



Jewish Reconstructionist Communities  
In Association with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

## GLOBAL DAY OF JEWISH LEARNING

### **“A Kiss is Just A Kiss? Mystical Union, Personal Salvation, and World Redemption through Kabbalistic Kissing”**

**Professor Joel Hecker**

#### **1. Song of Songs 1:2**

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine.*

#### **2. Kisses of Approbation** (BT *Hagigah* 14b)

There is a story of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai in which he was travelling on the road, riding a donkey with Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh travelling behind him. The latter said to the former, “Rabbi, teach me a portion from the account of the chariot.”

He said to him, “Did not the sages instruct that [one should not teach] the account of the chariot unless the person is wise and will understand [the details] on his own [by inference]?”

He said to him, “Rabbi, Permit me to say a teaching before you.”

I said to him, “Speak.”

As soon as Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh began to speak about the account of the chariot Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai dismounted from his donkey. He said, “It is not right that I should be hearing about the Glory of my Master while riding on a donkey.”

They went and sat under a tree and fire descended from the heavens, surrounding them, and there were ministering angels dancing before them like the attendants at a wedding rejoicing before the groom.

One angel responded from the fire, saying, “Like your words, Eleazar ben Arakh, so indeed is the Account of the Chariot.” Suddenly all the trees opened their mouths and began to sing, *Then shall all the trees of the forest sing with joy*” (Psalms 96:12).

When Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh finished with the account of the chariot, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai rose and kissed him on his head. He said, “Blessed is the Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who gave to Abraham our father a wise son who knows how to teach about the glory of our Father in heaven.”

### **3. Kisses from the Angels** (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:13)

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth*” (Song of Songs 1:2). Rabbi Yohanan said, “An angel used to take the word, or commandment, from the blessed Holy One, commandment by commandment, and repeat it to each of the Israelites, saying, ‘Do you accept this commandment? It entails the following rules and the following punishments; it has the following decrees and the following precepts, this many minor ones and this many major ones, and such and such a reward.’” Then the Israelites would answer yes, and the angel would ask each one whether he accepts it by oath to the blessed Holy One, and he would answer him yes indeed. Then the angel would kiss him on the mouth straightaway.”

### **4. Death by a Kiss** (Recanati, *Commentary on the Torah*, 37b-38a)

Thus a person should regard himself after completing the statutory prayers as if he had departed the world for he had separated from the Tree of Life and brought his feet towards the Tree of Death for he has returned his

surety (i.e. his body), as is said, [*Jacob*] *gathered up his feet into the bed, and expired*, (Genesis 49:33). Contemplate this great mystery that I will reveal to you that is contained in the teaching of our teachers, may their memory be for a blessing: “The patriarchs died by a kiss since they were exceedingly pious, masters of contemplation who were occupied with the supernal mysteries. They would delineate with the imaginative faculty as if these matters were engraved before them. When they would tie their souls with the supernal soul [spiritual] matters would increase and become blessed and revealed automatically from the [act of] vacating the mind. This is like a person who opens up a spigot and [the water] flows and flows. For the cleaving of thought is the source and the pool and the spring that never ceases. Therefore, one who causes his mind to cleave to an evil thought is worse than the sin as the rabbis said, “Thoughts of sin are worse than the sin itself.”

Our rabbis, of blessed memory, taught... “Ben Azzai was sitting etc.”... I am only sitting and teaching and the words are descending and rejoicing before me.” The reason is that when he would cause his soul to cleave to the supernal soul, the awesome words would be engraved upon his heart and he would imagine them as if a person were putting the words into his mouth. As a result of this cleaving with thought with this emanation that had emanated and that he drew down upon himself, the words were supplemented and increased, and from the joy they were revealed to him. This is why [the rabbis have taught] that the *Shekhinah* does not rest [upon a person] who is lazy, etc., but rather from joy.

Sometimes this joy will overcome him until a great and wondrous crying befalls him, and his *neshamah* and his *nefesh* will seek to separate from his body and this is death by a kiss. This teaches about the joining of the kisser to that which is beloved to him, for then his *nefesh* will cleave to the *Shekhinah*. This is why sometimes in the *Zohar* you will find in the revelation of mysteries, ‘Rabbi Ploni rose and cried.’ Perhaps his crying would overcome him until his soul was gathered up as it says, ... *and he gathered up his feet into the bed.*’ If

he sets his heart upon it his *ru'ah* and his *neshamah* will be gathered up to Him.

### **5. Kissing Words of Prayer** (*Zohar* 2:201b)

Israel enters the synagogue to praise their Master. They begin with songs and praises as one is required. Once a person has prepared himself in worship... [in] holiness to unite his heart in the performance of the inner worship of his Master and to align his heart and his will in the worship with those words, then the word ascends. Those angels that are appointed in the air, are appointed to the four ends of the world. One [angel] is appointed in the east, set there in the sky: his name is GZRDYA. With him are other great archons which wait for that word of prayer. It ascends in the air on that side and this angel takes it. If the word is fitting, all the archons kiss the word and ascend with it until that supernal firmament above where there are other archons.

When they kiss that word they open their mouths and say, “You are meritorious Israel for you know how to crown your Master with holy crowns. Meritorious is the mouth from which this word-crown emerges.” Then the fixed letters fly into the air of a holy aroma, for there are twelve letters of that name that rules in the air, and this is the name with which Elijah flew until he ascended to heaven.

### **6. God is Love** (*Zohar* 2:146a-b)

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.* What did King Solomon see that led him to insert words of love between the upper world and the lower world. The beginning of the praise of love that enters between them is *Let him kiss me...* It has been established: There is no love of *devequt*, of spirit to spirit, without a kiss. And it is the kiss of the mouth which is the spring of the

spirit and the way it exits. When one kisses the other, the spirits of these cleave with those and they are one. Then it is one love.

In the book of Rav Hamnuna Sava it says... that the kiss of love disperses to four spirits and the four spirits cleave together as one and they are in the mystery of faith. They ascend to four letters and the letters of the holy name depend on them and the upper and lower worlds depend on them. And the praise of the Song of Songs depends upon it. What are they? אַהבָּה (AHBH), love. They comprise the supernal chariot. They are the joining, the cleaving, and the completion of everything. These letters are four spirits, and they are the spirits of love and delight of all the limbs of the body, with no sadness at all.

When... these four spirits disperse, one fruit is made from these four spirits. It is one spirit comprised of four spirits. This offspring ascends and bursts through firmaments until it ascends and rests in one palace that is called the Palace of Love, and it is the palace upon which all love depends. And this particular spirit is called אַהֲוָה (Love).

## **7. Divine Kisses of Love** (*Zohar Hadash*, 60c, *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* on Song of Songs)

Rabbi Reḥumai opened, *The רו'אָה (ru'ah), spirit, of YHVH will alight upon him: ru'ah of wisdom and understanding, ru'ah of counsel and power, ru'ah of knowledge and awe of YHVH* (Isaiah 11:2). Here are four רוֹחוֹת (ruhot), spirits, and none has attained them other than King Messiah alone. But, look, it is written *From four ruhot come, O ru'ah* (Ezekiel 37:9)—it is not written *four!* Actually, *from four ruhot*—this is a complete *ru'ah*.

He said to him, “How does this happen?”

He replied, “This is the one borne of love in a kiss. How? Love’s kiss occurs solely with the mouth. *Ru'ah* joins with *ru'ah*, each comprising two

*ruh*ot: his *ru'*a*h* and his friend's *ru'*a*h*—both present in four *ruh*ot. All the more so with a man and woman: when joined, four *ruh*ot together. The son who proceeds from them—*ru'*a*h* coming from four *ruh*ot. This is as is said, *From four ruh*o*t come, O ru'*a*h*—this is a complete *ru'*a*h*.