

# The Rebbe's Discourses

Basic Summaries of the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses. בלי אחריות כלל וכלל

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## ENTERING THE THICKNESS OF THE CLOUD

**A**ND MOSES ENTERED THE THICKNESS OF THE CLOUD (*ARAFEL*), [TOWARDS] ELOKIM (Ex.20:18). These words signify the beginning of Moses' sojourn on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights. Rashi comments that he passed three barriers: darkness, cloud, and the thickness of the cloud.

A discourse by Rabbi Shneur Zalman<sup>2</sup> with comments by his grandson the Tzemach Tzedek discusses this passage. It quotes a kabbalistic explanation<sup>3</sup> that the thickness of the cloud is in the World of Action, which implies that the cloud is the World of Formation, and the darkness the World of Creation<sup>4</sup>.

Moses entered this spiritual realm at the lowest level, Action, which is this world, where G-d is hidden and called Elokim, because of the concealment of the Divine in this world<sup>5</sup>.

The Tzemach Tzedek points out that there is an alternative explanation of the term 'thickness of the cloud' (*arafel*), relating not to the lowest but to the most exalted level of the Sefirot. This is expressed in the verse 'G-d said He would dwell in the thickness of the cloud'<sup>6</sup>, which links to the idea that 'He makes darkness His secret place'<sup>7</sup>, understood as meaning Keter.

Considered in this way, the name Elokim signifies not the concealment of the Divine in this world, as in the first explanation, but a very exalted level of the Divine, the inwardness of Keter. The 'concealment' associated with the name Elokim is because it is beyond the lower levels of 'revelation'.

According to this second explanation, when Moses entered the thickness of the cloud, the *arafel*, he was entering a very exalted level: the inwardness of Keter, close to the Divine Essence.

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<sup>1</sup> *U-Moshe Nigash* Yitro 5725, published in *Dvarmalchus Yitro* 5776, 5782.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), founder of Chabad. Author of *Tanya* and a new edition of the *Shulchan Aruch*, Code of Law. The Tzemach Tzedek, his grandson, was the third Chabad leader: Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789-1866). See *Or Hatorah*, Yitro, p.1008.

<sup>3</sup> R. Naftali Bachrach's *Emek Hamelech*.

<sup>4</sup> The Four Worlds are, from highest to lowest: Emanation, Creation, Formation, Action.

<sup>5</sup> Elokim signifies the hiddenness of the Divine, while the Tetragrammaton expresses revelation.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings 8:12

<sup>7</sup> Psalms 18:12

One can ask: can these two contrasting explanations be reconciled? Does *arafel* signify a very low level or a very high level of closeness to the Divine?

Rabbi Shneur Zalman then asks a further question. Chassidic teachings explain that at the Giving of the Torah, the Essence of the Divine was revealed to the entire Jewish people. In that case, asks Rabbi Shneur Zalman, why is it only Moses who enters the 'thickness of the cloud' of the Divine? What about the rest of the Jewish people?

To answer this, we must consider the significance of the Giving of the Torah. A well-known idea of the Sages is that Abraham and the Patriarchs observed the Mitzvot of the Torah, at least in some form. This raises the question of what new stage was achieved by the Giving of the Torah at Sinai.

The Rebbe cites three explanations. One is that Abraham's service of G-d had the nature of 'moving forward, and stepping back' (*Ratzo veShov*), an ebb and flow movement, gradually coming ever closer to the Divine. In response to this the Mitzvot were revealed to him: the positive Mitzvot express moving forward in love of G-d, the negative express moving back in awe.

The Giving of the Torah meant that the 248 Positive Mitzvot and 365 negative were revealed not only to him and the Patriarchs, but to the entire Jewish people.

The second explanation is that the spiritual flow which resulted from the service of Abraham and the other Patriarchs and Matriarchs, remained in upper spiritual realms. At the Giving of the Torah this flow - activated by the service of the entire Jewish people, as in the first explanation - could descend to this physical world.

Finally, the third explanation. G-d told Moses that He was revealed to the Patriarchs by certain Divine Names, but not the Tetragrammaton (Exodus 6:3). Through the Giving of the Torah at Sinai, the Tetragrammaton would be revealed.

Another way of expressing this, is that the Patriarchs drew a Divine flow from the level of Kindness, Severity and Mercy, in the World of Emanation. By contrast, at Sinai, G-dliness beyond the downchaining of the worlds was revealed, a much higher level. This level was revealed in the Torah, which comes down into our physical world.

The Rebbe links these three explanations together: through the Giving of the Torah at Sinai, not only the Patriarchs but every Jew is given the power to reveal an exalted level of the Divine, from beyond the downchaining of the worlds, which is drawn down and expressed in *this* world, through the study and observance of the Torah.

But how can a lowly human being achieve this? Because the essence of the Divine is concealed at every level of the world around us. Indeed 'the world' *haolam* has the same letters as 'concealment' *he-elem*. The task of the individual is to discover the essence of the Divine within the concealment of existence. We do this through the Torah revealed at Sinai.

This links together the two different explanations of Moses entering the thickness of the cloud, *arafel*. By discovering the Divine on the lowest level, at the level of the World of Action, as in the first kabbalistic explanation, we are also discovering the Divine at the most exalted level, as in the second explanation.

Does the concept of ‘entering the thickness of the cloud’ apply only to Moses, or to every Jew? The text says that Moses entered, but the people ‘stood far off’. That might be understood as meaning that they have nothing to do with his journey. However, standing ‘far off’ is also a relationship. And Moses began his journey by being ‘far off’ with them, which also suggests a connection with him and his entry into the thickness of the cloud.

Further, Chassidic teachings stress that Moses is within each of us. And sparks of Moses’ soul enter the leaders of each generation, who guide us. Thus, we too are able to enter the darkness and discover the Divine.

An example of this is particularly through Torah study, when the most exalted reaches of the infinite Divine, beyond Reason enter the discussions of Torah study and the rational mind of the person.

We see that the Torah is utterly beyond reason through a description in the Talmud of Moses on Sinai being granted the power to see the life and death of Rabbi Akiva. Moses was greatly impressed with Rabbi Akiva’s teaching of Torah. But then when he saw how he was tortured to death by the Romans, he asked ‘Is this the reward for Torah?’ G-d answered: ‘be silent, thus it arose in My thought’<sup>8</sup>.

The Rebbe explains that this means that Torah emerges from a level utterly beyond our rational minds. Nonetheless, it was revealed on Sinai in such a way that it can enter our minds, in countless Torah discussions on the most subtle level, and every aspect of our lives.

Thus through engaging with Torah and keeping its laws, each of us too, led by Moses, can enter the thickness of the cloud and connect with G-d the Infinite.

**TORAH TEACHINGS ARE SACRED, PLEASE TREAT THIS PAGE WITH CARE**

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<sup>8</sup> Menachot 29b.