

## The Month of Iyar: Rectifying the Sense of Thought

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### Introduction

Whereas the month of Nissan is about physical freedom, the month of Iyar is about integrating this freedom into the inner chambers of our being: Our inner thought. Our thoughts have the power to lift us up or drag us down; they have the power to energize us or deplete us, to inspire us to greater accomplishments or to make those accomplishments impossible. When I first came to Teshuva and embraced the Torah lifestyle 34 years ago, I found it relatively easy to keep the external mitzvot such as adjusting my wardrobe including the necklines. What I found much harder was working on changing my thought patterns. Our thoughts and attitudes are very deeply ingrained and it seems nearly impossible to free ourselves from negative thoughts and judgments of ourselves and others that we may have been conditioned to think since early childhood. I was once at an event with both of my sisters and I happened to say something mildly derogatory to one of my sisters about the other sister. I immediately corrected myself and said, "I'm sorry I shouldn't have said this." My wise little sister remarked, "You shouldn't even have thought this." What she said stayed with me and I realized that in order to truly rectify speech, (the sense of the month of Nissan) we really need to rectify our innermost thoughts (the sense of the month of Iyar). Just as a garden hose with a permanent kink eventually will burst, and water will gush out, likewise, we cannot keep our negative thoughts from surfacing in the long run. The rectification of thought, the focal point of our introspective service to Hashem during the month of Iyar, follows directly upon the spiritual work engaged in during Nissan, the rectification of the realm of speech.

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### Purifying our Thoughts

After purifying the most direct expression of the heart, the act of speech, we are enabled to refine ourselves on the more subtle plane of thought and, through this purification process, become a fitting vessel for the main event in the month that follows – the receiving of the Torah. During every day of the month of Iyar we have a special mitzvah to count the Omer, as preparation for the receiving of the Torah on Shavuot, the fiftieth day of the Omer. The main spiritual work of the mitzvah of counting the Omer, in which each day of this month participates, is renewing our dedication to truthfulness and to the purification of our thought. We mention this central theme in the prayer we say upon counting the Omer. "...That we may be cleansed from the husks that obscure our essence and be purified from our un-cleanliness."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sidur Tefila, Seder Sfirat HaOmer.

## Imbuing our Actions with Pure Intention

In order to perfect our external actions, we need to imbue all of them with positive feelings and thought. When we do something begrudgingly it affects the quality of our deed, and it's sometimes preferable not to do whatever we are being asked, or we think we ought to do unless we are able to do it with our full heart. An act without inner intention is like a body without soul.<sup>2</sup> There is a great dispute whether mitzvot need intention or not.<sup>3</sup> According to one view someone who performed a mitzvah without intention it is considered as if he didn't perform the mitzvah at all. The importance of intent has even a halachic (Jewish law) application. When it comes to *tefila* (prayer) there is a unanimous consent that prayer needs intention.<sup>4</sup> For this reason it is permitted to pray in whatever language one can understand.<sup>5</sup>

## Practical Guidelines for Letting Go of Negative Thoughts

While we may not act or speak at all times, the mind is constantly busy, and not a moment goes by without thinking all kinds of thought. Therefore it's much harder to ensure that all our thoughts are always good and positive. Negative thoughts drain our energy and keep us from being in the present moment. The more we give in to negative thoughts, the stronger they become. It's like a small ball rolling along the ground, and as it rolls, it becomes bigger and faster. So how do we control negative thoughts which keep popping up, as it states, "No person is saved from thoughts of sin."<sup>6</sup> One interesting principle that may be helpful to know is that the mind can only think one thought at the time. Therefore, the trick is to always have positive thoughts, and affirmations at hand to replace the negative thoughts. For example, when I, at times, find it difficult to fall asleep due to anxious thoughts, I try to meditate on sending light to different people. This meditative practice can replace the negative thoughts and relax the mind. Another important principle to keep in mind is that while we are not in control over the initial thought that pops into our mind, we are certainly responsible for our response, whether we want to feed into that thought. This is why we are directed in the last paragraph of the *shema*, "Do not go after your heart and eyes after which you go astray."<sup>7</sup> The Torah mentions "Don't stray after them," as they are passing through your mind. Let them go. A third way to combat negativity is through positive affirmation. In my spiritual healing practice I often give my clients positive affirmations to repeat several times a day to help them overcome negativity and fear. For example if a person has a low self-image I may give her the following affirmation: "I chose to believe that I am a good person I deserve to receive love and respect." Other ways to overcome negativity may be to consciously smile, to sing, to reframe negative words such as "terrible," "upsetting" etc. with terms such as "challenging," and to focus on things we can be thankful for. When we truly desire [to banish negative thoughts and feelings] and make a concerted effort to do so, we will be successful. This is in accordance with the ruling of our Sages, of blessed memory: "If you strive, you will succeed."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Arizal, *Halikutim, Parashat Ekev* 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, Iruvin* 95b.

<sup>4</sup> *Rambam, Hilchot Tefilah v'nesiat Kapaim* 1:15, *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 101.

<sup>6</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batrah* 164b.

<sup>7</sup> *Bamidbar* 15:39.

<sup>8</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, Megillah* 6b; *Igros Kodesh*, Vol. VIII, p. 341.



## The Spiritual Attributes of Iyar

The spiritual attributes of the month of Iyar are all connected with rectifying our thoughts which implies contemplation and introspection.

המליך אות ו' בהרהור וקשר לו כתר וצרפן זה בזה וצר בהם שור בעולם, ואייר בשנה, וכוליא ימינית בנפש  
זכר ונקוה: (ספר יצירה ה, ז)

He made the letter *vav* king over thought and He tied a crown to it and He combined one with another and with them; He formed Taurus in the Universe, Iyar in the Year, and the right kidney in the Soul, male and female (*Sefer Yetzirah* 5:7).

The organ of this month is connected with rectification of thought as the kidneys are the source of our spontaneous thoughts. The right kidney advises constructive thought, and the left, evil thought. Our sages say, "The kidneys give advice."<sup>9</sup> In particular, the right kidney relates to spiritual advice or introspection. The kidneys act similarly to the 'conscience,' as it states, "*I will bless Hashem who advised me, even by night my kidneys chastise me.*"<sup>10</sup> This refers to the "*chesbon nefesh*" (soul-accountancy) which is a way to rectify our thoughts during the month of **Iyar**. The astrological sign, Taurus, in Hebrew שׁוֹר/*shor* also means to look or observe. **Iyar** is the month of introspection for the sake of self-improvement. The bull symbolizes perceptive discriminatory knowledge. As it states, "*The bull knows its master, the mule the stall of its master, Israel did not know, my people did not contemplate.*"<sup>11</sup> The letter of the month, the connecting *vav* helps us organize our thoughts, to see the full true picture, which may relieve negative narrow-minded thoughts.

### **Vav** -- The Linking Letter

Iyar is sandwiched in between Nissan, the host month of Pesach, which marks the beginning of a new journey, and movement from constraints to greater freedom and self-expression, culminating in the receiving of the Torah during the holiday of Shavuot hosted in the next month of Sivan. Iyar is the connector, giving us the opportunity for the healing and the emotional integration that enables us to not only open up, but also to express ourselves in new ways. The Hebrew letter *vav* is a connecting letter that means "and." The *vav* is a link. It's straight lined shape also supports this notion. The month of **Iyar** links together the two months of **Nissan** and Sivan through the power of *sefirat ha'omer*, which begins in **Nissan**, continues throughout **Iyar and** concludes in **Sivan**, the month of redemption and the month of the giving of the Torah. Only these three months are referred to in the Torah as the first, the second, and the third month of "the Exodus of Israel from Egypt." The *vav* likewise, symbolizes the neck, which contains 6 linked bones. It also represents the spine, the back-bone of our entire body which it resembles. Therefore the month of Iyar is especially suited for fixing all back problems which are related to the health of the entire body.

<sup>9</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 61a.*

<sup>10</sup> *Tehillim 16:7.*

<sup>11</sup> *Yeshu'ahu 1:3.*

## Connecting the Six Divisions

The numerical value of *vav*, six, symbolizes the six divisions of the Mishna, the foundation of the Oral Torah. The revelation of the Oral Torah occurred during the month of Iyar, when those who were unable to bring the Pesach Sacrifice during Nissan, appealed to Moshe for a second chance. This was granted to them on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Iyar. This *Pesach Sheni* (Second Pesach) which resulted from verbal interaction between people dedicated to service of Hashem, became the source of the development of the Oral Torah. Harmonization of the six attributes represented by the *vav* of this month is the ultimate purpose of the counting of the Omer. As an aid in this endeavor, it has become customary during this period to study the Tractate “Ethics of the Fathers” which contains six chapters.

## Letter of Truth

So it is written about Rachav. “Give me a sign (letter) of truth”<sup>12</sup> This is the letter *vav*, for it is called the letter of truth.<sup>13</sup> Just like *vav* indicates connection, the truth can always be verified by the facts to which it is connected. The Hebrew word for truth *Emet* connects all the letters in the alphabet from the first *alef* to the last *tav* through the middle letter *mem*. Nissan faith precedes truth. Nissan’s service is communal, whereas Iyar’s service is individual. Through our dedication to truth, we may achieve deliverance from evil thoughts.<sup>14</sup>

## Integrating the Physical Land with its Spiritual Content

The sign of the month the Taurus which is a bull represents material strength. The ox, whose main job is to plough the field, reflects the earth sign of this month. It is a time of material blessing and abundance. Yosef is called: *בְּכוֹר שׁוֹרוֹ/Bechor Shoro* –The firstborn ox.<sup>15</sup> He ensured the material welfare of his brothers in Egypt, by storing the crops from the years of abundance and saving it for the years of famine. Although Iyar is the month of material unfolding it also represents the most spiritual light as it is called the month of *זִיב/ziv*” (radiance, splendor).<sup>16</sup> The name Iyar is also etymologically related to the word *אוֹר/ohr* – light, since the light of the sun becomes exceedingly great in this month. Iyar is, furthermore, the month that we prepare for receiving the Torah, which is called *אוֹרֵי תֵּהָא/oreita* – Source of Light. Since the land of Israel is the only place that paradoxically integrates the most Divine spiritual light with the most physical earthy land, it makes perfectly sense that on the fifth of Iyar, dominion of part of the Promised Land returned to the Jewish people after 1884 years of exile. Only in the Land of Israel is working the land a mitzvah from the Torah which brings down spiritual light into the world. The true challenge in building the land of Israel is to connect and integrate the physical land with its spiritual content. The Jewish people are called *אָדָם/adam*.<sup>17</sup> The *alef* stands for the Oneness of G-d, merged with *דָּם/dam* – blood, which stands for the physical flesh and blood. When we realize that Israel is the only place where we can express our Jewishness to its fullest, then we will be able to truly appreciate the hidden goodness, which the Holy Land offers.

<sup>12</sup> Yehoshua 2:12.

<sup>13</sup> Zohar 169a.

<sup>14</sup> Rav Tzaddik of Lublin, *P’ri Zaddik, Rosh Chodesh Iyar 2*.

<sup>15</sup> Devarim 33:17.

<sup>16</sup> I Malachim 6:1.

<sup>17</sup> Yechezkiel 34:31.

## Transformative Temple Time

On Rosh Chodesh Iyar about three thousand years ago King Shlomo erected the first Temple.<sup>18</sup> He unified material splendor with spiritual radiance. He adorned the Temple with the most precious materials in this world, including gold, silver and copper. King Shlomo had the priorities right when he decided to build the Temple before he worried about his own castle. He understood that the challenge of money and all material abundance is to raise it up to serve Hashem, rather than to make it a goal in itself. It was also on the first of Iyar that Jews, who returned from the Babylonian exile, began constructing the second Temple.<sup>19</sup> It is therefore fitting that the month of Iyar became the very beginning of the Third Temple era by the beginning of the land of Israel returning to the hand of the Jewish people on the fifth of Iyar after more than two thousand years of exile. Let us take advantage of the month of Iyar to transform our personal space to a miniature temple by elevating our physical possessions to become vessels for spiritual mitzvot!

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<sup>18</sup> I *Malachim* 6:1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ezra* 3:8.

