

# Freedom of Choice

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Based on a class given on the 8th of Cheshvan, 5758 in Jerusalem

## Introduction

In the third chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, known in English as The Ethics of the Fathers, one of the tractates of the Mishnah, we read the following teaching from Rabbi Akiva (which in our text is the 15<sup>th</sup> *mishnah*—teaching of the chapter):

*Everything is foreseen,  
Yet, freedom of choice is granted;  
The world is judged with goodness,  
And everything is according to the preponderance of action.*

The Ethics of the Fathers contains what are considered the fundamentals of human morality and nature that precede the Torah. It is customary to recite its six chapters in the summer months, beginning with the first Shabbat after Passover, immediately after the Shabbat *Minchah* service.

Indeed, even a cursory reading of these words reveal that they deal with one of the most difficult and perplexing of all religious topics, the seeming **paradox between God’s omniscience vs. man’s freedom of choice**. Maimonides, who addresses this paradox in length in his writings, writes that it contains the most important principles of Torah and could only have been said by someone as great as Rabbi Akiva.

In this short study, written in honor of the dedication of a new Torah scroll to Chabad of Albuquerque by our dear friend, Dr. Jeff Sollins, we will delve into the meaning of Rabbi Akiva’s words using the methodologies of the inner dimension of the Torah—Kabbalah and Chassidut.

*Chabad* is an acronym that stands for the Hebrew words for “wisdom” (חֵכֶּמֶה) “understanding” (בִּינָה) and “knowledge” (דַּעַת) the names of the intellectual *sefirot*—three of the Divine emanations of light, energy, and life-force by which God forms and fashions everything in creation. The *sefirot* constitute one of the most basic models in Jewish thought, particularly in the study of the inner dimension of the Torah, and we will be using them quite a bit as we advance through this study. Let us present the traditional graphical arrangement of the *sefirot*, if only to get a general sense about them:



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	קֶטֶר <i>keter</i> crown	
בִּינָה <i>binah</i> understanding		חֻכְמָה <i>chochmah</i> wisdom
	דַּעַת <i>da'at</i> knowledge	
גְבוּרָה <i>gevurah</i> might		חֶסֶד <i>chesed</i> loving-kindness
	תִּפְאֶרֶת <i>tiferet</i> beauty	
הוֹד <i>hod</i> acknowledgment		נִצָּח <i>netzach</i> victory
	יְסוּד <i>yesod</i> foundation	
	מַלְכוּת <i>malchut</i> kingdom	

However, because we are more interested with the content of Rabbi Akiva's saying, we will leave basic concepts about the *sefirot* undefined, encouraging the interested reader to explore this topic through our basic text on Kabbalah.<sup>1</sup>

Before we begin let us say a few words about our methodology—the methodology of the study of the inner dimension of the Torah.

## Building Mental Structures with Torah

Kabbalah and Chassidut seek to reveal our deepest essence, unite it with the Divine, and thus unlock our deepest potential as human beings. To do so we must be adept at using the infinite wisdom of the Torah's inner dimension to find God's signature, as it were, in every aspect of ourselves, and the world around us. The Talmud explains that the Almighty is like a painter who signs his name on every work he completes; God has signed His Name on every facet of the universe, regardless of how big or how small.

At times, God's signature is one His holy Names. In our analysis of Rabbi Akiva's words we will see that it is signed and sealed with God's essential four-letter Name, *Havayah* is signed on it. Rabbi Akiva is considered the patron of Jewish mystical thought (he was the leader of the four Rabbis who entered the orchard,<sup>2</sup> a euphemism for the inner dimension of the Torah). He was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai—the author of the Zohar's—Rebbe. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that one of his most central sayings would be structured so that it would reflect God's essential Name.

To reveal God's signature, we will be using various models that carry one-to-one correspondence between them. When various models are seen to correspond to one another, the mind is calibrated as it were into Torah thinking. Ordering and analyzing the components of Rabbi Akiva's teaching based on the model of God's essential Name will prompt our minds to find ever-deeper levels of exploration and understanding of its meaning.

Perhaps the best way to understand the role of the model is to liken it to a key. This key is not for a physical lock but for opening still secured areas of the mind. Because of the nature of the mind, Kabbalistic models are always holographic. Once a Kabbalistic model is inserted into the mind, it acts like a key that has been inserted into a lock—a new door is opened. The mind opens and becomes aware of a new way to see the world and its inner structure. People, events, and places that had previously seemed dissociated and confusing, suddenly yield new levels of connection and meaning.

### God's Signature in Rabbi Akiva's Saying

The four letters of *Havayah* correspond to the four *sefirot*, wisdom, understanding, beauty, and kingdom. The *sefirah* of beauty is considered representative of the six *sefirot* from loving-kindness to foundation. The *sefirah* of crown corresponds to a fifth element in *Havayah* identified as the tip of the first letter, *yud*.

The full correspondence is thus:

letter of <i>Havayah</i>	<i>sefirot</i>
י קוצו של י (tip of yud)	crown
י ( <i>yud</i> )	wisdom
ה ( <i>hei</i> )	understanding
ו ( <i>vav</i> )	loving-kindness thru foundation
ה ( <i>hei</i> )	kingdom

The *mishnah* from Rabbi Akiva quoted above divides neatly into four parts and constitute one of the clearest examples of how a four-part saying or verse in Torah corresponds with the four letters of God's essential Name, *Havayah* also known as the Tetragrammaton. We will first write out the full correspondence in chart form and then proceed to discuss each row separately:

letter of <i>Havayah</i>	<i>sefirot</i>	part of <i>mishnah</i>
י ( <i>yud</i> )	wisdom	Everything is foreseen
ה ( <i>hei</i> )	understanding	Yet, freedom of choice is given
ו ( <i>vav</i> )	beauty	The world is judged with goodness
ה ( <i>hei</i> )	kingdom	And everything is according to the preponderance of action

## Wisdom: “Everything is Foreseen”

“Everything is foreseen” corresponds to the first letter of *Havayah*, the *yud* (י), and to the *sefirah* of wisdom. One of the first identifications that one comes across regarding wisdom is that it is related to the sense of sight.<sup>3</sup>

*Rashi* explains that the word usually translated as “foreseen” simply means “sees.” According to his commentary, Rabbi Akiva is telling us that God sees everything, what a person does in public, and more importantly everything that he does in private, when supposedly no one is looking.<sup>4</sup> *Rashi’s* explanation of this phrase implies that God also sees into our hearts and mind.<sup>5</sup> By limiting the scope of the first statement to the present, *Rashi* circumvents Maimonides’ contradiction between God’s omniscience and human freedom of choice.

As noted above, in his commentary on the Mishnah, Maimonides explains that “foreseen” implies that God sees the future and therefore Rabbi Akiva’s statement presents an apparent contradiction with freedom of choice.<sup>6</sup> It would seem that if God knows the future, His knowledge should determine our actions. This paradox lies at the heart of Jewish faith according to Maimonides and he deals with it even more extensively in his other works.<sup>7</sup>

In the end, Maimonides resorts to the following argument to explain the paradox: just as we cannot understand God Himself, so we cannot understand what it means that He knows all of our actions. Maimonides’ resolution of the paradox rests on faith; faith that God’s knowledge of our future actions does not force us to act in a certain way and that we continue to have free will in spite of his knowledge. From the verse: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts and My ways are not your ways”<sup>8</sup> Maimonides learns that there is an essential difference between God’s knowledge of reality and our knowledge of reality. Indeed, if His knowledge was similar to ours, there would indeed be a contradiction between His omniscience and our freedom of choice.

This is a good place to add that regarding this same verse, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts and My ways are not your ways” the Alter Rebbe explains that the second part is a conditional statement on the first part. Meaning, that the verse is saying, When are your thoughts not like God’s thoughts? As long as your way is not God’s way! But, if you, within human limits, emulate God, then you will, within human limits, share God’s thoughts. You will see reality from God’s perspective. But, if you do not follow God’s way, you will not be able to understand what God is doing in the world. At the personal level, you will not be able to understand the reward and punishment that God is giving you in response to you actions and you will never be at peace with God.

But, as we will explain later in regard to the second part of Rabbi Akiva’s teaching, meditating on knowing God leads eventually to an understanding of why God runs the world the way that He does.

Now, in Rabbi Akiva’s saying the adjective “foreseen” is written in its passive form. The same passive form of the word is also found in a similar saying by the sages

“Everything is revealed and known to You.”<sup>9</sup> The *Maharal* of Prague, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Torah scholar, in his commentary on the Mishnah titled *Derech Chaim* explains that the reason for the passive form is that there are certain actions that God does not *want* to see. These are negative actions. And so, God knows about them passively, without actively casting His gaze upon them. In other words, He does not engage His will when seeing these bad deeds.

So far, we have seen how the first part of the Rabbi Akiva’s *mishnah* corresponds to the *sefirah* of wisdom and the first letter of *Havayah*.

### Understanding: “Yet, Freedom of Choice is granted”

The second part of Rabbi Akiva’s saying corresponds to the second letter of God’s essential Name, *Havayah*, *hei* and to the *sefirah* of understanding.

In the *Zohar*, universal freedom is associated with the *sefirah* of understanding. The “World of Freedom”<sup>10</sup> is a phrase that the *Zohar* uses to describe the *sefirah* of understanding. It refers to the “World to Come,” where human beings will enjoy eternal freedom from the evil inclination and therefore freedom from judgment. Thus, we can liken our freedom of choice to a shadow cast from the World to Come on our own reality.<sup>11</sup> In the World to Come, absolute freedom is a result of God having done away with the evil inclination, leaving us free to follow Him without any inhibitions. In our present reality, freedom of choice reveals a higher level of our self, where we are free to choose between following our evil inclination and ignoring it. The more a person connects to and strengthens this higher level of self, the more he is living even now in the consciousness of the World to Come.

### Beauty: “The World is Judged with Goodness”

The *Zohar* states that wisdom and understanding, or more generally, the father and mother principles, are always united.<sup>12</sup> Their unification gives birth to children, represented by the emotive faculties (the 6 *sefirot* from loving-kindness to foundation) and the *sefirah* of kingdom, which in Rabbi Akiva’s teaching correspond to the third and fourth parts. Thus, when one unifies the first two parts of Rabbi Akiva’s saying, “Everything is foreseen, yet, freedom of choice is granted” one merits giving birth to the second half of his saying, “And the world is judged with goodness and everything is according to the preponderance of action.”

Maimonides explains that the third part indeed logically follows the first two parts and Rabbi Akiva’s intent is to say that even though God foresees everything, freedom of choice has been granted, and therefore it is a good thing that God judges the world. Meaning, that God is justified in judging people because people have freedom of choice.

And yet, God’s judgment is not harsh judgment. Both Maimonides and *Rashi* agree here that the meaning is that God judges the world mercifully (the inner quality of the *sefirah* of beauty, the central emotive faculty). Even though the entire concept of

judgment is related to the left axis of the *sefirot* (specifically the *sefirah* of might), which is considered harsh and strong, still, God's judgment is always leaning to the right side, towards loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is known as "good."

As we continue our study, we will see that the more we focus our thoughts—the intellectual powers of wisdom and especially understanding—on the positive, the more we give birth to feelings that indeed God judges everything mercifully and in a positive light. The Lubavitcher Rebbe would often state the Yiddish phrase, *Tracht gut, vet sein gut*, which captures this idea.

### Kingdom: "And Everything is According to the Preponderance of Action"

Finally the fourth part of Rabbi Akiva's saying, "And everything is according to the preponderance of action," corresponds to the fourth letter of *Havayah*, the final *hei*. The final letter of *Havayah* represents the *sefirah* of kingdom and the World of Action, so the parallel is very clear because the final statement is about action. Still, let us take this opportunity to go deeper into the meaning of this final part of the teaching.

According to Maimonides, this statement means that people's nature can only change through repeated actions. The famous example that Maimonides gives is of a person giving charity. If he gives a large sum, say a million dollars all at once, this may not open his heart at all—it will not lead to a change in his character. But, if the same sum is given in smaller amounts, time after time, then the person's character will change and his heart will always be open to charity. In the *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe explains this. Even though the amount given to charity each time is smaller, it is the *act of giving* that counts most. Giving itself cleanses the psyche. The same is true of any character trait that a person would like to fix. Many repetitions of a rectifying action are needed in order to make an impression, by cleansing the psyche. Even if a person gives a large sum, but only once, it will not have as strong an impression on his psyche. The repetition makes the difference.

The Alter Rebbe<sup>13</sup> takes Maimonides' principle and applies it universally. He explains that the psyche of the entire world is the *Shechinah*—the Divine Presence. Since the destruction of the Holy Temple and the exile of the Jewish people, the *Shechinah* is fallen and covered in dirt, as it were,<sup>14</sup> since the *Shechinah* is the Congregation of Israel. To raise the *Shechinah* and to restore it to its original glory requires many acts of kindness.

Sometimes people imagine that it is possible that one particularly great and extraordinary act could rectify the world and bring the Mashiach. But, the Alter Rebbe is saying that in principle there is no such possibility. Great and amazing acts of kindness that broke through all the barriers of separation in the world have already been performed, and yet the Mashiach has still not come. Instead, the *Shechinah* will permanently be raised out of the dirt only by a preponderance of numerous acts, even

small acts of kindness, executed by many people.<sup>15</sup> Every single *mitzvah*, every single act of kindness, even the smallest, cleanses the *Shechinah* further and when the necessary amount is complete, the Divine Presence will be restored.

Understanding preponderance as a measure of quantity fits one of the most basic Kabbalistic models, in which the *sefirah* of kingdom corresponds to quantity:

letter of <i>Havayah</i>	<i>sefirah</i>	predicate
<i>Yud</i>	wisdom	essence
<i>Hei</i>	understanding	form
<i>Vav</i>	beauty	quality
<i>Hei</i>	kingdom	quantity

But, there are commentaries that dispute the identification of the Hebrew word that we have translated as “preponderance” with quantity. Instead, they argue that this word (רַב) refers to quality.<sup>16</sup> According to this understanding, the last part of Rabbi Akiva’s teaching should be translated as, “And everything depends on the quality of the act.” Naturally, both points of view are valid. We find that in the Bible, this Hebrew word variously means both “many” (quantity) and “great” (quality).

Those commentaries that relate the impact of action on its quality give two different definitions to quality. The first is that the quality of an act is proportional to the amount in which it goes against the grain of your natural character. In other words, how difficult it was for you to overcome your innate nature in order to perform this act. This is called *itkafya* in Chassidut, meaning self-subjugation. If we pay close attention, we will see that Maimonides’ interpretation also contains a dependence on *itkafya*. Without the going against our innate nature, even numerous acts performed thousands of times will not change our character—they can be likened to breaking down an open door. In other words, if a person is stingy by nature—this is how God created him—for him giving a large amount of money is very, very difficult. Therefore, for him it could be that with one single act—given the difficulty of performing that act—he will forever be judged favorably.

The second definition of quality is as proportional to the amount of intent a person has when performing an act. The point here is not that it is difficult to perform the act because it runs against the grain of my natural countenance, but that it is difficult to do things with meaning and conviction. As the sages say, “A *mitzvah* without intent is like a body without a soul.” Even though action is the main thing in the end, still the impact of the action depends on the inner experience

This second definition of quality lends itself to various gradations and levels. The Rebbe of Komarna for instance explains that a person may have intellectual intent when performing a good deed, but may lack emotive excitement. The highest quality of a deed

is when it is done with excitement and lowliness, the inner quality of the *sefirah* of kingdom.

Even though the interpretation of the fourth part of the saying as relating to quality do not fit with the model presented earlier in which kingdom is the measure of quantity, still they relate to the quality of an action or deed, and the World of Action is the level of consciousness associated with the *sefirah* of kingdom.

So far, we have seen how Rabbi Akiva's teaching is signed with God's essential Name, *Havayah*. We now have a basic model that corresponds its four parts with the four letters of *Havayah*. The power of analyzing something in this fashion, by corresponding it to a well-known model (in our case the four letters of *Havayah*) is that we can then interpolate to other models that share the same structure.<sup>17</sup> In the next part of our study, we will interpolate Rabbi Akiva's *mishnah* onto the Hebrew calendar. This will provide us with even deeper insight into its meaning and application.



## Part II

### From Rabbi Akiva to the Hebrew Calendar

What we have seen so far is that the four parts of Rabbi Akiva's statement beautifully and easily correspond to the four letters of *Havayah*, God's essential Name. As always, we would like to uncover deeper levels of meaning in whatever we are studying. One of the most powerful tools that Kabbalah offers us in expanding our grasp of a topic is the possibility of comparing and interpolating between different models that share the same basic structure. In our case, we are going to be comparing Rabbi Akiva's four-part model we already have to the twelve-part model of the Hebrew calendar. As we will see, this comparison is made possible by an important principle taught by the early Kabbalists. But, first a few words of background about the Hebrew calendar are necessary.

Unlike non-Jewish calendars, which are technical, the Hebrew calendar, in its ideal form, is dynamic and ever changing. The Hebrew calendar is primarily lunar. Its 12 annual months are based on the revolution of the moon around the earth. So the first day of each month is defined as the day on which the new moon appears. But, the Torah commands the high court (*Sanhedrin*) to define and sanctify the first day of each month only after receiving testimony from witnesses who physically saw the new moon. When the calendar was dynamically defined by testimony, every new month carried with it a sense of renewal and the entire calendar was computed only one month in advance. Such was the youthfulness present in the Jewish demarcation of time through the first few centuries of the Common Era. It is not surprising therefore, that one of the richest topics in Torah is the study of the calendar.

Eventually, the high court lost its judicious power and its dispersal forced the sages of the time (about the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE) to resort to computing the calendar for centuries in advance, with only the approximate time computed for the beginning of each month.

In the Torah, each of the 12 months has a psychological sense associated with it. In addition, the months correspond to myriad models that also include 12 elements. We have written a great deal about these senses in other contexts. For our purposes let us simply write out the months with a few of their corresponding models in chart form:<sup>18</sup>

month	sense	tribe	letter
<i>Nisan</i>	speech	Judah	ה
<i>Iyar</i>	thought	Yissachar	ו
<i>Sivan</i>	progress	Zebulun	ז
<i>Tamuz</i>	sight	Reuben	ח
<i>Av</i>	hearing	Shimon	ט
<i>Elul</i>	action	Gad	י
<i>Tishrei</i>	touch	Ephraim	כ
<i>Cheshvan</i>	smell	Menasheh	ג
<i>Kislev</i>	sleep	Benjamin	ד
<i>Tevet</i>	indignation	Dan	ה
<i>Shevat</i>	consumption	Asher	ו
<i>Adar</i>	humor	Naftali	ז

## Freedom of Choice and the Month of Iyar

Our first step in corresponding Rabbi Akiva's *mishnah* with the calendar is to find a common point of reference. Focusing on the second part of the *mishnah*, "Yet, freedom of choice is given," recall that we have explained how it corresponds to the first *hei* of *Havayah* and the *sefirah* of understanding, or the mother principle, one of the three powers of thought in the soul. Among the 12 psychological senses that correspond to the months, the equivalent of understanding is the sense of thought associated with the month of *Iyar*. This will serve as our initial common point of reference from which we will interpolate Rabbi Akiva's saying onto the Hebrew calendar.

The implication of finding this point is that freedom of choice corresponds to the *sefirah* of understanding, which in turn corresponds to the month of *Iyar*. Let us delve further into this new level of correspondence.

The tribe associated with *Iyar* is Yissachar.<sup>19</sup> Yissachar is noted throughout the Bible as the people possessing a special ability to understand measures of time, which is why they had a special expertise in organizing the calendar, a special role that they played on the high court. In Hebrew, the relationship between thought and the calendar is much clearer than in English because both "computation" or "mathematics" (חֲשׁוֹבִין) and "thought" (מְחַשְׁבֵּה) stem from the same verb (חשב). The idiom used to denote preparing a calendar is "computation of time" (חֲשׁוֹבִין תְּקִיפוֹת). There are many types of thought. The type of thought needed to compute the calendar (which depends on observing nature with a mathematical eye) is the analytical type of thought associated with the *sefirah* of understanding.

One of the most explicit verses describing Yissachar's special gift says, "And from the sons of Yissachar, those who understand time"<sup>20</sup> thus explicitly connecting the tribe of Yissachar (and the month of *Iyar*) with the *sefirah* of understanding. Indeed, as we saw earlier, free choice corresponds to the *sefirah* of understanding, the main seat of thought.

We can now identify the month of Iyar as *the* month of free will. As such, Iyar is the month of awakening from below, because as we see in a moment, freedom of choice represents an awakening of the mundane to change its course. We can capture the essence of this point as: Initiative begins with the sense of free thinking.

Indeed, of all of Jacob's children, Yissachar was the one whose conception involved the most initiative. His mother, Leah out of her tremendous desire to increase the number of Jacob's offspring (and the number of tribes), gave her maidservant, Zilpah, to her husband as his fourth wife. For a woman, to consciously introduce another woman into her house is a very difficult thing, all the more so when until then, Zilpah had been her servant. Now, Zilpah had become equal to her former mistress. Leah who now had trouble of her own conceiving was given mandrakes by her son Reuben. Mandrakes are known to increase fertility, and Leah gave them to her sister Rachel, her husband's most beloved wife, who until then had had no children, in order that that night she send Jacob to her. Shortly thereafter, Yissachar was born and Leah called him by this name which means, "there is a reward," expressing her thanksgiving to God for having rewarded her for her initiative.

Moreover, in Kabbalah, Leah is considered the archetypal soul related to the *sefirah* of understanding.

This sentiment is found later in relation to the tribe of Yissachar, the tribe associated with the month of Iyar. When the Jewish people went out of Egypt, the leader or prince of the tribe was Netanel ben Tzu'ar. Netanel, means "God gave," or "Godsend." His father's name Tzu'ar comes from the word meaning pain or hardship. Thus, the full name, Netanel ben Tzu'ar, relates to the sages' saying that, "the reward is according to the pains taken..." (לְפִיּוֹם צָעָרָא אֲגִירָא). In other words, God gives (Netanel) reward (Yissachar) based on the pain (Tzu'ar) that was endured in order to achieve a goal.

Finally, let us add that every month also has a permutation of *Havayah* associated with it. Since the Name *Havayah* has four letters, they can be permuted 24 ways. But, because one of the letters, the *hei*, repeats, only 12 permutations are unique. These 12 permutations of *Havayah* correspond one-to-one to the 12 months. It is customary to have this permutation in mind when saying the blessing of the new month in the *musaf* service of *rosh chodesh*. The permutation of *Havayah* corresponding to *Iyar* is יהדו.

Our *tefilin* contain the text of the four paragraphs in the Pentateuch that mention the commandment of *tefilin*. There are two methods for ordering these paragraphs, one according to the opinion of Rashi, the other according to the opinion of his grandson, Rabbeinu Tam. For this reason, many Jewish men own and don two pairs of *tefilin*—one of each kind. Without getting into the details, יהדו, the permutation of *Havayah* associated with the month of *Iyar*, corresponds to the order of the paragraphs in the Rabbeinu Tam *tefilin*. Rabbeinu Tam *tefilin* are considered to be "the *tefilin* of the World to Come," which as we noted earlier, is a synonym for the *sefirah* of understanding.

## Freedom of Choice Year-round

Now that we have identified the month of Iyar with the second part of Rabbi Akiva's saying, we can interpolate backwards and forwards. The month before Iyar, the month of Nisan, then corresponds to the first part of the *mishnah*, "Everything is foreseen." And the third and fourth parts correspond to the months of Sivan and *Tamuz*, respectively. Let us explore this correspondence too.

As already noted, the exodus from Egypt, which occurred in *Nisan* is an example of an awakening of God above. God redeemed us from exile not in merit of our past deeds – we had no merits to entitle us to be redeemed – but only because He foresaw our future, our willingness and devotion to receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai and to be His chosen people. So clearly *Nisan* corresponds to "All is foreseen." And then comes the month of Iyar, which as explained corresponds to free choice, it is up to us to act properly – "Yet freedom of choice is granted."

The month of Sivan corresponds to "The world is judged by goodness." The good is of course the Torah (as the sages say "'Good' is the Torah," based on the verse "I have given you a good teaching, do not forsake My Torah"<sup>21</sup>). All of reality is judged according to the law of the Torah, which is called "the good." Of course, Sivan is the month of the giving of the Torah.

Another point to be made is that unlike other *mishnah's* that are part of a series of sayings by a sage in the tractate (*Avot*), our *mishnah* does not begin with the introduction: "He would say...." A possible reason for this is that our *mishnah* is the direct continuation of the preceding one from Rabbi Akiva. And, the preceding *mishnah* states,

*....Beloved are the Jewish people, for a jewel was given to them; how greatly they are beloved is known to them, for they have been given this jewel, as the verse says, "I have given you a good teaching, do not forsake My Torah."*

And then comes our *mishnah*, implying that it too is on the subject of the Torah and that once the Torah has been given, the world can be judged by it, and again this is merciful judgment because all of the Torah's laws are merciful.

The month of *Tamuz* is a month of action, the month to enact/live by the precepts of the Torah that we were given in the previous month of *Sivan*. The failure to do so in the original *Tamuz* that followed the Giving of the Torah at Sinai resulted in the sin of the Golden Calf and the breaking of the Tablets of the Torah (which were given on the condition that they be acted upon).

The early Kabbalists<sup>22</sup> explain that the 12 months of the year correspond to three Names of *Havayah* in succession.<sup>23</sup> It follows therefore, that we can continue our interpolation of Rabbi Akiva's *mishnah* to all 12 months. The complete model is then:

Month	letter of <i>Havayah</i>	part of <i>mishnah</i>
<i>Nisan</i>	<i>yud</i>	Everything is foreseen
<i>Iyar</i>	<i>hei</i>	Yet, freedom of choice is given
<i>Sivan</i>	<i>vav</i>	The world is judged with goodness
<i>Tamuz</i>	<i>hei</i>	And everything is according to the preponderance of action
<i>Av</i>	<i>yud</i>	Everything is foreseen
<i>Elul</i>	<i>hei</i>	Yet, freedom of choice is given
<i>Tishrei</i>	<i>vav</i>	The world is judged with goodness
<i>Cheshvan</i>	<i>hei</i>	And everything is according to the preponderance of action
<i>Kislev</i>	<i>yud</i>	Everything is foreseen
<i>Tevet</i>	<i>hei</i>	And freedom is given
<i>Shevat</i>	<i>vav</i>	The world is judged with goodness
<i>Adar</i>	<i>hei</i>	And everything is according to the preponderance of action

Let us explain in short the correspondence for the rest of the months.

- *Av* – “*Everything is foreseen*”: alludes to the destruction of the Temple on the 9<sup>th</sup> of *Av*, probably the most foreseen, i.e., prophesized event in the Bible (it was actually foreseen by God from the very day that Solomon completed the construction of the first Temple).
- *Elul* – “*Yet, freedom of choice is given*”: And freedom is given to change our ways. The month of *Elul* is the month of freedom of choice, the month of *teshuvah* (return to God and to the path of Torah) before *Rosh Hashanah* in which we receive the best opportunity of the entire year to choose to fix what needs fixing. In addition, the value of *Elul* (אֱלּוּל) is 67, the same as the value of “understanding” (בִּינָה), the *sefirah* that corresponds to the first letter *hei* of *Havayah*.
- *Tishrei* – “*The world is judged with goodness*”: *Tishrei*, which begins with *Rosh Hashanah*, the Day of Judgment is the month of judgment. For this reason the zodiac sign of *Tishrei* is libra, or scales, symbolizing that all of creation is judged by the Almighty in this month.
- *Cheshvan* – “*And everything is according to the preponderance of action*”: And everything follows the preponderance of action. *Chassidim* especially are familiar with the notion that following the holidays of *Tishrei*, once *Cheshvan* begins, it is time for action. It is customary for *chassidim* to spend the month of *Tishrei* by their Rebbe. At the end of *Tishrei* and the beginning of *Cheshvan*, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would send his *chassidim* off with the verse “And Jacob set on his way...,”<sup>24</sup> implying that like Jacob it is time to get to work.

Now, looking at the third instance of the correspondence:

- *Kislev – Everything is foreseen:* On the 25<sup>th</sup> of *Kislev* begins Chanukah, whose candles we gaze at, but cannot use their light for doing anything (a beautiful implication that seeing something does not necessitate action...). We are also taught in Kabbalah that *Kislev* is the month of dreams, which often foresee events of the future.
- *Tevet – Yet, freedom of choice is granted:* But freedom of choice is given: Chanukah is the only holiday on the Jewish calendar that spans two months. It begins on the 25<sup>th</sup> of *Kislev* and ends on the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> of *Tevet* (depending on the length of *Kislev*). Thus, Chanukah is the holiday that truly unifies the first two parts of the *mishnah* (and the intellectual *sefirah* of wisdom and understanding, which correspond to them). Chanukah is indeed a very intellectual holiday, marking the victory of Torah over Greek philosophy and culture,<sup>25</sup> the victory of the Divine paradox – "All is foreseen yet freedom of choice is granted" – over pure human rationality (that can accept one or the other, but not both simultaneously).  
Freedom of choice, which is in the *sefirah* of understanding is particularly related to the month of *Tevet* in which the sages say, "The body enjoys the body," implying that the warmth experienced by a husband and wife together is most enjoyable in this, the coldest month of the year. In more advanced Kabbalistic models, the body (the tangible form in which the essence of a thing manifests) corresponds to the *sefirah* of understanding.<sup>26</sup> In the *Zohar*, understanding is called "the body" in relation to the *sefirah* of wisdom (which is called "the life-force").<sup>27</sup> From this correspondence, we learn a very important corollary, that freedom of choice is particularly related to the body! This is true both in God's freedom to choose his chosen people, the Jewish people, which the *Tanya* explains was a selection of the Jewish body in particular. It is also true in our freedom of choice, which is manifest particularly because we have a physical body. In other words, God's freedom of choice focuses on our physical body, and human freedom of choice begins with our spiritual body. The beginning of our freedom of choice is found in our thoughts, represented by the *sefirah* of understanding.
- *Shevat – The world is judged with goodness:* We already mentioned that "the good" refers to the Torah. There are three months in which the Torah was given, *Sivan*, *Tishrei*, and *Shevat*. How so? The Written Torah was given to Moshe Rabbeinu on the 6<sup>th</sup> of *Sivan*, which we celebrate on *Shavu'ot*. After God forgave us for the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe Rabbeinu went up again to receive a second set of tablets. He came down from the Mt. Sinai on the 10<sup>th</sup> of *Tishrei*, on *Yom Kipur*. Thus, in *Tishrei* the Written Torah was given a second time. Finally, before his passing, Moshe Rabbeinu delivered the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch, in series of speeches.

Moshe began delivering these speeches on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Shevat, 37 days<sup>28</sup> before his passing. Thus, the month of *Shevat* is the month of the giving of the Book of Deuteronomy.

- *Adar* – *And everything is according to the preponderance of action*: The well-known description of *Adar* is “From the outset of *Adar*, augment your joy.” As the sages tell us, there is no joy like the joy of a *mitzvah*, i.e., the joy of performing God’s commandments. Thus, the month of *Adar* is particularly related to action and deed. We are taught that the greatest joy of Purim, the holiday of *Adar*, is the preponderance of our giving charity, the greatest, all-inclusive deed of the Torah, on that day.

By focusing on the first words of this description, “From the outset of *Adar*—augment,” the nature of *Adar* is explained in Chassidut to simply be augmentation, or increase, or preponderance (רִיבוי)—the act of augmentation itself cultivates joy and a feeling of the heart’s expansion. This parallels the final part of Rabbi Akiva’s saying so beautifully.

So we have seen how this most central *mishnah* fills up our entire year.

## Part III

### God's Omniscience – God's Holiness

How is the contradiction between God's omniscience and our freedom of choice explained in Chassidut? The explanation centers on the concept of God's holiness. Holiness means detachment and categorical difference, i.e., that whatever is holy does not share the same reality as that which is not holy. For instance, the Torah commands us to sanctify (that is, make holy) the priest. The Torah means that the priest cannot come and go or act freely like other people. Instead, the priest should be detached, in a category to himself. This is particularly expressed in that the priest, when indeed sanctified, is allowed to eat from certain sacrifices and offerings that others are not allowed to eat. In the language of the *Zohar*, "'Holy' is an entity unto itself."<sup>29</sup>

God's omniscience originates in an aspect of His expression that remains detached, or transcendent from creation. Kabbalah and Chassidut distinguish between God's transcendent and immanent expressions. His transcendent expression is called the "light that surrounds all worlds," or simply "surrounding light." The word "light" designates that this is only an expression of God's essential being, not His being itself. The word "surrounding" is also conceptual, referring not to the physical location of this aspect of God, but to its transcendent relationship with reality.<sup>30</sup> God's immanent expression is called the "light that fills all worlds," again referring to the relationship this aspect has with reality.

Clearly, God's essential holiness and categorical detachment from reality is synonymous with the light that surrounds all worlds. When God illuminates reality with this aspect of His being, His knowledge remains detached and circumspect, leaving reality untouched. To better understand this concept, let us provide a scientific analogy. Chassidut is a strong advocate of using science to provide us with analogies with which we can better understand the Torah.

One of the central issues of modern physics is measurement and the possibility of measuring without affecting the observed entity and the outcome of the measurement. When measuring, for instance the speed of a vehicle, we do not expect the infinitesimal influence of our measuring instrument to affect the vehicle's speed. But, when measuring very small objects, like an electron, any application of external energy, even the infinitesimal amount needed to measure its speed will indeed affect the result. Interestingly, this problem has spilled over into almost every area of modern thought. Drug trials, for instance, require double-blind studies in order to abnegate the effects of doctors and patients' beliefs and the placebo effect. Game theory takes into account the effect of the observers and their knowledge of players' strategy.



In any case, modern physics has discovered that the measurement problem is not a technical one. We cannot simply subtract out the affect of the measuring apparatus from the measurement in order to obtain the correct result. It turns out that the measurement apparatus is not an objectively external observer, but is coupled in every way with what is being observed. It cannot be subtracted out, because once a measurement is introduced into an experiment, it becomes part of the experiment.<sup>31</sup>

This state of affairs reflects the inherent principles of God's light that fills all worlds. Like the measurement apparatus, this light is intrinsically bound and coupled with everything in reality. Illuminating any aspect of reality with this light is tantamount to changing it. If God were limited to knowledge gathered by His light that fills all worlds, His omniscience would indeed determine our actions. But, God's light that surrounds all worlds is categorically different and remains transcendent. If we could tap into this light (or energy field, if you like), we too would be able to observe reality in a completely objective and non-intrusive manner.<sup>32</sup> Our understanding of the universe and its physical laws would be completely different.

Naturally, a great deal of the light emanating from the Torah (in Hebrew, Torah relates to the word *orah*, אֹרֶה, meaning "light") is God's surrounding light, allowing the person meditating on its meaning to discover truths that are as yet unknowable through direct observation of reality. Nowhere is this expressed more clearly in the Torah than in the Divine sanction: "You shall be holy, for I am holy." By commanding us to be holy, the Almighty is actually granting us the power to share, to whatever extent is humanly possible, in His omniscience with which He foresees everything. The corollary of this statement is that a *tzadik*, a holy individual, like the Almighty, can see from one end of the world to the other yet, still respect, and not interfere with the freedom of choice of his contemporaries.<sup>33</sup>

## Omniscience and Chanukah

Earlier we saw that the two months spanned by Chanukah, Kislev and Tevet correspond to the first two parts of Rabbi Akiva's teaching, "Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted." Thus, Chanukah in its essence is the holiday during which we can best practice tapping into the seeming paradox of God's omniscience and our freedom of choice.

As explained, God's omniscience does not contradict our freedom of choice because His knowledge of reality is gained from His surrounding light; light that we described expresses His holiness and transcendence above reality. So it follows that Chanukah is the time of year during which we should dedicate ourselves to consciously experiencing God's surrounding light.

One of the laws regarding Chanukah candles is that they may not be used for anything; their sole purpose is that we gaze at them. After lighting the Chanukah candles each night, we say the words,

*Throughout the eight days of Chanukah, these candles are holy and we are not permitted to make use of them, but only to gaze at them....*

For this reason, after lighting the Chanukah candles, it is proper to spend at least a half an hour doing nothing but simply gazing at their light. During this time one should focus one's intent on the holy Name, **בט**, the Name representing the two-letter root of the verb "to gaze," and the idiomatic partner of the verb "to foresee."<sup>34</sup> It is easy to understand that meditating on the light of the Chanukah candles offers a glimpse (and even more than that) of God's surrounding light and of the future.<sup>35</sup>

As mentioned above, Chanukah represents the victory of Torah over Greek philosophy and culture. The most denigrated aspect of Greek culture remains to this day its determinism and even fatalism illustrated dramatically in the Greek tragedy and philosophically in the writings of Epicurus.<sup>36</sup> When describing the Creator as the Prime Mover, the Greeks were highlighting His immanent light—light that affects creation, hence the adjective "Mover"—while at the same time discounting His transcendent light. For this reason, Greek philosophy was unable to grasp the notion of the Torah being a revelation of God's transcendent light and the verity of the commandments, the ultimate expression of God's transcendence and ability to command and master creation.<sup>37</sup> In the present day, focusing on the surrounding light during Chanukah, encourages our understanding that without including the knowledge of the Torah and a recognition of the Almighty, even modern science for all its achievements is still groping in the dark and remains unable to correctly describe reality.<sup>38</sup>

### **From Holiness to Purity**

Armed with the Chassidic distinction between God's transcendent light and His immanent light, let us return to take another look at the first half of Rabbi Akiva's saying. Most translations render it as:

*Everything is foreseen,  
Yet, freedom of choice is granted.*

Indeed, the word "yet" only appears in the English rendition of the original Hebrew, but nonetheless it seems to be implied by the textual context. But, have we not just explained that omniscience does not contradict freedom of choice? Why place the implied conjunction "yet" between the two parts? The answer is that God's transcendent light and His immanent light do present a paradox, which is why deep down, omniscience and freedom of choice existing together does constitute a paradox.

Put another way, omniscience represents a state of eternity, a state without change. Freedom of choice represents the possibility of change, the complete opposite. Thus, God's transcendent light represents His eternal and unwavering nature,<sup>39</sup> while His immanent light represents His willingness to experience, as it were, change. God's immanent light is what He invests into the mundane world. It represents the Almighty's

willingness to go through a process and to take a risk in creating reality—the risk as to how things will turn out, with the “belief,” so to speak, that things will eventually turn out for the better (as God desires in creation). This is definitely a surprising way to think about God, so let us apply it to ourselves.

We said that the reason that holiness, God’s transcendent light shared by holy individuals, does not negate freedom of choice is that it does not affect reality. But, because it does not affect reality, it is also unable to influence it. An individual who is holy, but nothing else, cannot be a force of change in the world. As great as the *tzadik’s* non-altering gaze at reality is, clearly the world needs to be rectified and we, the Jewish people who are all *tzadikim*,<sup>40</sup> need to push it in a positive direction. While holiness allows a person to remain aloof from reality and unaffected by the negative in it, it also prevents him from affecting it. In order to exert a positive influence on reality, we cannot look at the world only through God’s surrounding light alone. To influence reality we need to be able to interact with it in an influential way.

The simplest definition of freedom of choice is that it is the possibility of awakening (from below) to change things. When this change is for the better freedom of choice is called “purity” (טְהוּרָה). This is based on an important teaching of the sages that describes how God encourages change, and more so change for the better:

*If one comes to defile himself, an opening is made for him. If one comes to purify himself, he is helped from Above.*<sup>41</sup>

Thus, freedom of choice when exercised to create change for the better is called purity. Indeed, in Kabbalah, the union of wisdom and understanding, of the father and mother principles, is likened to the relationship between holiness and purity.

<i>yud</i>	wisdom	holiness	Everything is foreseen
<i>hei</i>	understanding	purity	Yet, freedom of choice is given

If as Jews we remain holy and detached from reality (and therefore safe from its adverse effects), we will not be able to take an active role in shaping it. But if we engage reality without a sense of what is pure and holy, we will fall under its influence and eventually lose our way, and instead of influence will be influenced. So, we have found that the strongest exercise of freedom of choice is the choice to be purified and to purify our surroundings.

We mentioned earlier that the *Zohar* calls holiness an entity unto itself. One of the simplest meanings of this statement is that holiness does not have an opposite. True holiness is not the opposite of anything. But, purity has an opposite state, which in Hebrew is called “defilement” (טְמֵאָה). In fact, there is a verse that describes them as opposites, “Who can bring the pure out of the defiled? Not one!”<sup>42</sup> For there to be

freedom of choice there have to be opposite states from which to choose. So choice really only begins with purity.

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<sup>1</sup>. *What You Need to Know About Kabbalah*.

<sup>2</sup>. *Chagigah* 14b.

<sup>3</sup>. For instance: 1) The Torah calls the sages, the wise men of the congregation, “the eyes of the congregation” (Numbers 15:24), 2) One of the sages’ sayings is “Who is wise? He who foresees that which is about to happen” (*Tamid* 32a).

<sup>4</sup>. אִם יִסְתַּר אִישׁ בְּמִסְתָּרִים וְאֵנִי לֹא אֶרְאֶנּוּ נֶאֱמַר ה'. Note the BST’s unique explanation of this verse.

<sup>5</sup>. בּוֹחֵן בְּלִיּוֹת וְלֵב.

<sup>6</sup>. One of the clearest examples that God knows the future is from the first of Jeremiah’s prophecies: “Before I [God] formed you in the womb I have known you...”

<sup>7</sup>. In his legal work, see *Hilchot Teshuvah*, chapter 5. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, see part 3 chs. 16 and on.

<sup>8</sup>. Isaiah 55:8.

<sup>9</sup>. *Berachot* 17a, and elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup>. *Zohar* II, 186a.

<sup>11</sup>. Interestingly though, because we are presently not free of our evil inclination, in our present reality freedom of choice predicates the possibility of Divine judgment.

<sup>12</sup>. See *Zohar* III, 4a.

<sup>13</sup>. *Igeret Hakodesh* 21.

<sup>14</sup>. The *Shechinah* is in many ways the symbol for the feminine aspect of the Divine. The metaphor of its fall among other things, implies that the feminine is not able to play its proper role. This is manifest in the fallen state of physical reality all the way from the cosmic level (the light of the moon waxes and wanes) to the national (the Jewish people depend on other nations for their welfare, etc.) to the personal (man and woman are not equal).

<sup>15</sup>. In Chassidic terminology, each act that cleanses the Divine Presence is called, “unification” (יְחוּד).

<sup>16</sup>. See also Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Bei’urim Lepingrei Avot*, pp. 176-7.

<sup>17</sup>. For an example of how this method is used by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, see *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 6, *parshat Yitro*.

<sup>18</sup>. See our [website](#) for parallel to more models.

<sup>19</sup>. Note that Iyar is the second month of the year, counting from Nisan, the first month of the Hebrew calendar. *Nisan’s* sense is speech, or leadership. Thought in some respects precedes speech and leadership.

<sup>20</sup>. I Chronicles 12:33.

<sup>21</sup>. Proverbs 4:2.

<sup>22</sup>. *Sha’arei Orach*, gate 5.

<sup>23</sup>. These three instances of *Havayah* represent the three instances found in the Priestly Blessing: May God (*Havayah*) bless you and guard you. May God make His countenance shine upon you and give you grace. May God turn His countenance toward you and grant you peace (Numbers 6:24-26). These three *Havayah’s* possess 12 letters together and are known as “the Name of 12 Letters” in the Talmud and in Kabbalah. These 12 letters also permute to spell הָיָה הַיָּה וְהָיָה,

meaning, “He was, He is, and He will be,” one of the most basic meanings of God’s essential Name.

<sup>24</sup>. Genesis

<sup>25</sup>. For articles on this topic, see our [website](#).

<sup>26</sup>. This is the model whose five elements: root, soul, body, garment, and chamber, correspond to the 4 letters of *Havayah* and the tip of the *yud*. In this model, the body corresponds to the first *hei* of *Havayah*.

<sup>27</sup>. This is the subject of *Igeret Hakodesh* 20 in the *Tanya*.

<sup>28</sup>. 37 is the numerical value of “Abel” (הָבֶל), Adam’s son who was murdered by his brother, Cain.

<sup>29</sup>. *Zohar* III, 94b.

<sup>30</sup>. In fact, as explained in Chassidut, God’s light that surrounds all worlds is as universally present as is His light that fills all worlds. Moreover, God’s surrounding light is described in the verse, “For I fill the heavens and the earth” (Jeremiah 23:24). Even though the verse uses the noun “fills,” it is referring to the surrounding transcendent light, which is universally present.

<sup>31</sup>. To understand this idea fully, we recommend Brian Greene’s book, *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, particularly chapter 4.

<sup>32</sup>. Of course, the entire essence of God’s transcendent light is that it cannot be sensed, making it very difficult to imagine how it might be tapped into physically. In addition, let us add that one of the qualities of this light is that it equalizes the large and the small, not just quantitatively but qualitatively as well. In other words, it is not judgmental.

<sup>33</sup>. See the Alter Rebbe’s volume of early teachings, *Et’halech Lozhnya*, s.v. *Lo ken avdee Moshe*, (p. 1) regarding the care that a *tzadik* takes to not reveal the future.

<sup>34</sup>. The sages use the idiomatic expression, to foresee and to gaze, in an important discussion that in many ways parallels Rabbi Akiva’s teaching and our study. Let us make do with a translation of this discussion, leaving it to the reader to make the proper connections (*Chagigah* 12a):

*Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: “Ten things were created on the first day, heaven and earth, chaos and confusion, light and darkness, spirit and water, day and night...”*

*Was light created on the first day? Yet, the Torah says, “God placed them [the sun and the moon] in the firmament of the heaven... And it was evening and it was day, the fourth day” (Genesis 1:17, 19).*

*[Rav’s statement] follows the teaching of Rabbi Elazar, as Rabbi Elazar taught that with the light that God created on the first day one can foresee (and gaze) from one end of the world to the other. But, when God saw the generation of the deluge and the generation of the dispersion, and realized that their actions were wicked, He concealed it, as the verse says, “And He holds back from the wicked their light.” () And who does He keep it for? For the *tzadikim* [the holy individuals], for the future, as the Torah says, “God saw the light that it was good [in the sense of beautiful, as in Rabbi Akiva’s teaching].” A *tzadik* is “good,” as the verse says: “About the *tzadik*, say that he is good” (). When God saw that the light was in trust for the *tzadikim*, He was joyful, as the verse says, “The light for the *tzadikim* causes joy.”*

<sup>35</sup>. The numerical value of this holy (בֵּיט) Name is 21, the same as that of “I will be” (אֶהְיֶה), God’s Name denoting the future.

<sup>36</sup>. So much so that a disbeliever in the Torah is generically called an Epicurean.

<sup>37</sup>. The Ba’al Shem Tov stress that not only are the commandments an illustration of God’s transcendence and ability to exercise mastery over creation, but they are also conduits for making

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a union between God and creation possible. He taught this by focusing on the similarity between the word for “commandment” (צווי) and the word for “together” (צוותא).

<sup>38</sup>. See more in our recent article, [“Converting the Wisdom of the Nations.”](#)

<sup>39</sup>. As expressed in the verse, “For I, God, have not changed and you the children of Jacob have not ceased to be” (Malachi 3:6).

<sup>40</sup>. Isaiah 60:21.

<sup>41</sup>. *Yoma* 38b, and elsewhere.

<sup>42</sup>. Job 14:4.