

מנחות ג:ז

שֶׁבַע קַנֵּי מְנוֹרָה מְעַכְבִּין זֶה אֶת זֶה. שֶׁבַע  
 נְרוֹתֶיהָ מְעַכְבִּין זֶה אֶת זֶה. שְׁתֵּי פָרָשִׁיּוֹת שְׂפָמִזוּזָה  
 מְעַכְבוֹת זֶה אֶת זֶה. וְאַפְלוֹ כָּתָב אֶחָד מְעַכְבֵּן. אַרְבַּע  
 פָּרָשִׁיּוֹת שְׂבֵה־פָלִין מְעַכְבוֹת זֶה אֶת זֶה. וְאַפְלוֹ כָּתָב  
 אֶחָד מְעַכְבֵּן. אַרְבַּע צִיצִיּוֹת מְעַכְבוֹת זֶה אֶת זֶה,  
 שְׁאַרְבַּעַתָּן מִצְוָה אַחַת. רַבִּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל אוֹמֵר,  
 אַרְבַּעַתָּן אַרְבַּע מִצְוֹת.



LETTER SHIN

The *shin* consists of three vertical lines arranged in a way that it ends up looking like a crown. These three lines signify the three pillars upon which the world stands: the study of Torah, prayer, and good deeds.

The three heads of the *shin* are also attributed to the three sanctities found in this world. The Holy One, blessed be He, the holiness of Shabbat, and the holiness of the Jewish people.

Menachot 3:7

**The** seven branches of the menorah are each essential to the mitzvah. Its seven lamps are each essential to the mitzvah. The two paragraphs of the *mezuzah* are each essential to the mitzvah; even each letter is essential. The four paragraphs of the *tefilin* are each essential to the mitzvah; even each letter is essential. The four threads of the *tsitsit* are each essential to the mitzvah, for the four are all one mitzvah. Rabbi Yishmael says: The four of them are four separate mitzvot.

ELUCIDATION

The menorah of the Holy Temple had seven branches, each one corresponding to one of the seven cardinal emotions and soul types. For “the lamp of G-d is the soul of man,” and this soul-light shone out from the Temple to illuminate the world.

The menorah needed to have all seven branches in order for it to fulfill its function. It displayed a diversity within unity—each separate branch was an indispensable part of the unified whole. So, too, we need to be whole. It is not only with love that we serve G-d and our fellows, but with reverence and respect, and all the varied places along the spectrum that runs between these two poles.

This diversity within unity characterizes each of these other emblematic mitzvot: the *tefilin*, which rest by our heart and our head; the *tsitsit* on the *talit* that enwraps our bodies, the *mezuzah* on our

doorpost that proclaims that this is a house suffused with awareness of G-d. Each of these mitzvot has several parts, each of which must be present in order for the mitzvah to be accomplished. And for each of our lives to be whole, we must learn how every thought, every emotion, every gift we have been given finds its right place in the service of G-d. And so with our people as a whole—every one of us is unique and indispensable. Each is a lamp of G-d, part of the golden menorah. In mourning, we know how much we miss the flame that has surged up from the wick.

Let us learn how to cherish each person and know how each is needed in G-d’s plan. We can share our flame with others and not be diminished; we can guard the flame that others shared with us. In this way, we hold fast to the miracle of the soul that has now ascended, and its beauty will continue to shed its light on our lives and our world.

MESSAGE

The seven branches of the menorah symbolize the seven Jewish character-types. The golden menorah must contain all seven branches—for no Jew is complete unless united with all the others.

ברכות א:ה

**מְ**זְכִירִין יְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם בַּלַּיְלוֹת. אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר  
בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה, הֲרִי אָנִי כְּכֹן שְׁבָעִים שָׁנָה, וְלֹא זָכִיתִי  
שֶׁתֵּאמֹר יְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם בַּלַּיְלוֹת, עַד שֶׁדָּרְשָׁה בֶּן  
זֹמָא: שֶׁנֶּאמַר (דברים טז,ג), "לִמְעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת יוֹם  
יְצִיאַתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ". "יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ"  
הַיָּמִים. "כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ", הַלַּיְלוֹת. וְהַכָּמִים אוֹמְרִים,  
"יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ", הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה.

Berachot 1:5

**One** should mention the exodus from Egypt at night. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said, "I am about seventy years old, and I had not merited to understand the scriptural basis for mentioning the exodus from Egypt at night, until Ben Zoma expounded it. As it says: "So that you should remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life" (Deut. 16:3). "The days of your life"—indicate the days; "all the days of your life"—indicate the nights. The Sages say: "The days of your life"—indicate this world; "all the days of your life"—includes the days of Moshiach.

### ELUCIDATION

Read simply, the Mishnah here instructs us about the daily prayers—just as we call to mind leaving Egypt in the morning prayer, so should we do at night.

But there are deeper levels here as well. Egypt was the first place of exile, and serves in the Torah as a paradigm of life as it must not be. It was a place of idolatry and slavery. It was a place in which the ruler was worshipped as a god and in which human beings, seen as having no innate worth, could be used and discarded at will.

When Israel was born, its first order of business was getting out of Egypt. We had been trapped and hemmed in, slaves in body and in spirit. Getting out of Egypt was an escape not only from physical slavery, but from mental and spiritual slavery as well. Only as free men and women could we rise to be the people of Israel.

In Hebrew, the name for Egypt is *mitsrayim*. The mystics tell us that the Hebrew name for something is connected to its essence. In this case, that connection is startlingly clear. *Mitsrayim* is connected to the word *meitsarim*, which means boundaries or limitations.

We can now complete the circle. The Mishnah here is telling us that we need to remember and apply the lesson of the exodus from Egypt—from all that hems us in—both by day and by night. *By day*, when things are clear and easy to navigate, then certainly we can make the choice. The Mishnah therefore teaches us that even *by night*, during times of pain, anguish, and unanswered questions, when things are not clear and the path in front of us is not certain, we can and must choose—and are empowered—to leave our limitations and connect to our Source.



LETTER MEM

The letter *mem* stands for *mayim*, which means water. The Torah is compared to water because just as water flows downward, so the Torah—G-d's wisdom—made its way from heaven to this physical world.

There are two forms of the *mem*: the open *mem* and the closed *mem*. The open *mem* represents the revealed Torah, the parts "open" to all, whereas the closed *mem* represents the Torah's secrets, which are "closed" and hidden.

### MESSAGE

Leaving Egypt—our perceived limitations and constraints—is a foundational idea in Judaism. Our endeavor to always fly higher must never stop, even during times of darkness and travail.

ביכורים א:

וְאֵלֹוּ מְבִיאִין וְקוֹרִין: מִן הָעֵצָרֶת וְעַד הַחֶג, מִשְׁבַּעַת  
הַמִּינִים, מִפְּרֹת שְׂפֵהָרִים, מִתְּמָרוֹת שְׂבַעֲמֻקִּים,  
וּמִזֵּיתֵי שָׁמֶן מֵעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן. רַבִּי יוֹסִי הַגַּלִּילִי אוֹמֵר,  
אֵין מְבִיאִין בְּכוֹרִים מֵעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן, שְׂאִינָה אֶרֶץ זָבַת  
חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ.

Bikurim 1:10

**These** bring their “first fruit” and read the declaration: those who bring between the festivals of Shavu’ot and Sukkot from the seven species with which the Land of Israel is praised, from the fruit of the mountains, from the dates of the valleys, and from the olives on the east bank of the Jordan. Rabbi Yosi the Galilean says: One does not bring first fruits from the east bank of the Jordan, for it is not “a land flowing with milk and honey.”

#### ELUCIDATION

One of the most joyous occasions described in the Mishnah is the bringing of the first fruits to the Temple. As the farmer approached the Holy City, he would be greeted by music and rejoicing. Ushered into the Temple, he would recite Torah passages that summarize the whole history of the Jewish people, a history which has resulted in this chance to offer a gift of the first of the harvest and to thank G-d for having led us into all this goodness—the promise of a land, a home, and its bounty made good.

At its essence, this mitzvah teaches us to be grateful, a trait and mitzvah that is central to our Jewishness, so central that the Torah’s words about its celebration occupy pages of our Haggadah every Seder night. The power of gratitude is so immense that it can overcome the greatest difficulties and pierce profound darkness. It motivates us to give our best—the fruit from the cool mountains, the dates from the hot lowlands—and

in the best time, when the produce is summer ripe. These are the gifts of G-d’s gift, the Land of Milk and Honey.

Each night, our sages teach us, when our consciousness recedes into the depths of sleep, we experience a disconnection from the world that is akin in a small way to death. Each morning, therefore, the very first moment that we awaken, we say the *Modeh ani*, wherein we contemplate and express our gratitude to G-d for being restored to life. This power of gratitude is stronger even than that tinge of death that clings to the waking sleeper.

In times of mourning, too, though under the shadow of death, we find a measure of comfort in our ability to demonstrate our gratitude to the deceased. We do this by saying *kaddish*, doing mitzvot, giving charity, and studying Torah in the deceased’s honor, and by resolving to continue the beautiful ways and legacy of the beloved departed.



LETTER VAV

The letter *vav* means a hook. Just as a hook joins two elements together, so too the *vav*, which serves as a prefix that links a word to the ideas expressed beforehand, links words, phrases and chapters, and bespeaks generational continuity.

#### MESSAGE

Expressing gratitude is a central theme in Judaism—gratitude in speech, but more importantly in deed. Though the soul of the deceased has departed this world, Judaism provides mediums through which we can express our gratitude for all that he or she has done for us.

ברכות ה:א

אֵין עוֹמְדִין לְהַתְפַּלֵּל אֶלָּא מִתוֹךְ כַּבֵּד רֵאשׁ.  
הַסִּידִים הָרֵאשׁוֹנִים הָיוּ שׁוֹהִים שָׁעָה אַחַת  
וּמִתְפַּלְלִים, כְּדִי שְׂיִכְנְנוּ אֶת לְבָבָם לְמָקוֹם. אִפְלוּ  
הַמֶּלֶךְ שׁוֹאֵל בְּשִׁלּוּמוֹ, לֹא יִשְׂכְּנוּ. וְאִפְלוּ נִחַשׁ  
כְּרוֹךְ עַל עַקְבוֹ, לֹא יִפְסִיק.

Berachot 5:1

**A person** should pray only when in a state of humility. The pious of earlier generations would reflect for an hour before praying in order to direct their hearts towards G-d. Even if a king greets one during prayer, one should not respond. And even if a snake is curled around his heel, he should not interrupt his praying.

### ELUCIDATION

Prayer serves as an antidote to self-absorption. The narcissist goes along convinced that the world revolves around him; but the prayerful person feels the gravity of the true Center of Being and places himself willingly in its orbit.

This attitude of humility, of openness to the larger reality beyond our filtered mind, is fostered by meditation. Shedding habits of thought requires a time and a space. Prepare yourself for prayer. Turn off the cell-phone and tablet, turn the mind inwards and upwards, and follow the train of thought to its source. Sit for a few unmeasured moments with one of the great works of the Chassidic masters designed

precisely to deepen one's awareness, to open up the flow from the deepest springs of consciousness so that we are aware of the great flow of bliss and being, streaming from G-d, of which we are a part. Then prayer will flow too and be able to change everything for the good.

But we still live in a real world, in the end, with real dangers—biting snakes and powerful, willful kings. The Sages clarify that if the snake or the king is deadly, we save our lives first and pray later. But the acceptance that the world itself can be beyond our control also teaches the lesson of humility, and will grant power and depth to the prayers of thanksgiving one will offer when safe from danger.



LETTER ALEPH

The numerical value of *alef* is one—alluding to the One G-d. The various permutations of the letters that make up the word *alef* contain numerous meanings. *Aluf* means a master, *pele* means wondrous, *ulfana* means study, *ofel* means darkness. We are meant to study the mystery of our Master's oneness, but ultimately His essence remains "in the dark," hidden from human comprehension.

### MESSAGE

Prayer, the daily focal point of our relationship with G-d, requires humility and focus. A degree of mental preparation is required in order to achieve this goal and achieve a meaningful prayer experience.

חולין יב:ה

א יטול אדם אם על בנים, אפלו לטהר את  
המצורע. ומה אם מצוה קלה שהיא כאסר, אמרה  
תורה (דברים כב, ז), "למען ייטב לך והארכת ימים",  
קל וחמר על מצות המורות שבתורה.

Chulin 12:5

**A person** should not take the mother bird along with the chicks, even to purify a *metsora* (leper) with them. And if the Torah says, "So that G-d may do good to you and you will have length of days" (Deut. 22:7) regarding an easy mitzvah such as this that comes at minimal cost, how much the more is there reward for the difficult mitzvot in the Torah.

#### ELUCIDATION

Every moment in life provides an opportunity to choose the good and the G-dly. It is not only in the great and dramatic moments that the quality of our life can be enhanced, but even in the smallest, seemingly insignificant ones. Every second, there is a chance to do a mitzvah, and thus establish a new and stronger connection with the Source of goodness and life.

Often times, though, we have several mitzvot in front of us at once. Should we do one at the expense of another? Should we cut off someone in our car just to get to the synagogue on time? Should be impolite to someone to teach him a lesson?

The Mishnah here tells us that we should seek a way to keep all our connections intact. It is a great mitzvah to offer a sacrifice so that a leper may come back to the Temple after being precluded from its holy ground. But, the Torah tells

us, when you go to find the bird for that sacrifice, you must be careful to observe the mitzvah that applies to that act, too. Be kind. Send away the mother bird before you take the nestling.

It may seem like a small thing, a matter of a nickel or dime. But that small thing is linked to the greatest thing of all, for it too is a mitzvah and creates a living connection with G-d that pours blessing and goodness into the world. We must seize every opportunity for goodness, no matter how small, and find a way to make every possibility for good come alive.

The same applies to the good deeds we do in the memory of loved ones who have departed. We can do big things and small ones in their merit and memory, and we must never underestimate the significance of even a small act—such as a dollar for charity—done on their behalf.



#### LETTER LAMED

The letter *lamed* means to learn and to teach. *Lamed*, positioned right in the middle of the Hebrew alphabet, is also the tallest of all the letters, expressing the centrality of Torah study to Jewish life. We must first learn and then teach. Without learning, we have nothing to teach; without teaching, our personal study is an exercise in vanity.

#### MESSAGE

There are greater mitzvot and smaller ones, easier ones and ones that require more effort. They all, however, share a common feature: their observance connects us to the Source of all Life.