

The End Is In The Beginning

The Importance of Studying TaNaKh

*By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
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*For those who wish to delve into the secrets of the Kabbalah
and master the profundity of Gemara,
let them turn to the TaNaKh (Bible).
Therein, will all be found!*

There is something very wrong today in the world of Torah study. Although there are possibly more yeshivot and students of Torah today than at any other time in history, still there is a substantial lack of fundamental knowledge of what Torah is really all about and where one is supposed to go to learn these necessary basics.

Learn a great Torah lesson from the Kabbalistic classic the Sefer Yetzirah. In its first chapter, the sacred text states that *"the end [of a thing] is in its beginning and its beginning is in its end."* These profound words can be discussed philosophically for a long time, but the more one complicates their meaning, the more one will miss their simple and straightforward intent.

Straight and to the point, the meaning is clear; whatever is to be found at the end of the road already is there at its beginning. This is a very important lesson about the Torah. As we say concerning the holy Shabat, so is it true regarding the entire Torah, *"sof ma'aseh, b'mahshava tehilah"* (last in action, first in thought).

In Pirkei Avot, our Sages of old have defined for us the proper course of Torah study. At the young age of five, one is to begin studying Mikrah; this is the study of the TaNaKh (Bible). At ten one begins the study of Mishna. This is the study of Halakhot Pesukot (clear and direct Jewish Law). Only after these two courses of study is one supposed to begin the study of Gemara, which is the study of the reasoning underlying the ordination of the Laws.

This sequence of study makes a lot of sense. First, one is to study the sources, then the lessons emanating from those sources, and finally how those lessons emanated from the sources and are connected to them.

In our many sins and lack of coherent direction, this plain and most direct sequence of Torah study is not followed today by almost every Orthodox Yeshiva in the world. While we have an abundance of Gemara study and many Yeshiva students who can rattle it off memorized page after page, we have a severe shortage of any Torah student (and Rabbi) that has ever read and mastered the entire TaNaKh. Worse than this, after many years of Gemara study, most students have never opened up and intensely studied the Shulkhan Arukh (Code of Jewish Law) and are therefore ignorant of the practical applications of Torah Law.

The modern course of Yeshiva students have failed to produce students, graduates and Rabbis who know the most sacred sources upon which all of Judaism is based. Ask any Orthodox Rabbi today whether while in Yeshiva or even afterwards when he attended a class in or even merely opened up to learn Biblical books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zecharia and Malakhi, or the books of Daniel, Iyob, Kohelet or Mishlei?

Other than for just a few minutes a day, ask any Orthodox Rabbi today whether while in Yeshiva or even afterwards how much times he spends studying the Shulkhan Arukh and its commentaries, and how much time he devotes to pouring over the numerous Responsa literature of the Aharonim that is the foundation of modern Halakha? If your Rabbi has not studied and is not an expert in these most important areas of Torah study that is the foundation of all Judaism, one needs to seriously ask just how well prepared one's Rabbi truly is!

The basics of the Torah are the lessons of the prophets. Our Holy Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed centuries ago because we failed to heed the message of the prophets. To this day, we fail G-d and Torah by not studying and pouring over their every word to see how we have erred and to rectify it.

The lessons of the prophets are the words of our Living G-d, preserved for us throughout eternity to morally instruct us and guide us. The words of the prophets are not academic polemics to be debated and analyzed intellectually. Their words are straight and to the point.

The message of the prophets is aimed at the heart, not at the head. It was because the people did not heed the dire warnings of the prophets and clouded their hearts, pursuing what they desired instead of what was best for them that they fell subject to the consequences of their own wanton ways. Today, nothing has changed; it is because our hearts are still misguided that we have not yet merited any form of national redemption.

In ancient days, like today, many a prophetic warning was ignored, dismissed as the rantings of crazy religious zealots. Their words spoke about down-to-earth, gut-level things. The prophets were poets, not philosophers. The intellectuals apparently did not appreciate the beauty in poetry. They instead preferred the intellectual challenges political intrigue. This is what led to their downfall; a clear violation of the warning we recite daily in our Shema Yisrael prayer, *"do not follow after your heart, after your eyes that lead you astray."*

While the mind can confuse, it is the heart that corrupts. Healing of the heart therefore, is our paramount challenge.

Many so-called serious students of Torah shy away from the simple messages of the prophets and TaNaKh because they do not consider them to be enough of an intellectual challenge. This foolish misunderstanding is easily refuted by the words of the Sefer Yetzirah quoted above. The deepest and most profound teachings of the entire Torah are to be found in its most simple and easiest to understand sections. The lessons of the Torah at its most simple and its most profound are one and the same. This is true whether one is studying either the Laws of Torah (Halakha) or its secrets (Kabbalah).

Learn from this a profound lesson, one can fathom and even master the secrets of the Torah without ever picking up a book of the Kabbalah! One who properly studies TaNaKh, Halakha and even Gemara can find within them all the secrets of the Kabbalah. I have seen in our generation Rabbis who I consider to be on the highest level of Kabbalistic knowledge who have never opened a Kabbalah book. On the contrary, I have seen so-called world-renown Kabbalistic Sages, who know every word of every Kabbalah book who still fail to grasp the very basics of what Torah and thus Kabbalah are really all about.

Many people today flock to the study of Kabbalah. They are intoxicated by its profundity. This in and of itself is not a bad thing. However, Kabbalah does not exist in a vacuum outside of Judaism. One cannot come to study Kabbalah without a full embrace of all Torah study, starting with TaNaKh, continuing with Halakha and proceeding to Gemara. Only with this proper balance will any Kabbalah study be properly understood. One cannot stand on a platform that has wobbly legs. Unless one goes back to the basics, one is standing on unstable ground. This is not only true for the study of Kabbalah, it is also just as true for the study of Gemara. This is a lesson to be learned equally by those who belong to Kabbalah cults and those who attend modern yeshivot.

The entire Torah, TaNaKh, Halakha, Gemara and Kabbalah (the PaRDeS) was given to us for one specific reason. In the words of the Kabbalah the reason is for us to

perform a spiritual union between the Holy One, blessed be He and His Shekhina. We proclaim this prior to our performing many of our Torah obligations. We recite a prayer called the "L'Shem Yihud," which begins with the words "for the sake of the unity of the Holy One blessed be He and His Shekhina." Although we often recite the words, we almost always fail to pay attention to what they actually mean.

The terms "the Holy One, blessed be He" and "His Shekhina" have very precise meanings in Kabbalistic literature. They are metaphors, often described with various other words, yet all having the same meaning. One of the greatest Kabbalists of the last few hundred years, HaRav Shalom Sharabi, in his book Nahar Shalom (41d) using his eloquent Kabbalistic language describes outright what is the purpose underlying all Kabbalah.

"Before all one must be very careful to subdue, to remove and put away the evil side within the garments of the "skins of flesh" of the Klipah Nogah. These are the 613 "organs" of bad character. These are very much more grievous than [actual] sins themselves. One must strengthen the good side of the garments which are the 613 "organs" of good character for they are the casing, throne and dwelling of the "skins of lights." ... There is no power in the 613 "organs" of the garments of the NaRaNHaiY and the "skins of light" to perform and observe the 613 commandments through the 613 organs of the body other than through the intermediaryship of the 613 "organs" of the garments of the "skins of flesh" that connect to the body..."

Please do not concern yourself with what are "skins of flesh," the Klipah Nogah, "skins of light" or the NaRaNHaiY. What these are is not the point! The Rav is telling us that BEFORE ALL we have to "remove and put away" our bad character! This is a simple lesson, the same lesson taught centuries ago by the prophets. Nothing has changed! The intent of Torah has been consistent, only the words used to describe things have changed.

Although we say that the essence of Judaism is the observance of Halakha, yet prior to one being able to observe Halakha properly, one must first have proper character. This lesson is clearly spelled out by another master Kabbalist, HaRav Hayim Vital. In his book, Sha'arei Kedusha, he wrote that "*midot kadmon l'mitzvot*," in other words, proper character is a prerequisite for the proper observance of the mitzvot and walking the path of Halakha (Jewish Law). Lessons about the importance of proper character dominate Kabbalistic literature alongside their esoteric lore.

This Kabbalistic message did not come as a revelation from Heaven. It did not need special Divine revelation, not from Eliyahu HaNavi, not from the Zohar and even not from the Ari'zal. The Kabbalistic message did not come from the Kabbalah, as we know it, at all. The message of Kabbalah is what the message of Torah has always been, the same message spoken over and over again by the Prophets.

The message is clear. The message is and has always been that *the purpose and meaning of the entire Torah, including its esoteric part the Kabbalah, is that we as human beings learn to rectify our personalities and character and to live as holy and righteous human beings created in the image of our Divine and blessed Creator.*

The prophets were outspoken and almost often always politically incorrect. From generation to generation, their words of social and national admonishment were recorded for us, to survive through posterity. Their message, applicable to us today as it was in their own day is simple and can be summed up in one word. How much easier can that can it be. The one word is this: REPENT!

The word does not need much explanation. You want to know what G-d requires of us and what He seeks from us? Simply go back to the words of the prophets.

Read and learn Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zecharia, Malakhi, and even Daniel. Read them by themselves, without all their extensive commentaries. Read their words with your heart, not your head. Let the message of our blessed Creator sink into your soul. Allow it to arouse your hearts!

When the Kabbalists speak about rectifying supernal worlds, they are actually talking about the realms deep within the human psyche. In essence, all of Kabbalah is about the rectification of character. Kabbalah is in essence Torah psychology, for whenever we speak of the spiritual realm, we are in actuality talking about the inner recesses of the human mind, the place where our souls meet G-d.

The Kabbalistic metaphors that speak of the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He and His Shekhina, the unification of Zeir Anpin and Nok, or the unification of Tiferet and Malkhut are three metaphors for the same reality. The Holy One, blessed be He, Zeir Anpin and Tiferet are three metaphors referring to the six sefirot that in Kabbalah are called the Midot (attributes). These are the fundamental psychological elements that underlie the formation the human psyche. The Shekhina, Nok and Malkhut are metaphors for the physical world, including our human body.

The secret of unification therefore is simple and summed up as follows: Manifest the proper alignment of character (the sefirotic midot) within our lives and in the world (Malkhut). This is considered the most sublime message of the most advanced Torah study of the Kabbalah. At the same time, this is and has always been the message of the prophets. As the Sefer Yetzirah has said, *the end is in its beginning and its beginning is in its end.*

When one embraces Torah and mitzvot with proper character, discipline, integrity and honor, as taught by the prophets, then will one be successful in truly bonding with Heaven. One will then be able to study Halakha and Gemara with the proper mindset enabling one to extract from these studies the hidden Heavenly fire that will purify one's innermost essence. All Torah study, including Kabbalah study is aimed towards this end, the refinement and rectification of character. When we can accomplish this formidable task, we can succeed in bringing Geulah (redemption) to our world, on both a personal and national level.

This message is simple and straightforward. It might even be too simple for the more academically minded amongst us. Yet, this is where the truth lies. G-d wants to be in our hearts. G-d wants our hearts to be guided by Him. Sometimes our heads get in the way of this. Place G-d first in one's heart, as it says, "love HaShem with all your hearts," and "place these words that I command you today upon your hearts," and then one's head will be cleared. One with a clear mind will be able to learn and practice Torah with simplicity, clarity and ease. This is the best way to walk the Torah path.

The solution to all the problems facing the yeshiva world and modern Israel today is simple. We must all return to the basics. Return to the words of prophets, sip in their words, as one would drink medicinal tea. Allow the spirit of our Living G-d to move in our hearts as both our minds and hearts ponder their sacred words. Hear the message that for so long we have missed.

Return to the source, walk the right path in simplicity. Allow the wisdom of our Living G-d to shine in your hearts without confusion, question or doubt. When we return to our Living G-d, He in turn will return to us. Moreover, how do I know this profound truth? Because I read it in the prophets. Their predictions for destruction certainly came true. I believe that their predictions for restoration will therefore also become equally true.

We have a great task before us.

שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד