



The Last Letters of **לֹא תִקַּח שׁוֹחַד** Spell Intimating that Devotion to Hashem “Echad” Saves a Person from the “Shochad” of the Yetzer HaRa

The upcoming, auspicious Shabbas Kodesh, Shabbas parshas Shoftim, is the first Shabbas in the month of teshuvah—chodesh Elul. Thus, it is fitting to begin this discussion with the sacred remarks of the holy Bnei Yissaschar (Elul 1, 10). He relates the beginning of the parsha to the month of Elul. Here are the opening pesukim of the parsha (Devarim 16, 18): **”שׁוֹפְטִים וְשׁוֹטְרִים תִּתֵּן לָךְ בְּכָל שַׁעֲרֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ לִשְׁבֹּטֶיךָ וּשְׁפֹטוּ אֶת הָעָם מִשְׁפַּט צֶדֶק, לֹא תִטָּה מִשְׁפַּט לֹא תִכְיֹר פָּנִים וְלֹא תִקַּח שׁוֹחַד כִּי הַשׁוֹחַד יַעֲוֹר עֵינֵי חֲכָמִים וַיִּסְלַף דְּבָרֵי צְדִיקִים.”** Judges and officers (enforcers) shall you place at all of your entryways which Hashem, your G-d, gives you for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert judgment, you shall not display favoritism; and you shall not take a bribe, because bribery will blind the eyes of the wise and distort the words of the righteous.

Here is the vital, practical advice the Bnei Yissaschar gives us: **At the beginning of Elul, we always read the passage of “Judges and enforcers shall you place etc.,” because this is the way to begin the process of teshuvah and is its essence. The ba'al teshuvah must place a judge and enforcer at all of these entrance points. This refers to all of the senses; they are gateways into a person given to him by the Creator, blessed is His name, to function with. This includes the eyes, the ears, the nose, the mouth, and the sexual organ. Each of these points must be**

monitored intelligently to judge what each sense should be used for and what it should avoid.

An enforcer punishes the transgressor. For instance, if a person uses his eyes to look at something that is prohibited or speaks with his mouth that which Hashem does not approve of, he should impose a penalty upon himself—such as giving money to tzedakah or subjecting himself to a form of physical suffering such as a fast. This was the practice of the disciples of the Ramak, z”l, and it is an essential part of teshuvah.

We will now introduce a pertinent passage from the Midrash (D.R. 5, 5) related to the opening passage of the parsha: **Rabbi Eliezer says: In a place where there is “din” (judging) there is no “din”; and in a place where there is no “din,” there is “din.”** (These statements seem to be contradictory.) **Instead, what Rabbi Eliezer actually said is: If judgment is made below, judgment is not made above; and if judgment is not made below, judgment is made above.**

If we combine these messages, it is evident that the Midrash is hinting to the wonderful opportunity HKB”H provides us with. During the month of Elul, we have the opportunity to perform teshuvah before all of creation is judged on the Day of Judgment—Rosh HaShanah. By exacting judgment below during the month of Elul through sincere teshuvah and accepting

our due punishment and giving tzedakah, the judgment above on Rosh HaShanah will be replaced; instead, HKB"H will treat us with "rachamim"—divine mercy and compassion.

The Yetzer HaRa Blinds a Person from Recognizing His Transgressions

This explains beautifully the juxtaposition of the admonition: **"You shall not take a bribe, because bribery will blind the eyes of the wise and distort the words of the righteous."** Undoubtedly, this is also intimately related and crucial to the teshuvah of chodesh Elul. Here is the commentary of the esteemed Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Riminov, zy"a, in the sefer Ilana D'Chayei on this passuk: **"You shall not take a bribe"—even words of persuasion. For, it is the way of the yetzer to bribe a person by telling him, "You are a tzaddik; you engage in Torah and tefilah." Hence, the Torah warns you not to be bribed (persuaded) by the yetzer hara; do not listen to anything it says. This form of bribery can blind even those who were wise in the teachings of the Torah—if they even listened to it once. This is the tactic of the yetzer hara. "And it distorts the words of tzaddikim"—to disregard even the words of the "tochachos," by convincing a person that he is a tzaddik and does not need to heed any of this.**

We can now appreciate how this admonition is intimately related to the month of teshuvah. During chodesh Elul, every Jew must open his eyes and view his deeds of the past year clearly and honestly. Were they good or bad? Did they comply with the guidelines of the Torah or perhaps, chas v'shalom, were they contrary to the will of Hashem and His Torah? So, although this admonition applies at all times, it is especially relevant during the month of Elul. It is imperative that **we not be bribed** by the yetzer hara, who tries to convince us that we are tzaddikim. For, **its bribery blinds even chachamim**, so that they will not discern which of their deeds were negative and require teshuvah. It

will distort the words of the tzaddikim who rebuke the people of Yisrael convincing us that their rebukes are unnecessary.

The Final Letters of וְלֹא תִקַּח שוּחָד Are אַחֲד

Since it is the nature of Torah to be elucidated from seventy different perspectives, I would like to delve into the wonderful connection between the "lo ta'aseh" of **"וְלֹא תִקַּח שוּחָד"** and the month of Elul. We find that the Yismach Moshe (Mishpatim) brings down a fabulous "remez" in the name of our master, the Arizal, in relation to the passuk (Iyov 14, 4): **"מִי יִתֵּן טָהוֹר מִטְמֵא לֹא אֶחָד"**—**who can produce purity from impurity? No one!** He refers to a teaching in the Mechilta (Mishpatim 20) that any judge who takes a bribe does not die until he purifies the impure and pronounces the pure impure. Then he quotes a statement by our blessed Rabbis in the Gemara (Kesubos 105b) that the word **"shochad" (bribe)** signifies that it is something that makes the donor and the recipient **"chad" (one)**—i.e., it unites both parties. Based on this, the Arizal explains that although the final letters of the words **"וְלֹא תִקַּח שוּחָד"** spell **אַחֲד**; nevertheless, one who takes a bribe deletes the word **"לֹא"** from this phrase; then the final letters of the two remaining words only spell **אֶחָד**. As such, the passuk in Iyov is saying that someone who purifies something or someone that is impure is someone who is not connected with the **One**, which is evident from the fact that he accepted a bribe.

It is worth noting that the source for this "remez" is actually from the Zohar hakadosh (Raiya Mehemna, Mishpatim, 117b) on the passuk (Shemos 23, 7): **"מִדְּבַר שָׁקֶר תִּרְחֹק וְנָקִי וְצַדִּיק אֵל תִּהְרֹג וְגו'"**—**distance yourself from anything false; do not kill one who is innocent or who is righteous etc. Both parties in a lawsuit must be treated equally; it should not be said that there was any bias or favoritism. The Torah teaches that Hashem does not show favoritism and does not take bribes. A judge must emulate the "echad"—Hashem—as alluded to by the last letters of וְלֹא יִקַּח**

שׁוֹחֵד—he must refrain from accepting bribes. He must treat both litigants equally and not sway the verdict more to one of them.

From this, we can deduce that our sacred duty during the month of teshuvah is to cling to Hashem, so as not to fall into the trap of the yetzer hara. For, it will try to bribe us and convince us that we do not need to do much teshuvah, since we study Torah and serve Hashem. On the contrary, we must recognize beyond a shadow of a doubt that we have sinned and must make amends during the month of Elul for what we have done wrong.

This explains fantastically the famous “remez” associated with the name Elul that comes from the commentary of the Rokeiach on Shir HaShirim. The passuk says (Shir HaShirim 6, 3): “אֲנִי לְדוּדִי וְדוּדִי לִי”—**I am devoted to my beloved, and my beloved is devoted to me.** The first letters spell אלו"ל. In keeping with this discussion, this implies that during the month of Elul, every Jew must be devoted to Hashem. That is the only way to overcome and thwart the yetzer hara, who attempts to bribe us with its duplicity and lies. It wants us to believe that we are consummate tzaddikim and do not need to perform teshuvah. Instead, we must return and be devoted to our beloved; as a result, HKB”H will grant us abundant material and spiritual good.

Yaakov Avinu Snatched the Month of Elul from Eisav HaRasha

Based on this precious introduction from the Raiya Mehemna in the Zohar hakadosh—that the only way to overcome the yetzer hara, who distorts the truth and blinds Jews with its bribes, is by clinging to Hashem “**echad**”—I would like to present to our royal audience a fascinating fact about chodesh Elul.

We will begin with to illuminate the matter by introducing what the Bnei Yissaschar (Tamuz-Av 1, 6) brings down in the name of the Megaleh Amukos on Vaeschanan (107) concerning the way the months of

the year were divided up between Yaakov and Eisav. We learn from the Zohar hakadosh (Yisro 78b) that Yaakov Avinu took for his sacred portion the three months of **Nissan, Iyar, and Sivan**. Hence, Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim in Nissan; they were purified of all their spiritual impurities during the days of the Sefirah preceding Matan Torah in Iyar; they received the Torah on Har Sinai in Sivan.

Correspondingly, Eisav took for his domain of tumah the three months of **Tamuz, Av, and Elul**. Eisav was elated that the month of Elul fell to him, since it would enable him to prevent Yisrael from performing teshuvah to Hashem prior to the judgment of Rosh HaShanah. This motivated Yaakov Avinu to employ all sorts of strategies to take control of the month of Elul from Eisav. Thus, Yisrael would be able to perform proper teshuvah during this vital month and, as a result, would be absolved of any guilt on Rosh HaShanah. This left Eisav with only the two months of Tamuz and Av—the months during which the two Batei HaMikdash were destroyed.

The Tosafists Teach that Yitzchak’s Eyes Were Blinded by the Bribery of Eisav HaRasha

To explain how Yaakov Avinu succeeded in his holy quest to extract the month of Elul from Eisav’s grip, we will refer to the episode chronicled in parshas Toldos. When Yitzchak Avinu initially intended to bestow his berachos upon Eisav, it says (Bereishis 27, 1): “וַיְהִי כִּי זָקֵן: **וַיִּצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶיךָ עֵינָיו מֵרָאִת וַיִּקְרָא אֶת עֵשָׂו בְּנוֹ הַגָּדוֹל**—**and it was when Yitzchak had grown old, his eyesight became poor; he summoned Eisav, his older son.**

In Da’at Zekeinim, the Tosafists teach us something incredible. The reason Yitzchak’s eyesight became poor was because he loved Eisav so much that he was blinded by his deceptive remarks. And as per our current discussion: **Bribes blind us to the truth.** In a similar vein, the Ba’al HaTurim writes (Bereishis 27, 1) based on the Midrash Tanchuma (Toldos 8): **Why did Yitzchak’s**

eyesight deteriorate? Because he gazed upon the image of Eisav HaRasha. Additionally, because he (Eisav) would bring what he had hunted and feed him (Yitzchak), and it is written (Shemos 23, 8): “For the bribe will blind those who can see clearly.”

I am astonished and flabbergasted! It seems inconceivable that Yitzchak Avinu—who was purified and sanctified on the mizbeiach during the Akeidah—could be bribed so easily by Eisav—by his deceptive remarks and the food he fed his father from his hunting. As it is written (Bereishis 25, 28): **“וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת עֵשָׂו”**—**Yitzchak loved Eisav for trapping was in his mouth.** As a consequence of Eisav’s bribery, Yitzchak’s eyesight deteriorated, in keeping with the notion of: **“כִּי הַשּׁוֹחֵד יַעֲוֶר עֵינֵי חַכְמַיִם”**.

To explain the matter further, it is well-known that Yitzchak Avinu epitomized the midah of “din” and “gevurah.” Yaakov Avinu attests to this by saying (ibid. 31, 42): **“אֱלֹקֵי אָבִי אֱלֹקֵי אַבְרָהָם וְיִצְחָק”**—**the G-d of my father—the G-d of Avraham and the Dread (Fear) of Yitzchak.** Furthermore, we know that the ministering angel of Eisav is the yetzer hara who blinds people so that they do not recognize their sins and iniquities. Therefore, HKB”H arranged for Eisav to bribe Yitzchak, so that he would lose his eyesight and ability to discern the truth. The Gemara (Shabbas 89b) teaches us that because of this, at the time of the future geulah, Yitzchak Avinu will be the only one of the Avos who will advocate on behalf of Yisrael. He will challenge HKB”H and say: **“פִּלְגָא עָלֵי וּפִלְגָא עָלֶיךָ”**—**half should be on me and half on You.** After all, he knows full-well the power of Eisav’s ministering angel to blind Yisrael from being cognizant of their wrongdoings.

Rivkah Imeinu Chose Yaakov Avinu to Expose Eisav’s Duplicity

Continuing along this path, we will now explain why Rivkah Imeinu urged Yaakov Avinu to enter his father Yitzchak’s tent to receive the berachos in lieu of Eisav

HaRasha. We have learned in the Gemara (Pesachim 56a): **“בִּיקֶשׁ יַעֲקֹב לְגִלּוֹת לְבָנָיו קֶץ הַיָּמִין וְנִסְתַּלְקָה מִמֶּנּוּ שְׂכִינָה, אָמַר: שְׂמָא חָס וְשְׁלֹמֹה יֵשׁ בְּמִטָּתִּי פֶסוּל, כְּאִבְרָהָם שִׁינָא מִמֶּנּוּ יִשְׁמַעֲאֵל וְאַבִּי יִצְחָק שִׁינָא מִמֶּנּוּ עָשׂוּ. אָמְרוּ לוֹ בָּנָיו, שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה’ אֱלֹקֵינוּ ה’ אֶחָד, יָאָקֹב אָמְרוּ כִשֶּׁם שֶׁאִין בְּלִבְךָ אֱלֹה אֶחָד, כִּךְ אִין בְּלִבְנוּ אֱלֹה אֶחָד.”** Yaakov wished to reveal secrets pertaining to the final geulah to his sons; however, the Shechinah abandoned him, and he was deprived of divine inspiration. This led him to suspect that one of his sons might be unworthy; they reassured him unanimously with the response **“שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה’ אֱלֹקֵינוּ ה’ אֶחָד”**—communicating the fact that just as he worshipped but one master, so, too, did they. To this, Yaakov Avinu replied, **“בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ, לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד”**.

In Gur Aryeh, parshas Vayeitzei (Bereishis 28, 11), the Maharal of Prague explains that Yaakov Avinu with the twelve shevatim he fathered were the “merkavah”—chariot—for HKB”H referred to as **אח”ד**. The letter **“chet,”** with a gematria of eight, represents the eight sons of the matriarchs, Rachel and Leah. The letter **“dalet,”** with a gematria of four, represents the four sons of the maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah. Yaakov himself, their father, who imparted his kedushah to them is represented by the letter **“aleph.”** Altogether, they form the word **אח”ד**. Hence, when Yaakov asked his sons if perchance, chas v’shalom, any of them were unworthy to be part of the holy chariot, they replied in unison: **“שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה’ אֱלֹקֵינוּ ה’ אֶחָד”**—**just as there is only אח”ד (One) in your heart, so, too, there is only אח”ד (One) in our heart.** We are devoted to you and the kedushah you have inculcated in us to be the “merkavah” to HKB”H, the **אח”ד**.

This explains fantastically the wisdom and perception of Rivkah Imeinu. She sent Yaakov to receive the berachos from his father Yitzchak in place of Eisav. For, she perceived via “ruach hakodesh” that he was destined to establish twelve shevatim, who together with him would be the “merkavah” for HKB”H, the **אח”ד**. Thus, it was guaranteed that the dictum **לֹא תִקַּח שׁוֹחֵד**, whose final letters are **אח”ד**, would be upheld by

him. As the Raiya Mehemna teaches, this means that in order to be spared from the lies and bribes of the yetzer hara, it is necessary to devote oneself to Hashem **“echad.”** Do not be deceived into believing that you are a tzaddik and do not need to make amends or do teshuvah for any wrongdoings. Therefore, it was fitting for Yaakov specifically to be the one to abolish the klipah of Eisav, who deceived his father with verbal bribes and trappings that blinded him to the truth.

The Rationale for Covering the Eyes when Reciting Krias Shema

I would like to propose a rationale for the established Jewish minhag of covering one's eyes when reciting the first passuk of Krias Shema (Devarim 6, 4): **“שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד”**. Here is how it is mentioned in the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 61, 4): **It is customary for people to place their hands over their faces when reciting the first passuk, so one should not look at anything else that may prevent him from concentrating.**

We can add another practical reason for this practice based on a teaching in the Gemara (A.Z. 20b): **“אמרו עליו: על מלאך המות שכולו מלא עינים, בשעת פטירתו של חולה עומד מעל מראשותיו וחרבו שלופה בידו וטיפה של מרה תלויה בו, כיון שחולה רואה אותו מזדעזע ופותח פיו וזורקה לתוך פיו, ממנה מת ממונה מסריח. They said of the Malach HaMavet that he is full of eyes. When an infirmed person is dying, it stands above his head, with its unsheathed sword in its hand, and a drop of poison at its tip. As soon as the sick person sees it, he shudders and opens his mouth; it (the Malach HaMavet) promptly throws the drop into his mouth. From it he dies; from it he rots; from it his face becomes sallow.** What is the significance of the description of the Malach HaMavet—as it appears to a person about to die—as **“full of eyes”**?

We can suggest an explanation In keeping with our current discussion. We have learned that it is the strategy of the yetzer hara to bribe a person and

convince him that it is okay to pursue that which his heart desires. In essence, this means that a person can no longer discern the truth clearly with his mind's eye. In a sense, his eyes have been taken away from him. Thus, when the Malach HaMavet comes to take a person's neshamah, it is **“full of eyes”**—namely, the eyes it took from that person throughout his life.

I would now like to propose a novel reason for covering one's eyes when reciting the first passuk of Krias Shema. We are demonstrating that in the merit of connecting with HKB”H, the **“Echad,”** via the mitzvah of Krias Shema, our eyes are protected from the yetzer hara; it cannot blind them or steal them from us. Thus, we are immune to the reality of **“כי השוחד יעור עיני חכמים”**.

The Mystery of Shabbas

It now gives me immense pleasure to explain a statement in the Zohar hakadosh (Terumah 135a) that many recite on the night of Shabbas Kodesh: **“רזא דשבת—דשבת איהי שבת דאתאחדת ברזא דאחד”** **the mystery of Shabbas is that on Shabbas everything is united in the mystery of Echad (Oneness).** In the translation of Onkelos, the letter **“aleph”** is omitted from the word **אח** in the passuk of Shema Yisrael; it is translated simply as **“חד”**. To compensate for this deficiency, the **“aleph”** is added to the word **“שבת”**, which he always translates as **“שבתא”**. Thus, the statement **“רזא דשבת דשבת איהי שבת דאתאחדת ברזא דאחד”** can be interpreted to mean that by means of Shabbas, we rectify the letter **“aleph”** omitted from the word **אח**.

At first glance, this explanation is puzzling. What is the connection between Shabbas and the **“echad”** in Krias Shema? Based on our current discussion, however, we can suggest an answer. During the six weekdays, the yetzer hara bribes people and prevents them from seeing with their mind's eye the right thing to do. On Shabbas Kodesh, however, a Jew is granted a **“neshamah yeteirah,”** which imparts extra kedushah to his intellect. This is evident from the remark HKB”H

made to Moshe Rabeinu (Shemos 31, 13): **וְאַתָּה דָּבַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אַךְ אֵת שַׁבָּתוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ כִּי אוֹת הִיא בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם לְדוֹרוֹתֵיכֶם לְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי ה' מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם**—and you, speak to Bnei Yisrael, saying: “Just observe My Shabbasos, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I am Hashem, Who sanctifies you.”

Clearly, the purpose of human intelligence is to differentiate between good and evil. In the words of the Yerushalmi: **אִם אֵין דַּעַת הַבְּדִלָה מִנֵּין**—if there is no knowledge (intelligence), how can there be **“havdalah”** (differentiation)?! By means of knowledge and intelligence we are able to connect with the **“Echad”** of the world rather than being led astray by the duplicitous, conniving yetzer hara. Furthermore, we know that Shabbas Kodesh is the heritage of Yaakov Avinu, who instituted the mitzvah of Krias Shema on behalf of Yisrael, so that we could be devoted and attached to Hashem, our G-d, **“Hashem echad.”** In this manner, we avoid falling into the trap of the yetzer and being blinded by its bribery.

This illuminates for us the statement in the Zohar hakadosh: **The mystery of Shabbas is that on Shabbas everything is united in the mystery of Echad; as we have explained, this is the mystery (concealed meaning) of “Hashem is echad and His name is Echad.”** Let us elaborate. Since we are prohibited from doing work on Shabbas, we are able to

dedicate ourselves to Hashem **Echad**. This explains the conclusion of the statement in the Zohar marvelously: **As we have explained, this is the mystery** (concealed meaning) **of “Hashem is echad and His name is Echad.”** The secret and deeper significance of Krias Shema is that with this declaration, we connect with HKB”H: **“שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֵלֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד”**.

It should now be clear to us why it was specifically Yaakov Avinu who snatched the month of Elul away from Eisav HaRasha—even though it rightfully belonged to him. After all, the ministering angel of Eisav and the yetzer hara are one and the same. It convinces a Jew with its bribes that he is a consummate tzaddik and does need to perform teshuvah during the month of Elul. As we have learned, Yaakov Avinu and the twelve shevatim—the foundation of the people of Yisrael—are the **“merkavah”** for HKB”H, Who is **Echad**. Therefore, it is specifically Yaakov Avinu who is best equipped to defeat the klipah of Eisav—the yetzer hara that convinces a Jew with its bribes that he is a tzaddik. In the merit of Yaakov Avinu, who took possession of chodesh Elul, Jews are able to see clearly with their eyes—to recognize their sins and wrongdoings—so that they may perform complete, thorough teshuvah in the month of Elul. By doing so, they will ameliorate the **“din”** of Rosh HaShanah and be granted a **“kesivah va’chasimah tova”** and a good year blessed with every berachah!

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