poplar, hazelnut and chestnut; he peeled white streaks in them, baring the white of the rods."** Due to his level of kedushah, he was able to perceive and attain the source of the Torah. So, he stripped the external wood off the rods to bare the underlying **"whiteness."** Thus,

he revealed the source of the Torah concealed in the whiteness of the parchment, from which all 600,000 letters of the Torah draw their sustenance.

"He thrust the rods that he had peeled into the runnels of the watering troughs, to which the flocks would come to drink facing the flocks, so they would become heated when they came to drink." In other words, he utilized the exquisite light of the letters of the holy Torah to illuminate the neshamos that had reincarnated into the flocks of Lavan HaArami. **"Then the flocks became heated by the rods, and the flocks gave birth to ringed ones, speckled ones, and dappled ones."** In other words, they gave birth to the 600,000 neshamos of Yisrael that are associated with the 600,000 letters of the Torah. Since they were born as part of Yaakov Avinu's personal flocks, he was able to begin their tikun, enabling them to ascend from the level of sheep via reincarnation to the neshamos of Bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim. Ultimately, their tikun was completed when they exited Mitzrayim and received the Torah, which is comprised of 600,000 letters that illuminate the 600,000 neshamos of Yisrael.



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