

# The Lights of Iyar

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

## Iyar and Light

The two names of the second month of the Hebrew calendar are *Iyar* and *Ziv*. Both are related to light. *Iyar* (אייר) is cognate to the word “light” (אור). *Ziv* (זי), which means “splendor” or “brilliance,” is one of the 13 synonyms for light in Hebrew. Both names allude to the special light that shines in this second month of the Jewish calendar.

Perhaps the most basic metaphor for understanding God’s manifestation in reality is that of light. Therefore, in order to understand this manifestation it is first necessary to properly understand light. The discussion of light and its nature in Kabbalah and Chassidut is deep and varied. In regard to sources of light, three major aspects are identified.<sup>1</sup> The first aspect is the source of the light or the “luminary” itself (מאור) from which light emanates. The second is the light that radiates out of the source but is still recognizable as coming from that particular source; this is simply called “light” (אור). The third aspect is light that, to our eyes, illuminates without its source being directly observable; this is called “brilliance” (זי).

Take for example the sun. The sun itself is the luminary. The visible radiation emanating from the sun is the light. An example of the sun’s brilliance would be the daylight that illuminates our room even when the sun is not shining directly into it.

Thus, the name *Iyar*, which refers to light that emanates directly from the luminary and can still be seen as connected to it. But, *Ziv* refers to the *expansion* of that light as it shines far from its source. As we continue, we will see that the month of *Iyar* also taps into a luminary—a source of light.

## A House of Brilliance

Applying our newfound understanding to God’s manifestation in reality, we can now say that the name *Ziv* refers to the radiance that descends from the Almighty to shine on the Jewish soul even as it is encloded in a physical body here on earth. Likewise, the *ziv*, i.e., God’s brilliance, awakens in the Jewish soul the desire to build a



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House for God within the context of physical reality, which seems to be far removed, as it were, from the source of Divine light. Indeed, the Bible relates that King Solomon began building the First Temple, “In the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of *Ziv*, which is the second month.”<sup>2</sup> The *Radak*, one of the classic medieval commentaries, explains: “The month *Ziv* is the month of *Iyar*... and, as the sages explain, it is called *Ziv* because of the splendor of the trees, namely the brilliance of the flowers and buds.” So, it is in the month of *Iyar*, the month of brilliance that King Solomon began to build the House of God.

The sages state that the ultimate purpose of creation was for God to have a dwelling place below, i.e., in our mundane reality.<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word for “world” (עֲלָם) shares the same root as the word for “concealment” (הַעֲלָמָה), alluding to the manner in which mundane reality conceals Divinity. The Exodus from Egypt, in the month of *Nisan* (the month preceding *Iyar*), signifies the escape from the boundaries of typical mundane assumptions and limitations and the soul’s ability to sense the ultimate purpose of creation. This is the general physical and spiritual renewal of the consciousness of the Jewish soul. Building on this spiritual renewal, in the month of *Iyar*, the soul is further awakened and inspired with the desire to build an eternal House of God in this, our mundane reality.

### **Iyar: The Ascent of the Mundane**

The sages relate<sup>4</sup> that from the outset of creation the Creator decreed that the supernal reality shall not descend to the mundane reality, nor shall the mundane ascend to the supernal. This decree was in place until it was nullified with the giving of the Torah (in the third month of *Sivan*). Indeed, we find that God was the first to descend, as it were, “And God descended on Mt. Sinai”<sup>5</sup> and then, “Moses ascended to God.”

In fact, it was the events of the two preceding months, *Nisan* and *Iyar* that prepared the way for the annulment of the decree. In *Nisan*, during the Exodus, “the King of Kings revealed Himself to His people.”<sup>6</sup> Here, the supernal revealed Himself to the mundane, but still remained in His place, as it were.

In *Iyar*, it is we who are in the lower mundane reality that become intensely aware of our lowly state. However, thanks to this very awareness, at the same time we are also able to sense the ultimate purpose of creation and see that the desire of the Almighty, the *Tzadik* of the world (God is called *Tzadik* in the Torah<sup>7</sup>) is to dwell specifically amongst the lowly, and without doubt, “the passion of the *tzadik* [in this case, God’s own passion in creating the world], He will fulfill.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, during *Iyar*, the beings of our mundane reality are slowly refined to become a proper vessel able for receiving the

revelation of the essence of the supernal reality. This is accomplished by our fulfilling the commandment of Counting the Omer. Indeed, the word for “counting” (סְפִירָה) in Hebrew stems from the same root as the word for “sapphire” (סַפִּיר), a brilliant stone synonymous with light scintillating from within materiality, thus alluding to the polishing effect the Counting of the Omer has upon our physical and innate natures.

## The Omer

We count the *omer* on each of the 49 days between the first day of Passover—the day of the exodus from Egypt—and the festival of *Shavu'ot*—the day on which we received the Torah at Mt. Sinai. The first day of the *omer* is thus the 16<sup>th</sup> day of *Nisan*, the day on which the very first grains were gathered in the fields of the Land of Israel and used to make a special grain offering in the Temple; this offering is called the *omer* (which literally means a “bushel”). The first grain to mature is barley (שְׂעוּרָה), which is considered to be fit for livestock, as opposed to wheat, which is fit for human consumption. Thus, the *omer* was made of barley and is symbolically fit for rectifying our own animal soul.

This is the ritual source for our understanding that the focus of the 49 days of the Counting of the Omer is the animal soul and its 49 aspects. It is specifically on these days that the vessels of our animal soul can be addressed and rectified by means of the light emanating from the act of counting itself (recall that we noted above the connection between counting and brilliance). But, as we shall now see, counting the *omer* affects our animal soul in three different ways that correspond to the three main aspects of light described above, luminary, light, and brilliance.

## Counting as an Act

Counting the *omer* is a physical act. It is not enough to count the *omer* on a calendar or in one's mind. One has to actually (stand up) and utter the words. Thus, each day we say a blessing (as we do before performing any commandment) and recite the formula,

*Today are such-and-such days, which are such-and-such weeks<sup>9</sup> and such-and-such days<sup>10</sup> in the omer.*

Counting requires us to utter these words with our power of speech.

## The Brilliance in the Counting of the Omer

Now, the Hebrew spelling for *omer* is עֹמֶר while the word for “a saying” or “an utterance” is אֹמֶר. The only difference between these two words is the first letter, ם (*ayin*, in *omer*) vs. א (*alef*, in *utter*). These two letters *alef* and *ayin*, which have the same

phonetic origin in our vocal organs,<sup>11</sup> are like light (the *alef*) and the vessel that contains that light (the *ayin*). The most explicit example of this relationship is found in the verse, “God made Adam and his wife clothing of skin.”<sup>12</sup> But the sages relate that in the Torah scroll written by Rabbi Meir, one of the greatest sages of the Mishnaic period, this verse was written as, “God made Adam and his wife clothing of light.”<sup>13</sup> In Hebrew, “skin” (עור) and “light” (אור) have the same relationship as *omer* (עֹמֶר) and “utter” (אָמַר). “Skin” begins with the letter *ayin* and “light” begins with the letter *alef*. Rabbi Meir’s variation on this verse suggested that had Adam and Eve not transgressed God’s commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, their skin would have appeared radiant, allowing the inner light of the soul to luminously be seen through it (and so it was indeed before the primordial sin).<sup>14</sup>

Thus by uttering the count of the *omer* on each day, we are actually illuminating the *omer*, which as we saw represents the (as yet) non-rectified traits of our animal soul. That the day by day count of the *omer* has this power is the secret of the verse, “Day by day expresses an utterance (אָמַר)...”<sup>15</sup> The act of counting day by day expresses an utterance that illuminates our unrefined character traits. Moreover, in the Torah, the commandment to count the *omer* appears in the reading of *Emor* (אָמַר)!

### The Light in the Counting of the Omer

So far we have seen one side of the relationship between utterance and the *omer*, but actually there exists an even deeper two-way relationship between them. In the writings of the Arizal, “utterance” (אָמַר) is an acronym for “light” (אור), “water” (מים), and “firmament” (רַקִּיעַ). Since God created the world with 10 Utterances (עֲשָׂרָה מְאֻמְרוֹת),<sup>16</sup> light, water, and firmament reflect the three stages in the emergence of all things created during the first six days of creation.<sup>17</sup> Thus, an utterance represents the stages through which light descends (or is drawn) from above to below.

But, now note that the final letters of these three words—“light,” “water,” and “firmament”—are *mem* (מ), *reish* (ר), and *ayin* (ע), which spell *omer* (עֹמֶר) from end to beginning! What this means is that by our utterance of the count of the particular day of the *omer* we are drawing light from above, illuminating the *omer*—i.e., our unrefined nature. At the same time, this descending light causes the *omer* itself to ascend by reversing the order of the descent, from “firmament” to “water” to “light”—the order in which the final letters of these words spell *omer*. In Kabbalah this is described as the process by which direct light, descending from above, is reflected and returned to its source. In practice this means that the Divine light illuminating and rectifying our animal soul through the counting of the *omer* also elevates it.<sup>18</sup>

The light that descends and is reflected above through the counting of the *omer* is an expression of the “work of clarification” (עבודת הַבְּרִיּוּרִים) whereby the sparks of holiness caught within mundane reality are freed and elevated (as elucidated in Kabbalah). Normally, the spiritual work of clarification cannot elevate that which is being clarified. Only the Divine sparks of holiness are elevated. In other words, that which was mundane, remains mundane, and only the sparks of holiness that were trapped in it return to their supernal source. But, the light that descends by our counting the *omer* not only elevates the Divine sparks trapped within the animal soul (as does every commandment) but also reveals in the animal soul in and of itself sparks of holiness whose will and desire is to make for God a dwelling place below.

### The Luminary in the Counting of the Omer

But above and beyond these first two levels, the counting of *omer*, specifically during the month of Iyar, also taps into a luminary, an actual source of light. While at Mt. Sinai we received the revealed aspect of the Torah (both Written and Oral), the primary revelation of its concealed aspect is on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of *Iyar*, or as it is commonly known, *Lag Ba’omer*, the 33<sup>rd</sup> day<sup>19</sup> of the Counting of the *Omer* and the day of passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (*Rashbi*), the author of the *Zohar*. The revelation of the concealed aspect of the Torah is the luminary that lights up the month of *Iyar* and the entire Counting of the *Omer*.

The text of the Torah is of course one and the same, whether we are referring to its revealed or concealed aspect. But, what is unique about the concealed aspect is that it was the instrument, the interpretation of the text used by God to create the world. This is described in the verse, “Then, I [the Torah] was a nursling for Him [God], day by day, I was His delight.”<sup>20</sup> The sages explain that “day by day,” which suggests two days, means that the Torah preceded creation by two Divine days, which are equivalent to 2000 human years. During that time, the Torah was like a nursling, like a baby that is still fully dependent and nourished by its mother; the Torah was essentially one with God’s essence.

At Mt. Sinai, the Torah, as it were, descended into the mundane and became the essential expression of God’s will in reality.<sup>21</sup> However, the concealed aspect, whose principal revelation began with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, brings us the Torah as it was before God. The revealed understanding of the Torah presents it as God’s will, the concealed understanding presents it as one and the same with God’s essential delight (like a nursing child that a mother takes delight in). In the language of the *Zohar*, “The Torah and God are one.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, it is specifically about the concealed

understanding that the *Zohar* states, “God purveyed the Torah and created the world.”<sup>23</sup> It is the concealed aspect of the Torah that reveals how the text is the sourcebook and blueprint for all creation. As *Rashi* explains the first verse of the Torah, “The world was created for the sake of the Torah, as it is written, ‘God acquired me [the Torah] as the beginning of His path, I am the first of His endeavors, since always.’”<sup>24</sup> In Kabbalistic terminology the revelation of the concealed aspect of the Torah is thus the revelation of the primordial Torah.

The *Zohar* recounts how on his day of passing, *Lag Ba’omer*, *Rashbi* revealed the deepest of the Torah’s secrets, the aspect of the Torah whose subject matter is the Creator Himself and not only His revealed will. *Rashbi* commanded his student Rabbi Abba to put the teachings down in writing, thus opening the door for the secrets of the Torah to be revealed to all generations. Thus, on *Lag Ba’omer*, the 18<sup>th</sup> day of Iyar, the luminary itself shines into our mundane reality, stimulating our mundane reality with the power of the primordial Torah, the instrument of its own creation. Sensing this revelation, our souls are empowered to count the *omer*, to refine our material nature, and to become a vessel and dwelling place for God on an entirely different level.

As *Rashbi* explained, the luminary that shines in the Torah and is revealed by the concealed teachings carries with it understanding and healing, “His heart will understand, he will return and be healed.”<sup>25</sup> Our seeming distance from God may at times fill us with a feeling of despair. Like light that has departed its source, we feel detached and severed from our supernal root in holiness and goodness. But, when the luminary shines forth, when the source itself is revealed, all such doubts are dispelled and our feeling of detachment and estrangement from the Almighty is healed. Thus, it is specifically the luminary revealed in the inner teachings of the Torah that can truly make us into *ba’alei teshuvah*, true returnees to God. Unlike the *teshuvah*, the return to God formulated in the revealed dimension of the Torah, which demands that we first close the distance created by our sins through repentance, the inner dimension of the Torah begins by revealing that there never was and there is at present no essential separation between our souls and the Creator. The light, our light, has never really left its source, and we are still one with God. In the language of the *Zohar*, “the Jewish people and the Torah and God are one!”<sup>26</sup>

This realization is one of the great innovations, revelations, and topics especially of the teachings of Chassidut innovating and expanding even upon the classic texts of Kabbalah. Such a profound insight has the power to reach even those at the lowest spiritual levels, those individuals who perhaps have given up totally on ever touching upon holiness and leading an inspired and holy life. Once the luminary has been sensed,

we can resolve ourselves to change and to dedicate ourselves to our and the Almighty's one true desire, to create for Him a dwelling place here below – “The luminary within it (the Torah) will transform us to goodness.”<sup>27</sup>

When the luminary is revealed, the Counting of the Omer acts to not only elevate the sparks of holiness in our animal soul, but to transform it in its entirety, bringing us fully into Divine service. This is known as the service of unification (עבודת ה'חידים), where even innate nature is revealed as desiring only that which God desires and for which purpose God created the world.

### 3 Symbolic Levels of Light

Let us summarize the three aspects of light revealed during the Counting of the *Omer* and the month of *Iyar* in a chart,

time	aspect of light	Description	Divine service
<i>Lag Ba'omer</i>	luminary (מאור)	source of light	service of unification
<i>Iyar</i>	light (אור)	light extending from the source	service of clarification
<i>Ziv</i>	brilliance (זי)	light illuminating far from its source	Introspection

The luminary (מאור) reflects the hidden essential light source. The light (אור) is a revelation from the hidden essence (proximate to its source). The brilliance (זי) is an illumination extending from the light reaching another, far removed soul, as explained in *Chassidut*. The initials of luminary (מ), light (א), and brilliance (ז) spell the mnemonic מאז, which is the secret of the verse mentioned above regarding the Torah, “God acquired me [the primordial Torah] as the beginning of His path, I am the first of His endeavors, since always [מאז].”

As discussed above, the luminary represents the service of the *ba'al teshuvah*, the individual returning to God, whom the sages describe as one who can attain a level that even the perfectly righteous cannot.

The light symbolizes the service of the *tzadik*, the righteous individual who is described as God's chariot in this world. Indeed, this is the service that is most connected to the name *Iyar*, since *Iyar* (אייר) is also an acronym of the four archetypal souls that constitute the Divine chariot: Abraham (אברהם), Isaac (יצחק), Jacob (יעקב), and Rachel (רחל).<sup>28</sup> Finally, the level of brilliance is the illumination of light that extends even into the lowest levels of reality, shining upon them love and caring in order to draw them close to the Torah.

### 3 Levels in the Blessing

When actually counting the omer every evening, we can meditate upon all three of these effects that the counting has. The formula that we use—

*Today are such-and-such day/days, which are such-and-such weeks<sup>29</sup> and such-and-such days<sup>30</sup> to the omer*

—contains a clear allusion to each of the three:

- *Today* (הַיּוֹם) reflects the essential luminary. In Hebrew, the word “today” is formed by adding a “the” to the word “day,” stressing that it refers to “the day,” just as luminary refers to *the* source of light.
- *day* (יּוֹם/יָמִים) refers to light as in the verse, “God named the light day.”
- *to the omer* refers to the brilliance that illuminates the Divine spark present in the heart of every Jew, awakening it to begin the process of ascending and create a dwelling place for the Almighty in our mundane reality.

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1. *Tanya, Sha'ar Hayichud Veha'emunah* ch. 3. *Torah Or, Vayeira* 14a.

2. I Kings 6:1. In the Torah *Iyar* is referred to as “the second month” for it is the second month after *Nisan*, the first month of the Jewish year, the month of redemption from Egypt (alluding as well to the final redemption with the coming of Mashiach).

3. *Midrash Tanchuma, Naso* 16.

4. *Ibid., Va'eira* 15.

5. Exodus 19:20.

6. Passover Hagadah. Maimonides *Hilchot Chametz Umatzah* 8:4. See *Rashi* to Exodus 15:2

7. Deuteronomy 32:4.

8. Proverbs 10:24.

9. Of course, on and after the seventh day, when seven days make one week.

10. On and after 8 days, which constitute one week and one day.

11. Both are guttural letters. See also Ramban to Deuteronomy 21:14, where he gives examples of words in which these two letters are interchangeable.

12. Genesis 3:21.

13. *Bereishit Rabbah* 20:12.

14. Other examples of the *alef-ayin* relationship can be seen in the pairs of words: nothingness (אֵין)-eye (עֵינַי); ashes (אֶפֶר)-dust (עֶפְרָה); seer (רוֹאֵה)-shepherd (רוֹעֵה).

15. Psalms 19:3.

16. See also our articles on [pi](#) and on the [periodic table of the elements](#).

17. In Kabbalistic terminology, these are the three implicit stages involved in the secret of “from the thickening of lights did vessels emerge.”

18. Up to, and including, the level of the very source from where the light of the utterance originally descended.

19. 33 alludes to the word “open” or “reveal” (גָּלַה), whose value is 33, in the verse, “Open my eyes and I shall see the wonders of Your Torah” (Psalms 119:18).

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<sup>20</sup>. Proverbs 8:30.

<sup>21</sup>. The sages describe that Moshe Rabbeinu had to argue with the angels in order to allow the Torah to be brought down into our mundane reality. The angels believed that the Torah was too pristine for physical beings.

<sup>22</sup>. *Zohar* III, 73a.

<sup>23</sup>. *Ibid.* I, 134a.

<sup>24</sup>. Proverbs 8:22.

<sup>25</sup>. Isaiah 6:10.

<sup>26</sup>. *Zohar* III, 73a.

<sup>27</sup>. *Eichah Rabbati, Petichta* 2. Jerusalem Talmud *Chagigah* 1:7.

<sup>28</sup>. The Divine chariot described in the first chapter of Ezekiel is made up of 4 faced angels. The four faces are that of a lion, an ox, a human being, and an eagle. These four correspond to the four *sefirot* of loving-kindness, might, beauty, and kingdom, respectively. Likewise, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Rachel are the archetypal souls of these four *sefirot*.

<sup>29</sup>. Of course, on and after the seventh day, when seven days make one week, as above.

<sup>30</sup>. On and after 8 days, which constitute one week and one day, as above.