

Torah Study for Human Beings

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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We live in a time over three thousand three hundred years since the giving of Torah at Sinai. Over the many centuries countless Rabbis have written an equally countless number of commentaries on the Torah. With all that has been written, learned and understood, we all still walk away from Torah not understanding the full depths of its message. In many cases, we do not even understand some of the most basic lessons. After all our years of study, we still come away asking, "what have we really learned; what do we really understand." True scholars are honest and courageous enough to admit what they do not know. Only fools think they know something that indeed they do not.



There is much that we do understand about Torah and yet there is so much more that we do not. The famous Sage, Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (the Gra) stated something rather profound (Sefer Even Shelaymah 8:21). He said that when the secrets meanings of the Torah are not understood properly then even the simple meanings will remain unclear. I do not know many who can honestly claim that they have a true grasp of Torah secrets, therefore how many can say that they have a true grasp of even surface things? Yes, we believe we know so much, but in the end, let the truth be told, we understand next to nothing.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai so eloquently stated in the Zohar that if the surface of the Torah is all there is to it, then even today a better version can be penned. Yet, because the Torah is not of this Earth, it contains a level of such advanced information that even with all our modern technology we cannot even conceive of what type of information Torah conceals. The Torah contains layer upon layer of understanding completely separate from its simple surface statements. We do not have the mental faculties, not even the imagination to guess how to explore the Torah and to discover its actual depths and meanings. Rabbi Shimon knew this secret well. The Holy Zohar attributed to him reveals many of Torah secrets. Yet, even Rabbi Shimon acknowledges that not even he has discovered them all.

Pirkei Avot (6,2) records a comment made by Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi that every day a psychic voice cries out from Sinai saying, woe to the world for the disgrace shown to the Torah. This disgrace is caused by us, Torah's handlers. How would we feel if we had a precious treasure, intricate, delicate and very important and we let it fall into the hands of monkeys who had absolutely no clue as to the real meaning or value of that which fell into their hands. We would be devastated by the loss of our precious treasure and its waste in the hands of monkeys.

Well, guess who the real monkeys are here? Now, you understand why Torah cries out saying woe to the world for the disgrace shown to Torah. Men honor and respect Torah; only monkeys disrespect it. Respecting Torah requires spirit, intelligence, wisdom and discipline. These are attributes unknown to monkeys. Therefore, Darwin might not have been right that man evolved from apes, but maybe it's the other way around; maybe some men devolved into apes. Judging from some human behaviors, there might actually be something to this.

We read entire sections of Torah, chapters after chapters that seem to speak about matters that bare no relevance whatsoever to our daily lives. Woe to us for the disgrace we show to Torah. Every word and statement however irrelevant it may appear contains within it a massive amount of information vital to our very existence. Woe to us that we have never developed the intelligence to figure out what it is that we cannot see. Yet, how can we see that which cannot be seen. How can we know the unknown? As apparently impossible as this might sound; it is not impossible at all. We can discover what has not yet been discovered; we just have to use the right forms of mental technology and apply them accurately. When we use the right tools, then we can perform the proper work.

One of the interesting concepts brought to us by Kabbalistic literature is the idea of the forms of Divine manifestation revealed in creation called the Ten Sefirot. Basically, the Sefirot are patterns or functions of Divine energy that interact with one another creating a concentric whole, the form being what is called, the Image of G-d in which man was created. These energy functions are not physical objects, they are merely abstract constructs of purpose or function. One of them is called Wisdom; another is called Understanding; yet a third is called Mercy and a fourth is called Severity. No one can rightly say these are tangible objects, yet they do very much exist. Love and hate also exist without any tangible physical form and yet these two play an undeniably great role in shaping human life on Earth, so it is with the Sefirot.

The Sefirot form what we can call a DNA pattern of sorts that underlie all forms in all dimensional planes. The Ten Sefirot are said to be subdivided into five general categories. These five are the basic substructures of all things on creation. The five are Will, Unconscious Mind (Spirit), Conscious Mind (Intellect), Heart (Emotions) and Body (Form). Everything in creation contains these elements. Certainly this is true of mankind, yet the Zohar relates that this pattern is also true of the Torah itself. More radically, the Kabbalah states that it is through these energy forms and patterns that the Unknowable G-d beyond creation is made knowable to those He has created. Therefore, G-d the Unknowable makes Himself known

through the interactions of this Divine form of the Sefirotic pattern. These in turn are concentrated within the Torah which thus contains the Image of G-d. Torah is then concentrated even further to manifest in our physical universe in the form of a book, made up of words and letters.

Our present form of Torah is its Body (Form). Being that we live in a physical finite universe; Torah reveals itself herein in a physical way dealing with finite issues. Yet, concealed within the Torah are its Heart, Mind, Spirit and Will. These higher levels are only accessible through their corresponding faculties within man. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai was a man who developed his higher human faculties. As such he was able to penetrate into Torah's depths through the corresponding depths in his own being. Only once he had developed these areas within himself was he enabled to recognize these areas within the Torah. Discovery requires a mental state corresponding to the level or dimension that one seeks to open.

The five general categories of Sefirot each give rise to and dominate within specific dimensional parameters. It is not right to say each gives rise to its own world or universe because this could give one the wrong impression that the domains of the Sefirot are somehow physical places. There is no concept of physicality with regards to Sefirot. They can give rise to physical manifestation but they themselves are beyond any such concrete forms. Indeed, the oldest known reference to the Sefirot was made by none other than the famous Rabbi Akiva of the Talmud. In the Sefer Yetzirah wherein which he allegedly penned the ancient teachings of the Patriarch Avraham, Rabbi Akiva refers to the Sefirah as being "belimah." This term would literally be translated as "without what." Numerous commentators have therefore interpreted this to mean many different things.

Here now we come to a problem. The Sefirot, similar to the concepts of love and hate can never really be fully defined by words, in spite of the best tries made by poets, psychologists and Kabbalists alike. The human intellect is not the domain that can directly experience the Sefirot. The human mind may comprehend them and endeavor to contemplate them, but the mind is not the faculty to do more. Sefirot are ethereal and as such are above the realm of intellect. However, we humans also have within us higher realms above intellect. We call them Spirit and Will. Both of these reside in that domain of the mind cut off from us. Because we do not have ready access to these closed areas of the mind through normal intellectual processes, we call this area of the mind, the unconscious. It is a very real force within the human makeup; one that is fully dominant and in control of all beneath it, especially including the intellect.

The Sefirot therefore can never be fully understood through the faculties of conscious human intellect. They can however be experienced through areas within the unconscious mind, through the Spirit. Those who access the Spirit within their unconscious will grasp an intuitive awareness of the true nature of the Sefirot. However, one's perceptions will not necessarily make all that much intellectual sense. Describing the insights received at the level of Spirit requires a poet and an artist, not an academian and philosopher.

The Sefirot are “belimah,” meaning without a construct form understandable to the human intellect. Rabbi Akiva knew this and wrote the Sefer Yetzirah in a coded poetic form. His student, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai also knew this and therefore taught the Zohar in a similar coded poetic fashion. These great Sages and all those who followed in their footsteps are far beyond the intellectual level of learning. Their learning rises up from within them, from within the recesses of their unconscious minds, from the realm of Spirit. Their understandings of Torah therefore are as superior to ours as our understandings of Torah are superior to those of a monkey. Woe to us for the disgrace we show the Torah, by understanding it like a chimp and then acting not too differently from monkeys.

What we see and understand of Torah is such a pitifully small portion of its whole. Even after thousands of years of study and thousands of commentaries written, because the vast majority continue to approach Torah exclusively through the realm of human intellect, our accomplishments remain as limited as is our approach. Woe to us for the disgrace we show not only Torah but also ourselves. Because we fail to make the endeavors to cultivate the Spirit and Will levels of the human experience, we remain half brained and thereby half blind. One cannot see the whole picture by only looking at its bottom half. One misses the entire message when one wastes one’s time only looking at a minute portion of it.

The Torah is formed after the pattern of the Ten Sefirot belimah. The essence of Torah and thus its true teachings totally transcend our physical world and our physical understandings. What we read, what we study and what we practice is only the upper-most surface level. Woe to us that we have not even penetrated the Torah more than skin deep.

When we read and study those portions of Torah that seem to us so dry and boring, remember this; you have absolutely no idea of the profundity and depths that you are missing. And unless you make the efforts to find them out, you never will. Unless you make the efforts to become fully human, you never will. Unless you cultivate the Spirit, you will remain not too different from the ape. Woe to us for the disgrace we show to Torah, to ourselves and to Heaven.

We were created in the supernal Image and we cling to that which makes us no different from animals. How inhuman! Maybe this explains why we act the way we do and why we treat other human beings like dogs instead of like people. Maybe if we first started acting human, then we in turn could start treating others as human. It all starts with Torah and it all ends there as well.

The Sefirot are the pattern and the guide. Not for naught is the pattern of the Sefirot called in Kabbalah the Tree of Life. Rightly did the King Solomon state (Mishlei 3:18), “it is a Tree of Life for those who cling to it.” When we learn how to learn properly, only then will we make the right and proper discoveries that will lead us into the dawn of a new era, the era of us being fully and wholly human. This is what we call the age of Mashiah. At that time we will also have the Torah of Mashiah. It is the same exact Torah as we have now (and have always had), but finally we will be able to understand it properly, even as did Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi

Shimon Bar Yohai before us. These great Sages have left their mark and they have left us their writings so that we can follow in their footsteps. Who is willing to tune out their intellects and start tuning in to their Spirits?

“Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.” Mishlei 3:17-18

