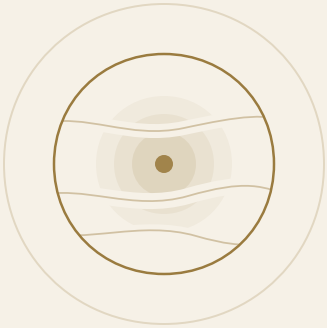
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Through a Clouded Lens

The Akeidah and the Courage to Choose

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Notes by a student

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PROLOGUE

Reality Feels the Way It Feels

What we are trying to do is draw the wisdom of being a functional human being in a world that is difficult, with a soul that knows it's difficult and a body that feels it's difficult. We want to bring that wisdom into the light of *pnimiyus haTorah*, the inner dimension of the Torah, the illumination of its secrets. The work a person does to overcome whatever it is they have to overcome, to set limits to the self and overcome the self, is at its inner core connected to the very principles upon which *pnimiyus haTorah* is built.

When we join the two, while keeping the real difference between them, a third point is revealed: a Torah of return—a return rooted in Torah, and a Torah rooted in the return itself. That gives birth to the Torah of the *ba'al teshuvah*, the one who returns, a Torah that can be lived with, written and engraved upon the bones of each person's experience in this world.[1] It reveals that *pnimiyus haTorah* is ultimately there to fix the body itself, to fix the lowest places imaginable.

And when we read it in the words of the *tzaddikim*, we say: Wow—these righteous individuals, who theoretically didn't struggle the way our generation has to struggle, also intuited the spiritual truths and medicinal salves our generation would need. If it worked for them, it can certainly work for me; if it was true for them, it's certainly true for me. The task is to sew the wisdom of the sages together with the day-to-day experience of turning to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, simply to make it through the day in front of us.

The Torah of Izhbitz

The *tzaddik* we'll be learning with is Reb Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz. Izhbitz describes the shape, the architectonics, of a modern soul when it finds itself alienated from the absolute unity of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. His Torah is almost like a gift planted in the past for the future. Without it, it's very difficult to understand how we can attune ourselves to what it means to be a human being in modern, post-modern, post-post-modern society.

The Torah of Izhbitz is the *refuah* before the *makkah*—the cure prepared before the wound.[2] It teaches that reality is reality, and reality feels the way it feels, in all of its intensity, all of its

struggle and all of its severity. And it's specifically there, in the human element, that we find what makes us more significant than any other force in reality other than the Infinite itself, so to speak: we get to choose. We get to clarify, to work through the thicket of the limitations and deficiencies that define human experience.

We do not operate in a place of clarity of mind. We operate in a world cut through with doubt on the existential level. A person who actually leaned into it would be *tamid mesupak*—perpetually called into doubt, putting themselves in question, feeling the ground beneath their systems of thought perpetually crumbling: somehow, miraculously, maintaining stability, but nevertheless crumbling.

The Torah of the Mei HaShiloach reveals that it is specifically from within that bottom place that *emunah* takes on its vibrancy. There we uncover the secret of *Torah shebe'al peh* and the inner point of the heart: the gift each personality brings into existence through the coping mechanisms, framings and reframings we cultivate by the light of a radical faith beyond knowledge and beyond provability, rooted in an inner knowing that knows more than can possibly be known. The Torah of Izhbitz gives us permission to operate within that space.

It's a Torah drawn down from the heilige Rebbe of Kotzk and from Rav Simchah Bunim, from the Yid HaKadosh, the Chozeh, the No'am Elimelech, the Maggid, the Ba'al Shem Tov HaKadosh, the Arizal, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and Moshe Rabbeinu himself. Through it we will ask: what does the Akeidah mean for us, and how do we orient ourselves to it in our day-to-day lives?

NOTES

1 *Likutey Moharan* I:4, §5.

2 *Megillah* 13b.

CHAPTER ONE

Only a Request

In this week's *parsha* we encounter something profoundly significant about what it means to be a human being in this world: the *nisayon* of the Akeidah. The Akeidah was a symbol of all tests in general, but it was singular in its nature because of its traumatic element.

To get at the true kernel of the test itself, there's a *Derashos HaRan*[1] that the Mei HaShiloach builds upon, and Rav Kook, *zechuso yagein aleinu* continues in the same vein. The Ran says that the essential matter at the heart of the Akeidah was the language of *na*: HaKadosh Baruch Hu *requests* of Avraham Avinu—please—to go ahead and follow through with this task. *Kach na es bincha*—please take your son.[2] And Rashi says: *ein na ela lashon bakashah*[3]—*na* is nothing but the language of request.

The language of *na*, of "please," of beseechment, is not a command. It's not a dictum a person has to follow through on to maintain the status quo; nothing depends on it. It is a request—a request free from any dependency, free from any form of necessity propelling me one way or the other.

That "please" placed Avraham Avinu in what Rav Kook describes as the full and total expression of *bechirah*[4]: free will, the terrifying nature of human responsibility and freedom that rests at the core of what makes us our best selves and what makes us, *lo aleinu*, our worst selves. This is the point of *bechirah*: the ability to choose.

The path of least resistance

We spend most of our waking hours either unaware of *bechirah* or fighting against it by doubling down into the habituated nature of our experience in this world. Habituation, natural tendencies, the basic functioning that continues without any volitional choice from moment to moment—these take away a lot of the anxiety at the heart of human experience. I do what I have always done, what I've always done has continued to work, and therefore I will continue to do what I have always done.

By engaging with whatever model of thinking we have always engaged with, we flow ever so smoothly down the path of least resistance, where I don't have to overcome myself today. I don't have to make a decision about how I want my life to go today, because life will carry me today.

A *nisayon* is the opportunity to recognize: oh my goodness, if I am not responsible, if I am not focused on the decisions of the day-to-day moments of my life—and ultimately the main decision is how I am going to see the circumstances, how I am going to choose to look at the world—then life will be overcome and inundated by the natural flow of habit. What the Chazon Ish called *hazanachas hachayim lezerem hativ'i*[5]—abandoning life to its natural current.

So when HaKadosh Baruch Hu says to Avraham Avinu *na*, "please," Rav Kook says that Avraham relinquished every element of compulsion, inner or outer, and was left with the pure nature of a decision. That itself is terrifying. What does one do when one comes face to face with the recognition that the matter depends on me? The way I decide right now is going to be the outcome of the situation; it is going to be the direction in which life continues to go.

NOTES

1 *Derashos HaRan* 6, s.v. *Hineh mevu'ar ki hamitzvos veha'aveiros*.

2 *Bereishis* 22:2.

3 Rashi, *Bereishis* 22:2, s.v. *kach na*.

4 Rav Kook, *Olas Re'iyah* I, *Parshas HaAkeidah*, s.v. *Vayomer kach na es bincha*.

5 Chazon Ish, *Emunah uBitachon* 4:1.

CHAPTER TWO

Elokim and the Clouded Lens

Rav Kook gives us the philosophical psychology of *bechirah*. The Mei HaShiloach softens Avraham Avinu's dilemma and gives it more of the modern sensibility we find ourselves in on the regular. For him, the *nisayon* of the Akeidah, or any *nisayon*, is not simply a singular moment and act. It is a perpetual state, accessible to the mind if it's honest enough with itself about how it feels in the moment.

On *VeHa'Elokim nissah es Avraham*—and God tested Avraham, his tenth test[1]—the *heiliger* Mei HaShiloach teaches that the test of the Akeidah was the profound *emunah* Avraham Avinu had in Hashem.[2] *Emunah* is not a knowing. *Emunah* is rooted in the recognition of an ultimate unknowing: I can't know, and I won't ever fully know. The acceptance of faith was the real innovation of Avraham Avinu, in contradistinction to the idolatrous impulse to know everything. Avraham sacrificed that; he shattered the idols and came to find God through questioning itself, as the Mei HaShiloach describes in *Parshas Lech Lecha*.[3]

The paradox at the heart of paradox

Hashem had told Avraham that Yitzchak would be the continuity of his existence, the generational imprint: *es brisi akim es Yitzchak*[4]—it's with Yitzchak that I will establish the covenant; you will be continued through Yitzchak. And now HaKadosh Baruch Hu suddenly reveals not a point of ambiguity, but a contradiction—something that fundamentally dispels what I assumed to be true a moment before. Bring Yitzchak as a *korban*.

And even though Avraham Avinu encountered this paradox at the heart of paradox, he believed in Hashem's original words. He trusted the first words exactly as he had before the second ones were spoken. The level of belief Avraham had in Yitzchak being his continuation, before Hashem said to bring him as a *korban* and after, didn't shift. Nothing changed. The complete shift in circumstances did not change the inner faith, the inner knowing.

This faith cannot be grasped by the human mind—*ein haseichel ba'adam lehasig*. It's a level of *shevisah*, of complete and utter equanimity, to the degree that even the opposite itself does not push one away from the certainty of the thing now being opposed.

The Test Through Uncertainty

In truth, says the Mei HaShiloach, part of what made the Akeidah so intense is that Avraham Avinu didn't hear directly from God that he should bring his son as a *korban*, that he should kill his child. That was never explicitly stated.[5] It wasn't a clear command; there was a semblance of ambiguity, a territory of not knowing whether it was his responsibility or not. The Ran says this ambiguity was ultimately the main *nisayon*.

And therefore the verse does not say that Hashem tested him. It says *Elokim* tested him. HaKadosh Baruch Hu has two ways of expressing Himself to the human being: Hashem and *Elokim*.

Hashem—*Havayah*, the Four-Letter Name—is the revelation of HaKadosh Baruch Hu's desire for the human being. It is the alignment of the self with God to the degree that there is a uniformity between essence and expression, so that the expression, which is creation, becomes the receptacle and mirror through which the essence shines, and the human being becomes a *merkavah*, a chariot for the Divine. That's when HaKadosh Baruch Hu reveals Himself in a clarified way, where we know exactly what to do.

But then there's *Elokim*. *Elokim* is the *gematria* of *hateva*,[6] the natural order of things. In the world of Izhbitz and Radzyn, *olam keminhago noheig*—the world runs its natural course.[7] The *teva* is a real thing that HaKadosh Baruch Hu has planted in reality, and that is where the struggle comes from: the seemingly endless repetition of things that seems to operate on its own, God forbid. It's certain that Hashem is the one giving the directive, but it's not clear to the mind of the individual. It's being heard in an echo, not in the direct voice of the call.

Ve'al zeh ne'emar "VeHa'Elokim," lashon tokef, says the Mei HaShiloach—this is why the verse says *Elokim*, a language of *tokef*, forcefulness. HaKadosh Baruch Hu was expressing Himself through *Elokim*. There was an intensity, an urgency. There was nothing to do other than to choose the orientation, because Hashem wasn't deciding at that point.

Aspaklaria de'lo nahara

The matter came to Avraham through the secret of an *aspaklaria de'lo nahara*,[8] a lens that does not shine. It is a non-transparent veil through which we gaze at what rests beyond it. There's a concealment; I'm not grasping it clearly. It's *mesupak*, stuck in a place of undecidability and unknowing. There's no fundamental revelation. It's a translation of a revelation, an echo of an original voice, the shadow of an original light—an unknowing that is the residue of a previous knowing. As the Zohar HaKadosh says, Avraham Avinu received the Akeidah through the *aspaklaria de'lo nahara*.[9] It was a clouded lens.

The secret of *na*, says the Mei HaShiloach, is this *aspaklaria de'lo nahara*. There are two ways in which the prophets—those close to the Ribono shel Olam, His chariots, and each and every one of us—encounter the messages HaKadosh Baruch Hu sends us through reality, through our lives, through ourselves.

One is the clear lens, the *aspaklaria de'nahara*, where things are clear and vivified. I know exactly what the marching orders are; it's not so much a question of what is right or wrong in my subjective stance, and there is really no *nisayon* of *bechirah*. That's the place of the cultivation of habit, of healthy morals and responsibilities, which remove any handicap that would prevent me from doing the right thing when it's clear.

And then there's the clouded lens, where it's not clear to me what's right. My subjective feelings and emotions are tied up in it; experience is tied up in it; reality is tied up in it. I'm tired, I'm hungry, I'm angry, I'm lonely, I'm scared, I'm anxious. All of it is influencing who I am in relationship to this moment, and I just don't know. The sturdy ground of certainty has been taken away from me.

And in that moment, a person comes face to face with the recognition that I have to choose: how I want life to go right now, how I want to see myself. Am I going to see myself through a lens of hopelessness because I fell, or with a lens of light, because I know that I've fallen before and I can get up again? It's up to me. In that stage of the clouded lens, a person is left without defenses, singularly engaged with the secret of *bechirah*—the power that rests at the heart of the human being.

The test of Avraham, not of Yitzchak

And therefore, the Mei HaShiloach says, it isn't called the *nisayon* of Yitzchak. It's *Akeidas Yitzchak* but it's the test of Avraham. Why, if Yitzchak was the one who was actually going to suffer? Because Yitzchak had the capacity to rely on Avraham. He believed that everything Avraham was saying came directly from Hashem. And that's not so difficult—to believe in Avraham, to believe in the *tzaddik*, to believe in his father.

Yitzchak's real *nisayon* was a different one: what happens on the altar, where he says "bind me tightly,"[10] in the aspect of *gevurah*, severity, and what happens afterwards. For Yitzchak, it wasn't the *nisayon* of *emunah*. But Avraham didn't have what to rely on. He didn't have a clarified vision. He didn't know what Hashem wanted from him. It was *mesupak*, ambiguous, undecided.

And in that place, as Rav Kook describes, all of the forces—the foreknowledge of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, what HaKadosh Baruch Hu would have wanted, how I assume He would want, how I assume I should act, based on this or that—all of it went away. There was no clarity there.

Because the word was not explicit to him—*lefi shelo hayah eitzlo hadibur bimfurash*, in the Mei HaShiloach's words—Avraham Avinu encountered the terrifying moment of *bechirah*: no separation between self and reality, the heavy responsibility that emerges when a person recognizes that the matter depends solely on me. In that tiny place of *bechirah* that remains, the job is always to choose—and then to realize afterwards that it was never our choosing. We live in that suspension between foreknowledge and choice,[11] and the *tzaddikim* say that this is what is taking place at the Akeidah.

NOTES

1 *Bereishis* 22:1; *Avos* 5:3; *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 31.

2 *Mei HaShiloach* I, *Vayera*, s.v. *VeHa'Elokim nissah es Avraham*.

3 *Mei HaShiloach* I, *Lech Lecha*, s.v. *Vayomer Hashem el Avram*.

4 *Bereishis* 17:21.

5 Rashi, *Bereishis* 22:2, s.v. *veha'alehu*.

6 הטבע = 86 = אלהים.

7 *Avodah Zarah* 54b.

8 *Yevamos* 49b.

9 *Zohar* I:120a.

10 *Bereishis Rabbah* 56:8.

11 *Avos* 3:15.

CHAPTER THREE

Afar: Removing the *Negiah*

What did Avraham have to remove in that moment? The Mei HaShiloach answers: *ve'im hayah lo shum negiah ke'av leben, az hayah machricho leracheim alav*.

If he had any *negiah*, any personal bias, at all, as a father toward a son, it would have compelled him to have mercy on him.

At this point Avraham Avinu had to do the very difficult work of realizing: oh my goodness, the choice depends on me. And if the choice depends on me, I must abstract myself from the situation. I must remove my own reasoning, my biases, my own thinking that gets invested in every moment of experience. Because when my own thinking, my own desires, my biases and my tendencies get involved, I'm already down the path my mind laid out for itself before the struggle even began.

The mind operates according to a preconceived perspective of what it is meant to do and where it is going to get stuck. If I allow the biases of the mind and the stories I tell myself to influence the freedom of my actions, I've already lost, because it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's the prophecy that our Sages say was given over to the *shotim*, the foolish ones.[1] The *shoteh* is the one who is *meshoteit bemachshavah*, whose mind wanders in a perpetual ruminative flow, circling and circling.

When I allow myself to be influenced by my cognitive distortions, the experience is already defined, congealed and sedimented within the lens of that distortion, and I'm too late to have an actual moment of free choice. So in this moment, with no clear directive and the recognition that he had to choose, Avraham had to remove every *negiah*: any sense of self, any emotional connection that would cloud his orientation toward the moment itself.

"We will return to you"

Because in truth, Avraham knew, and he was correct: Hashem never wanted him to kill Yitzchak.[2] Hashem never wanted Avraham to take the life of his son. It only appeared that way to Avraham.

We see that Avraham intuitively and unconsciously already knew this. When he leaves Eliezer and Yishmael[3] at the foot of the mountain, he says: me and the *na'ar*, the lad, will return to you. [4] The *na'ar*, Yitzchak, who was supposedly about to be killed! Ah—Avraham's unconscious knew. His body understood that he was coming down with Yitzchak.

That is the place from which Avraham Avinu was operating. His secret faith that Yitzchak would continue forever was the same before HaKadosh Baruch Hu told him to bring him up as after; nothing changed. HaKadosh Baruch Hu told him something that seems to tear the world asunder, and he doesn't flinch, because he had the *emunah yeteirah*, the extra measure of faith. He knew intuitively—the body keeps score of the future—what goodness was going to emerge.

Afar va'eifer

When Avraham Avinu reaches this abstraction of the self out of the circumstances—becoming unfeeling for a certain moment so that he can make the right decision without any preconceived notions—this, says the Mei HaShiloach, is what he means when he argues with Hashem to protect Sedom and says, *ve'anochi afar va'eifer*, "I am dust and ashes."[5]

What does Avraham mean when he says "I am dust"? Dust reflects the fact that there are still elements of me that are not completely clarified, traits of my own that are still unrefined, so that growth can take shape from within the dust. *Afar* is the recognition that there is still an immense amount of clarification of self to be done so that I can make a decision.

NOTES

1 *Bava Basra* 12b.

2 Rashi, *Bereishis* 22:2, s.v. *veha'alehu*.

3 Rashi, *Bereishis* 22:3, s.v. *es shnei ne'arav*.

4 *Bereishis* 22:5; Rashi ad loc., s.v. *venashuvah*.

5 *Bereishis* 18:27.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Gifts: Half a Name and Everything

Removing the self, *hishtavus*—equanimity—becoming unfeeling for a moment—this can sound very much like certain spiritual paths that developed in the East. The difference may appear to be a hairsbreadth, but that hairsbreadth is the linchpin that holds together the entire system of what it means for us to approach HaKadosh Baruch Hu. And this week's *parsha* is where that difference is made.

The pull toward the East

There's an idea that isn't explicit in the Zohar HaKadosh, but emerges from the text when it's read in its spirit. It's often brought in the name of the Sfas Emes, and it was popularized and developed in the writings of Rav Moshe Shapira, *zechuso yagein aleinu*, and his students. It concerns the difference between the wisdom of the East, so to speak, and the Torah itself.

Why are so many Jews, and why is the soul, so drawn after wisdoms that developed in the East? Mindfulness, awakening, paths that have everything to do with quieting the mind to open oneself to paying attention and living in the present. All of these teachings are clearly revealed in our holy books.

Nevertheless, many Jews found themselves going East to gather these sparks, to find the baseline stability on which to build intentionality, mindfulness, attunement to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and the vessels that work with it. Throughout the history of Klal Yisrael there have been individuals who went down that path and drew out wondrous tools to draw down the real work of serving Hashem.

But there remains a rootedness, a connection, to this "wisdom of the East," which has been translated and taken out of its original context. Certain practices, intentions, points of focus and starting points, the ones that determine the whole system, remain in conflict with what the Torah says it means to cultivate mindfulness, to be a person with real attention. The *hafshatas hainyanim*—the stripping of these ideas from their original setting—often makes them seem

disconnected from their roots. But the roots continue to express themselves, and some of the ideas become problematic because of where they are rooted.

One reason given, from the Sfas Emes and from the systems of Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin, the Gra and Rav Kook, is the Bnei Keturah. Avraham Avinu had children from Keturah who were sent east, and he gave them gifts. Those gifts were *shemos*, names—names that were not complete, *shemos betumah*, names of impurity:[1] spiritual forces, awakenings, identifications and focus that do not lead to the full culmination of the spiritual vision. That full vision was the secret Avraham Avinu gave over to Yitzchak, Yitzchak to Yaakov, Yaakov to the tribes, and the tribes to us.

These gifts can be used to one degree or another, but when it comes to actual divine service, the differentiation has to be made. The Zohar HaKadosh in *Parshas Vayera*[2] clarifies where that wisdom came from and what our work is once we find ourselves able to connect to the Torah HaKedoshah.

What you desire draws after you

The Zohar HaKadosh is discussing life and death, presence and absence, transition, beginning again. It speaks of a relationship in which what is awakened below—the *mayin nukvin*, the desire a person has down here—creates the *shefa*, the flow of blessing, that comes down from Above. As we function below, so will be the awakening Above.

Says the holy Zohar HaKadosh: *Come and see: as a person is drawn after HaKadosh Baruch Hu in this world, with all their yearning, so after they leave this world they are drawn after His light, and a path is cleared for them* to behold what they desired so deeply, each moment of their lives. It's the same thing the Idra Zuta says of Rabbi Shimon: *with one knot I am bound to You*—one singular desire for You.[3] The work, obviously, is to uncover the gift within the desire for the gift itself.

The book of the Bnei Kedem

Said Rav Abba. It's important to understand why it's Rav Abba who says this. Rav Abba was the scribe of Rabbi Shimon. He understood the significance of listening to the words of the *tzaddik*, writing them down, knowing what the *tzaddik* was saying, and not following whatever the spiritual fancy of his own heart might be. Rav Abba had the secret of *bittul*, of nullifying his own wisdom to the light of the *tzaddik*, and the ability to contract his Rebbe's words, to draw them down into a real system that can be worked with. So it's Rav Abba who leads us into this story, where we see the importance of the difference between the wisdom of the East and the Torah.

One day I found myself in a town of those who came from the East, the Bnei Kedem. They spoke to me of the wisdom they knew from the ancient days. They showed me a library of the books of their wisdom *and brought one book before me.*

Written in that book: *according to the desire a person directs in this world, so they draw down a spirit from Above, a mirror image of the desire they attach themselves to.*

This first teaching isn't talking about the afterlife, or reward and punishment. It speaks of active participation in cultivating a desire, so that what a person desires in this world can theoretically manifest from Above. It shows, in a very clear but undefined way, an inherent connection between the desire one cultivates and that desire's capacity to manifest.

If a person contemplates something holy and good, that thing is drawn down to them from Above.

And if they think about something negative, they draw that down too. It's a mixed bag, because it's a technology of *kavanah*, intention, without the purpose at the heart of intention—the intention behind the intention, the goal of *what* I'm paying attention to, not simply *how* I pay attention.

It sounds very much like manifestation thinking: my thoughts draw down a like-minded response, a co-creation that mirrors me back. All of that might be true in the secret of *hashgachah pratis*, Divine Providence, but not because the mind is paying attention. HaKadosh Baruch Hu has created a mechanism in which, when I nullify my mind to Him, He sends down a flow of blessing. It has nothing to do with my will. The only will I have is to nullify my will *legamrei*, entirely, to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. The Bnei Kedem are far more about orienting my will and choosing what it is that I want.

The main thing depends on words, actions and the desire to connect. Through the awakening from below, that thing is drawn down from Above. One can orient oneself to *the rites and services of the stars and constellations*—to use the energy of the *teva* itself, which is just a garment on the infinite light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. All the rules and regulations for drawing down what a person wants are written there.

All I have to do is want enough, manifest my desire enough, and then on its own, the Bnei Kedem say, somehow that orientation will reveal that everything I need is exactly where I have it, and there's no point in going out and searching for anything.

They had teachings about the future too. *When a person leaves this world, what they did here is the path they'll follow*—a karma path. The energy a person put out in this world is the energy they'll meet in return: *if in holiness, in holiness; if in impurity, in impurity*. All of this is the language of the Bnei Kedem, those names of impurity.

If a person attaches to holiness, they become part of that celestial kingdom, a servant before HaKadosh Baruch Hu among the angels—*venasati lecha mahalchim bein ha'omedim ha'eileh*—

I will give you a place to walk among these who stand.[4] There's a desire to become like an angel —whereas only the *Yid* understands the secret that a human being is much higher than an angel. The emptiness of the mind lets a person live like an angel, removed from worldliness: no possessions, no attachment, emptiness, a life of complete Heaven. That is the secret of the Bnei Kedem.

And the same in the opposite direction: a person who sends their energy out to a negative place becomes attached to it, becomes the thing they're thinking about. If the desire has power of its own, as the Bnei Kedem say, that is heresy. Desire has no power of its own. Desire is a place of *bittul* that draws down the power from above it—the secret of the Ein Sof, the Infinite, flowing down into the soul of Israel.

The will is a *bittul*; that's the secret of the Torah HaKedoshah. The Bnei Kedem feel that the will has a power of its own, and so wherever it directs itself, it can adapt and become that thing, because it identifies so much with the will. That is the opposite of the *bittul* of the will to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. It is the attempt to manifest what I desire, as opposed to letting go of desire and giving in to the infinite light that rests at the core of all things.

And someone who spends their time on these negative things, say the Bnei Kedem, is taken when they leave this world to *Gehinnom*—a place of destruction, a place of desolation.

"Very close to the words of the Torah"

Says Rav Abba, after seeing all the wisdom of the East: *My children, these words are very close to the words of the Torah! But you have to distance yourselves from these books.*

A book is the expression of a wisdom that melts into reality and becomes a climate in reality, a way of thinking: *b'sefer u'sefar u'sippur*—through book, number and telling.[5] The book is the mind itself. To distance oneself from these books means to distance oneself from these ideas.

Yes, it looks very close, very similar to the light of the Torah. But the way to relate to these books is to keep one's distance, *so that your heart not be drawn after their practices and all their circuitous paths, lest, heaven forbid,* going too far down that path, *you turn away from the path of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.*

These are books of emptiness. They proclaim that there is an emptiness in the world, a real *tzimtzum*, a contraction, and that if the world is empty, God forbid, all a person can do is mimic it—become empty as well, not attempt to possess, not attempt to acquire. Any acquisition, relation or joining is just an inevitability of pain, more suffering from more attachment. That pessimistic science sees emptiness as the only thing that is real, and the only way to relate to emptiness is from a removed position of non-judgment. It looks smart, says Rav Abba; it looks like *chochmah*, very wise. But it's as far from the daytime of Torah as the nighttime of that place.

The Zohar HaKadosh introduces the whole conversation with exactly this warning: *Don't be like those who don't pay attention to what they stand upon, who every day think of themselves as walking in emptiness.* A person who orients toward emptiness will find emptiness. That is the orientation of the Bnei Kedem, a non-judgmental passivity in the face of suffering and emptiness. It's a path of *tzimtzum kipshuto*, taking the contraction literally, as if God has truly withdrawn—the opposite of *tzimtzum shelo kipshuto*, the contraction that is not literal.

The Torah is a path of fullness! The Torah is radical affirmation, positive affirmation. The Torah is not non-judgmental; the Torah is profoundly judgmental, as Rabbi Nachman explains of finding the *nekudah tovah*, the good point, the point that includes everything.[6] Avraham Avinu was the opposite of this pessimism. He was the radical optimism of the radical choice to say *Baruch She'amar vehayah ha'olam*—Blessed is He who spoke, and the world came to be.

Half a name

Rav Abba sees all this, and it looks similar. But he understands why a person has to stay away from these books: people can be drawn away by them. *For the Bnei Kedem were wise*—they had *chochmah*. They had *bittul*, they had emptiness, but they had no *binah*, understanding. They had no ability to draw the light of Torah down into the heart, into the "yes" of *Baruch She'amar vehayah ha'olam*.

This wisdom they received from Avraham Avinu! He gave it to the children of the concubines, as it says: *Velivnei hapilagshim asher le'Avraham nasan Avraham matanos, vayeshalchem me'al Yitzchak b'no*—to the sons of the concubines Avraham gave gifts, and he sent them away from Yitzchak his son.[7] *Pilagshim*, *peleg shem*—half a name, half the picture.

The emptiness is right. *Bittul* is necessary to bring about the true existence of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, so to speak, to say yes to reality and become a *shliach*. But they got only half the picture. Avraham gave them the gift of emptiness, the preparatory stage of emptying the mind, which only brings about something good when the mind is filled afterwards with the secret of Yitzchak. Not like the Bnei Kedem, who are just empty and proclaim a posture of emptiness.

Vayeshalchem me'al Yitzchak b'no: he sent them away from Yitzchak, the secret of *binah*, which draws the *chochmah* of *bittul* down into the vessels of divine service. That is the *tzimtzum* Rav Abba is revealing. *Be'odenu chai kedmah el eretz kedem*—he sent them east, and that's where those books come from. *And afterwards that wisdom branched into many paths.*

So a person can no longer lay claim to its inner kernel, because it's only a *peleg shem*. It's the *tzimtzum* without the revelation, the awakening to emptiness without the emergence of fullness. A person gets intoxicated on the emptiness—non-attachment, passivity, non-judgment—and can stay empty their whole life.

Quite the opposite! Our job is to fill the world: to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.[8] The *bris milah* is the revelation of a radical acceptance of the condition of the world together with the radical belief that there is an inherent meaning at the heart of each and every thing—the opposite of emptiness.

Everything

The Torah that comes down in the real way from Avraham Avinu, through Yitzchak and Yaakov, is not the same thing. We didn't get just half the picture. We didn't get just the *tzebrochenkeit*, the brokenness, just the emptiness, just the recognition that this world is a *shver*, hard place. With us it says *vayiten Avraham es kol asher lo le'Yitzchak*:[9] he gave us everything. *VaHashem beirach es Avraham bakol*[10]—Hashem blessed Avraham with everything: the fifty gates of *binah*,[11] the forty-nine with the fiftieth within them, the union of *chochmah* and *binah*, the ability to draw the infinite awareness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu down into the practicality of vessels, and not to get stuck in the emptiness of the *tzimtzum* that proclaims emptiness and disavows acquisition.

Avraham Avinu is *Koneh Shamayim*.[12] Avraham Avinu is all about acquisition! It's all about owning, creating vessels for HaKadosh Baruch Hu, drawing the light of the Infinite down into this world. HaKadosh Baruch Hu is *Koneh shamayim va'aretz*, Owner of heaven and earth, because Avraham Avinu gave Him that name. We get everything; we don't get just half the picture.

All that he had went to Yitzchak: *the holy portion of faith.* That is the secret of faith. Only faith answers the question of *reikanus*, the emptiness the Bnei Kedem proclaim. The only fulfillment is the *mehemnusa*, the faith Avraham attached to. There was something real there. And from that side comes Yaakov, the revelation of the tribes of God, of the soul of Israel, of Mashiach Tzidkeinu, of whom it says *vehinei Hashem nitzav alav*—behold, Hashem stood over him.[13] Hashem is right there! Not a *peleg shem*, not emptiness, not *reikanus*—a radical affirmation of HaKadosh Baruch Hu's presence right here, right now.

A person has to be connected to HaKadosh Baruch Hu perpetually, perpetually! As it says, *uvo sidbak*[14]—come and cleave to Him directly, by way of His creation, His Torah and His *mitzvos*.

After the maror

So a delicate but fundamental cut is being made. The *chochmah* of the Bnei Kedem is a *groyse chochmah*, a great wisdom, the wisdom of emptiness. But it's only half the picture, and it becomes intoxicating if a person grabs only that half. The emptiness proclaims a life of non-acquisition, of not engaging, of nullifying myself. And it fits; the Jewish mind wants something like this. It's a gift from Avraham Avinu. It sounds familiar.

But Rav Abba says it has become too delicate, because a person can be taken off the path and lose the second point, the fulfillment that comes afterwards. We have to wait until after the *maror*, the bitter herbs. We can't be like the German in Rabbi Nachman's story,[15] who eats only the *maror* and runs out saying, "This world is bitter, this world is empty!" The Jew says to him: You fool, you should have waited for after the *maror*! If we wait a little after the *maror*, we come to *Shulchan Orech*, the festive meal, we come to eat a feast, and the *seudah iz gevein a seudah*—the meal was a real meal. It might not be as beautiful as the libraries of the Bnei Kedem, but Rav Abba saw it and said: this is close.

God forbid to rely on the Bnei Kedem, on the secret of thinking "I know anything," and so come to *reikanusa*: there's nothing, and I don't grasp anything. A person who falls into that false *bittul* is left with nothing but the self. It becomes a self-obsession, an attempt to manifest the mind and create one's own destiny inside one's own head.

Rather, uncover the secret of the inner wisdom, the radical affirmation that *yesh lismoch*—there is something to take hold of, I can build a palace of meaning here! That's the radical mission of Avraham Avinu: not falling back into emptiness and the disavowal of meaning, God forbid. Rather, *ein shum ye'ush ba'olam kelal*—there is no despair in the world at all![16] This is what Rabbeinu, Rabbi Nachman, *sha'ag bekol gadol*, cried out with a great voice, because it's a perpetual fight against the Bnei Kedem, against being sucked into the vacuum of emptiness: the lack of connection, the desire to sit idly by and not engage, not share, not participate, not say yes to the world, not invest, not feel it, not be present in each and every moment. The mind is sometimes afraid of that place, and so we have a tendency to want to be like the Bnei Kedem, to nullify ourselves in the emptiness of it all.

That is only half the picture.

NOTES

1 *Sanhedrin* 91a.

2 *Zohar* I:99b–100b.

3 *Zohar* III:288a (*Idra Zuta*).

4 *Zechariah* 3:7.

5 *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1.

6 *Likutey Moharan* I:282.

7 *Bereishis* 25:6.

8 *Bereishis* 1:28.

9 *Bereishis* 25:5; compare *Sfas Emes*, *Chayei Sarah* 5655.

10 *Bereishis* 24:1.

11 *Sha'arei Orah*, gate 2, on *VaHashem beirach es Avraham bakol*: כל = 50, the fifty gates of *binah*; *Rosh Hashanah* 21b.

12 *Bereishis* 14:19, 22; *Bereishis Rabbah* 43:7, where by making Hashem's name known, Avraham becomes as if a partner in the creation of heaven and earth.

13 *Bereishis* 28:13.

14 *Devarim* 10:20.

15 *Ma'aseh miMaror*, in *Sippurim Nifla'im* (Jerusalem 5695), 59–60.

16 *Likutey Moharan* II:78.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Power of Powerlessness

The fullness of the picture, its complete wholeness, is *bittul* for the sake of the completion that comes afterwards. *Avada* we have nothing. But once we recognize that we have nothing, HaKadosh Baruch Hu completes us. He pours His light into the secret of the *ma'aseh merkavah*, the workings of the Chariot, where the person becomes a chariot for HaKadosh Baruch Hu, in the secret of *ha'Avos hen hen hamerkavah*—the Patriarchs are themselves the Chariot.[1]

Chesed, *Gevurah* and *Tiferes*—lovingkindness, strength and harmony—the traits of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, are themselves the chariot. More *mochin*, expanded consciousness, is drawn down through the gradations of *bittul*—not through the self-assertion of will, but through its negation, the *mesiras nefesh* of throwing oneself with abandon into HaKadosh Baruch Hu's desire and not my own. Then these three, the *ChaGaS*, rise, and their very top, the upper vessels, become the vessel for a new *ChaBaD*.[2] The self becomes *mochin*; we reveal the light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu within us.

That is the secret of the *ma'aseh merkavah* of the holy Patriarchs. It's not that there's nothing. There is an existence, and that existence nullifies itself to such a degree that HaKadosh Baruch Hu reveals Himself and rests His Shechinah upon the holy Patriarchs through complete *bittul*.

The secret of the true *tzaddik* is the opposite of *reikanus*. It's fullness, because the *tzaddik* has gotten out of himself. There's no desire of his own; there's only the will of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. There we bind ourselves to the level of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and distance ourselves from what Rav Abba, through the inner wisdom he received from the mouth of the *tzaddik*, was able to recognize he had to stay away from.

It's the main path of *bittul*, versus a path that keeps leading to an affirmation of the self, rooted in the desire to have actual power, actual impact. Only when I realize that I have no impact and no power does HaKadosh Baruch Hu let me live with the secret of pretending that I have power—the secret of the wooden sword in the story of trust,[3] the secret of *avodah letzorech gavoah*, serving for the sake of Above. Not that *avodah letzorech gavoah* actually means anything

—*Rachmana litzlan mehai da'asa*—Heaven save us from such a view! HaKadosh Baruch Hu needs nothing to reveal everything. He is abundant mercy, and He can reveal everything through the traits of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

Thinking does nothing

For Rav Abba, the secret of *chochmah*, of receiving from the face of the *tzaddik*, is to receive from the understanding of the *tzaddik* the difference between two notions. One says the mind has a power of its own, God forbid. The true one says the mind has no power of its own, other than coming to recognize that it has no power of its own. When the mind recognizes that, it becomes a *shliach* for HaKadosh Baruch Hu—not, *chas veshalom*, that thought has any real existence of its own.

Thinking does nothing. Thinking is only an opening for HaKadosh Baruch Hu to send good thoughts from Above into our minds, not because my mind has any capacity. That's the difference. This is the *kol asher lo*, the "everything" Yitzchak inherited: he lives with holy laughter, knowing: I don't do anything, I don't manifest anything. My feet are in the air, my head is on the ground, I know nothing, I'm doing somersaults in this world, I have no power. And from that place we learn how to act. We learn to put on the garment of Yitzchak, of Yaakov, of the tribes of God, and to affirm reality.

The secret of *shivisi Hashem lenegdi samid*—I have set Hashem before me always[4]—of a settled mind, of self-nullification and complete equanimity: these are levels in *bittul*, not levels in comprehension. The mind is not looking to grasp. Prophecy will be revealed when we can properly nullify ourselves. When we think our minds can receive prophecy without the *bittul*, we're running to the *chochmah* without the *binah*, or taking the *binah* without the *chochmah*, depending on how you look at it. We miss the point and fall back into the Bnei Kedem, into an immature spiritual perspective of an all-inclusive nothingness that leads to nothing and gives nothing to build on.

We don't have to make recourse to the Bnei Kedem. We can find the light of *emunah*, the secret of the faith in everything that fills the emptiness of everything. That is the secret of *va-Hashem beirach es Avraham bakol*, and Avraham gives that "everything" to Yitzchak and to Yaakov. Each of us has it in the secret of Yosef HaTzaddik: the guarding of the *bris*, the trait of *kol*, of "all," which joins heaven and earth. That is the radical affirmation of the hyper-essentiality at the heart of all things, together with the complete *bittul* of Yosef HaTzaddik, who nullifies himself *in gantzen*, entirely. It's only there that he becomes the interpreter of dreams.

Bechirah bi'yediah

Now we can return to the Akeidah. The counsel Avraham Avinu teaches us is this. In moments of pure *bechirah*, where it's up to us to lean into reality with full control—because HaKadosh Baruch Hu has removed Himself from me so that I can choose volitionally—I must not fall into the mind-trap of thinking that I am absolutely in control. What I am absolutely in control of is recognizing that I am not in control.

Yes, I have *bechirah*; yes, I can choose; yes, I'm the one who has to choose right now. But what I choose to recognize is that I'm not the one who is ultimately choosing; it's You, Hashem. This is called *bechirah bi'yediah*: choosing to live in accordance with the fact that HaKadosh Baruch Hu is everywhere and everything.[5] Even when I feel completely abandoned in making the next volitional choice, I'm aware that every ounce of myself is moved only by the Ribono shel Olam, who moves through me. I'm a *shliach*.

When a person recognizes their mission—that in truth I am not a self, I am simply a messenger of the Infinite One, the Holy One, blessed is He, the Ribono shel Olam—then I can choose to do what comes most naturally to me, and what comes most naturally is to do the next right thing. I choose to live with the foreknowledge that, at the end of the day, I don't have free choice. My choice is to recognize that the free choice I feel I'm making is not as free, and not as much of a choice, as I conceive it to be, because I'm choosing to believe that HaKadosh Baruch Hu is everywhere and everything.

Vayishlach Avraham es yado

And in that moment, even though Avraham Avinu had the *nisayon* of what to do actively, the Torah reveals a profound secret: *vayishlach Avraham es yado*[6]—Avraham stretched out his hand. Avraham Avinu had to move his own arm. By choosing, there is going to be a revelation that I didn't truly choose the outcome of this circumstance. It's choosing to live with a mindset of knowing, choosing to recognize: I don't know. In this moment, I don't know. All I can rely on is that all I have is the Ribono shel Olam.

And when a person is capable of making that choice, of elevating themselves and sacrificing themselves for the Ribono shel Olam—sacrificing any foreknowledge of self—there is the revelation of the Akeidah. The revelation of the lamb, of *ayeh haseh le'olah*—where is the lamb for the offering?[7]—the revelation that HaKadosh Baruch Hu is present even when I feel He's not present.

In the sleeplessness that this freedom of choice brings, a person comes to choose to recognize that, at the end of the day, I don't truly have so much choice. When I use my last vestige of power

to acknowledge my powerlessness, I become a vessel and a receptacle for the Ribono shel Olam in this world. I can choose to be aware that I'm powerless, and that's my power.

NOTES

1 *Bereishis Rabbah* 47:6.

2 *Sha'ar HaKavanos*, *Derushei HaLaylah* 6.

3 Rabbi Nachman, *Ma'aseh miBitachon*.

4 *Tehillim* 16:8.

5 Compare *Mei HaShiloach* I, *Vayera*, on *Bereishis* 18:15: *hakol bidei Shamayim, ve'af yiras Shamayim* —everything is in the hands of Heaven, even the fear of Heaven.

6 *Bereishis* 22:10.

7 *Bereishis* 22:7.

CHAPTER SIX

The Next Right Thing

We asked at the start: what does one do when the matter depends on me? The main *nisayon* of the Akeidah is exactly that—choice, the ability of a human being to make a choice. In difficult situations, when a person feels it's been left to them, nothing is going to compel me. Reality is not going to prove to me what the right thing to do is. I'm the one who has to choose what the next thing is. I'm not being compelled; it's a *nisayon*. No macro or micro system is pushing me toward one choice over the other.

This only happens when I truly allow myself to exit the mind's natural tendency to flood itself with the old, familiar ways of thinking. The innovation of Avraham Avinu at the Akeidah was that he was able to stop that flow.

He was able to lean into the action itself, to determine within the indeterminate—not influenced by emotion or thought, but simply doing the next right thing.

Avi ve'imi azavuni

Very often a person is in a situation where it isn't a thought or an emotion that leads the body somewhere; the body is triggered by itself. Obviously it was preceded by a trigger of the heart and the mind, but at a speed so rapid and unconscious that it was never noticed. What a person experiences is that they find themselves already at the bottom, in the world of *Asiyah*, of action. This is the clouded lens from the inside—tired, hungry, angry, lonely—with the alarms blaring in the mind: *avi ve'imi azavuni, vaHashem ya'asfeini*[1]—my father and my mother have abandoned me, but Hashem will gather me in.

Abba and *imma* are *chochmah* and *binah*, the mind and the heart:[2] my defense mechanisms, cultivated so delicately in my mind and my heart, are gone! But in this place, *Hashem ya'asfeini*.

I have to uncover the secret that HaKadosh Baruch Hu gives me the strength to do the next right thing, even though I don't know how and I don't know why. The one thing I have to do is to contract myself like the Name *Elokim*.

This is perhaps what the Mei HaShiloach means when he says the real *nisayon* was that Avraham had to ensure one thing. In the face of a real *bechirah*, when there's no compulsion what-

soever, the one thing a person has to do is remove the self-interest: to do everything they can to reach a place of *bittul* where I don't care what the outcome will be, because I'm in a place of *hishtavus*, of equanimity.

To make the right decision, he simply had to make a *tzimtzum*, a contraction, in the heart: to quiet the heart that feels it always knows what to do, and make a simple choice.

Zeh*: We Always Had It*

If you look at the world from an Avraham perspective, you wake up, you see whatever is going on around you, and you want to change things. There's frustration, there's noise, there's distraction, and you want to make it better—to rectify the world, to introduce people to God. Avraham changes his name. He shifts his orientation; he sees a world on fire and says, "I want to make it better." But a person who is only trying to fix is saying that something is not okay with the way things are in this moment, and that path alone is exhausting.

Yitzchak never changes his name. He hears the same noise and the same difficulties, and instead of asking Hashem for a different life, he says: if this is how it is, this is where Hashem wants me to find Him—wherever and however I am, right here, right now.

These two mindsets have to be with us all the time. We want to change, we want to do better, and at the same time we accept the circumstances, knowing that this is where Hashem wants to be revealed.

A *talmid* once came to Rav Yisroel Salanter and said, "If I had my rebbe's head, his heart and his body, I could be the greatest servant of God." Rav Yisroel said, "No. Your head, your heart and your body, your circumstances, your noise, your condition—that is the place." I don't have to prove anything or earn anything. Hashem, You're right here with me. And from that place, I'm going to want to grow naturally.

Rabbi Nachman, in what I believe is one of his most significant teachings, speaks of the future, when we will all stand in a great circle and Hashem will reveal Himself,[3] and we will say *zeh Hashem kivinu lo*—this is Hashem, for whom we have yearned.[4] Why "this"? Because when the revelation comes, we'll be amazed and say: This? This I already knew! This is how I felt in exile. You were always there with me. We were never lacking anything; we had every ingredient we needed to attach ourselves to HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

That is the light of Yitzchak Avinu, the laughter of the future: the deep secret that we didn't have to do anything. Hashem is right here in our hearts. If we can be a little more patient with the noise, we find that we have everything we need. And from inside that acceptance, we take the next right step.

The knife of Avraham

With that strength, given to us by Avraham Avinu at the Akeidah, every *Yid* knows what to do when the heart or the mind departs. Every person has the ability to make that *bechirah*. That's the *nisayon*. The choice is the *nisayon*: the next right step, the next right moment, the next right thing. The next yes to the world, the next okay to a person, the next smile at a person.

Every right decision we make is a radical revolution of the highest spiritual order, and it's only done through abandonment to the moment and the free choice of *ein na ela lashon bakashah*. We live in the time of *Ma'ariv*, the evening prayer, the time of Yaakov Avinu,[5] when prayer feels like *reshus*, optional.[6] *Reshus* is the *gematria* of the initials of *shav'asenu kabel ushma tza'akasenu yode'a ta'alumos*;[7] it's the void of the *reshus*, and that is the world we live in.

On a certain level, everything operates in the place of *ein na ela lashon bakashah*. HaKadosh Baruch Hu has created a reality in which the real *bechirah* seems to be our choosing to align ourselves: *derech emunah bacharti*—I have chosen the way of faith.[8] When I own the choice in front of me by removing myself from the influences of self within me, when I can abstract myself and make a *bechirah* with the strength HaKadosh Baruch Hu gives me—there I uncover the light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu in every place I go, and I reveal as big a *nes* as the Akeidah itself. And we continue to eat from that knife of Avraham Avinu,[9] which keeps feeding the Jewish people along the radical, razor-sharp line of free choice, of choosing the next right thing.

Be'ezras Hashem, may we merit the words of Rav Abba: to run straight into the waters of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and away from the waters of the Bnei Kedem—not because they're bad, but because so much better awaits a person in the waters of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. And so may we fulfill the words of the Zohar HaKadosh, *through this book they will go out of exile in mercy*,[10] finding in the Zohar HaKadosh itself the light of radical acceptance and radical affirmation at the same point. That is the secret of redemption, *be'ezras Hashem*.

NOTES

1 *Tehillim* 27:10.

2 *Tikkunei Zohar*, *Hakdamah* 17a (*Patach Eliyahu*).

3 *Taanis* 31a; *Likutey Moharan* I:65.

4 *Yeshayahu* 25:9.

5 *Berachos* 26b.

6 *Berachos* 27b.

7 רשות = 906 = שק"ו צי"ת, the initials of שועתנו קבל ושמע צעקתנו יודע תעלומות.

8 *Tehillim* 119:30.

9 *Bereishis Rabbah* 56:3: the knife is called *ma'acheles*, for "all that Israel eats in this world, they eat only in the merit of that *ma'acheles*."

10 *Zohar* III:124b (*Ra'aya Mehemna*).