



SIFRA, SEFER, SIPPUR  
A Shavuot Teaching, 5781 / 2021

...וברא את עולמו בשלשה ספרים בספר ספר וספור : (ספר יצירה א: א)

[HaShem] created His universe  
with three ספרים (*sefarim*):  
ספֵּרָה (symbol) – the Torah of Bereshit  
סֵפֶר (scroll) – *the Torah of Sinai*, and  
ספִּיר (story) – the Torah of souls. [SY 1:1]

The Torah, says Sefer Yetzira, is really three in one. There's the Torah of Bereshit, the Torah of Sinai, and the Torah of souls. Our job, says the Baal Shem Tov, is to unify these three Torot with every word we speak and breath we take (as recorded in his famous letter, below):

*Mashiach informs the Baal Shem Tov: "I will appear] when the world can perform unifications and elevations as you... The BeShT then advises Reb Gershon of Kitov: ...Your way shall ever be in the presence of G-d which should never leave your consciousness.... With every word of your lips intend to make yichudim, for in every letter there are **Worlds, Souls and Divinity**, which ascend and connect and unify with each other..., and [then] unite together in true *yichud* with the Divine.<sup>1</sup>*

Let's define our terms:

**The Torah of Bereshit (ספֵּרָה):** The Zohar informs us that "HaShem looked into the Torah and created the world." The entirety of creation is a translation of the Primordial Torah into the language of symbols, whereby each object and moment expresses something that HaShem seeks to communicate to us. Reality is an ongoing revelation of HaShem's will through the (nonverbal) medium of physicality. The Baal Shem Tov refers to the *Torah of Bereshit* as the dimension called, *Worlds* (עולמות).

**The Torah of Sinai (סֵפֶר):** This is the Five Books of Moses—the living Torah that we received at Sinai and continue to study and practice until this very day. It is the Torah of ink on parchment, along with its authoritative commentaries and legal rulings. It is, however, the second tablets, the Torah of Briyah, as opposed to Atzilut. Moshe shattered the first tablets when he returned to the camp and witnessed the Golden Calf. These second tablets are the Torah of duality (permitted/forbidden, pure/impure, reward/punishment, good/evil. The first (shattered) tablets were the Torah of unity—the non-dual Torah of Atzilut that eluded our grasp. The Baal Shem Tov refers to the *Torah of Sinai* as the dimension called, *Divinity* (אלקות) because it records HaShem's explicit instructions to creation.

**The Torah of Souls (ספִּיר):** The Torah's revelation was the most profound manifestation of G-d that ever transpired on the planet. A searing revelation of Presence engraved the souls of an entire nation with the-truth-of-the-universe compressed into a single burst of light. Its impact continues to impel their generations to be seekers and servants of G-d, and will do so till the end of time.

The midrash informs us that Moshe told each person where they should stand to experience that event. Each observed the revelation from a unique distance and angle, witnessing some perspective of G-d (and truth and Torah) that no one else saw, for no

one else beheld the prophesy from quite that vantage point. That private glimpse becomes our *chelek* in Torah, our letter, so to speak, in the scroll of souls.

The Torah of Souls is the composite of life-stories—the paths taken and choices made to bring each soul's *chelek* of revelation to light. It's the sumtotal of insights pressed from the hearts of Jews striving to live with integrity to the truths we absorbed at Sinai. The Torah of Souls turns each life into a teaching tale. Each one of our lives is a *megilla* in the making.

The Torah of Souls (unlike the Torah of ink on parchment) is actually the Torah of Atzilut—the Torah of the first *luchot*, the non-dual Torah of unity. That is what burst on the scene at Sinai, on Shavuot, and engraved itself on our psyches before withdrawing back up to its root when its tablets shattered.

The Baal Shem Tov calls this dimension of reality, *souls* (נשמות), the Sefer Yetzira calls it *sippur*, for it turns each life into a holy-site of revelation. We humans are storytellers, not least of which is the tale we tell of our very own life, a saga that goes through daily tinkering. We don't realize that it's more of a myth than a history. We think it's a factual account, but really it's a story that we have constructed to explain ourselves to ourselves. There is a whole psychology called narrative therapy, that helps people construct a healthy narrative that highlights their freedom of choice and ability to change.

So the question becomes, what does it mean to create unifications between these three dimensions—these three Torot? What are our clues?

First, in the Baal Shem Tov's mystical vision, he was comforted by three practices that were revealed to him, that would enable the masses to accomplish *yichudim* rivaling his own—a prerequisite to the messianic unfolding, he was told. Though he was not permitted to share those techniques outright, he immediately spoke about uniting “*Worlds, Souls and Divinity*” (as recorded in his famous letter, included below)

Second, the Baal Shem Tov's relief came from realizing that these messianic *yichudim* did not require *tsaddikim* to fulfill them. They were simple practices (workarounds, so to speak) that would accomplish *tikunim* similar to his own, yet *these* would be available to the masses. Assuming that his teaching about “*Worlds, Souls and Divinity*” is related to these prerequisite *yichudim* (since they are mentioned in the very next sentence), one can further assume that their fulfillment must be fairly straight forward and (relatively) undemanding.

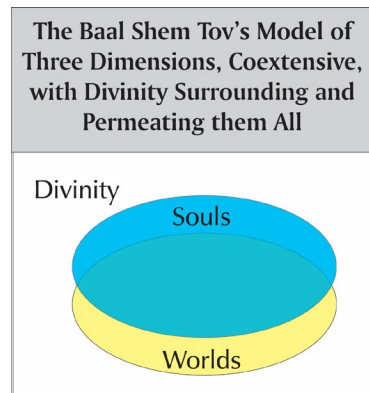
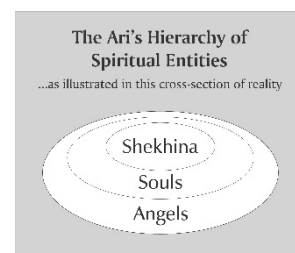
With that in mind, one could speculate, based on the Komarna's teachings excerpted in *Mekor Mayim Chayim*<sup>2</sup>, that the uniting of “*Worlds, Souls and Divinity*” could be as simple as staying consciously present with one's prayer, Torah study and, ultimately, with life. When a person engages their physical body—their vocal chords and larynx (*Worlds*)—and speaks words of Torah, liturgy or even just truth (*Divinity*)<sup>3</sup>, and stays present (with full attention) while doing so (*Neshamot*) they effect a *yichud*. They become, in that moment, a channel uniting heaven and earth, via their personhood and attention—a conduit through which heavenly light (*Divinity*) enters and enlightens both themselves

(*Neshamot*) and the world (*Worlds*). They have fulfilled the BeShT’s mysterious instruction by simply speaking truth and staying present.

The Ari’s Shaar HaYechudim is also called the Gate of Prophecy. It presents pages of very complex and esoteric *yichudim*. Anyone can read them, but only the most advanced *mekubalim* can actually do them. In part because they take years of practice, and in part because not everyone has that particular type of intelligence—called visual imagination—that can work with such complex and dynamic imagings. Similarly with the Ari’s prayer-kavvanot as arranged by R. Shalom Sharabi, where each word of a blessing unpacks into pages of precisely arranged tables of *shemot*. These are the classic *yichudim* formulated by the Ari and practiced by kabbalists for centuries.

The Baal Shem Tov introduced a softer more accessible definition of *yichud*, one that emphasizes relationship, engages the heart, doesn’t involve secrets, and is within everyone’s reach. It’s a more feminine kabbala, as opposed to the classic PaRdeS-centered *yichudim* which aim to transcend physicality, demand a wealth of esoteric knowledge and require adepts to perform them,

The Komarna points out that the Besht’s model of “*Worlds, Souls and Divinity*” is a variation on the Ari’s parallel system of “*Angels, Souls, and Shekhina*.” At first glance they seem equivalent, but there is a subtle difference between them. The Ari’s model presents the hierarchy of spiritual entities, as arranged by kabbala: Angels occupy the outermost sphere which accords them a lowly status. Souls occupy the next tier along with its intermediate status. The Shekhina, Who dwells at the core of reality, holds the light of pure oneness. Classic *yichudim* are often compared to a ladder (*sulam*) that the aspirant must climb to access the Shekhina’s rarified realms.



The Baal Shem Tov’s model does also touch on hierarchy, but its layers also intersect and there is some perspective where *each* is the highest in some regard. Whereas the Ari starts with an entity (angels), the Besht chooses a more expansive starting point, ie *Worlds*—the living breathing embodiment of Divine will, that exerts a profound influence on the *Souls* (i.e., creatures) that must compete and adapt to its patchwork of shifting ecosystems. *Worlds* here includes our multi-layered reality (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual) that comprise the dynamic backdrop of existence.<sup>4</sup>

*Souls* are the sparks that enliven all the creatures that have ever been and will ever be. Each soul is an I-Center unto itself yet it’s also a cell in the universe-encompassing Adam that includes the entire biosphere within its bounds. *Souls* serve as the cosmic “*other*” enabling Divinity to actualize the potential of relationship which, by definition, requires two for its tango and which is, arguably, the very purpose of creation.

*Divinity* is the Primal-Will-to-Good which eternally creates and sustains the universe. He/She/It fills all worlds, surrounds all worlds and drives them (second by second) toward perfection.

The *yichud* of *Worlds*, *Souls*, and *Divinity* (of *Sifra*, *Sefer*, and *Sippur*) can happen right here, right now, when a person consciously brings G-d into their study, prayer, or life-moment thereby fulfilling the first mitzvah in the Code of Jewish Law “to hold HaShem before one at all times.”<sup>5</sup> One way to do so, as elaborated by the Mishna Brura, is to bring the image or sound of HaShem’s 4-letter name into awareness thereby uniting the moment (*Worlds*) with *Divinity* (HaShem’s name) via one’s conscious intention to do so (*Souls*).<sup>6</sup> HaShem declares, “Wherever my name is mentioned there I will be.”<sup>7</sup> There are infinite ways to accomplish the Baal Shem Tov’s *yichud* for there are infinite ways to bring HaShem into the moment.

It’s the nature of an anniversary that it activates the *reshimu* of its original event. At Sinai we received the Torah of Atzilut (of Unity) into our heart, bones, cells and spaces (*Souls*). It is that experience, impressed upon our soul, that enables us to make *yichudim*—to bring *new* light, unifying light, *ohr chadash* (*Divinity*) down into the *World*. On Shavuot, if we listen in, we can glimpse the *chidush* that was (and is) our particular *yichud*.

## חג שמחה

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<sup>1</sup> On Rosh HaShanah of the year 5507 [1746 CE] I performed, by means of an oath, and elevation of soul, as known to you, and saw wondrous things I have never seen before. What I saw and learned there is impossible to convey in words, even face to face...I ascended from level to level until I entered the chamber of the Mashiach, where the Mashiach learns Torah with all the Tanaim and tzadikim and also with the seven Shepherds...I asked the Mashiach: “When will the Master come?” And he answered, “By this you shall know: When your teaching will become public and revealed in the world, and your wellsprings burst forth to the farthest extremes—that which I have taught you and you have comprehended—and they also shall be able to perform unifications and elevations as you, then all of the ‘shells’ will cease to exist, and there shall be a time of good will and salvation.”

I stood in wonder and great distress as to the length of time necessary for tis, when could this be?! But from what I learned there—three potent practices and three Holy Names, easy to learn and explain—my mind settled and I thought that possible, by means of these, men of my generation will be able to achieve levels similar to mine...But I was not given permission all my life to reveal this.... But this I may inform you and may G-d help you, your way shall ever be in the presence of G-d and never leave your consciousness in the time of your prayer and study. Every word of your lips intend to unite: for in every letter there are *Worlds*, *Souls*, and *Divinity*, and they ascend and connect and unify with each other, and afterward the letters connect and unify to become a word, and [then] unify in true unification in *Divinity*. Include your soul with them in each and every state. And all the *Worlds* unify as one and ascend to produce and infinitely great joy and pleasure, as you can understand from the joy of groom and bride in miniature and physicality, how much more so in such an exalted level as this. Surely G-d will be your aid and wherever you turn you will succeed and reach greater awareness. “Give to the wise and will become ever wiser.”

—from a letter by R. Yisrael Ba’al Shem Tov to his brother-in-law, R. Gershon of Kitov

<sup>2</sup> Baal Shem Tov on the Torah, Parshat Noach, Amud HaTefilla, Mekor Mayim Chayim ff 13.

<sup>3</sup> “HaShem your G-d is true” (Jer. 10:10); “HaShem’s seal is truth” (Yoma 69b); “There’s no truth except Torah” (TY RH 50:5).

<sup>4</sup> Kabbalistically this dimension of reality does equate with the angel: Mem-tet-tet (מט"ט) which makes it very close to the Ari’s first level of “angels.”

<sup>5</sup> SA 1:1, Rema 3; MB (there) SK: 4.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about the Mishna Brura’s teaching, see [Meditation Video Series ~ A Still Small Voice](#), #1:

<sup>7</sup> Ex. 20:24.