

The Month of Tevet: Snowed In

Soul Contemplations on a Snowy Day in the Month of Tevet

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Introduction

So it finally came, the rain, and in its wake the blessed snow. Perhaps not exactly a blessing, but I hope at least a blessing in beautiful, lacy, white disguise. I can't believe that just a little more than a week ago we were almost swimming in the ocean, and sun tanning at the beach. Israel's weather changes are so drastic, it felt like it was going to be summer forever – and then – winter hit us from behind.

Somehow the snow gives me the feeling that nothing can be taken for granted. I'm thankful I still have electricity, phone, and running water. The snow gives me the opportunity to thank Hashem for my cozy warm home, and for the fact that my husband is snowed in together with me, rather than being snowed out like last year when it snowed and he had to spend the night at work. When it snows in Gush Etzion all the roads are closed, the schools have off and the children excitedly roll snowballs and slide down the driveway. No one can go to work. Happy snow vacation!

Cleaning our Slate White as Snow

Although snow is rare in Israel, in my experience we get about one week of snow every two years, still שֶׁלֶג/*sheleg* – snow is mentioned 21 times in the Bible. The spiritual ailment of *tzara'at*, a skin lesion, is compared to snow due to its white color.¹ Yet, snow also represents purity and atonement from sin.² Looking out of the window, seeing the pure white color of snow embracing the trees, is an incentive to repent.

...אם יהיו חטאיכם כשנים כשֶׁלֶג ילבינו אם יאדמו כתולע כצִמָּר יהיו: (ספר ישעיה פרק א:יה)

“...though your sins be like שָׁנִי/*shani* – scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be white as wool” (*Yesha'yahu* 1:18).

Even if you are full of sin compared to a reddish scarlet stain which doesn't come off easily in the wash, Hashem promises to atone for our sins and make our slate white as snow.³

Read on to learn about Keeping our Inner Fire Going, Becoming Cold to Sin but Hot to Holiness, Entering the Snowy Palace of Love, and Mastering the Secret of Three embodied in the Hebrew word for snow!

¹ *Shemot* 4:6; *Bamidbar* 12:10; II *Melachim* 5:27.

² *Yesha'yahu* 1:18; *Tehillim* 51:9.

³ *Metzudat David*, *ad loc.*

Keeping the Inner Fire Going

Yet, snow also symbolizes the coldness of indifference and apathy, the opposite of warmth, enthusiasm and excitement. It states about our archenemy Amalek that he made Israel cold on the way.⁴ The Rebbe of Lubawitz used to bless Jews to be “a warm yid.” The snow outside reminds me to keep my inner fire going, the fire for mitzvot, for my husband and children, for my life and the Torah. The Woman of Valor is called אִשֶׁת חַיִל/*Eishet Chail* in Hebrew. This can also translate as “A Woman of Fire” from the word “אֵשׁ/*eish*” meaning fire. The *Eishet Chail* is not afraid of a little snow, neither is her household as it states:

לֹא תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשֶּׁלֶג כִּי כָל בֵּיתָהּ לְבָשׁ שָׁנִים: (ספר משלי פרק לא פסוק כא)

“She does not fear of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet.”⁵

Becoming Cold to Sin but Hot to Holiness

The *Eishet Chail* uses the fiery color of deep red שָׁנִי/*shani* scarlet to protect her household against the cold of snow. Perhaps we can say that the *Eishet Chail* has her own and her family’s fire in control. She channels the very same fire which usually causes people to sin, into fire and passion for Hashem’s mitzvot. The *Eishet Chail* teaches us to be cold to sin, yet hot for holiness. This is what protects her family from the snow of *Gehinum* (hell). Besides the fire of hell, there is also the hell of coldness and snow. These two kinds of hells correspond to the two kinds of *yetzer hara*. Most sins derive from fire – *ta’ava*, passion, these sins are cleansed by the fire of *Gehinum*, yet, there is also the opposite kind of *yetzer* – coldness – indifference and complacency. Not caring, or being involved in what goes on around oneself. This is the cynical coldness of Amalek about whom it states: “אשר קרד” He cooled down Israel’s holy fire and yearning for holiness and Torah that burned within our heart at the time of receiving the Torah.

One of the problems at our time is when a person is able to overcome his passion for sin, he sometimes forgets to remain hot for holiness. It might be even worse to turn off the fire for holiness which requires deed, initiative and warmth, like Torah learning, *tefilah*, yearning for the Temple and for Mashiach.⁶ For a woman it is not enough to keep her own fire for holiness going, she is praised for ensuring that this fire keeps burning within the hearts of her entire household; teaching them the correct balance between warmth and cold. Her house refers to her personal home but also to the whole house of Israel, for every woman is a mother of all Israel as well.

Entering the Snowy Palace of Love

The Torah teaches us also about the counterpart to the *Eishet Chail*, the *Ish Chail* – Man of Valor:

וּבְנֵיָהוּ בֶן יְהוֹיָדָע בֶּן אִישׁ חַיִל {חַיִל} רַב פְּעֻלִים מְקַבְּצָאֵל הוּא הָפָה אֶת שְׁנֵי אֲרָאֵל מוֹאֵב וְהוּא יָרַד וְהָפָה אֶת הָאָרֶיָה {הָאָרֶיָה} בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּאָר בְּיוֹם הַשֶּׁלֶג: (ספר שמואל ב פרק כג:כ)

“Benayahu ben Yehoyada, the son of the valiant man of Kabtze’el who had done mighty deeds ...descended and smote the lion in the midst of the pit on the day of the snow” (II *Shemuel* 23:20).

⁴ *Devarim* 15:18.

⁵ *Mishlei* 31:21.

⁶ Based on Rav Tzaddok, HaCohen of Lublin, *P’ri Tzaddik, Parashat Chayei Sarah* 1.

Benayahu was on the level of such great enthusiasm, that even in the “day of snow” when coldness has dominion, he was able to overcome and smite the “lion,” which refers to the palace of love. Benayahu opened the palace of love and influenced loving flames of excitement to all of Israel.⁷ The heavy layer of snow outside reminds me of my heart-wall inside, which doesn’t allow the light from Above to illuminate my heart with love and enthusiasm. I need great *chizuk* (strengthening) to arouse my inherent love to be stirred up into a dazzling glow.

The Purity and Discipline of Torah on “the Day of Snow”

The Talmud explains the symbolic meaning of the “day of the snow.” “There are those that say that Benayahu broke an opening in the ice and descended into it to immerse.”⁸ *Rashi* adds that he descended into the hole in the ice to immerse and purify himself in order to be able to study Torah that could only be learned in a state of purity. There are those that say that he learned the *Sifra* of the House of Rav on a winter’s day. In other words, on a single winter day (when the days are short) he completed the entire book that would later be called the *Sifra*.⁹ The *Sifra* is the *midrash-halachah* commentary on the *Vayikra*. Both *Vayikra* and the *Sifra* contain an enormous amount of *halachic* data, most of it on the Temple sacrifices and laws of purity, which require a tremendous amount of discipline, concentration and knowledge to master. Therefore, “the day of the snow” refers to a very deep level of Torah-study that requires an extraordinary amount of self-discipline and knowledge.¹⁰

Mastering the Secret of Three

There is more to “the day of the snow” than a mere natural phenomenon or a symbolic expression describing extraordinary depth and breadth of Torah. The Hebrew word for “snow,” is שְׁלֵג/*sheleg*. This word consists of three letters: *shin*, *lamed* and *gimel*. The numerical value of *gimel* is 3, of *lamed* is 30, and of *shin* is 300. Thus, all its letters are exponents of the number 3.¹¹ The number “three” in Hebrew is שלוש/*shalosh*, related to the word שלשלת/*shalsholet*, which means chain, and continuation. What is the connection between snow and the chain of continuation? Perhaps we can say that we attain continuation through getting a new white purified start in life. The Hebrew words for fire and snow share the letter *shin*, perhaps because the coldness of snow illicit our inner fire of passion for holiness. Indeed Maharal explains that the number three is always elevated because it represents the middle between two extremes.¹² The snow teaches us the proper balance between heat and cold. By learning to become cold to sin but hot to holiness, we can master the secret of “three,” embodied by the Hebrew word for snow. The two last letters of the word שְׁלֵג/*sheleg* are *lamed* and *gimel*, which can be read as גל/*gal* – roll or reveal. As the children roll snow balls perhaps we can uncover the heavy layer of snow, ignite the inner flame of our lives and reveal the secret of “the day of snow”!

⁷ Shem M'Shemuel, *Parashat Tazria, Shabbat Rosh Chodesh* 1871.

⁸ *Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 18a-b.

⁹ The *Sifra* is an ancient text from Talmudic times, written by *Tannaim* (150- 200 C.E.) It is possible that the *Sifra* is even from the time of King David in whose time Benayahu ben Yehoyada lived.

¹⁰ Shabtai Teicher z”l, *Zohar Sabba D'Mishpatim, The Old Man in the Sea* Part1, Appendix 10:5.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 10:6.

¹² Maharal, *Chidushei Aggadot*, Part 4, p. 130, *Tractate Bechorot*.