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The Mazal of Kislev - "Keshes" (The Bow)

The *mazal* of the month of Kislev is called "*keshes*" (which can either mean "bow" as in bow-and-arrow; or it can mean the "rainbow").^[1]

Yitzchok Avinu blessed Esav with the gift of "*keshes*" – his descendants would become successful archers in battle. The Sages explain that the "*keshes*" of Esav refers to the Greek nation^[2]. Thus, the *mazal* of the month of Kislev, which is *keshes*, is directly related as well to the events of Chanukah, where we had to deal with the Greek exile.

Where is the first time in the Torah that a *keshes* is mentioned? The first "*keshes*" mentioned in the Torah was the "rainbow", which appeared in the sky after the *Mabul*.^[3]

However, the rainbow existed already before the *Mabul*. The *Midrash* states that there were ten things created on Friday at twilight, and one of them was the "*keshes*", the rainbow. The Ramban explains that the original rainbow of Creation, which was created on the sixth day, is a rainbow that is formed when the sun's rays bounce upon the wind. But the rainbow that appeared after the *Mabul* was a sunlight amidst the "clouds".

Only after the *Mabul* did there appear a rainbow that appeared in the clouds. Hashem said that the rainbow after the *Mabul* is a sign that He will remember the *bris* (the covenant) that He made with mankind not to destroy the world. Before the *Mabul* there was also a rainbow, but the *Mabul* gave new meaning to the rainbow: now the rainbow would be called "*kashti*" ("My sign"), which He places in the clouds, as a sign that He remembers the *bris* that was made.

What was the *keshes* of before the *Mabul*, which was created on Friday at twilight? And what was the rainbow that came after the *Mabul*, which is associated with the clouds? What is the difference between these two kinds of *keshes*?

"Keshes" in the Side of Holiness Vs. "Keshes" in the Side of Evil

The concept of "*keshes*" is found both in the sides of good and evil, just as everything else in Creation, which exists in both the sides of good\holiness and evil\impurity.

The Torah describes Yishmael as being a skilled archer, who was successful hunter with his *keshes*, his bow and arrow. This is describing the evil kind of *keshes*. [Later we will explain what this is]. In contrast, the holy kind of *keshes* is found with Yosef. One of the blessings given to Yosef is "*keshes*".

The *keshes* of Yosef has the power to fight Esav, and in the future, the *keshes* of Yosef will overcome the evil *keshes* of Esav.

What is the holy kind of *keshes*, and what is the evil kind of *keshes*? What is the *keshes* of the nation Yisrael, which is holy, and what is the *keshes* that the Greek nation possesses, which is evil?

Evil “Keshes” - A Sense of False Completion

Keshes is from the word *koshi* (difficulty), and it is also from the word *kishut* (adornment, or beautification). [The implication of “*koshi*” (difficulty) is the evil use of *keshes*, whereas the use of *kishut* (adornment\beautification) is the holy use of *keshes*, as follows.]

A *keshes* is always a half-circle, as the Talmud explains.^[4] In a *keshes* of bow and arrow, there is the arrow, and there is the half-circle of the bow, which the arrow is strung from. The *keshes* - it use as a bow that flings arrows - is a weapon of war. In this sense, *keshes* connotes *koshi*, “difficulty”, for it means war.

How is the *keshes* used in war? The very fact that it is a half-circle makes it possible for the arrow to be flung from it.

The *keshes*\rainbow is also a half-circle. A rainbow results from when the sun meets the wind, resulting in an arch-shaped bow - a rainbow - which has the shape of a half-circle. However, the two ends of the half-circle do not meet with each other. Each end stands on its own and the two ends do not unify; they remain as two separate ends which do not meet at some point. This symbolizes how the *keshes* connotes difficulty and war.

Applying this concept in terms of the soul, the evil use of *keshes* is when one is incomplete yet he thinks of himself as perfect and complete. This is also known as the trait of *kashyus oref* (to be stiff-necked; a kind of evil brazenness), which is also related to the word *keshes*. The arrow in a bow is only able to be strung because of the half-circle of the bow; so too must one understand that he is only a half, and he is incomplete. When a person perceives himself as whole and complete, he has the negative trait of *kashyus oref*, and this is the evil side to “*keshes*”.

“Keshes” In Holiness: Praying To Fill What We Lack

The holy kind of *keshes* is when a person utilizes the power of *bakashah* (request; prayer) - also rooted in the word *keshes*. The Sages said, “*Tefillah* (prayer) does half.” When a person wants something, he is like a half-circle, like a bow - he knows he is not complete, he feels lacking somewhat, and he seeks completion. Thus, when he prays for what he lacks, his prayers accomplish the other “half” that he is missing.

Bakashah is when I realize that I only have half, and I am trying to get the other half. This is what lays behind the concept of *tefillah*. It is when I have the perspective that I am not remaining in the half that I have; I am hoping to have my other half filled. This is the holy kind of *keshes*: the power of *bakashah*, or *tefillah*.

This is how “*keshes*” results in “*kishut*” (adornment, or beautification), which is the good and holy use of *keshes*. Hashem designed all of Creation in a way that we are all lacking and insufficient, and we need to be completed by other “half” - the Creator. All created beings are incomplete and need to be completed by their other half, which is the Creator. The beauty of Creation, its *kishut* (beauty), is precisely when the many “halves” of this creation are completed by their other “half”.

As an example, Hashem did not bring any rain until Adam prayed for it. This taught us that man is

essentially lacking, for he is a created being and thus insufficient, and through prayer, he accomplishes the other “half” that is missing.

At the beginning of creation, Hashem created the *keshes* (the rainbow) on Friday, at twilight. But the Sages also said that at that very time, the *sheidim* (demons) and *mazikin* (harmful spirits) were also created. This alludes to the evil kind of *keshes*, which is *kashyus oref*.

But after the *Mabul* came a *keshes* (rainbow) which symbolizes holiness. The rainbow which Hashem put into the sky after the *Mabul* was a sign that He would forever remember the *bris* (covenant) He made with the word to never destroy it again.

This *keshes*\rainbow appeared in the clouds. Unlike the original *keshes*\rainbow of creation, which is a combination of sunlight and air, the rainbow that came after the *Mabul* was a combination of sunlight and cloud. The clouds enable the rain, which man had to pray for, in order for the rain to come. Thus, the *keshes* that appears in the clouds represents *bakashah*, prayer. This is a kind of “*keshes*” that requests its other half.

This is in line with the concept of *bris* that the *keshes*\rainbow represented. In a *bris*, there are two sides, and one of the sides is loyal to the other; the one who agrees to the *bris* is saying that he is incomplete by himself, and he needs the other to complete him.

But by the *keshes* of bow and arrow, the bow seems to be complete in and of itself, even though it is only a half. This is the evil kind of “*keshes*” – the “*keshes*” of Esav, of Yishmael, and of the Greek nation – a *keshes* that does not recognize its incompleteness, thinking that it is complete in and of itself, failing to realize how it really needs another half to complete it.

Keshes and The Concept of Bris

Yosef HaTzaddik represents the concept of keeping the *bris* (the holy covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people, which we must guard in various ways), thus, Yosef contains the holy kind of *keshes* (for the holy kind of “*keshes*” is associated with the concept of *bris*), which can counter the evil *keshes* of Esav.

Chazal say that if one stares at the *bris* of himself^[5] (and surely if he stares at the *bris* of another), his own “*keshes*” (his “bow”; the male organ) is withheld, and he will not be able to bear children. The *bris* implies that he is but a half, who is incomplete and needs to be completed by the one whom he made the *bris* with; meaning, he must guard the *bris* with the one whom he has made the *bris* with, which is his spouse [and on deeper level, the Creator].

This is the holy kind of “*keshes*”: when I realize that I am but a half, and I need another half to complete me. This perspective of “*keshes*” (in the side of holiness), is at the core of the concepts of *tefillah* and *bris*.

The Deeper Meaning of “Keshes”: Equalizing With Others (and Integrating With Hashem)

There is also another meaning to *keshes* explained in Chazal: *keshes* is also from the word “*hekesh*”, which means “comparable.”

The *keshes*\rainbow after the *Mabul*, which symbolized the concept of *bris*, was about the *bris* between Yisrael and Hashem (even though it took place before there was a *Klal Yisrael* yet, it was an allusion to the future *bris* that Hashem would make with *Klal Yisrael*, through the Torah). The rainbow after the *Mabul* showed that all creation are “*mukashim*” (to be compared, so to speak) to Hashem.

The *halachah* is that it is forbidden to stare at the “*keshes*” of oneself or of others^[6], and the Sages say that this is like gazing at the *Shechinah*, which is forbidden. How is the *keshes* of the body compared to the *Shechinah*? It is because *keshes* alludes to how all created beings are “*mukash*” (compared) to Hashem. Thus, to stare at the *keshes* (whether it is the *Bris Kodesh* on the body, or whether it is the rainbow, which symbolizes the *bris*) is like staring at the *Shechinah*, which is forbidden.

“*Hekesh*” - What I Have Is Equal To What Others Have

There are two abilities in man that contradict each other: *tefillah* (prayer, which means that I am insufficient and I need something to complete me), and *someiach b’chelko*, “being happy with one’s lot”. These two abilities contradict each other because if I pray, I am not happy and sufficient with what I have, and if I am happy with what I have, I see no reason to pray, because there is nothing that I lack that I am trying to fill.

Simply speaking, “one who has a hundred wants two hundred”, and a person cannot be *someich b’chelko* as long as he wants something that he doesn’t have right now. But if a person gains the ability to be “*makish*” himself to others – in the sense that he feels that what he has is equal to what others have, and that what others have is equal to what he has – then he sees no reason to want anything that others have, for he realizes that he really does have what he sees in others. This is the deep attitude that is behind the power to be *someiach b’chelko*.

When one is using the concept of *keshes* for evil, he will want something and will fight and engage in war with others, in order to get what he wants (this is the “*koshi*” aspect of *keshes*, and it is evil). When one is using the concept of *keshes* in the side of holiness, when he wants something, he will pray to Hashem to get it (this is the “*bakashah*” aspect in *keshes*, and it is good and holy). But there is also a higher way of using *keshes*: if I want something, I can realize that whatever I have is really *equal* to what another has – and then I will no longer want what others have. I can only pray for something I want when I am unaware that I really have what another has; once I realize that I have what others have, I see no need to pray for it.

The desire in a person to have anything else that he doesn’t yet have is a lack of *someiach b’chelko*. It is a lack of understanding that whatever I have is really *equal* to what another has.

When Hashem split the waters on the second day of Creation, the lower waters were jealous of the upper waters. The lower waters thought that the higher waters were more important, so the lower waters were jealous. They thought that the upper waters have something that they don’t have. A person always wants the other half of what he is missing, which seems to not be in his possession. Either he will fight to attain it (which is evil) or he will pray for it (which is holy). But there is a deeper perspective he can have: if one is “*makish*” himself to others – if one realizes that all that he has is equal to what others have, and that the same is true vice versa – he realizes that the half which others possess is also a part of him. He is not lacking anything. This is the depth of *someiach b’chelko*.

“*Keshes*” and the Greek Nation

The Sages associate the concept of *keshes*, contained in the month of Kislev, with the Greek nation. What is this *keshes*?

The ancestor of the Greek nation, Yefes, was given a blessing by Noach that he would “dwell in the tents of Shem”. In other words, Yefes was blessed with the *chochmah* (wisdom) that would come to the Greeks, which would eventually challenge the *chochmah* of the Torah, which was inherited by the

descendants of Shem.

What, essentially, is the difference between the Torah's wisdom and the Greek wisdom?

The wisdom of the nation Yisrael, which is the wisdom contained in the Torah, is essentially the fact that Hashem learns with a person as he learns Torah; "One who sits and learns Torah, the *Shechinah* sits with him and learns with him." [7] When one learns Torah, he is able to have the understanding that he is but a half, who is incomplete and who needs to be completed by another half, the Creator.

By contrast, when one learns any wisdom other than the Torah (and any non-Torah wisdom is included in Greek wisdom), it is viewed as a wisdom that complete in and of itself, devoid of any other half; it is disconnected from Hashem. Only with learning Torah can a person realize that his wisdom is just a half, which needs Hashem in order for it to be completed.

Hashem is on one side, Yisrael is on the other side, and there is a *bris* (covenant) that connects us together. That *bris*, symbolized by the *keshes*, is the Torah. But what is this *bris* of the Torah? It is when one learns Torah with the understanding that his learning is just the "half" that he is accomplishing, and he still seeks the other half, Who is Hashem.

Before learning the Gemara, there is a *tefillah* to say, composed by the sage Rabbi Nechunia ben Hakanah. This is a *bakashah*, a request and a prayer from Hashem, that we should succeed in our learning. We need *bakashah* before we learn Torah so that we can understand that our Torah learning is our "half" that we can accomplish, and to understand that our other half that we need is Hashem.

This is the holy power of *keshes*, which Yosef personified. Yosef merited to be called one who is "tender in his years, yet a father of wisdom." Yosef became great in *chochmah* (wisdom) because he merited to have Hashem learn with him, through learning with Yaakov Avinu. Yosef recognized that he is the other "half", the lower half, whereas Yaakov is the upper half. Such Torah learning is the Torah of the nation of Yisrael.

By contrast, the evil kind of "*keshes*" is the perspective of the Greek nation, which is when one perceives his wisdom as complete and independent of Hashem, when in reality, any of the wisdom that he learns is but a half a larger whole, which he fails to recognize.

In Summary

Thus, altogether, there are three levels to the concept of *keshes*. The evil kind of *keshes* is when I think that I am complete. The good kind of *keshes* is when I realize that I am a half that needs to be completed by another half. A higher level of *keshes*, which was the level reached completely by Moshe Rabbeinu, is when one understands that he is "*mukash*" - when one is at a state of equilibrium with all others, because he recognizes the other half as equal with his own half. Moshe Rabbeinu realized this fully, and that is the depth of why the *Shechinah* spoke from his throat.

In Conclusion

The *avodah* in the month of Kislev, which is about the concept of *keshes*, is thus to realize that I am but a half, and that I must seek to be completed by my other half.

"There is no generation which does not have in it a righteous person like Moshe"[8] - thus, every Jew can attain a spark of Moshe Rabbeinu's level, to be "*mukash*", to equalize ourselves and align ourselves with our other "half", Hashem - and in this way, we can merit some degree of Moshe's level: "the *Shechinah* speaks from his throat."

[1] *Sefer Yetzira* 5:4

[2] *Beraishis Rabbah* 65:8

[3] *The Deluge (otherwise known as the Flood)*

[4] *Eruvin* 65a

[5] *It is forbidden according to Halacha for one to gaze upon the male organ, either of himself or of another.*

[6] *see ibid*

[7] *Berachos* 5a

[8] *Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim*

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