

Aṭalta De-Geulah as Envisioned by Ḥiddushei HaRim

By: HESHEY ZELCER

The Verse

R. Yitzhak Meir Alter (1799–1866), in his *Ḥiddushei HaRim, Parashat Be-Midbar*,¹ has a homiletic interpretation of a Biblical verse from *Parashat Noah*. The verse reads:

בְּשָׁנָה שֶׁשׁ מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה לְחַיֵּי נֹחַ בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בְּשִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּיוֹם הַזֶּה
נִבְקָעוּ כָּל מְצִינֹת תְּהוֹם רָבָה וְאַרְבַּת הַשָּׁמַיִם נִפְתְּחוּ. (בראשית ז:יא)

D'var Torah

Ḥiddushei HaRim begins his *d'var Torah* by proclaiming he is about to say something important he would like his audience to hear—especially the *talmidei ḥakhamim*—and approve.

יש לי איזה דברים הנחוצים לאמרם, כדי שיסכימו להם השומעים, והרבה פעמים
יש דברים הנאמרים ברבים כדי שישמעו ת"ח ויסכימו להם, ויהי' הלכה כרבים.
I have something urgent to say, to gain the listeners' approval. Many
times, things are said publicly so that *talmidei ḥakhamim* will hear and
approve—and the ruling will be that of the majority.²

What is the pressing thought for which *Ḥiddushei HaRim* is seeking the approval of the masses and their leaders? He begins by quoting a passage from Zohar:

¹ ספר חידושי הרי"ם על התורה, מועדים ולקוטים, אוסף דברי תורה ומאמרים מאת כבוד קדושת
אדוננו מורנו ורבנו, רשכבה"ג שר התורה, צדיק יסוד עולם איש אלקים קדוש מרן יצחק מאיר
זצוקלה"ה מגור, לוקט וסודר ע"י נכדו יהודא לייב לוין, הוצאת "נחליאל" ירושלים תשכ"ה,
עמוד קצה.

² All translations are by the author.

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אי' בזה"ק³ שבשנת ת"ר יתפתחין תרעי דחכמתא לתתא ויתתקן עלמא לאעלא בשביעא, דבר נש דמתתקן ביומא שתיתאה מבי ערבא שמשא לאעלא בשבתא, ע"ש.

We find in the holy Zohar that in the six-hundredth year of the sixth (millennia), the gates of *hokhmah* will open above, and the wellsprings of *hokhmah* will flow below. The world will then be ready to enter the seventh millennia. Just as a person prepares himself on the sixth day as the sun sets to enter the Sabbath, so too here. There is a hint for this (*Beresheet* 7:11), "In the six-hundredth year of the life of Noah, etc., the deep fountains burst forth."⁴

The quoted Zohar says that in the year 5600, the Heavenly gates of knowledge will open above and, correspondingly, knowledge will flow below.⁵ The Julian date for the year 5600 is 1840. In 1840, *Hiddushei HaRim* was 41 years old, in the prime of his life. He then says that the words of the Zohar are surely correct:

בודאי דברי הזוה"ק כנים אשר כן הוא שיש פגימות שאין תשובה מועלת בהם והטעם שהפגימות הללו באות מהמוח ותשובה באה מהלב כמ"ש (ישעיהו ו:י) ... ולקבו יבין וישוב ויפא לו.

Surely, the words of the holy Zohar are correct for there are faults for which repentance cannot atone. The reason being, that these faults come from the mind, and repentance comes from the heart as it states (Isaiah 6:10), "the heart will understand, he will repent and he will be healed."

³ *Hiddushei HaRim* is paraphrasing a passage from Zohar. The actual Zohar text is as follows:

פרשת וירא, קי"ז ע"א. ובשית מאה שנין לשיתאה, יתפתחון תרעי דחכמתא לעילא, ומבועי דחכמתא לתתא, ויתתקן עלמא לאעלא בשביעא, כבר נש דמתתקן ביומא שתיתאה מכי ערב שמשא לאעלא בשבתא, אופ הכי נמי, וסימניך (בראשית ז יא) בשנת שש מאות שנה לחיי נח וגו', נבקעו כל מעיינות תהום רבה.

⁴ The translation follows the text of the Zohar as in the above footnote.

⁵ The Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, interprets this Zohar similarly. See: 241 נח, הוספות, כרך לה, לקוטי שיחות, כרך לה, הוספות, נח, 241: ג. ענין הנ"ל איז אויך א ביאור נוסף אויף דעם וואָס עס שטייט אין זהר (אויפן פסוק בשנת שש מאות שנה לחיי נח וגו' נבקעו כל מעיינות תהום רבה), אז "בשית מאה שנין לשיתאה יתפתחון תרעי דחכמתא לעילא ומבועי דחכמתא לתתא" — אז בשנת ת"ר לאלף הששי וועלן זיך עפענען די שערות פון חכמת התורה (חכמתא דלעילא) און אויך די מעיינות פון חכמות העולם (חכמתא ל-תתא).

וואָס מען האָט דאָך געזעהן בפועל, אז אין דעם זמן האָט זיך אָנגעפאָנגען דער גילוי (ניט נאָר געלערנט לתלמידים במקום א' — נאָר לרבים ובפרסום) פון רזין דאורייתא (תורת החסידות), אָנ-הויבנדיק פון בעש"ט וואָס זיין התגלות האָט זיך אָנגעהייבן (בשנת תצ"ד) א פאָר יאָר פאָר "שית מאה שנין לשיתאה". און אויך בנוגע צו חכמות העולם, ל-הבדיל — איז אָנהייבענדיג משנים אלו נתגלה געוואָרן נייע ענינים וואָס פריער האָט מען ניט געוואוסט פון זיי...

Hiddushei HaRim argues that there are sins of the mind for which there is no repentance. To what kind of sins is he referring? If a person, for example, lusts after someone's property it is a sin of the mind. Surely, one can repent for such a sin and gain forgiveness. What type of sin of the mind cannot be forgiven? When a person sins but believes he is doing the right thing. For example, assume a person no longer accepts a basic tenet of Judaism such as that the Torah is from Heaven. For such a sin, there is no repentance. One cannot choose to believe something he does not. If someone believes that a core concept of Judaism is false, how could he repent? Thus, a person cannot repent for such a sin of the mind.

Let us put this "sin of the mind" in context. In 1840, the Enlightenment and its Jewish counterpart, the Haskalah, were well underway. With the Enlightenment, Jews in many European countries were suddenly able to attend university. The Enlightenment also brought a sudden surge in knowledge, as people were free to learn the teachings of others and express their thoughts even when it contradicted tenets of their own religion. With their newfound freedom, many previously observant Jews started questioning their religious beliefs and many lost their faith. What hope was there for these Jews? HKB"Y, cognizant of this problem, brought down a solution into the world. What is the solution?

והקב"ה ברוב רחמיו וחסדיו הגדולים מקרב אותנו לגאולה ונפתחו תרעי דחכמתא שיוכלו לתקן גם את הפגימות הללו, אף את הפגימות שלא יוכלו לתקן עד עתה, וזהו **אתחלתא דגאולה**, ובתנאי שישוב בלב שלם ולא יחזור לכסלה עוד ובשביל זה נתן הקב"ה הרמז הזה בפ' בשנת שש מאות לחיי נח וגו' משום שאז היה החסרון והפגם בזה כנודע וזהו שנא' וארובות השמים נפתחו.

And the Holy One, with his great compassion and magnanimity, is bringing us close to Redemption and the gates of *hokhmah* were opened so that we are able to correct even the faults we could not correct until now. This is *athalta de-geulah* (the beginning of Redemption), conditional, however, that we repent with a full heart and not return to the foolishness. For this the Holy One, blessed is He, hinted at in the verse (*Beresbit* 7:11), the "six-hundredth year in the life of Noah," for then they had this defect and fault. That is what is meant by "the windows of the Heavens opened."

What was the solution for Jews not to be lost to the Enlightenment, and its new spirit of doubting and questioning religious assumptions? During *Hiddushei HaRim's* life, *hasidism* was blossoming. By 1840, under

the leadership of *Hiddushei HaRim*, Gur *hasidut* began. *Hasidut* was the antidote sent down from Heaven to counter the effects of the Enlightenment,⁶ specifically the Haskalah.⁷

A point to consider: *Hiddushei HaRim* writes that if “the people repent with a full heart,” Redemption will follow. Is he implying that if they do not repent their fate will be the same as the tragic fate suffered by the people during the Noah flood?

Summary

Putting it all together, this is how we understand *Hiddushei HaRim*’s homiletic interpretation of the aforementioned verse from Noah. בשנת שש מאות שנה, in the six-hundredth year of the sixth millennia, i.e., in the year 1840, נבקעו כל מעינות תהום רבה, all the waters below burst through and there was a great increase in scientific and other knowledge. Concurrently, וארבת השמים נפתחו, the windows of Heaven opened; *hasidism* flourished, and there was a great opportunity for spiritual renewal. If people use the opportunity to repent it will heal the negative side effects of the Enlightenment, ushering in the Messianic age. Twinning the Enlightenment with *hasidut*⁸ is *atbalta de-genulah*, the Beginning of Redemption, and it ushers in the Messianic era. ❧

⁶ A friend who read an earlier draft of this article suggested it is difficult to know with certainty what *Hiddushei HaRim* had in mind with this *d’var Torah* as he often communicated using “allusions, asides, hints, metaphors and non sequiturs.”

⁷ See R. M. M. Schneerson’s interpretation in fn. 5 above.

R. Norman Lamm would similarly propose *hasidism* as an antidote to the current malaise of Modern Orthodoxy. See for example, “Neo-Hasidism and its Discontents,” *Lehrhaus*, “Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm saw Hasidism as ‘a preferred theological grounding for the concept of Yeshiva University’ and ‘worked in multiple ways to include Hasidut as a part of the YU curriculum.’” See also Norman Lamm’s magisterial work, *The Religious Thought of Hasidim: Text and Commentary*.

⁸ In ca. 1960 R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his *The Lonely Man of Faith*,⁸ outlines the ideal Jewish person, who goes back and forth between Adam 1, Majestic Man, and Adam 2, Covenantal Man. A man, according to R. Soloveitchik, can only fulfill his destiny when he pursues the ways of the world: science, technology, medicine, engineering, etc., but also his spiritual aspect. *Hiddushei HaRim* here lays out a similar ideal. A person who is a product of the new science of the Enlightenment, an Adam 1, must use *hasidut* to solidify his spiritual aspect, his Adam 2 persona.