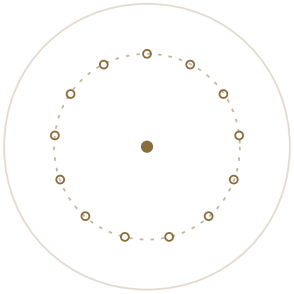
שְׁלֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה מִדּוֹת

The Thirteen Middos

Foundations and Kal VaChomer



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Notes by a student

PART ONE

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Prologue: Two Torahs, One Teacher

The Kollel

This series is the opening project of a morning *kollel* in Beit Shemesh, under Rav Yaakov Klein, *shlit"a*, built on a *chibbur*—a joining—of *nigleh* and *nistar*. *Nigleh* is the revealed Torah, the practical world of daily *avodah*: what a Jew has to do in this world. *Nistar* is the hidden Torah. Most programs teach one or the other. But the closer we come to the light of *Mashiach*, the more our task is to show that the two are sides of one coin. *Nitnu me-ro'eh echad*: they were given by one shepherd, Moshe Rabbeinu.[1] Their separation is historical, not essential.

The same split appears earlier, inside the Torah itself: *Torah Shebichsav*, the Written Torah, and *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, the Oral Torah. At first glance they are opposites, two different ways Hashem reveals Himself. The secret is not to live in one of them. It is in the pathways of love that join them: the *yud-gimmel middos she-haTorah nidreshes bahen*, the thirteen principles through which the Torah is expounded, which Rabbi Yishmael received and transmitted as *halachah l'Moshe mi-Sinai*, law given to Moshe at Sinai.[2]

Three Thirteens

These thirteen are more than tools *Chazal* used to draw new *halachos* out of the verses. As the *tzaddikim* teach, they are bound up with every other thirteen, and the series sets three lists side by side. There are the thirteen *middos* by which the Torah is expounded. There are the thirteen *middos* of *rachamim*, the attributes of mercy.[3] And there are the thirteen *ikkarei emunah*, the principles of faith.[4] Following the Komarna Rebbe, each *middah* is read together with its partners in the other two lists. Beneath them all lie deeper Kabbalistic structures. They are thirteen ways the mind is meant to work.

The guides are Rav Kook, in his commentary on the *siddur*, and his student the *Nazir*, Rav David Cohen, alongside the *Rama mi-Pano* and the Komarna Rebbe.[5]

Three Lenses

Each *middah* is looked at three ways:

1. As a way of thinking: its hermeneutics, the cognitive move it makes, and the orientation it requires.

2. As a spiritual ideal: how the move becomes a way of thinking about Hashem and drawing Him into life.
3. As a tool for daily living, so that our lives become a *sugya* of *Shas*.

As Rebbe Nachman says, you can learn *shor shenagach es ha-parah*, the ox that gored the cow, and that is a fine fulfillment of Torah. But you can also live it. We live in a world of damages, working out how to deal with this and that. Living with Hashem on the fly means living in *Torah Sheb'al Peh*. The hope is to live a little more like *Chazal*, to open our hearts a little more to the *ruach ha-kodesh* that remains, and so to bring all this worldliness back to Hashem.

This Part

Part One lays the foundation and takes the first step. Its first section asks why the thirteen *middos* exist at all: *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is what happens when prophecy ends, and its night is the plan, not the fall. The second asks what thinking is: always translation, a likeness rather than an identity, held faithful by rules. The third enters the first *middah*, *kal vachomer*, with its partners *Keil* and the first *ikkar*, and follows it from a simple inference all the way to the Infinite and back down to a person's worst moments.

Notes

1. *Koheles* 12:11; read in *Chagigah* 3b as the single source behind all the disputing opinions of the sages.
2. The *Baraisa d'Rabbi Yishmael*, at the opening of the *Sifra* (*Toras Kohanim*), recited daily after the morning *korbanos*.
3. *Shemos* 34:6–7.
4. As formulated by the Rambam and recited in *Yigdal* and the *Ani Ma'amin*.
5. Rav Kook's commentary on the *Baraisa* appears in his *siddur* commentary, *Olas Re'iyah*.

I

Pathways of Love

The first question is why. Why should the Torah need rules for interpretation, and why should those rules be bound up with mercy?

The answer this section builds is that *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is the Jewish way of hearing Hashem's voice after prophecy ends: by thinking, within limits Hashem Himself set. The thirteen *middos* are those limits. They refine the imagination until the mind becomes a vessel for revelation. And the descent from the clarity of the Written Torah into the night of the Oral Torah is not a regrettable fall. It is *lechatchilah*—the plan from the start.

CHAPTER 1

When Prophecy Ends

The Nazir

The *Nazir* was among Rav Kook's closest students.[1] A Volozhin-trained genius who had gone to Switzerland to study Western philosophy, he met Rav Kook there during the First World War[2] and gave himself wholly to his teachings, compiling them into *Oros HaKodesh*.

He also developed a real longing to receive prophecy. He took on *nezirus* and spent his life trying to recover the voice of God. One of the ways he saw us recovering it day to day was through *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, through learning Gemara. For the *Nazir*, the Talmud is what happens when prophecy ends. A religion built on God revealing Himself must go on when He no longer speaks: we need to hear His voice, and He is not speaking. That is the problem *Chazal* are solving.

Chacham Adif Mi-Navi

Chazal give a hint: *chacham adif mi-navi*—the sage is, in a sense, greater than the prophet.[3] The Ramban explains it, and Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin builds a world on it.[4] Prophecy, like *Torah Shebichsav*, is revealed: loud and clear. Yet hidden within *chochmah*—human understanding, human wrestling with meaning—there is something that gives the soul a deeper insight than the Written Torah can. When we are forced, in prophecy's absence, into the realm of human wisdom, we can reveal something about the Torah more powerful than what the Torah itself reveals. That is the secret of *Torah Sheb'al Peh*.

This is how we become a vessel for prophecy again. When a Jew uses his reasoning properly and works through a question, legal or *hashkafic*, in the realm of *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, he re-enters the prophetic flow. For the *Nazir*, thinking is how Hashem speaks through us again.

Rules for the Freeway

But there are rules. A person can't open his mind, call it a freeway, and declare that whatever drives down it is the word of God. There are precise rules for how a Jew is meant to think, and these are the thirteen *middos*. Rebbe Nachman explains that left to itself, the imagination pulls a person in every direction: toward addiction, stuckness and fantasy. The thirteen *middos* refine the imagination until the mind can carry the light of Hashem.

That is what lets *Chazal* do something that would otherwise be heresy. If someone today said *al tikri zeh ela zeh*—"don't read the word this way, read it that way"—we would call him a *kofer*, a denier, for overriding the Written Torah. Yet *Chazal* do it constantly. It doesn't mean this; it means that. That freedom to read the text otherwise exists only through the gift of the thirteen *middos*, which are *halachah l'Moshe mi-Sinai*. Hashem Himself gave us a way to interpret His word. So the *middos* are more than a bridge from the general light of the Written Torah to the particulars of the Oral. They are thirteen pathways that let a human being think about the words of Hashem so that his own words become real.

In short: For the *Nazir*, *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is how the Jewish people go on hearing Hashem after prophecy ends: *chacham adif mi-navi*. But thinking only becomes revelation within rules. The thirteen *middos*, given at Sinai, refine the imagination so the mind can carry Hashem's word.

Notes

1. Rav David Cohen (1887–1972), known as "the *Nazir*" for his lifelong vow of *nezirus*.
2. Rav Kook was in St. Gallen, Switzerland, from 1914 to 1916, and the two met there in 1915.
3. *Bava Basra* 12a. The Ramban explains the line in his *chiddushim* there.
4. Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin (1823–1900), Chassidic thinker and halachist.

CHAPTER 2

Thirteen Middos of Compassion

After the Eigel

This is why the Maggid of Mezritch saw the thirteen *middos* of the Torah as one with the thirteen *middos* of *rachamim*, the attributes of mercy.[1] When do the *middos* of *rachamim* enter the world? After the *cheit ha-eigel*, the sin of the golden calf.

What was that sin? *Klal Yisrael* had lost sight of the Written Torah's true power. Moshe went up to Heaven, they couldn't see him, and they didn't know how to live without him. Left to their own imagination, they found ways to recapture him. They made a new leader, a new creature, something to lead them. Their mistake was to think that when *Torah Shebichsav* disappears, you manufacture another one. The task was to find a way of interpreting the Torah that would work for them now. That is what gives us the *luchos sheniyos*, the second tablets. The second *luchos* are *Torah Sheb'al Peh*: not the clarity of the first, but the struggle of wading through the details of human life.

And what passes between the breaking of the first *luchos* and the giving of the second? The thirteen *middos* of *rachamim*. Hashem teaches Moshe how to tell the people they are still all right. You fell, you lost prophecy, the first *luchos* are broken. But here is the secret of *rachamim*: thirteen principles that draw Hashem's endless compassion down into moments that feel impossible.

The two sets work the same way. Each is thirteen pathways from an original ideal that is no longer here into the new, murky territory of a human being who craves the voice of God, admits he can't hear it, and is shown the way forward anyway.

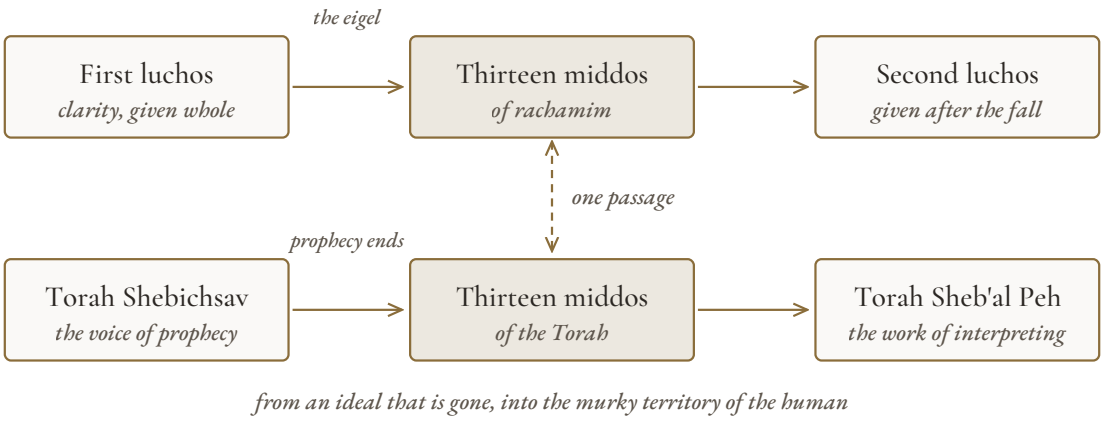


Figure 1. *One passage told twice. The thirteen middos of rachamim carry the people from the broken first luchos to the second; the thirteen middos of the Torah carry the Written Torah into the Oral.*

Stroking the Beard

The Bnei Yissaschar points to an ordinary habit. When someone is stuck on a *sugya*, he strokes his beard. Why should that be the reflex? Because, as we know from the Arizal, the thirteen *middos* of *rachamim* correspond to the thirteen *tikkunei dikna*, the rectifications of the beard.[2] Whether or not you have a beard, you have one: these are thirteen spiritual channels through which the light of Godliness is drawn down into measured form. It is told of the Baal Shem Tov that when he *davened*, his beard spread in thirteen directions.

So learning, the *middos* of the Torah and the *middos* of *rachamim* are bound together. When the mind can't break through, when it doesn't know how to carry the light of the Written Torah into the Oral, its natural reaction is to awaken the thirteen *middos* of *rachamim*. That is the pipeline through which new Torah comes down.

Rav Yosef Engel

One could object that this is only *derush*, a homiletic flourish. But Rav Yosef Engel—a Kabbalist and a *chassid* at heart, and at the same time a master of *Shas* and *poskim*, who wanted to awaken the playfulness of Torah and the prophecy hidden in it—uses this very alignment to explain a *halachah*. Why is it a rule that *ein onshin min ha-din*, that no one may be punished on the strength of a *kal vachomer*? Because once the two sets are aligned, the first *middah* of the Torah, *kal vachomer*, corresponds to the first *middah* of compassion, *Keil*—Hashem's *chesed*, His loving-kindness. A tool rooted in *chesed* can't be used to punish. The terms of one realm carry over into the other. Chapter 18 returns to this in full.

In short: The thirteen *middos* of *rachamim* came after the golden calf to carry the people from the broken first *luchos* to the second, which are *Torah Sheb'al Peh*. The thirteen *middos* of the Torah do the same work, and the two sets line up so closely that Rav Yosef Engel derives *halachah* from the match.

Notes

1. *Shemos* 34:6–7.
2. In the Zohar's *Idra Rabba*, the "beard" of *Arich Anpin* has thirteen *tikkunim*, channels of mercy.

CHAPTER 3

Torah of the Night

The Moon

To understand the thirteen *middos*, we need to know why Hashem created *Torah Sheb'al Peh* at all.

The Midrash Tanchuma at the beginning of *Parshas Noach* describes the covenant of the Oral Torah.[1] One who learns *Torah Sheb'al Peh* takes on a night of experience: concealment, unclarity, a world where it is nearly impossible to know what is going on. Living on *pas b'melach*, bread with salt, is not only physical deprivation.[2] It is cognitive: a person breaking his head to work out what *Chazal* actually mean.

Chazal say that on the mountain Moshe knew it was night when Hashem taught him *Torah Sheb'al Peh*.[3] The Oral Torah is like the moon, which receives from the sun and has no light of its own. *Chazal* knew this, and they had a holy humor about it; you can't begin learning without a *milsa d'bedichusa*, a word of levity. When they looked for a verse about their own project, the Gemara, they chose *b'machashakim hoshivani k'meisei olam*—"He has set me in darkness, like the long dead"—and said: this is the Talmud Bavli.[4] They named *Torah Sheb'al Peh* as restoration from inside the darkness. The truth is obscured on purpose, so that the Oral Torah can emerge the way it does: confusing and confounding.

	Torah Shebichsav	*Torah Sheb'al Peh*
Light	the sun	the moon, receiving
Time	day	night: *Me'eimasai... b'arvin*
Sense	seeing revelation	*ta shma*: hearing its echoes
Sefirah	*chochmah*	*binah*
Tree	*Eitz HaChaim*	*Eitz HaDa'as Tov V'Ra*
Tablets	the first *luchos*	the second *luchos*
Avos	Avraham hears Hashem	Yitzchak listens to Avraham
Reach	universal: the nations claim it	the secret *bris* with Israel

Figure 2. *Two ways Hashem reveals Himself. Each row is one of the chapter's pairings.*

The Secret Bris

Rav Hutner explains in *Pachad Yitzchak*, in the first *ma'amar* on Chanukah, that the Written Torah is given openly. The nations have access to it. It is meant as a universal light, the sunlight of redemption, and they do claim it as their "Old Testament." *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is the covenant Hashem forges with the Jewish people alone. And how many covenants are there? Thirteen, matching the thirteen *middos*.[5]

What keeps the Oral Torah a secret between *Klal Yisrael* and Hashem? Exactly its murky waters: the concealment, the mental acrobatics needed to reach *limud ha-Gemara aliba d'hilchesa*, learning the Gemara through to the practical law. The nations want sunlight; they want no part of the descent. The moonlight of *Klal Yisrael*—whispering in the shadows, breaking our heads over words we may never fully grasp—is the *bris* of *Torah Sheb'al Peh*: clarifying the darkness of night to uncover the light of day.

Me'eimasai

That is why the Oral Torah opens as it does: *Me'eimasai korin es Shema b'arvin?*—"From when do we read the *Shema* in the evening?"[6] The whole edifice begins with the question of the night. I am in the time of *arvin*, I don't know what to do, and I have to cry out. How do I find the oneness of Hashem here? The answer is *Torah Sheb'al Peh*. The Arizal reads *me'eimasai* not only as "from when" but as "from my dread," from *eimah*: from my fears and my anxiety. My anxiety itself propels me to cry *Shema Yisrael* in the night.

A world of *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is like a *daf* of Gemara. There are roundabout routes; there is *chasurei michasra*, "the text is missing something"; *iba'is eima*, "if you like, say this instead"; *teiku*, an unresolved question; *tiyuvta*, a refutation. What better way to bring a person into mature reality than to force him through a confusing text? That is the *bilbul*, the confusion, of the Talmud Bavli. The realm of the Oral Torah is where we take the imagination and use it to recover the light of Hashem.

The Gemara as the Site of Prophecy

When the *Nazir* published *Kol HaNevuah*,[7] Rav Aharon Lichtenstein put its claim sharply: a Jew who sits before a Gemara isn't only fulfilling the *mitzvah* of learning; he is re-entering the prophetic stream, so that the Gemara becomes the site of prophecy. A remarkable idea, he said, but he could not necessarily agree.

On the path of *Chassidus*, though, look at what the *tzaddikim* do when they learn. They are connecting to the light of *Elokus*, Godliness. Hashem shines from every white space of the Gemara, as much as from the Written Torah: from the details, the murkiness, the struggle to make order out of this world. The *tzaddikim* connect *Gemara* to *gumra*, a coal not yet aflame: the more you breathe on it, the more light comes out. The whole world is a *daf* of Gemara, and the way to live in it is through the thirteen *middos*.

They asked Reb Dovid of Lelov what he would learn in *Gan Eden*. He said, "*Maseches Reb Dovid Lelover*." Each life is one long tractate of questions and answers, *shakla v'tarya*. Our job is to find our way through a world darkened on purpose, because light that comes out of darkness is far stronger than light that never passed through it.

Chochmah and Binah

The Written Torah is clarity, revelation, daytime. I know what's written. It belongs to *chochmah*, wisdom given whole and ordered. The Oral Torah is *binah*, understanding one thing from another. Its signature is *ta shma*, "come and hear." Hearing is an experience of distance. It is not seeing the light of revelation; it is hearing its echoes. The radical project of *Chazal* is that within those echoes lies a hidden way of restoring prophecy.

In short: The Oral Torah is Torah of the night: the moon, *b'machashakim*, the *Shema* of *arvin*. Its obscurity is not a defect. It is what makes it Hashem's secret covenant with Israel, and for the *tzaddikim*, it is where His light shines from within the struggle.

Notes

1. *Tanchuma*, *Noach* 3.
2. *Avos* 6:4.
3. *Shemos Rabbah* 47:8.
4. *Eichah* 3:6; *Sanhedrin* 24a.
5. Mishnah *Nedarim* 3:11 (of *milah*).
6. Mishnah *Berachos* 1:1 (2a), the first words of the Mishnah and the Talmud.
7. *Kol HaNevuah* (1970).

CHAPTER 4

The Descent Is Lechatchilah

Not a Consolation Prize

One could assume that ideally there would be only the Written Torah, plus *Sefer Yehoshua* to divide *Eretz Yisrael*.[1] But the *luchos* were broken, there was the calf and the striking of the rock, and so we had to receive all the unfolding *masechtos*. *Maseches* is related to *masecha*, a covering, something that blocks. On that reading the Oral Torah is an unfortunate symptom: we can't live in sunlight, so we manage by moonlight. That makes it *b'dieved*, second best.

The same could be said of the two trees in *Gan Eden*. As the *Tikkunei Zohar* and the *Gra* explain, the *Eitz HaChaim*, the Tree of Life, is the Written Torah, and the *Eitz HaDa'as Tov V'Ra*, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, is the six orders of the Mishnah: good and bad, right and wrong, pure and impure. In the realm of the Tree of Life everything is clear. *Eitz chaim hi la-machazikim bah*: it is a tree of life to those who hold it (*Mishlei* 3:18). We hug the Written Torah and dance with it. The Oral Torah is the entrance into the *heichal ha-temuros*, the chamber of changes, where one thing goes up and another down, and *eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim chaim*, these and those are both the words of the living God (*Eruvin* 13b).

We might think: *nebech*, Adam ate from the wrong tree and had to leave *Gan Eden*. Heaven forbid. The *tzaddikim* teach plainly that it is *lechatchilah*. The descent from the Tree of Life to the Tree of Knowledge, from *Gan Eden* to the world outside it, from Sinai to the confusion of exile, is not a cosmic mistake to be repaired. It is the choreography Hashem planned from the outset.

Why? Because Hashem wants a dwelling place in the lowest places: in the details of this world, in *shor shenagach es ha-parah*, the ox that gored the cow (*Bava Kamma* 46a). Look how everyone is introduced to the Oral Torah: *shnayim ochazin b'tallis*, two people holding a garment, each claiming it is all his.[2] Someone is lying. That is the world you are entering, a world of *sheker*, of falsehood, and that is where Hashem wants to be found.

Yitzchak in the Field

Vayeitzei Yitzchak lasuach ba-sadeh lifnos arev: Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field toward evening (*Bereishis* 24:63). The *Chasam Sofer* says that Yitzchak, listening to Avraham at the *Akeidah* without hearing Hashem himself, is the first instance of *Torah Sheb'al Peh*. The Baal HaTanya teaches in *Torah Ohr* that the field is the field of the Oral Torah, where Yitzchak went to find his way. *Lifnos arev*: to clarify the *irbuvya*, the mixture and confusion of ideas. That is the *avodah* of the night.

It is *lechatchilah* because the further we descend into the particulars, the more we reveal the secret of *chacham adif mi-navi*. The abundance of Torah comes from exactly this intensity of concealment. Had Moshe's teachings not been forgotten during the days of mourning for him, Osniel ben Kenaz would never have had to restore them through *pilpul*, sharp reasoning (*Temurah* 16a).

The Refined Imagination

The Oral Torah offers one more thing the Written does not, and it is the gateway to redemption: the use of the imagination. The imagination is rectified through the thirteen *middos*. That is why no one may make a *gezeirah shavah*, a comparison between two verses that share a word, on his own authority.[3] As Rebbe Nachman teaches, Moshe Rabbeinu had a *dimyon mezukak*, a refined imagination, and only that can make associations where the link isn't obvious.

Within the forgetting, we are forced to uncover our own share in Torah. *Lamdanus*, analytic learning, shares its language with *l'dameh*, to liken, to imagine. Through the imagination we recover more than prophecy. *U-v'yad ha-nevi'im adameh*: "through the prophets I am imagined" (*Hoshea* 12:11). We can be prophets without the prophetic voice. Rav Tzadok describes the wisdom of *Chazal*, present in every Jew, as *ruach ha-kodesh*, the holy spirit, which pulses through every word of *Chazal*, all the more so the *aggadeta*. We try to see how *lamdanus*, imagination and thought can bring us *ruach ha-kodesh*, not only in learning but walking through the *shuk* and talking with our families.

Mortar and Bricks

The whole descent into Egypt was, as the *Tikkunei Zohar* teaches, the root of the struggle of *Torah Sheb'al Peh*. *B'chomer u-vi'leveinim*, with mortar and with bricks: *chomer* is *kal vachomer*, and *leveinim* is *libun hilchesa*, the whitening, the clarifying, of the law.[4] To awaken the exile of Egypt and the redemption from it, enter the Oral Torah; enter the thirteen *middos*. The task, as the Arizal told Rav Chaim Vital, is to break our heads over the revealed Torah, so that we clarify this worldliness and reveal Hashem's light within it.

The Wondrous Union

That is why the Baal HaTanya says that in the cave, Rashbi was not learning the Zohar; he was learning Mishnah and *halachah*. In *Tanya*, chapters 4 and 5, he describes the *yichud nifla*, the wondrous union of Torah study: as you learn, your mind encompasses the Torah and is encompassed by it. The later Chabad Rebbes, commenting on the *Tanya*, note that this applies chiefly to the revealed Torah, because the mind can actually grasp it. With the hidden Torah the mind grasps nothing: you are held by Hashem, but you aren't holding Him. In *nigleh* there is a union found nowhere else, precisely because the mind can reason it through.

The secret of *lamdanus* is that even when you're wrong you're right, so long as you have a *sevara yesharah*, straight reasoning, and learn the right way: *lishmah*, for its own sake, or at least aiming at it. Not to aggrandize yourself, manipulate or win. Of one who learns for those reasons, *Chazal* say it would have been better had he never been created (*Berachos* 17a). But learning with some measure of honest reasonableness, the reasoning itself is the reward.

Heaven Brought Down to the Ground

Malchus, kingship, the last *sefirah*, is the final frontier, like David HaMelech, whose hands were stained with blood in his effort to declare a woman pure for her husband (*Berachos* 4a). *Halachah* is the acronym of *Hari'u la-Hashem kol ha-aretz*, "Call out to Hashem, all the earth" (*Tehillim* 98:4; 100:1). *Halachah* is not "I can't be in Heaven, so I'll settle for the ground." *Aderaba*, on the contrary: I have tasted Heaven, and to really taste it I bring it down to the ground, a *dirah ba-tachtonim*, a dwelling in the lowest realms. The *Gra* notes that *Talmud* has the letters of *das lamo* in *eish das lamo*, "a fiery law for them."[5] The Talmud is the fire of revelation found in murky places, reminding us that all the noise and all the opinions are rooted in Hashem's single voice.

In short: The descent from the Tree of Life into the Tree of Knowledge, from Sinai into exile, is *lechatchilah*: Hashem wants to be found in the details and even in the *sheker*. There the imagination, refined by the *middos*, recovers more than prophecy, and the mind reaches a union with Torah possible nowhere else.

Notes

1. *Nedarim* 22b.
2. Mishnah *Bava Metzia* 1:1 (2a), the first Mishnah many children learn.
3. *Pesachim* 66a: one may apply a *gezeirah shavah* only if he received it from his teachers.
4. *Shemos* 1:14; Zohar I 27a (*Tikkunim* material).
5. *Devarim* 33:2. תלמוד and דת למו are the same five letters.

CHAPTER 5

Ten, Three, and the Hidden Vav

Echad and Ahavah

The *Gra* and his students point out that to join two opposites, things that seem to have nothing to do with each other, you must uncover a hidden unity: *echad*, oneness.

If I wake with a split screen in my mind—Written and Oral, light and dark, sun and moon, rebbe and student—everything will feel split. Maybe I can learn to tolerate opposites, to live with the clarity of one and the unclarity of the other. But tolerance isn't the goal. The goal is to turn apparent opposites into a living paradox in which both are happening at once. We begin with a contradiction, prophecy's illumination and exile's concealment, and the real secret is the *achdus*, the unity, that shows each to be part of a larger whole.

That, say the *Gra* and his students—Rav Yitzchak Isaac Chaver in many places—is the *ahavah*, the love, of the thirteen *middos*.[1] Thirteen is the numerical value of both *ahavah* and *echad*.[2] To connect the two Torahs, we have to connect ourselves to the deepest light there is, the light that can hold both. So the thirteen *middos* aren't only rules of interpretation. They are the hidden paths by which Hashem reveals Himself in daily life.

Ten and Three

In the introduction to his commentary on the *middos*, Rav Kook writes that there are two numbers to consider: ten and three.

Ten—he develops this at length in *Reish Millin*—is *ribui ha-mis'acheid*, multiplicity unified.[3] All we really have are the numbers one through nine; after that they repeat. Nine is the full spread of difference, three threes: *Chochmah*, *Binah*, *Da'as*; *Chesed*, *Gevurah*, *Tiferes*; *Netzach*, *Hod*, *Yesod*. Gather it all into one and you have ten, the *yud*, a tiny drop. Ten is all difference made one.

Three is a dangerous number. Other paths have stretched three into real separation. Two we can handle: *achas dibber Elokim, shtayim zu shamati*—"God spoke once; twice have I heard it."[4] One is two and two is one. But three is movement in three directions, spreading into noise and difference. So ten is separation gathered into unity, and three is unity unfolding into separation.

The *Baraisa* of Rabbi Yishmael, says Rav Kook, holds both. It has the three, the expansion into details and more details that is *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, together with the faith that all the details lead to a deeper unity, the *yud*. Ten and three are thirteen, *echad* and *ahavah*. True unity holds both: the spreading out of detail and the gathering of detail into principle.

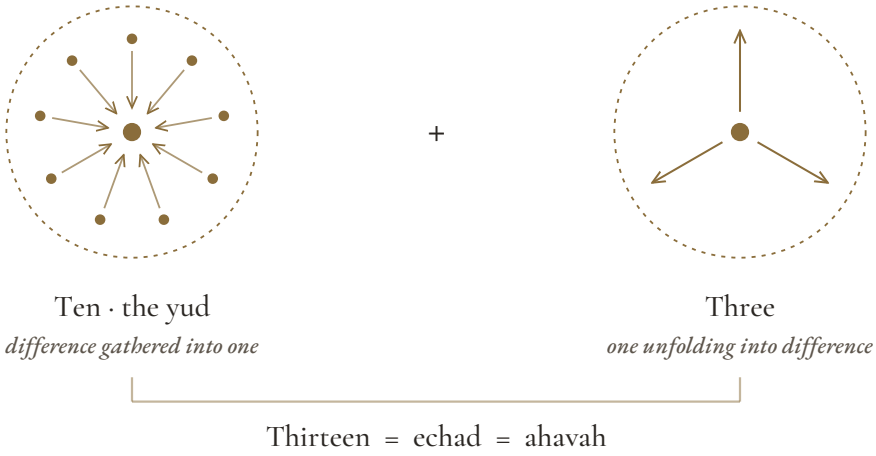


Figure 3. *Rav Kook's ten and three. Ten gathers difference into one; three unfolds one into difference. The thirteen middos hold both movements, and thirteen is echad and ahavah.*

The Middle Letter

You could talk endlessly about the Gemara's structure, about Bavli and Yerushalmi, *ta shma* and *ta chazi*. Learn the *Gra* and his students from Shklov and you reach a theology in which the deepest thing a person can do is sit before a *daf* and receive whatever orientation of soul unfolds there, above all in the strange, meandering, maddening *aggadeta*. You have to know how. And that is the *vav*.

Chazal ask: what is the middle of the Torah? The early sages were called *soferim*, counters, because they counted its letters, and so they found its innermost letter: the enlarged *vav* of *gachon* in *Parshas Shemini*, *kol holech al gachon*, every creature that crawls on its belly is impure.[5] That is the belly of the snake, the very place of concealment, and there the Torah hides its center. Spell out the *vav*—*vav*, *aleph*, *vav*—and it equals thirteen: *ahavah*, *echad*, and the thirteen *middos*.[6]

Every *masechta* is another *tzimtzum*, another contraction of the light. So is every *daf*, every line. Every question in a *Tosafos* awakens *mayin nukvin*, a longing from below for Hashem to send down clarity. The more we think our way through *Shas*, the more Hashem's light is revealed down here.

In short: Thirteen is *echad* and *ahavah*: the love that holds opposites as one. Rav Kook reads it as ten (difference gathered) plus three (unity unfolding). Its emblem is the *vav*, the hidden middle of the Torah, found in the belly of concealment and worth thirteen when spelled out.

Notes

1. Rav Yitzchak Isaac Chaver (1789–1852), Kabbalist in the *Gra*'s school.
2. 13 = אחד ;13 = אהבה.
3. *Reish Millin* (1917), Rav Kook's short mystical treatise on the letters and vowels.
4. *Tehillim* 62:12.
5. *Vayikra* 11:42; *Kiddushin* 30a.
6. 13 = 6 + 1 + 6 = ואו.

CHAPTER 6

Turning Torah into Tefillah

Wholeness and Lack

Modeling himself on David HaMelech, Rebbe Nachman describes the whole choreography of a Jewish life as turning Torah into *tefillah*, prayer.[1]

At first the two look separate. Torah is the realm of intellect. As Rav Tzadok explains, it brings a feeling of wholeness: I identify with what I know, what I can conquer, how much I can gather. *Tefillah* is the realm of lack. The *Ikkarim* says so, and the Maharal builds his treatment of prayer on it: we *daven* for many reasons, but mainly to recognize that we depend on Hashem, and that without Him we are incomplete.

The Beis Yaakov asks why a drunk may not pray. The Gemara describes the drunk as one to whom *kol ha-olam domeh lo k'mishor*, the whole world looks like a level plain: no struggle, no issue, which is what anyone seeks in intoxication. That is the opposite of prayer. Prayer is *hakaras ha-chesaron*, recognizing what I lack.

So Torah and *tefillah*, the mind's wholeness and the heart's lack, seem to be two kinds of consciousness. Torah is *chayei olam*, eternal life; *tefillah* is *chayei sha'ah*, the life of the hour (*Shabbos* 10a). Turning Torah into *tefillah*—the *Rishonim* already model it in the *Iggeres HaRamban*—means not letting what I understand sit in my mind as another deposit in the bank.[2] It means giving it existential weight in how I live. Torah is meant to be the healing salve that lets a Jew function here. What good is Torah learned in a Petri dish, if I sit in *kollel* all day and never meet the world? *Pilpul* for its own sake can fill the head. The goal is to bring it down into lived experience, which is the realm of *tefillah*.

Siman Nun

Reb Noson did this with *Likkutei Tefillos*. But most of us do it without knowing: every morning, at the start of *Shacharis*, we bring the thirteen *middos* into our prayer. This is *Siman Nun*, section fifty, of *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim*. Rav Tzadok says the *simanim* themselves can be expounded, and the *Kereisi U'Pleisi*, Rav Yehonasan Eybeschutz, did exactly that.[3]

Siman Nun has us include three layers of Torah in *tefillah*: *Mikra*, *Mishnah* and *Talmud*. *Parshas HaTamid* is *Mikra*, *Eizehu Mekoman* is *Mishnah*, and the *Baraisa* of Rabbi Yishmael is *Talmud*, because *midrash* counts as Talmud. *Siman Nun* is *Sha'ar HaNun*, the fiftieth gate: the joining of Torah and *tefillah*.

The *Gra* notes, and the Chafetz Chaim brings in the *Mishnah Berurah*, that this *baraisa* was chosen to stand for the Talmud because it opens *Toras Kohanim*, the book of *korbanos*. We no longer have the *Beis HaMikdash*. We have learning about it, to the point that one who studies the *korbanos* is considered as if he had offered them (*Menachos* 110a). To bring us into the question—how do I bring *korbanos* without a *Beis HaMikdash*?—we say the first *baraisa* of *Toras Kohanim*.

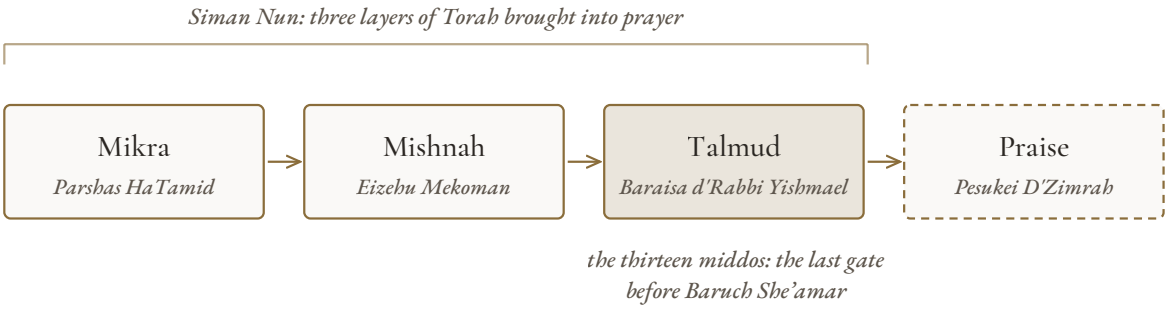


Figure 4. *Siman Nun: the morning order. Mikra, Mishnah and Talmud lead into the praise of Pesukei D'Zimrah, and the thirteen middos are the last step before it.*

A Lamdan on Reality

There is another reason. The Gemara is not only a body of information. It is a way of thinking. There is the content of the Oral Torah and there is the frame through which a person learns to think like *Chazal*. *Chazal* has the value of *mah*, "what," the word of *bittul*, self-effacement.[4] The best way to learn to think like them is to see the rules they themselves had to follow.

So right before *Pesukei D'Zimrah* we enter through the thirteen *middos*. Think about it. A person gets up to say *Baruch She'amar v'hayah ha-olam*, "Blessed is He who spoke and the world came to be." That is a radical affirmation: affirming goodness while setting aside many difficult things. *Pesukei D'Zimrah* is praise of Hashem's world, testimony that nature testifies to Godliness. A *tzaddik* can do that. How is little old me supposed to do it every morning, cranky and tired?

So *Chazal* tell us: you'll have to interpret. You'll have to be a *lamdan* on reality, and you'll need the thirteen *middos*. Sometimes the goodness is plainly revealed. Sometimes the verse isn't clear, another verse contradicts it, and I need the same roundabout reasoning *Chazal* used to reach the conclusion of a *sugya*. There is no better entry into *Pesukei D'Zimrah* than saying: Hashem, I may not see the *halachah* clearly in front of me, but I'm willing to interpret until I see You in this world.

The Last Middah

There is a tradition in the name of the Ruzhiner that just as the *middos* of *rachamim* correspond to periods of history, so do the *middos* of the Torah. Each epoch follows its own *middah*. Already in his time, he said that *ikvesa d'Meshicha*, the footsteps of *Mashiach*, corresponds to the last *middah*: *shnei kesuvim ha-machchishim zeh es zeh, ad she-yavo ha-kasuv ha-shelishi v'yachria beineihem*—two verses that contradict each other, until a third comes and decides between them. Two postulates, not yet settled, waiting. That is our generation. You can see it, he said, in that whatever you say, someone will come along and disagree.

In short: Rebbe Nachman's goal is to turn Torah, the mind's wholeness, into *tefillah*, the heart's lack. Every morning *Siman Nun* does it: the thirteen *middos* stand at the gate of *Pesukei D'Zimrah*, teaching us to be *lamdanim* on reality until we can praise Hashem in it. And our generation, the Ruzhiner says, lives in the last *middah*, waiting for the third verse.

Notes

1. *Likkutei Moharan* II 25.
2. The Ramban's letter to his son: whenever you finish learning, search what you learned for something you can fulfill.
3. Rav Yehonasan Eybeschutz (c. 1690–1764).
4. מה = 45 = חזל. Moshe and Aharon say *v'nachnu mah*, "what are we?" (*Shemos* 16:7).

II

Thinking as Translation

The *middos* are rules for thinking. So before entering the first of them, we have to ask: what is thinking?

Yiddishkeit is not trying to recreate *Moshe Rabbeinu*'s prophecy. That happened, and in some form it will happen again: *Torah chadashah me'iti teitzei*, "a new Torah will go forth from Me," a re-forming of the same letters we have now.[1] In between lies *Torah Sheb'al Peh*: the way to survive exile without prophecy.

The Baal Shem Tov was once walking with his daughter Udel and his early *chassidim* toward an inn. It began to rain, then to pour. The *chassidim* weren't troubled; they were with their rebbe. But Udel, who as a daughter could ask what no one else would, said, "*Ta*, when are we going to get there?" "*B'siyata d'shmaya*, with Heaven's help, Hashem will help us get there." The rain grew heavier; she asked again and got the same answer. Finally she said, "But who is going to help us *until* we get there?"

That is the question *Torah Sheb'al Peh* answers. The clarity of Moshe's revelation opens the Jewish story and will close it. As the Ohr HaChaim teaches, *Moshe* is *Mashiach* and *Mashiach* is *Moshe*: *hu rishon v'hu acharon*, he is the first and the last.[2] The story closes with the Torah of *Atika Stima'ah*, a Torah freed of all stuckness and human complication.[3] Between them runs the long, winding road of the Oral Torah: the Gemara, the work of finding meaning inside concealment.

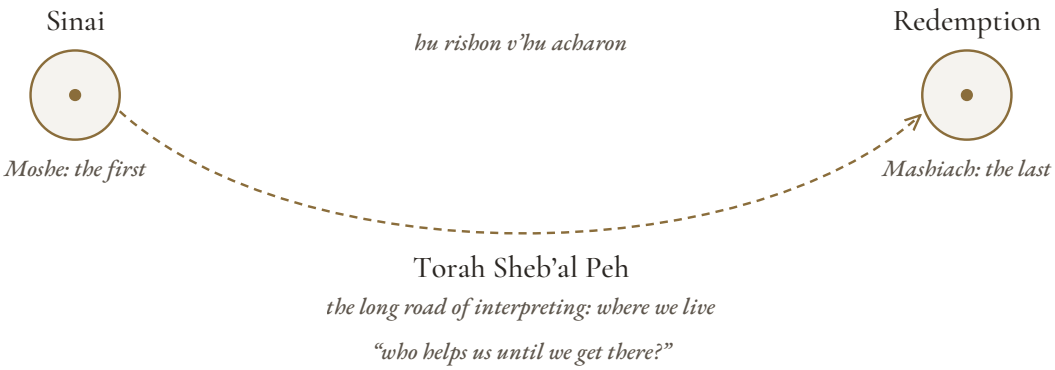


Figure 5. *The arc of the Jewish story. Revelation stands at both ends; between them runs the road of the Oral Torah, where we live.*

This section's answer: all thinking is translation, never the source, always a step removed, a likeness rather than an identity. That is not a weakness. It is the way Hashem chose to be found in exile, and the thirteen *middos* are what keep the translation faithful.

Notes

1. *Vayikra Rabbah* 13:3, on *Yeshayahu* 51:4.
2. Rav Chaim ibn Attar (1696–1743), author of the *Ohr HaChaim* commentary on the Torah.
3. *Atika Stima'ah*, "the Hidden Ancient One": in the Zohar, the innermost dimension of *Kesser*.

CHAPTER 7

Learning Is Translation

Thought Before Thinking

Thought in its original form needs no teacher. The *neshama*, the soul, in its purified state receives exactly what it needs, without time, without language, without the labor of understanding. It isn't meant to *understand* wisdom; it is meant to *be* wisdom. That is the promise of *v'lo yilm'du od ish es rei'eihu*: in the future no one will need to teach another, because what is revealed will simply be known.[1]

Thinking is something else. It is always derivative, a step below revelation. Every way the mind takes in the world—sight, sound, sense, memory—is one step removed from the source. Revelation is what it is; understanding is what happens afterward, in its absence. The *tzaddikim* find this in *Tehillim*: *achas dibber Elokim, shtayim zu shamati*.[2] God spoke once. What I heard was two: a splitness, the need to work out how to understand a oneness.

The Aleph Is Translation

Rav Kook opens *Reish Millin* with the *aleph*. *Ha-aleph me'ir banu es ha-machshavah shel ha-reishis*: the *aleph* lights up in us the thought of the beginning. We behold its greatness and fall silent before its wonder. Its one teaching is *l'hakshiv, lilmod*—to listen, to learn: *l'alef*.

Here is a puzzle. *Aleph*, as in *ulpan*, is the Aramaic word for learning, the *targum*, the translation, of *limud*.[3] If the second letter, *beis*, were derivative, that would make sense. But that the very first spark of thought should carry its meaning *in translation*—and translation is always interpretation—is surprising.

Rav Kook answers: *ha-ulpan zehu targum ha-limud*. The soul knows that whatever arrives through study is not the source. The source is the inner idea that can't be put into words. It was humanity's inheritance before, and it will be again on the great day when all will know Hashem *mi-ketanam v'ad gedolam*, from the least to the greatest. Until then, learning *is* translation. It is *achorayim*, the back side, of the thinking mind's face: *lo ha-oros ha-nishmatiyim, ela tardemasa*—not the wakeful light of the soul, but its slumber.

Holy Tongue and Targum

Lashon HaKodesh, the holy tongue, is the language of directness, where a thing is what it is. *Adam HaRishon* saw the essence of each creature and could name it in the holy tongue.[4] *Targum* is what happens when that directness is gone, when an original revelation has to be carried into a language that can mean

something at a distance. Translation and interpretation go together; both are second-degree responses to revelation. The moment I am conscious of anything, I am already interpreting it through my own lens and situation. The thing itself—ultimately *HaKadosh Baruch Hu b'chvodo u-v'atzmo*, Hashem Himself—lies beyond reach.

In short: Thinking is always one step below revelation: *achas dibber Elokim, shtayim zu shamati*. Rav Kook finds this in the *aleph* itself, whose name means learning in Aramaic. Learning is translation, the mind's slumber rather than the soul's waking light, until the day all will simply know.

Notes

1. *Yirmiyahu* 31:33.
2. *Tehillim* 62:12.
3. The verb is used even in Hebrew: *va-a'alefcha chochmah*, "and I will teach you wisdom" (*Iyov* 33:33).
4. *Bereishis* 2:19–20; *Bereishis Rabbah* 17:4.

CHAPTER 8

The Chaf of Anochi

The Gap

No interpretation will ever capture the original. Revelation always exceeds what interpretation can hold, because interpretation works across a distance. It reasons upward, inductively, trying to climb back toward a source it can't see. *Sof davar ha-kol nishma, es ha-Elokim yera*: "The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God" (*Koheles* 12:13). In the end, *yiras Hashem*, the awe of Heaven, names exactly this gap between revelation and everything derived from it.

Anochi, Not Ani

The *Mei HaShiloach* finds the same gap in the first word of *Matan Torah*: *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*.[1] Why *Anochi* and not *Ani*? *Ani*, says the Izhbitzer, would have meant that God emptied Himself out completely, leaving nothing further to understand. That is the idea of *kenosis*, a self-emptying God who discloses Himself totally and leaves only human commentary behind. The *chaf* of *Anochi* says otherwise: Hashem has never fully revealed Himself. *Toras Hashem temimah*: even after the totality of revelation, the Torah remains whole and perfect as before. *Chazal* read *Anochi* as *Ana nafshi kesavis yehavis*, "I wrote and gave My very self."[2] Even so, that self can never be wholly grasped.

In grammar, a *chaf* before a word is the *chaf ha-dimyon*, the *chaf* of likeness: *k'*, "like." It marks resemblance, not identity. Identity would mean interpretation stands level with revelation, that the Oral Torah carries the same force as the Written. It doesn't. Our task is to bring the Oral Torah back into the Written. But all my best estimations, all my greatest thinking, all the books on every shelf joined together, remain only *k'*: an imaginative attempt to discern the original revelation.

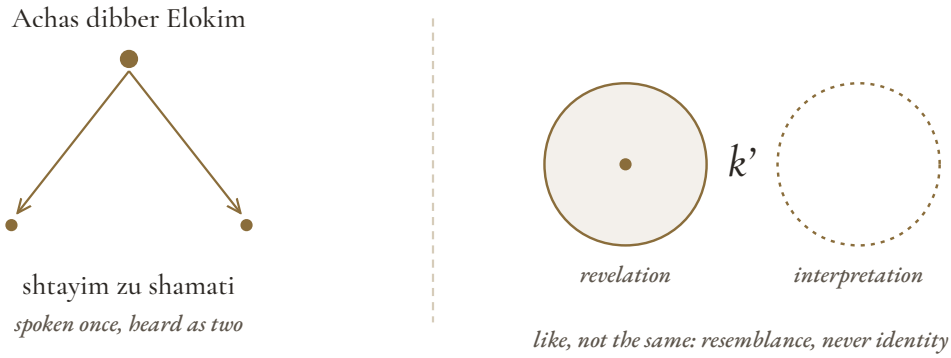


Figure 6. *One, then two. Revelation is a single point; what reaches us is heard twice, and every interpretation stands to it as k', "like": resemblance, not identity.*

The Strength of the Likeness

This is not a confession of weakness. It is the key to everything that follows. *Chazal* understood that the reawakened imagination is how we find Hashem in this world, so much so that imagination and *Torah Sheb'al Peh* turn out to be one. The thirteen *middos* show it: they are rooted in similarity, not identity. Every one of them rests on a *hekesh*, the mind's capacity to discern likeness within difference.

The Written Torah has no difference in it; it is unified. The Rimanover teaches that all that truly emerged at *Matan Torah* was the *aleph* of *Anochi*, and that single silent *aleph* still echoes through reality.[3] Everything else is *shtayim zu shamati*. Far from diminishing the Talmud Bavli and the human labor of understanding, this reveals its real strength. In the absence of prophecy, Hashem wants us to struggle through interpretation. Revelation is His work; interpretation is ours.

In short: Hashem said *Anochi*, not *Ani*: He gave Himself and remained beyond grasp. Every interpretation is *k'*, a likeness, and the thirteen *middos* are all built on likeness. That isn't the Oral Torah's weakness but its work: revelation is Hashem's, interpretation ours.

Notes

1. *Shemos* 20:2. Rav Mordechai Yosef of Izhbitz (1801–1854).
2. *Tehillim* 19:8; *Shabbos* 105a.
3. Cited by Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, ch. 1.

CHAPTER 9

Choosing a Lane

What Makes It True

If all thinking is interpretation, what makes an interpretation true?

Rebbe Nachman teaches that a reader can find wisdom in a *sefer* that its author never intended. Every written *sefer* of the Oral Torah is a *hora'as sha'ah*, an emergency measure: the Oral Torah was never meant to be written, and only the threat of forgetting permitted it (*Gittin* 60a). Once written, it takes on something of the Written Torah, and the letters of the true *tzaddikim* carry some of that power. But the *chiddush* is not that I've uncovered a secret the author buried. It is that, by the authority the thirteen *middos* grant a thinking Jew, my thinking—done with a proper *sevara* and a proper method—is what makes the interpretation true.

The Ohr HaChaim, cited also by the Kluger Rav, Rav Shlomo Kluger of Brody, says that in *aggadeta* it doesn't finally matter whether an insight is true *l'amitah shel Torah*, in the ultimate truth of Torah. What matters is that it was reached through *sevara yesharah*, straight reasoning, with the tools *Chazal* handed down. The Oral Torah is the opposite of fundamentalism. At its core stands *eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim chaim*, "these and those are the words of the living God," precisely because it claims no pure revelation (*Eruvin* 13b).

When Certainty Becomes Power

Treat the Oral Torah as if it were the Written, and it is corrupted. That tends to happen when power, which works by claiming certainty, gathers in rabbinic centers. It wasn't always manipulative. The *Chasam Sofer* was among the first *acharonim* to define precisely what a person must believe to remain within Orthodoxy, and he did it as an *eis la'asos*, an emergency: Reform was arriving with an interpretive freedom that knew no limit (see *Shu"t Chasam Sofer*, *Orach Chaim* 28). But over time that necessary firmness hardened into the sickness of *da'as Torah* as a mechanism of control.

A Lane, Not the Truth

So how do we know what's true? A person needs a rebbe, who has a rebbe, who has a rebbe; we trust the *mesorah*, the chain of tradition. In practice the halachic system is real and a person needs direction. We rely on our *rabbeim*. The secret is that a person chooses a lane and trusts it, not because it is the absolute truth, but because he has accepted it as *his* truth. Someone who keeps *mitzvos* and customs from a place of absolute certainty has missed the point.

Why is the *Akeidah* called Avraham's trial and not Yitzchak's? The *Chasam Sofer*, as we saw in Chapter 4, answers that Yitzchak never heard the command from Hashem. He heard it from his father and trusted him. That is the first *Torah Sheb'al Peh*: truth received through a person you have chosen to follow. So too for us. Once you choose your lane and your *Moshe Rabbeinu*, the rav through whom you understand Torah, his word becomes your certainty. It is relative, not absolute: you can live by it fully without claiming it is the capital-T Truth that cancels everyone else's.

This presumes self-knowledge, which our age of *ribui dei'os*, every view available at once, makes harder. *Da es atzmecha*, know yourself, says the tradition; and yet *lo eida nafshi*, "I don't know my own soul" (*Iyov* 9:21).

Contingent Knowledge

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, in *Chorev*, explains why *Chazal* follow *rov*, the majority, instead of chasing absolute clarity: all knowledge is contingent on what is available now. So too in *psak*, where context shapes the law as much as the text. We are not a finished product, yet we rely on the intimations of a path.

The same is true of following a *tzaddik*. Someone who says, "*Likkutei Moharan* is my path," may be mistaken; Rebbe Nachman never asked us to live directly by his own illumination. Hashem gave us the moon, which is what we receive from: Reb Noson, who drew out Rebbe Nachman's teachings and applied them. The Gemara speaks sharply against those who rule directly from the Mishnah (*Sotah* 22a). Each generation grows from the one before, and the farther from the source, the more hidden it becomes. All a person has is the *Moshe* of his own generation. At the heart of *Likkutei Moharan* and *Likkutei Halachos* is the *ner tamid*: there is always a *talmid chai*, a living student who draws the *tzaddik*'s words down in a form the next generation can hold. The purist who wants to live by the original truth alone will suffer real distortion, because the world changes, and wisdom has to change with it without being corrupted.

In short: An interpretation is true not because it recovers the author's hidden intent, but because it was reached with *sevara yesharah* and *Chazal*'s tools. So we choose a lane—a rebbe, a *mesorah*—and live by it fully, as our truth rather than the only truth, and we receive the *tzaddik* through the living students of our own generation.

CHAPTER 10

The Slumber of the Mind

Dreaming

Why does Rav Kook call translation the mind's *slumber*? Because it resembles dreaming. In a dream the mind doesn't create new content; it works over material already given. *Chazal* teach that dreams feed on the thoughts of the day.[1] Day is the Written Torah; night is the Oral. Dreams are Aramaic, translational, and so is *Torah Sheb'al Peh*. The thirteen *middos* are always an attempt to recover a meaning that faded when revelation ended.

We saw in Chapter 4 that this nighttime of the mind is not a regrettable fall but the plan. Here it turns personal, with a kind of holy humor: I know I lack the full picture. Rather than feeling unworthy of an opinion, the Oral Torah makes the human condition itself the site of a new, secondary revelation. The capacity to err, to be mistaken, to stand in argument with another voice, does not contradict wisdom. It is how wisdom is revealed.

The Power of Targum

That is why *targum* carries such force. The Gemara says the land of Israel shook when Yonasan ben Uziel made his *targum* of the Prophets, and when he sought to translate *Kesuvim* a heavenly voice stopped him, because it holds the end of days—in *Daniel*, which contains the secrets of *Mashiach*.[2] The Maharal draws the lesson that those secrets emerge from within the space of translation. The Maharal, Rebbe Nachman, and Rav Avraham ben Rav Nachman on *Torah* 19 all suggest that although *Lashon HaKodesh*, the language of vision and direct revelation, is the higher mode, *targum* holds a greater spiritual potency.[3]

Shnayim mikra v'echad targum: we read each verse twice and the *targum* once.[4] We read the verse twice because the Torah is the Torah. Then the *targum*—our stuckness in the human condition, our effort to recover lost meaning—becomes the vehicle that shows the power of the Written Torah, which can be revealed even in translation. Dig too deep into *targum* and you hasten a full revelation whose time has not yet come. Notice, too, that *shnayim mikra v'echad targum* mirrors *achas dibber Elokim, shtayim zu shamati* in reverse: there, one becomes two; here, two lead to one.

Why There Are Rules

We met the rules in Chapters 1 and 4: interpretation without limits is chaos, each person following *shri-rus libo*, the stubbornness of his heart, and no one may make a *gezeirah shavah* on his own. What the rules reveal is something more. If the Oral Torah were only a traumatic response to losing the Written, there would be no rules at all; each person would read whatever his method allowed. The existence of rules reveals an idealism hidden in the descent. Following them, as Rebbe Nachman sees it, is how one becomes *mezakech es ha-medameh*, purifying the imagination until the associations one draws are *k'das Moshe v'Yisrael*, true to Moshe and Israel.

In short: Translation is like dreaming: it works over what was given. *Chazal* don't treat this as a fall but as the way Hashem wants to be found, which is why *targum* holds hidden power. And because that power is real, it needs the thirteen *middos* to keep the imagination pure.

Notes

1. *Berachos* 55b: a person is shown in a dream only what comes from the thoughts of his heart.
2. *Megillah* 3a.
3. *Likkutei Moharan* I 19, on *Lashon HaKodesh* and *targum*; Rav Avraham Chazan (1849–1917), son of Reb Nachman of Tulchin, in *Biur HaLikkutim*.
4. *Berachos* 8a.

CHAPTER 11

Two Beginnings: Kesser and Chochmah

Beis Reishis

All of this reflects the deepest structure of how Hashem brings existence into being. *Bereishis* is *beis reishis*: two beginnings.

The Ramchal sets this out in *Kin'as Hashem Tzeva'os*, a remarkable work in which he takes up the claims of the Sabbatean heresy and the Zohar passages they twisted to reach their contorted conclusions.[1] He vindicates the words of Rashbi and the Arizal, shows how teachings that seem strange can be read clearly, and shows where the errors crept in. There he writes that the beginning of all things is two beginnings: *Kesser* and *Chochmah*.

All existence can be described as giver and receiver, *mashpia* and *mekabel*. Hashem reveals; creation receives. The work of the individual and of consciousness happens from *Chochmah* downward: preparing, understanding, doing the inner work. But the purpose of it all is to return to *Kesser*, where everything is one.

The Hidden and the Revealed Beginning

Kesser, the crown, is the realm of *achas dibber Elokim*, where only Hashem exists and only the Written Torah exists. It is hidden from us now. It will be revealed on the day when we no longer need teachers or books to find wisdom, when we can discern it from within, and even then only relatively. The revealed beginning is *Chochmah*: human ingenuity, our capacity to discern purpose in the world.

The Ramchal explains that the source of *Chochmah*—what we have been calling the interpretive realm of the Oral Torah—is what makes *bechirah*, free choice, possible. It is where darkness can cover light and a person must push it away. The source of *Kesser* is the root of the final rectification, which comes after all choice. The two run side by side. Hashem created the human being through *Chochmah*, but the world's purpose is to return to *Kesser*.

This fits what we have seen. The future revelation, clear and needing no interpretation, is the level of *Kesser*, a state of *mishtomemus*, wonder-struck silence, in which all is revealed. Below it, from *Chochmah* down, a creature separate from God must struggle to find the way back to His original light. That is why the Targum renders *Bereishis* as *b'chochmah*, "with wisdom": the beginning itself reaches us in transla-

tion.[2] To be human is to grapple with interpretation along winding roads. As Rav Kook said, thought is derivative because it is rooted in *Chochmah*; its summit, a return to the level of the Written Torah, is *Kesser*.

Why Not Chochmah and Binah?

One might expect the pair to be *Chochmah* and *Binah*, since the Oral Torah is usually tied to *Binah*, understanding one thing from another, and the Written to *Chochmah*, revelation whole. But the Ramchal draws a different line. Measured against *Kesser*, *Chochmah* includes everything that unfolds from it. *Kesser* is will; thought begins with *Chochmah*. *Chochmah* and *Binah* are *trein re'in d'lo misparshin*, two companions who never part,[3] and *Sefer Yetzirah*'s *havein b'chochmah va-chachom b'vinah*, "understand with wisdom and be wise with understanding," teaches that *Binah* is already latent in *Chochmah*.[4] *Kesser* is the silence beyond human grasp; *Chochmah* is where grasp begins.

Then the Ramchal adds the decisive point. Once a person accepts that *Chochmah*, with all its grappling, is the only road to Godliness, he can reach back into the light of *Kesser* and draw it down into *Binah*, carrying revelation into the very process of interpretation. That, he says, is why the Torah is interpreted through twenty-two letters: *kaf-beis*, twenty-two, is the initials of *Kesser* and *Binah*. The lower level of translation is not simply a fall into something secondary. It is a new vessel for drawing down the original lights of revelation.

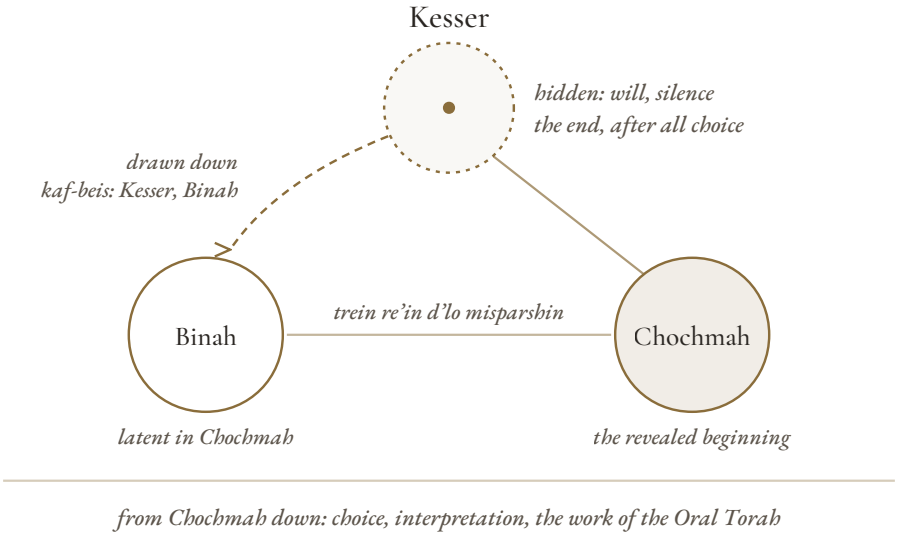


Figure 7. *The Ramchal's two beginnings. Kesser is hidden: the end, after all choice. Chochmah is the revealed beginning, with Binah latent in it. From within the work of interpretation, the light of Kesser can be drawn down into Binah:* כ"ב.

In short: There are two beginnings: *Kesser*, hidden, the final oneness, and *Chochmah*, revealed, the source of choice and interpretation. We live from *Chochmah* down. But accepting that road lets us draw the light of *Kesser* into *Binah* itself, so that translation becomes a vessel for revelation.

Notes

1. Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707–1746).
2. *Targum Yerushalmi* on *Bereishis* 1:1.
3. Zohar III 4a.
4. *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:4.

CHAPTER 12

Life as a Daf Gemara

Yirah and Ahavah

Reishis chochmah yiras Hashem: the beginning of wisdom is the awe of Hashem.[1] *Yirah* is *Chochmah*, the *yud* of *Chochmah*: the place where a person stands *mishtomem*, unable to act, the realm of *bittul*, self-nullification, and the higher awe. *Ahavah*, love, is *Binah*: the realm of relationship, where I can do for another, engage in Torah and *mitzvos*, refrain from sin, and build a living bond with Hashem. The beginning of wisdom is realizing that the interpretation is now ours to do. And after all the processes of *Binah*, *sof davar ha-kol nishma*: we arrive again at *es ha-Elokim yera ki zeh kol ha-adam*. All a person finally reaches is *yiras Hashem*, and *yiras Hashem* is *Chochmah*.

Sameness or Sugya

This changes how a person lives each day. Someone who wakes believing his task is to draw down new revelation will be frustrated by everything. He will watch *Koheles* play out before his eyes: *mah she-hayah hu she-yihyeh*, what was is what will be, the same building blocks repeating forever.[2] For someone who craves novelty and a constant download of revelation, the world will feel like night.

But someone who understands that his task is to interpret reality, to uncover the wisdom hidden in what is given, won't experience the sameness of things, or the details that distress and distract, as a contradiction of his spiritual goal. Each day is a *daf* of Gemara. Like any *daf*, it has *kushyos* and *teirutzim*, questions and answers, and confusion, and the whole effort to recover the original voice from inside its echo. The echo is where we live, and in it we search for remnants of revelation.

Such a person isn't frustrated by lacking clarity, by being stuck in the *pratim*, the particulars, without access to the great *klalim*, the principles. This is the task: to be down here interpreting reality, learning existence as a *sugya*. Everyone meets *kushyos* every day. A family member is joyful, and then I see him upset. That is a *stirah*, a contradiction, *minei u-vei*, from one and the same person: two contradictory states. I find the same contradiction in myself. Seen through the Oral Torah, as the way Hashem wants to be found, experience opens up and yields *chiddushei Torah*.

What a Chiddush Is

Chiddushei Torah are not new Torahs or new revelations. They are the radical possibility of drawing something new out of what is already given. Whoever imagines his *chiddushim* bring down something never before revealed misunderstands *talmud Torah*, unless he is among the true *tzaddikim*, the unique ones of the generations. And even their *chiddushim* uncovered levels already hidden in the Written Torah, building on what earlier generations revealed. Anyone who announces a new path is someone to run from. A person must constantly renew himself—*ha-yashan yischadesh v'he-chadash yiskadesh*, "the old will be renewed and the new will be sanctified."[3] But *chadash asur min ha-Torah*: what is truly new has always proven to be manipulation and perversion, and it has brought the Jewish people heartache and suffering.

Chazal gave us a formula that can carry us through exile. *Chazal* has the value of *mah*, "what," as we saw in Chapter 6: they hold the power of *Chochmah*, and there is a *bittul* built into the way of thinking they handed down.

In short: If my task is to receive new revelation, the world's sameness is night. If my task is to interpret, each day is a *daf*: its contradictions are *kushyos*, and its answers are *chiddushim* drawn from what was already given. Renewal, yes; novelty that breaks the chain, no.

Notes

1. *Tehillim* 111:10.
2. *Koheles* 1:9.
3. Rav Kook, *Igros HaRe'iyah* I, 164.

CHAPTER 13

To Hear, Not to See

The Eye and the Ear

The Greeks missed this. They did not see that all thinking is interpretation and all consciousness translation, that the human being is a sleeper interpreting a dream, not a discoverer of new truths. Greek thought, as the *Nazir* points out, is ocularcentric: rooted in sight, *re'iyah*.[1] To see is to grasp something in full clarity, provable and settled by one's own tools. Greek philosophy, broadly, attended to how things appear and judged truth from appearances. What could be seen and understood was true; what couldn't was not.

Chazal are not trying to see. They are trying to hear. *Ta shma*, come and hear; *shma minah*, from this we hear.

The Zohar's Ear

The Zohar, admittedly, says *ta chazi*, come and see. But it is Rabbi Shimon's world, *Shimon* from *shmi'ah*, hearing, and it is rooted in *Binah*. That is why it moves even more fluidly than a *daf* of Gemara. *L'havdil elef havdalos*, it is like improvised jazz: one sage reads a verse one way, his companion reads it entirely differently, and it isn't a dispute. It is *Chochmah she-b'Binah*: interpretive, yet whole, so that each person's reading becomes his truth.

Hearing Is Split

The Oral Torah is auditory, and that is what the *Nazir* sees in the thirteen *middos*. His whole project was to distinguish Greek wisdom from Torah wisdom. Torah wisdom is an *audiologic*, an inner hearing—*kala pnima'ah d'lo ishtama*, the Zohar's "inner voice that is not heard." It is the discernment of hidden patterns, of likeness and metaphor, of one idea turning into another by comparison, which is where meaning unfolds.

Hearing is inherently split. *Shtayim zu shamati*. *Trei kalei lo mishtam'ei*, two voices can't be heard at once: one does not fulfill the *mitzvah* of hearing the *Megillah* if another voice is sounding in his ear.[2] Vision has no such limit. Hearing belongs to *Binah*, the beginning of discernment, from which *dinin mis'arin*, severities, are aroused. There everything is already two, and the task is to discern which voice to follow.

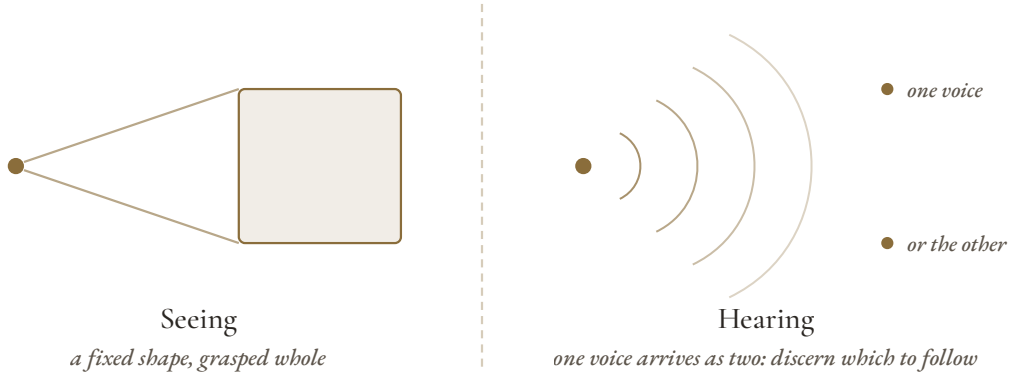


Figure 8. *Two ways of knowing. The eye grasps a fixed shape whole; the ear receives one voice as two and must discern which to follow.*

Kol HaNevuah

In *Kol HaNevuah* the *Nazir* writes that Hebrew logic is *shim'i*, acoustic, not *iyuni*, visual. It isn't "seeing is believing." Jewish thinking is *dibbur pnimi, devarim she-ba-lev*: inner speech, words in the heart, which *Binah* hears and judges. This, he says, is a great principle, an opening into the secret of the Jewish spirit. The logic of inner hearing is given in the *middos* by which the Torah is expounded. It is the gateway to *Chazal*'s *midrash halachah* and the ways of the Talmud, whose depth and sharpness expand the Jewish mind. Its deeper purpose is to bring the ear back to its covenant, to the place where prophecy can again be received.

Scripture never says "I thought." It says *amarti ani b'libi* and *dibarti ani im libi*: I said in my heart, I spoke with my heart.[3] The Mishnah and Midrash speak of *mashma*, *mi-mashma she-ne'emar*, *shomei'a ani*: "it is heard from," "I hear." And the core of our faith is *Shema Yisrael*.[4] We are not asked to see God, but to hear Him, to discern Godliness within concealment. So, the *Nazir* concludes, *ha-emes ha-muchletes l'Yisrael einah nikneses lo b'histaklus elyonah, ela b'shmi'ah pnimis*: Israel's absolute truth enters not through a higher gaze but through inner hearing—*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*.

A Dreamscape of Interpretation

The *Aruch HaShulchan*, in his introduction, compares the Gemara's disputes to a *shirah*, a song of many voices.[5] To hear the inner language of Torah, its *kol ha-pnimi*, is the source of *chiddushei Torah*. That makes it deeply subjective, interpretive, translational.

That is why the Gemara opens with the *Shema* at night and arrives, within the same tractate, at the interpretation of dreams.[6] All of *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is one long dreamscape of interpretation. How do I recover meaning where meaning was lost? Certainty where certainty is gone? *Chazal*, in the wisdom Hashem

gave them, answered with the thirteen *middos*. At heart they are the secret of *ahavah*: pathways for drawing certainty down into uncertainty, so that the lack of clarity itself becomes a vessel for a deeper certainty.

In short: Greek wisdom sees; *Chazal* hear. Hearing is already two and must discern, and that is the logic of *Binah*, of the thirteen *middos*, and of *Shema Yisrael*. The Oral Torah is a dreamscape of interpretation, and the *middos* are love's pathways for drawing certainty into it.

Notes

1. "Ocularcentric": centered on the eye. Seeing grasps fixed shapes; hearing follows what unfolds in time.
2. *Megillah* 21b; *Rosh Hashanah* 27a.
3. *Koheles* 2:1 and 1:16.
4. *Devarim* 6:4.
5. Rav Yechiel Michel Epstein (1829–1908), *Aruch HaShulchan*, introduction to *Choshen Mishpat*.
6. *Berachos* 2a; dreams in *Berachos* 55a–57b.

III

Kal VaChomer

Now the first *middah*, read with its partners: *kal vachomer*, *Keil*, and the first *ikkar*.

The *Gra* teaches that the opening of a thing contains everything that will unfold from it: the beginning is not one part among many, but the seed of the whole. So *kal vachomer*, the first *middah*, already shows how all thirteen work. In that it resembles *Kesser*, the crown, the first *sefirah*, in which everything is contained. And by the end we'll see it is more than a resemblance: *kal vachomer* is rooted in *Kesser*, and in its mirror, *malchus*.[1]

The idea this section builds is this. A *kal vachomer* looks at two things that seem to belong to different worlds—one light, one heavy—and hears a single frequency running through both, played at different volumes. That way of hearing has a limit, *dayyo*, "it is enough": what is derived can never exceed its source. That keeps it honest. And it has a direction: it leans toward the *kal*, toward lightness, compassion and the sweetening of judgment. That lean is the *middah* of *Keil*, the first of the thirteen attributes of mercy. Followed all the way up, it reaches *Kesser* and the Infinite beyond it; followed all the way down, it reaches us in our worst moments, where Hashem has not left.

Notes

1. On the first and last mirroring each other: *na'utz sofan bi-techilasan*, "their end is wedged in their beginning" (*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:7).

CHAPTER 14

Two Ways of Connecting Things

The Syllogism

The *Nazir HaKodesh* opens his treatment of the thirteen *middos* in *Kol HaNevuah* with a contrast. On the surface, the *kal vachomer* looks like the most famous move in Greek logic, the syllogism: all men die; Socrates is a man; therefore Socrates dies.

Look at what the syllogism actually does. It works by categories. There is a class—men—with a property—mortality. Socrates is placed inside the class, and so the property is handed down to him. Nothing is discovered about Socrates himself; he simply inherits what his category already contains. The connection is external and mechanical: this belongs to that box, so it gets that box's rules.

This is the ocularcentric nature of Greek wisdom we met in Chapter 13—knowing by seeing. The eye wants certainty, and certainty comes from fixed shapes with clear borders. Categorization—sorting reality into genera—makes life very domesticated: this is that, that is this. But there's no creativity in it. It is correspondence, not insight.

The Kal VaChomer

The *kal vachomer* does something else entirely. It does not begin with a category that holds both cases. It begins with two things that look like they don't belong together at all—one *kal*, light and lenient, one *chomer*, heavy and severe—and finds that they are the same thing at different intensities.

Take a simple case. Spitting on the floor of any room is disrespectful; all the more so on the floor of a *shul*. A room and a *shul* are not members of one class with one rule. They seem like separate worlds. But if I go into the room and ask *why* spitting there is wrong—what quality of the place it violates—I find that same quality in the *shul*, only stronger. The "all the more so" isn't borrowed from a category. It's discovered from inside.

So the *kal vachomer* relativizes our categories. We tend to treat *kal* and *chomer* as two boxes. The *kal vachomer* says they are two points on one scale.

Hekkesh Tenai and Hekkesh Mofti

The *Nazir* gives this a precise name. There are two kinds of *hekkesh*, two kinds of inference.[1] The *hekkesh mofti* rests on a *mofes*, a proof—visible evidence that both cases share a category. That is the syllogism. The *hekkesh tenai* rests on a *tenai*, a condition—"if this, then that." It is contingent, a kind of hypothesis, and its connection comes not from outward evidence but from an inner thread between two things that look different.

The *kal vachomer b'tavnito*, in its true form, says the *Nazir*, is a *din hekkesh tenai*. It is *ha-banuy mi-shnei chalakim*, built of two parts: *kodem v'nimshach*, the starting case and what extends from it. The starting case, the *ikra d'dina*, is usually the *kal*. And notice its grammar: *b'rosho milas ha-tenai "im"*—it opens with the word "if." It begins as a question, *b'ofen she'eilah*, *bi-tmiyah*, in wonder—"if it is so here..."—and ends in clarity: *eino din*, "is it not logical?"[2] It moves from wonder to certainty, rather than starting from certainty and filing things away.

Kal, Not Kol

Why did earlier students of the *middos* misunderstand this? The *Nazir* gives a striking answer. The *chokrim*, the philosophical analysts, read the *kal vachomer* as a *hekkesh mofti*—just a syllogism—because they read the word *kal* as *kol*.[3] *Kol* means voice, like a *bas kol*, an echo. On that reading the inference says: what you hear faintly in the small thing, you'll hear fully in the great thing. Same sound, same category—a static match. Reading *kol*, they lost the *kal*: the movement between light and heavy, the gradient. That, says the *Nazir*, is precisely where the mistake lay.

The Logic of Binah

So the *kal vachomer* works the way *Torah Sheb'al Peh* works. Greek logic is deductive: it starts from the general principle and works down to the particulars. *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is inductive: it starts among the *pratim*, the particulars, in many-ness and even confusion, and climbs toward the *klal*, the thread of unity. The *Nazir* calls this *ha-higgayon he-chadash ha-mushpa me-ha-higgayon ha-ivri*, a new logic shaped by Hebrew logic—and contrasts it with *higgayon ha-da'as ha-tehorah*, the "logic of pure cognition," the scientific observation of external facts.[4] Its contingency, its human frailty, is not a weakness. It is the depth of the thing.

Its root, the *Nazir* says, is *din tzedek ha-binah*—the righteousness of *binah*. *Binah* is *meivin davar mi-toch davar*, understanding one thing from within another.[5] Contrast *chochmah* in this sense: "this looks like that, so they're the same." *Binah* doesn't look at the shape of things at all. It listens to the inner frequency, and to the volume being turned up or down. When it hears that a stringency holds in the light

case, something in the mind says, with inner righteousness: *tzarich lihyos kein*—it must be so in the heavy case too. *Amnam mahuto hu hekkesh hashva'ah*: in its essence it is an inference of equating. Which brings us to the heart of it.

	The syllogism	The *kal vachomer*
Knows by	seeing: fixed shapes, clear borders	hearing: the inner voice
Connects through	a shared category	a shared core at different intensities
Inference	*hekkesh mofti*: from proof	*hekkesh tenai*: from a condition, "if"
Begins with	a general principle, in certainty	a particular case, in wonder
Direction	deductive: *klal* → *pratim*	inductive: *pratim* → *klal*
Faculty	"this looks like that"	*binah*: *meivin davar mi-toch davar*
Key word	*kol*: the same sound, echoed	*kal*: light rising to heavy

Figure 9. *Two ways of connecting things.*

In short: Greek logic connects things by putting them in the same category—seeing. The *kal vachomer* connects things that look different by hearing one inner frequency at two volumes. It begins with "if," lives in *binah*, and works the way *Torah Sheb'al Peh* works: from the particulars up.

Notes

1. *Hekkesh mofti*: demonstrative inference, proven from evidence. *Hekkesh tenai*: conditional inference, "if... then...." These are the medieval Hebrew names for the demonstrative and hypothetical syllogisms.
2. *Eino din* is the standard closing formula of a *kal vachomer* in the Mishnah and *Sifra*; see, e.g., Mishnah *Bava Kamma* 2:5.
3. קל, read without vowels, can be heard as *kal* (light) or as *kol* (voice, as if spelled קול).
4. Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (1902).
5. *Chagigah* 14a; *Sanhedrin* 93b.

CHAPTER 15

One Frequency, Many Volumes

Hashva'ah

The *Nazir* defines the first *middah* in one phrase: *ha-middah ha-rishonah, kal vachomer, hu b'mahuto hashva'ah*—in its essence it is *hashva'ah*, an equating. *Hashva'ah* means drawing two different things together until their shared core shows: *hashva'as ha-chamur la-kal*, equating the heavy with the light.

This doesn't mean they're the same. The difference between them is real—but it is a difference of intensity, not of nature. One thing runs at a low volume, the other at a high volume, on the same frequency. All the *kal vachomer* does is turn the volume up or down. That's why it is often phrased simply as *kol she-ken*, "all the more so": what is true here at this volume is true there at a higher one.

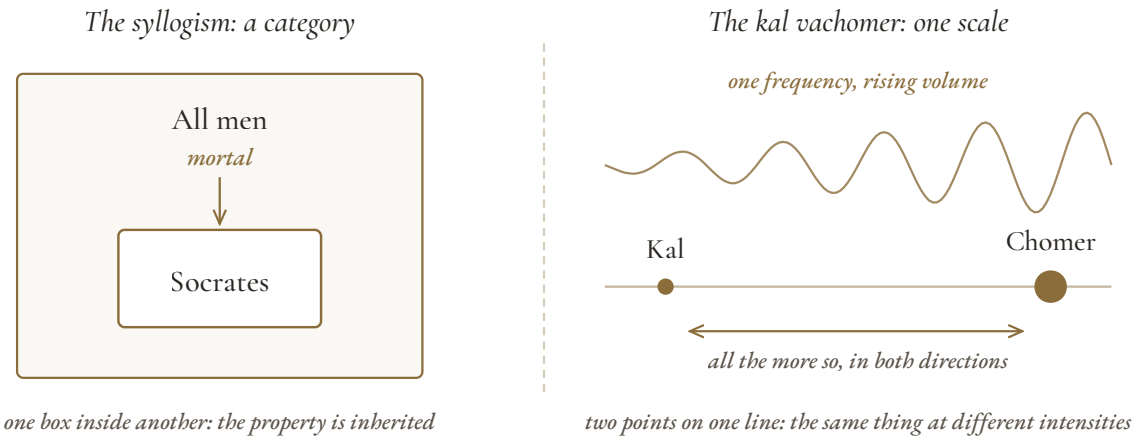


Figure 10. *On the left, Socrates inherits a property by being placed inside a category. On the right, the light and the heavy are one frequency at two volumes, and the inference runs both ways.*

The word has a cousin: *hishtavus*, equanimity, from the same root, *shaveh*. The *Baal Shem Tov HaKodesh* teaches that *hishtavus* is being equally settled whether things go well or badly.[1] It's the same move. Good moments and hard moments look like opposite worlds; *hishtavus* finds the one ground beneath them. *Hashva'ah* is *hishtavus* in thought.

Both Directions

Because the light and the heavy are on one scale, the inference runs both ways. The Komarna Rebbe, in *Asiris HaEifah*, his commentary on *Toras Kohanim*,[2] defines it: *limmud chumra l'davar chamur mipnei she-matzinu oso chumra b'davar kal mimenu*—learning a stringency in the heavy case because we find it

in the lighter one—and equally, learning a leniency in the light case from a leniency found in the heavier one. If the light carries weight, all the more so the heavy; if the heavy has an ease, all the more so the light. A one-way rule would be a hierarchy of categories. A two-way rule is a single scale.

Unicity, Not Uniformity

Now widen the lens. The *Torah Shebichsav*, read on its own, is differentiation: many laws, many stories, seemingly unconnected. The thirteen *middos* are what reveal the unicity within it—and thirteen is the *gematria* of *ahavah* and of *echad*, as we saw in Chapter 5.

But unicity is not uniformity. It doesn't collapse differences and say "it's all the same." The light stays light and the heavy stays heavy; halachah keeps every distinction. What the *middos* assume is that beneath every distinction there is a *hashva'ah* waiting to be uncovered. The *Nazir* calls this a radical notion: there is a unicity to thought. The intensities and volumes we meet—in halachah, in midrash, in our own lives—are part and parcel of one reality.

In short: *Hashva'ah* is the core of the *kal vachomer*: light and heavy differ in intensity, not in nature. That's why the inference runs both ways, and why the thirteen *middos* reveal the Torah's unity without erasing its distinctions.

Notes

1. *Tzava'as HaRivash* 2: that all things be equal to a person, whether praised or shamed, and so in all matters.
2. Rav Yitzchak Eizik Yehudah Yechiel Safrin of Komarna (1806–1874). *Toras Kohanim* is the *Sifra*, which opens with the thirteen *middos*.

CHAPTER 16

The Boundary: Dayyo

An Honest Objection

Here a fair question arises. If the mind can hear hidden unities between things that look different, isn't that dangerously open-ended? Are we uncovering a truth, or laying one over reality? Any clever system could declare its own rules—"this belongs with that"—and run.

Dayyo

The Torah's answer is *dayyo*: *dayyo la-ba min ha-din lihyos ka-nidon*—it is enough for what is derived to be like its source.[1] A *kal vachomer* can carry a quality from one case to another, but it cannot inflate it. Whatever you discover can't exceed what you started from.

Without that limit, the *kal vachomer* would collapse back into the Greek mode it was meant to replace—symbolic resemblance with no brakes, where anything can be applied to anything. *Dayyo* reflects the deeper fact that the thirteen *middos* themselves are *halachah l'Moshe mi-Sinai*. They are received, not invented. The creativity of *binah* works inside a given frequency.

Moshe Before Rabbi Akiva

So *dayyo* is what ties *Torah Sheb'al Peh* to *Torah Shebichsav*. Our human interpretation is meant to align with the original intention. We aren't inventing; we're uncovering.

The classic story shows how.[2] Moshe is shown Rabbi Akiva's *beis medrash*, sees him drawing mountains of law from the crowns of the letters, and can't follow—his strength fails him, a *chalishas ha-da'as*. "You have a man like this, and You give the Torah through me?" Then a student asks Rabbi Akiva for his source, and he answers: *halachah l'Moshe mi-Sinai*. But if it came from Moshe, why couldn't Moshe follow it?

The *Leshem* explains[3] that the *klal* holds everything in potential, unformed and unmanifest. The *pratim* emerge slowly, as the *klal* congeals into detail over generations. Moshe is the *klal*; Rabbi Akiva unfolds the *pratim*. Moshe can't recognize them in their unfolded form, yet they are entirely his: "Where do you think I got this from? I drew it out of *Toras Moshe*."

That's why every one of the thirteen *middos* carries a *bittul*, a self-nullification—to the *da'as* of *Chazal*, and to the fact that these are the frequencies within which Torah thinking is meant to take place. The freedom of *binah* and the boundary of *dayyo* go together.

In short: *Dayyo* keeps the *kal vachomer* honest: the derived case can't exceed its source. It reflects that the *middos* are received from Sinai—what Rabbi Akiva draws out was already in Moshe's *klal*.

Notes

1. Mishnah *Bava Kamma* 2:5; *Bava Kamma* 25a.
2. *Menachos* 29b.
3. Rav Shlomo Elyashiv (1841–1926), author of *Leshem Shevo v'Achlamah*.

CHAPTER 17

Light and Heavy as a Way of Life

Beyond Halachah

The thirteen *middos* are not only tools for reading the Torah. They are ways of reading reality. And the first thing the *kal vachomer* does for a person is free him from what Rav Kook calls being *shikkor b'chitzoniyus*, drunk on externals: what is, is what is, and we live by the rigid details of appearance. Everything stays in its box; nothing touches anything else.

The *kal vachomer* listens instead to the *pnimiyus*, the inner dimension—*kala pnima'ah d'lo ishtama*, the inner voice that is not heard[1]—and hears a *hekkesh* running through reality itself. Two things may look like blue and red. Go into each one's inner core, find its innermost point of significance, and you can carry that point across to the other and see how they're one. External similarity is fragile; scratch the surface and the differences show. Inner similarity holds beneath external difference. That is a way of living in the world as unity: *kal*—ease, light, air—and *chomer*—weight, matter, what sinks to the ground—held as one.

Greatness and Smallness

Rav Kook makes this explicit in *Olas Re'iyah*.[2] The *kal vachomer b'orchei ha-Torah*, he writes, *hu k'mo ha-godel v'ha-kotan b'metzius ha-klalis*—it is like greatness and smallness in existence as a whole. In halachah it appears as a leniency in one law and a stringency in another. Abstracted, it is the relationship between *godel*, openness and expansion, and *kotan*, constriction and heaviness, everywhere.

And neither can be known alone. *Im lo ha-godel, lo noda lanu ha-kotan; v'im lo ha-kotan, lo noda ha-godel*—without greatness we couldn't recognize smallness, and without smallness we couldn't recognize greatness. *Ki hem erachim she-hem nimdadim davka zeh l'umas zeh*: they are values that are measured only against each other. So too *kal* and *chomer*: without leniency there would be no way to relativize severity, and without severity no knowledge of leniency. Hashem made them *b'hashva'ah*, *kal l'umas chomer v'chomer l'umas kal*—each measured against the other.

Where Each Comes From

Then Rav Kook asks where each one comes from in the soul.

The *kal* comes from the great spirit, *hofa'as ha-ruach ha-gedolah*: *she'ifah azizah*, a mighty yearning, *l'malos kol chov, l'harbos or kodesh, u'l'hagdil Torah u'mitzvah u'l'ha'adirah*—to fulfill every obligation, to increase holy light, to make Torah and mitzvah great and glorious. Its engine is *oneg*, delight. From the side of the *kal*, *ha-kol hu kal*: everything is light, simple, *tamim*.

The *chomer* comes from a heaviness of mind, *koved ha-rosh*: *hechre'ach ha-haganah*, the need for defense against *ha-ratzon ha-sho'eg ha-so'er*, the roaring, storming will that moves through all of life. Open yourself completely to the world and its storms may drown you. So the mind constricts, contains, and focuses on particulars. That too is holy: *kabbalas ol malchus shamayim*, accepting the yoke of Heaven, is the *chomer*. It's how we say, "I'm serious enough to handle this."

Shnei ha-mizugim yachad bonim es shleimuso shel ha-middah: the two blends together build the wholeness of the *middah*—*ha-elyoni v'ha-tachtoni*, the upper and the lower at once.

So the Torah isn't asking for pure *kal*, with all *chomer* banished to the dungeon, or for pure *chomer*, with all *kal* sent away. It's asking for the relationship. But notice the order. The *kal* is the root—*kalus*, the openness with which we take in the world and draw vitality from it. The *chomer* comes in second, as protection, because we live among other people, their thoughts and their stuff, and our own stuff, in a world that demands discernment. Openness first; protection in its service.

In short: Rav Kook widens the *kal vachomer* into a picture of the soul. *Kal* is expansive yearning and delight; *chomer* is protective seriousness. Each is known only against the other, both are needed—and the *kal* is the root.

Notes

1. An Aramaic phrase from the *Zohar* for the innermost, inaudible voice, associated with *binah*.
2. *Olas Re'iyah* I, in his commentary on the *Baraisa d'Rabbi Yishmael* after the morning *korbanos*.

CHAPTER 18

Leaning Toward the Light: Keil

The Kal Comes First

That ordering—*kal* before *chomer*—is the most important point of all. It is what links the *kal vachomer* to the first of the thirteen attributes of mercy: *Hashem, Hashem, Keil, rachum v'chanun*.[1] *Keil* is the first.

Kal vachomer doesn't pretend that everything is easy. *Aderaba*—it is fully aware of the *chumriyus*, the severity of this world. But HaKadosh Baruch Hu built into the first *middah* a bias: in the face of reality, lean toward the *kal*. All the *dinim*—severity, constriction, darkness—are ultimately *nimtak b'shorshan*, sweetened at their root.[2] The first place we meet the tangle of light and heavy is the place we learn to bend our minds toward the good.

Miriam's Seven Days

The Torah shows this lean in its own *kal vachomer*. Miriam spoke against Moshe—and in a sense against the *Shechinah*. Hashem says: *v'aviha yarok yarak b'faneha, halo sikalem shivas yamim*—if her father had spat in her face, would she not be ashamed seven days?[3] All the more so before the *Shechinah*. By the *kal vachomer*, that should mean fourteen days. But *dayyo*: *tisager shivas yamim*—seven, not fourteen.[4] The inference is allowed to teach; it is not allowed to make the punishment heavier than its source.

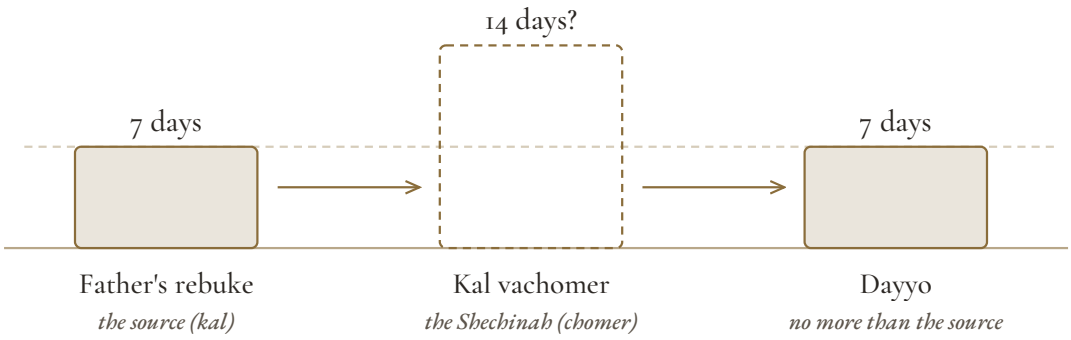


Figure 11. *Miriam (Bava Kamma 25a). The kal vachomer would double the source; dayyo holds it to the source.*

Ein Onshin Min ha-Din

Halachah generalizes this: *ein onshin min ha-din*—no punishment is derived from a *kal vachomer*.[5] You may derive *dinim* and *halachos*, but not punishments. Why? As we saw in Chapter 2, Rav Yosef Engel explains[6]—and the *Dovev Meisharim* brings it in his responsa[7]—that it is because the *kal vachomer* is rooted in *Keil*, the first *middah* of mercy. At the root of Hashem's will for the world is the revelation of compassion. The logic of the first *middah* can reach toward mercy freely; it is held back from reaching toward punishment.

Malchus Receiving from Tiferes

The Arizal gives the inner mechanics. *Drashah zu mi-tzad ha-malchus*: the *kal vachomer* comes from *malchus*, this world, where we meet things in categories. And *malchus* is a receiver: *she-mekabbeles me-ha-tiferes pa'am kach u'fa'am kach*—it receives from *tiferes*, sometimes one way and sometimes the other.[8]

Tiferes is *rachamim*—not plain *chesed*, not plain *din*, but their blend: the wisdom to respond to each moment as it requires. That was Yaakov Avinu's *middah*, sometimes *chesed*, sometimes *din*.[9] So when *malchus* receives from the *chesed* within *tiferes*, we see with the eyes of *kal*: *meikilim es ha-din u'mer-achamim al ha-olam*, easing judgment and having mercy on the world. When it receives from the *gevurah* within *tiferes*, we see with the eyes of *chomer*: *ha-din ha-machmir ladun es ha-olam*, strict judgment. The *kal vachomer* is how this world takes in a light that is both.

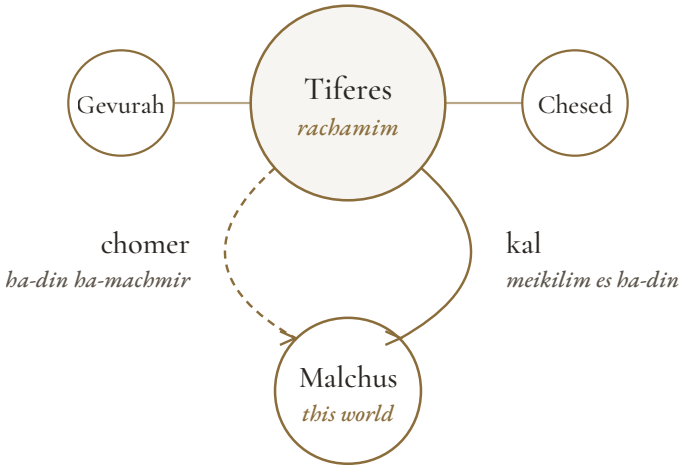


Figure 12. *The Arizal: malchus receives from tiferes, which holds chesed (right) and gevurah (left) together. From chesed it sees with the eyes of kal; from gevurah, with the eyes of chomer.*

That might sound like the Arizal is neutral—sometimes open, sometimes strict, *malchus* like the moon, sometimes full and sometimes empty. But he isn't saying *din* stands on its own. Whenever we speak of *tiferes*, we are ultimately speaking of *da'as*, and ultimately of *Kesser*. And wherever there is *malchus*, *Kesser* is mirrored in it. Trace the *din* upward and you arrive where there is no *din*. That is the next step.

The Name Keil

The *meforshim* argue over what the name *Keil* means. On one side, it's the name of *chesed—chesed Keil kol ha-yom*.[10] On the other, it carries *takifus*, strength: *Mi chamocha ba-eilim Hashem*, "Who is like You among the mighty?"[11] Some readers of the *Zohar* took *Keil* as *gevurah*.

The Komarna Rebbe says it's both, and explains why. *Keil* is the first appearance of the possibility of judgment—the root of all *gevuros*. It is where severity first enters the picture. But at the very moment severity first appears, it is still transparent to its source: we can see that it comes from HaKadosh Baruch Hu. And the moment you see that severity comes from Him, it is sweetened. That's *hamtakas ha-dinim b'shorshan*.

So *Keil* stretches all the way down. The three worlds of separation, *Beriah*, *Yetzirah* and *Asiyah*, correspond to *Keil Shaddai*, *Keil Havayah* and *Keil Adnus*.[12] In *Heichal HaBerachah* the Komarna Rebbe writes: *b'shorsho hu etzem ha-chesed*—at its root *Keil* is pure loving-kindness—*u'mi-sham nispashtu telas almin*, and from there the three worlds spread out. And those worlds are hard places: *marei d'yevava* and *yelalah*, masters of wailing and lament, *marei terisin*, masters of shields—*Keil zo'em*, the God who is angry every day.[13] Yet the *middah* of *Keil* has the power to be *kofeh u'mamtik l'chol ha-dinim*—to subdue and sweeten every one of them.

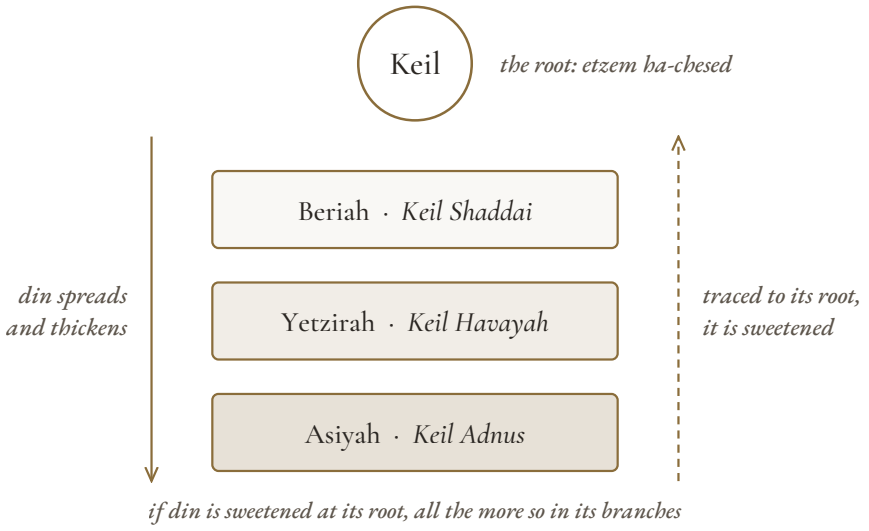


Figure 13. *The Komarna Rebbe on Keil: from its root in pure chesed, the name spreads through the three worlds of separation, where din thickens. Traced back to the root, every din is sweetened.*

The Komarna Rebbe's Kal VaChomer

Here is his *kal vachomer*. *Din* is at its most intense at its root, up where it first emerges. Down here in the worlds of separation, we meet it diluted and scattered, in day-to-day symptoms. Now: if even at its root, where *din* is strongest, it is *nimtak b'shorsho*—sweetened by our recognition that it all comes from His will—then all the more so every *din* we meet down here, which is only an extension of that upper *din*, can be sweetened too.

The lean of the first *middah* turns out to be the whole program: trace any severity back to its source, and it softens.

In short: The *kal* comes before the *chomer*, and so *kal vachomer* corresponds to *Keil*, the first attribute of mercy. That's why *dayyo* caps Miriam's seven days and why *ein onshin min ha-din*. *Keil* is where judgment first appears and where it is first sweetened—and if *din* is sweetened at its root, all the more so in its branches.

Notes

1. *Shemos* 34:6. Counts differ: *Rabbeinu Tam* (*Tosafos*, *Rosh Hashanah* 17b, s.v. *shalosh esreh*) counts each *Hashem* as a *middah*; the Kabbalistic count used here begins from *Keil* and ends with *v'nakeh*.
2. *Hamtakas ha-dinim b'shorshan*: a harsh judgment is softened by tracing it back to its source in Hashem, where it is one with compassion.
3. *Bamidbar* 12:14.
4. *Bava Kamma* 25a: the *kal vachomer* yields fourteen; *dayyo* reduces it to seven.
5. *Makkos* 5b. Prohibitions may be derived by *kal vachomer*, but a punishment must be written explicitly.
6. Rav Yosef Engel (1858–1920), author of *Beis HaOtzar* and *Gilyonei HaShas*.
7. Rav Dov Berish Weidenfeld, the Tchebiner Rav (1881–1965).
8. *Tiferes* is the center of *Ze'ir Anpin*, the six *sefiros* from *chesed* to *yesod*; *malchus* is the receiving *sefirah*, identified with the *Shechinah* and this world. The pairings below—HaKadosh Baruch Hu and the *Shechinah*, Hashem and *Klal Yisrael*, Torah and *tefillah*—are all expressions of *tiferes* and *malchus*.
9. Avraham is *chesed*, Yitzchak *gevurah*, Yaakov *tiferes*, which blends them.
10. *Tehillim* 52:3.
11. *Shemos* 15:11.
12. The three worlds below *Atzilus*, the world of unity. *Havayah* is the Tetragrammaton; *Adnus* is the name *Adonai*.
13. *Tehillim* 7:12.

CHAPTER 19

All the More So Above: Kesser

The Kal Is Kesser

The *Rama mi-Pano*,[1] collecting the explanations of the thirteen *middos*, takes the *kal vachomer* to its highest point: *ha-remez ba l'kesser elyon b'hisyachaso eitzel ilas ha-ilos*—it alludes to the supernal *Kesser* in its relation to the Cause of all causes.

To feel the force of this, recall what *Kesser* is. It is the loftiest *sefirah*, but it is still a *sefirah*—not HaKadosh Baruch Hu *b'chvodo u'v'atzmo*, in His own essence. The early *mekubalim* argued whether *Kesser* is identical with *Ein Sof* or distinct from it.[2] The question touches everything. If the *sefiros* are separate from God, what are we doing? We'd be worse than the *meshalshim*, those who make God three; we'd be the *me'asrim*, making Him ten![3] And if they are God Himself, we're claiming direct access to the Infinite.

The answer, from the Ramak and the *tzaddikim*, is *atzmus v'keilim*—essence and vessels.[4] The essential light is beyond grasp and definition. It shines through vessels that let it take on differentiation, and in *Atzilus* the vessels are fused with the light: *Ihu v'chayohi chad b'hon, Ihu v'garmohi chad b'hon*—He and His life-force are one in them, He and His vessels are one in them.[5] Not God, not separate from God: the vehicles through which the Infinite is drawn down. *Kesser* is the first of these—*Or Ein Sof* as it dawns in consciousness—but beyond it is always *Ein Sof* itself, the *Ba'al HaShem*, the Owner of the Name.

The Inference

Now the *kal vachomer*. *Ha-kesser kal hu v'ukma hu b'erech ilas ha-ilos*: *Kesser* is the "light" case—it is even black, so to speak, before the Cause of causes. However high a revelation reaches, it darkens before the endless light. *V'im kol zeh*—even so, *ne'esar ha-histaklus bo*: we're forbidden to gaze upon *Kesser*; we can claim no grasp of it. *Kol she-ken b'mah she-l'ma'lah mi-menu*: all the more so what is above it!

And then the turn. *Kesser* is still so great that it is the way HaKadosh Baruch Hu reveals Himself to us. But regarding the simple infinite light itself, *l'vado ha-meromam al kol berachah u'tehillah*, alone exalted above all blessing and praise—*eino ba min ha-din lihyos ka-nidon*. Here *dayyo* runs in reverse. We don't say the Infinite is like *Kesser*. We say *Kesser* teaches us something about what lies beyond it.

What This Gives Us

This is what the first *middah* opens. Everything we see, every assumption we make about the world, every truth our wisdom holds, is derivative before the essence of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. And in that essence, the root of everything, there are no *dinim* and no severity. So all the more so at the next level, *Kesser*, where revelation begins—and from there all the way down. The sweetening of Chapter 18 has its ground here: the source of all things has no *din* in it at all.

The First Ikkar

The same structure explains a puzzle in the first *ikkar*. In the *Ani Ma'amin* we say: *she-haBorei Yisbarach Shemo Hu borei u'manhig l'chol ha-beru'im*—the Creator creates and guides all creatures.[6] That's about *hanhagah*, how Hashem runs the world; so too *Yigdal*.

The Rambam formulates it differently.[7] The first foundation is to know that the Creator *exists*—that His existence is unlike any other, that all existence draws from Him, that He is *mechuyav ha-metzius*, necessary existence, whose absence cannot even be conceived. Nothing there about running the world.

The Komarna Rebbe points out the *stirah*, the contradiction, and resolves it with our two levels. The Rambam speaks of the essence—from whose standpoint there is no world at all; nothing exists but Him. Whoever brought the thirteen *ikkarim* into *tefillah* speaks *mi-tzad ha-sefiros*, from the side of His engagement with the world. And between them runs a *kal vachomer*: if HaKadosh Baruch Hu is present in every action and detail of this world, all the more so is He beyond it. The *Ani Ma'amin* we say each day is the *kal*; the *Ribbono shel Olam* Himself is the *chomer*.

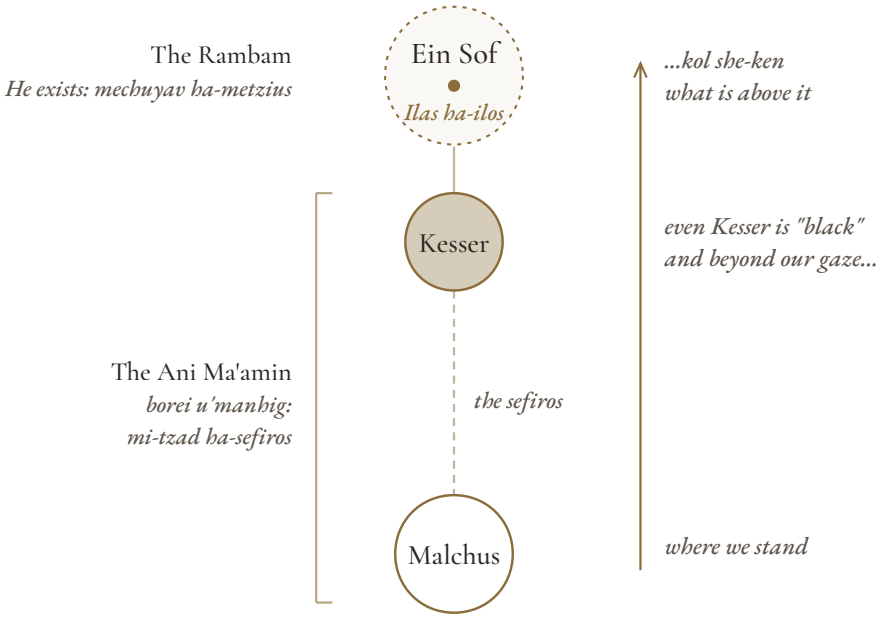


Figure 14. *Kal vachomer upward. If even Kesser is beyond our gaze, all the more so the Infinite above it. On the left, the two readings of the first ikkar.*

In short: For the *Rama mi-Pano*, the deepest *kal vachomer* is *Kesser* before the Infinite: if even *Kesser* is beyond our gaze, all the more so what lies above it—and since the Infinite holds no *din*, neither, ultimately, does anything that flows from it. The first *ikkar* shows the same two levels: Hashem guiding the world, and all the more so Hashem beyond it.

Notes

1. Rav Menachem Azaryah mi-Pano (1548–1620).
2. Surveyed by the Ramak, *Pardes Rimonim*, *Sha'ar* 3.
3. *Shu"t HaRivash* 157.
4. Ramak, *Pardes Rimonim*, *Sha'ar* 4.
5. *Tikkunei Zohar*, *Hakdamah* 3b.
6. *Siddur*, after *Shacharis*.
7. *Peirush HaMishnayos*, *Sanhedrin* 10:1, first foundation.

CHAPTER 20

Living the First Middah

Yishmael and Yitzchak

Rav Yosef Engel brings a teaching on Sarah's words *garesh ha-amah ha-zos v'es benah*.[1] The *Midrash* reads Hashem's earlier promise to Avraham as a *kal vachomer*:[2] *hinei beirachti oso*, "I have blessed him"—Yishmael; *v'hifreisi oso*, "I will make him fruitful"—Yishmael; *v'hirbeisi oso*, "I will multiply him"—Yishmael. *Kal vachomer*: *v'es brisi akim es Yitzchak*—and My covenant I will establish with Yitzchak. If all this for Yishmael, all the more so for Yitzchak.

Why does this promise to Avraham come as a *kal vachomer*? Because Avraham is *chesed*, and he understood the secret of *Keil*, the power to sweeten every *din*. Even about the son who must be sent away, the language Avraham receives is blessing first—and from that blessing, all the more so for Yitzchak.

Keil Na Refa Na Lah

And now we can return to Miriam with fresh eyes. Why does the *kal vachomer* stop at seven days instead of fourteen? Look at Moshe's prayer just before: *Keil na refa na lah*—"Please, *Keil*, heal her, please."[3] The Maggid of Mezritch asks why Moshe chose the name *Keil*. Because he was invoking the very *middah* that grounds *ein onshin min ha-din*. He prayed through the first attribute of mercy, and the Torah's first *middah* of logic answered with *dayyo*.

Hashem Is Still There

Finally, what does it mean to live with the *middah* of *Keil*? The Ramak teaches, on *Mi Keil kamocha*,[4] that even when a person sins—takes the God-given vitality coursing through every cell at that very moment and uses it to destroy—Hashem is still there, still giving that strength, still patient. You are never distant.

And that is the most personal *kal vachomer* of all. If Hashem is with me in my struggles, with me when I do wrong, with me in places where His presence seems absent—then all the more so is He with me in moments of alignment and calm.

The *kal vachomer* teaches that HaKadosh Baruch Hu doesn't want to punish us. He wants unity seen everywhere, and He wants us to live this way: making *kal vachomers*, hearing the one frequency beneath light and heavy, and leaning, always, toward the light in which all the *dinim* are *nimtak b'shorshan*. *Be'ezras Hashem*, we'll continue this for each *middah*.

In short: The first *middah* is meant to be lived. Avraham, who is *chesed*, receives even Yishmael's blessing as a *kal vachomer* toward Yitzchak, and Moshe prays *Keil na* and is answered with *dayyo*. The most personal *kal vachomer* of all: if Hashem is with me when I fail, all the more so when I am aligned.

Notes

1. *Bereishis* 21:10.
2. *Bereishis Rabbah* 47:5, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, on *Bereishis* 17:20–21.
3. *Bamidbar* 12:13.
4. *Tomer Devorah*, ch. 1, on *Michah* 7:18: Hashem sustains a person with life and strength even at the very moment he uses them to sin.

Key Terms

Aggadeta: the non-legal teachings of *Chazal*: narrative, ethics, theology.

Ahavah / Echad: love / one; both equal thirteen.

Al tikri: "don't read it as..., but as..."; a rabbinic re-reading of a word.

Aleph / Ulpan: the first letter; in Aramaic, learning.

Anochi / Ani: two words for "I"; *Anochi*'s *chaf* marks a self given yet never fully grasped.

Arich Anpin / Ze'ir Anpin: the "Long Face" within *Kesser*, and the "Short Face" of the six emotive *sefiros*.

Atika Stima'ah: the "Hidden Ancient One," the innermost dimension of *Kesser*.

Atzmus v'keilim: essence and vessels; the infinite light and the *sefiros* through which it is revealed.

Baraisa d'Rabbi Yishmael: the passage listing the thirteen *middos*, opening the *Sifra* and said daily.

B'dieved / Lechatchilah: after the fact, second best / from the outset, ideally.

Binah: understanding one thing from within another (*meivin davar mi-toch davar*); discernment and relationship; the faculty behind the *kal vachomer*.

Chacham adif mi-navi: "a sage is greater than a prophet."

Chaf ha-dimyon: the prefix *k'*, "like"; resemblance, not identity.

Chiddush: a new insight drawn from what is already given.

Chochmah: wisdom given whole; the revealed beginning.

Dayyo: "it is enough": what is derived cannot exceed its source.

Dimyon mezukak: refined imagination.

Eilu v'eilu: "these and those are the words of the living God."

Ein onshin min ha-din: punishments are not derived by *kal vachomer*.

Ein Sof / Ilas ha-ilos: the Infinite; the Cause of all causes.

Gezeirah shavah: inference from a word shared by two verses; only by tradition.

Hamtakas ha-dinim b'shorshan: sweetening judgments at their root by recognizing their source in Hashem.

Hashva'ah: equating; revealing the shared core of two different things. Related to *hishtavus*, equanimity.

Hekkesh: inference from likeness. *Hekkesh tenai*: conditional ("if... then"); *hekkesh mofti*: demonstrative, from proof. The *kal vachomer* is the first kind.

Hora'as sha'ah: an emergency measure for its time.

Kal vachomer: inference from the lighter case to the heavier (or the reverse); the first of the thirteen *middos*.

Keil: the first of the thirteen attributes of mercy; the name of *chesed* that also carries strength, where judgment first appears and is first sweetened.

Kesser, tiferes, yesod, malchus: the crown (highest *sefirah*, will, hidden oneness); beauty, the center that blends *chesed* and *din*; foundation, the channel that joins them; kingship, the receiver, identified with the *Shechinah* and this world.

Lamdanus: analytic Talmud learning; linked to *l'dameh*, to liken.

Lashon HaKodesh / Targum: the holy tongue of direct naming / translation into Aramaic.

Mechuyav ha-metzius: necessary existence: the Rambam's first foundation.

Mezakech es ha-medameh: purifying the imagination.

Middos ha-rachamim: the thirteen attributes of mercy (*Shemos* 34:6–7).

Nigleh / Nistar: the revealed and hidden dimensions of Torah.

Sevara yesharah: straight, sound reasoning.

Shnayim mikra v'echad targum: reading each verse twice and its translation once.

Siman Nun: *Orach Chaim* 50, on reciting *Mikra*, *Mishnah* and *Talmud* each morning.

Ta shma / Ta chazi: "come and hear" (Gemara) / "come and see" (Zohar).

Tikkunei dikna: the thirteen "rectifications of the beard," channels of mercy.

Torah Shebichsav / Torah Sheb'al Peh: the Written Torah / the Oral Torah.

Yichud nifla: the wondrous union of mind and Torah in learning.

Yirah / Ahavah: awe (*Chochmah*) / love (*Binah*).