



# What Makes Us Jewish?

Judaism is expressed by what we do and what we are—our actions and our existence. Every Jew has a holy inner core that can never be tainted. We have bechirah (“free-choice”) in whatever we do, but not in who we are. We can choose whether or not we will put on tefillin, recite berachos, and so on, but we can’t choose whether or not to be a Jew. Once you are born a Jew, it stays with you for the rest of your life.

Each of us possess kol (“voice”) and dibbur (“speech”). Kol refers to the internal part of us that always remains pure. This is analogous to a diamond that may be covered up with lots of dirt, but its inner core is always a diamond. We refer to this when we say neshama shenasata bi tehorah he (“the neshama which You [Hashem] put inside us, is pure”). It is impossible to actually corrupt that holy/pure part of ourselves. We can only cover it up with layers of dirt.

The concept of invincible neshama originates with the avos (“forefathers”). It says about Avraham (Nechemia 9:8), u’matzasa es levavo (“and You [Hashem] found his heart”)—the lev (“heart”) refers to something internal. Yitzchak was bound at the akeida, thus creating an internal connection between himself and Hashem. And finally, about Yaakov, Yitzchak said (Bereishis 27:22) hakol kol Yaakov (“the voice is the voice of Yaakov”), and we already mentioned before that kol is internal. The avos put this internal bond into our genes.

The idea of existence and action is a theme found throughout Torah:

1) For example, the duality of existence and action can be seen in how Anti-Semitism rears its ugly head. Yavan (the Hellinist Greek of Seleucid Syria) opposed performing positive actions; in other words, they didn’t want the Jews to perform mitzvos. In contrast, Amaleik opposed our existence, as they wanted to totally annihilate us (as we see in the story of Purim). On Purim, we have a custom to drink—(Eruvin 65a) Nichnas yayin yatza sod (“when wine goes in, the secret comes out”)—as it is on Purim when the Jewish people celebrate their continued existence in the face of opposition. On Purim, we celebrate by indulging in physical pleasures—drinking, mishloach manos and the like—because Haman wanted to kill us physically. Drinking on Purim reflects the existence aspect. It serves to remind a Jew even if he is drunk and his mental faculties are not properly functioning, he still remains a member of the chosen nation. This is in contrast to Chanuka, when the Yevanim wanted to

destroy our spirituality. They tried to get us to stop performing good actions, so we celebrate Chanuka through hallel (“praise”) and hodaah (“thanksgiving”), which are not tangible actions, but rather abstract verbalizations.

2) We wear Tefillin (“phylacteries”) worn on our head and our arms. The shel rosh (“of the head”) symbolizes existence/being, as we say in shema about the shel rosh, (Devarim 6:8) v’hayu l’totafos bein einecha (“they shall be as totafos between your eyes”). This phraseology of “shall be” focuses on one’s state of existence. The first part of this pasuk, U’kshartem le’os al yadecha (“you shall tie them as a sign on your arm”), refers to the shel yad (“of the arm”) and is expressed as an act of doing (“tying”). Moreover, the bracha recited on the shel rosh is al mitzvas tefillin (“...about the mitzva of tefillin”), which focuses on the essence of the commandment and its existence. In contrast, the bracha on the shel yad is l’haniach tefillin (“... to put on tefillin”), which focuses on the action of putting on tefillin. Because the shel rosh represents the core

essence/existence as opposed to the more external action, it has more kedusha (Menachos 34b, Shulchan Aruch 42:1. See Berachos 60b, Tosafos).

3) Chazal (Shemos 12:6, Rashi, 12:26) tell us that in order to merit being redeemed from Mitzrayim, Hashem gave us two mitzvos—dam Pesach (the blood of the Paschal Offering) and dam milah (the blood of circumcision). Dam Pesach reflects the idea of action, as it is referred to as avoda (“ritual worship”). Dam milah, on the other hand, represents the concept of existence, as it is the source of existence.

Pesach is the time we were formed as a nation, as it says (Shemos 6:7) v’lakachti eschem li l’am (“and I [Hashem] will take you for Myself as a nation”). The forty years that the Jews spent in the midbar represent the forty days of a fetus’ gestation, which leads to the formation of a v’lad (fetus). In fact, the word v’lad in gematria equals 40! Chazal tell us that the Jews were like an ubar—a fetus in its mother’s stomach. Just like an unborn baby does not yet have the ability to perform any actions rather it just exists, similarly this was the state of being of the Jewish Nation in its formative years before they would actually enter the holy land.

The pasuk that says (Mishlei 1:8) shema bni mussar avicha v’al titosh toras imecha (“hear, my child, the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother”) teaches us that the approach to following one’s “father” is active—“listen.” On the

flip side, when it comes to following one’s mother, the approach is passive—“do not stray.” This is because women are the ones who have a special ability to keep people on the right path, all one has to do is not stray from her advice/directives. We see this idea in several places:

1. Rashi says on the pasuk of (Bereishis 2:18) lo tov heyos h’adam l’vado (“it is not good for man to be alone”) that the downside of having Adam alone is that others might say that since man is unparalleled in all of creation, he is a god alongside Hashem (chas v’shalom). In order to avoid people making that sort of mistake, Hashem created for Chava to show that Adam has a female counterpart and is not to be understood as alongside Hashem. From this example, we see that this trait is inherent in a woman since we see it in the creation of Chava (and not that she did anything active).

2. Avraham’s wife Sarah was the person who decided that Hagar and Yishmael should be sent away so that Yitzchak would not be negatively influenced by them (Bereishis 21:10). Similarly, Rivka was the one who ensured that Yaakov would receive Yitzchak’s berachos instead of Eisav (Bereishis 27).

3. Chazal tells us that it was in the merit of the righteous Jewish women that the Jewish People were saved from their exile to Mitzrayim (See Shemos 38:8, Rashi).

The theme of passive existence is seen in relation to Pesach. It was on Pesach that we were taken out of Mitzrayim, even though we did not deserve because we had fallen to the 49th level of impurity.

On the seder night, we say kulanu mesubin (“we all recline”), essentially we declare our passivity, reassured knowing that it all comes from Hashem.

In general, one must first initiate in some way in order to be deserving of Hashem’s help, but on Pesach night, Hashem initiates. The word Pesach means to “skip over”—we skip over the concept of (Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:2) pischu li pesach... (If we make an opening of teshuva as small as the point of a needle, Hashem will open it much wider.). Now we can understand (Shemos 12:23) u’pasach Hashem al hapasach (“Hashem skipped over the entrance”) concept pischu li pesach shel machat (Butzina D’nehora on Shemos 12:23).

On Pesach—the Yom Tov so closely connected to the idea of existence—that the number four is seen so clearly. How many Imahos do we have? Four. The eim (“mother”) ensures our existence as a Jew

## Rabbi Yehoshua Alt

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