

## Kabbalistic Explanations of the Torah, Mitzvot, and Reincarnation

Having examined some of the basic teachings of Kabbalah, we will now explore how Kabbalah elucidates both the Torah narratives and its mitzvot, and how it can affect the practical application of halachah (Jewish law). Both the Torah's narratives and its mitzvot can be understood on many levels, and Kabbalah offers profound insights that literally contain worlds of meaning. This class will present various examples illustrating how Kabbalah adds to both our understanding of the Torah and our appreciation of its beauty and depth. We will also examine the phenomenon of reincarnation, which, although hinted to in the Torah, is explicitly dealt with by Kabbalah. Finally, we will conclude by underscoring the importance of studying Kabbalah with the correct approach.

In this class, we will address the following questions.

- ❧ How does Kabbalah enhance our understanding of the Torah and its commandments?
- ❧ What does Kabbalah reveal about reincarnation?
- ❧ What are the dangers of studying Kabbalah in the “wrong” way?
- ❧ What can the study of Kabbalah add to my life?

### Class Outline:

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## SECTION I. KABBALISTIC EXPLANATIONS OF THE TORAH AND THE COMMANDMENTS

### PART A. KABBALISTIC EXPLANATIONS OF THE TORAH

The words of the Torah represent many layers of meaning, and each verse in the Torah can be interpreted on many different levels and understood in many different ways. In one place, our Sages tell us that the Torah has seventy facets of meaning (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15). The Ramchal writes in Derech Etz Chaim that there are no fewer than 600,000 possible interpretations of every verse in the Torah! There are four main categories of interpretations of the Torah, each of which encompasses numerous interpretations of every verse (Siftei Chaim, Emunah u'Bechirah Vol. II, p. 257).

#### 1. Vilna Gaon, commentary to Mishlei (1:20) – The Torah has many levels of meaning.

The Torah has two general levels of meaning. One is *pshat* or the simple meaning, the other is *sod* or the secrets hiding beneath the surface. *Sod* includes a sub-level, *remez*, meaning hinting or insinuation. This includes various forms of codes or other indications that there is indeed something beneath the surface. *Remez* is thus the gateway to *sod*. *Pshat* also includes a sublevel, *drash*.

התורה נחלקת לשנים שהם ארבע. והם פשט וסוד, ובכל אחד שנים. בסוד: סודות עצמן ורמז הוא פתח השער לסודות. ובפשט: דרש ופשט.

The four levels can be understood as follows:

(פשט) – **P'shat** – The straightforward explanation or literal meaning of the text.

(דרש) – **Drash** – Deeper explanations of the text based on established exegetical principles known from tradition (e.g., the thirteen principles enumerated in the Baraita of Rabbi Yishmael in the introduction to Sifra, which appears in the daily prayer service). The body of Talmudic works known as Midrashim is included in this category.

(רמז) – **Remez** – The word *remez* literally means a hint or allusion. The Maharsha (Eiruvin 21a) describes the *remez* level as "*ma'aseh bereishit*" or philosophy. In essence, *remez* is a lower level of the profound understanding of the Torah represented by *sod*. An example of *remez* is found in Bereishit/Genesis 42:2, where Yaakov tells his children to go to Egypt in search of food with the words "רדו שמה" ("descend to there") and Rashi explains that the word רדו is an allusion to the upcoming 210 years of exile in Egypt, since the numerical value of the word is 210 (ר = 200, ד = 4, ו = 6). The forefathers, on their exalted spiritual level, possessed *ruach hakodesh*, a spirit of Divine inspiration that enabled them to foresee future events. Many examples of this phenomenon are found in the Midrashim and commentaries on the Torah.)

(סוד) – **Sod** – Kabbalistic, secret or mystical explanations of the text.

To illustrate just one Kabbalistic insight into the Torah, we will analyze a phrase in Shemot (Exodus). We will demonstrate its meaning on the levels of both *pshat* and *drash* and then conclude with a Kabbalistic interpretation.

2. **Shemot (Exodus) 13:18 – The verse describes the Exodus from Egypt with the term *chamushim*, which is understood to have different meanings.**

The Children of Israel went out of the land of Egypt *chamushim*.

ויסב אלהים את העם דרך המדבר ים סוף וחמשים עלו  
בני ישראל מארץ מצרים:

What is meant by *chamushim*?

3. **Rashi, *ibid.* – The p'shat level of *chamushim* means armed.**

*Chamushim* always means armed. Because God caused the Jewish people to travel in the desert, it meant that they needed to take weapons with them. For people who are traveling through inhabited places know that they can acquire there the things they need, but one who journeys into the desert has to prepare himself beforehand with everything he might need. This verse was written only to explain the story, so that you should not wonder about the fact that the Jewish people had weapons in the wars against Amalek, Sichon and Og, and Midian, when they struck them with the sword. Similarly [the word *chamushim* means "armed" when] it says (Yehoshua 1:14), "You shall pass through *chamushim*." And Onkelos also translated it as "*mezarzin* – armed," as he translated (Bereishit/Genesis 14:14) "He armed his students" with the word "*v'zariz*." [This proves that the word *mezarzin* in Onkelos here means "armed."]

אין חמושים אלא מזויינים. לפי שהסיבן במדבר גרם להם שעלו חמושים, שאלו הסיבן דרך יישוב לא היו מחושים להם כל מה שצריכין, אלא כאדם שעובר ממקום למקום ובדעתו לקנות שם מה שיצטרך, אבל כשהוא פורש למדבר צריך לזמן לו כל הצורך, ומקרא זה לא נכתב כי אם לשבר את האוזן, שלא תתמה במלחמת עמלק ובמלחמות סיחון ועוג ומדין, מהיכן היו להם כלי זין שהכום ישראל בחרב. וכן הוא אומר (יהושע א יד) ואתם תעברו חמושים. וכן תרגם אונקלוס מזרזין, כמו (בראשית יד יד) וירק את חניכיו וזרזו.

Ramban (Nachmanides) further elucidates the p'shat by explaining why the Jewish people felt it necessary to arm themselves.

4. **Ramban, Shemot 13:18 – Explaining the reasoning behind the p'shat – they left armed either to defend themselves against the neighboring Philistines or to symbolize that they were leaving Egypt triumphantly, not as escaping renegades.**

The reason for "the Children of Israel left Egypt armed" is to teach that even though God directed them through the desert, they were afraid that the Philistines, who lived in the nearby cities, might attack them, so they armed themselves like people who go out to war. Some explain that the verse is teaching us that they left Egypt triumphantly and considered themselves redeemed [therefore carrying weapons in a display of victory], and they did not leave in the manner of fleeing slaves.

וטעם וחמושים עלו בני ישראל - לומר כי אע"פ שהסב ה' אותם דרך המדבר היו יראים פן יבאו עליהם פלשתים יושבי הערים הקרובות להם והיו חלוצים כמו היוצאים למלחמה. ויש אומרים שספר הכתוב שיצאו ביד רמה וחשבו להיות גאולים, ולא הלכו כדמות עבדים בורחים:

Although the literal translation of the word *chamushim* is armed, the commentators also adduce explanations on the level of drash. The word *chamushim* is homiletically related to the word *chamesh*, five, which yields an entirely different interpretation:

5. **Rashi, Shemot 13:18, 10:22, based on Mechilta – The drash level of *chamushim*: one fifth of the Jews left Egypt.**

Another explanation (from the Midrash – Mechilta) one fifth of the Jews left Egypt; four fifths died during the three days of the plague of darkness.

Why did God bring the plague of darkness? Since there were evil people in that generation who did not want to leave Egypt, they died during the three days of darkness so that the Egyptians would not see their downfall and say that the Jews were being afflicted by a plague just like them.

דבר אחר חמושים אחד מחמשה יצאו, וארבעה חלקים מתו בשלשת ימי אפילה:

ולמה הביא עליהם חשך?  
שהיו בישראל באותו הדור רשעים, ולא היו רוצים לצאת, ומתו בשלשת ימי אפילה כדי שלא יראו מצרים במפלתם ויאמרו אף הן לוקין כמונו.

Parenthetically, this Midrashic interpretation requires some explanation. Why was it necessary for eighty percent of the Jewish people to perish during the plague of darkness? If they did not want to leave Egypt, why were they not simply permitted to remain there when their brethren left?

Rabbi Moshe Meiselman explains that the Jewish people were created with a purpose: to have a relationship with God and live as His people. During the first eight plagues in Egypt, God performed numerous overt miracles in order to instill in the Jewish people a crystal-clear belief in Him and in their mission as Jews. The Jews who died in Egypt clearly recognized God and the purpose of their existence. The reason that they did not want to leave Egypt was that they were not interested in fulfilling that mission and preferred to remain in a morally corrupt culture. That is why the Midrash calls them “evil.” Consequently, upon the Exodus from Egypt – which marked the formation and physical creation of the Jewish nation – there was no longer any reason for God to keep them alive.

6. **Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel – Another drash of *chamushim* based on the number five: Each family left Egypt with five children.**

Each person left Egypt with five children.

וכל חד עם חמשה תפלא סליקו בני ישראל מארעא דמצרים.

Another interpretation on the level of drash relates to the literal meaning of “armed,” but is nevertheless a homiletic interpretation:

7. **Targum Yerushalmi, Shemot 13:18 – Another drash of *chamushim*: The Jewish people left Egypt “armed” with good deeds.**

The Jewish people left Egypt armed with good deeds.

מוזיינין בעובדא טבא סליקו בני ישראל פריקין מארעא דמצרים.

How can so many different explanations be true? In fact, this verse provides a wonderful example of how several different interpretations, each one a facet of the truth, complement each other and blend together to give us a clearer picture of what actually happened.

## 8. Rabbi Yosef Salant, Be'er Yosef, Shemot 13:18 – Explaining how the Midrashim work together to reconcile the questions asked.

The explanation of the Targum Yonatan ben Uziel cited above is quite perplexing in asserting that each member of the Jewish people left Egypt with five children.

Furthermore, the Targum Yerushalmi cited above, which states that the Jewish people left Egypt armed with virtuous acts, also requires an explanation. What virtuous acts did they perform immediately upon leaving Egypt? For on the previous day, the fourteenth of Nissan, the Prophet Yechezkel/Ezekiel (16:7) described the Jews metaphorically as, “You were naked and uncovered,” meaning they were not involved in any mitzvot in order to merit being redeemed, and therefore God gave them the two mitzvot of the Pesach sacrifice and circumcision.

Nevertheless, we can answer these questions through the Mechilta quoted above in Rashi that “they left Egypt *chumashim* – one out of five – that four-fifths died during the three days of the plague of darkness”; that there were evil people in that generation who did not desire to leave and therefore died.

Who was it that died? Certainly it seems that it must have been the wicked adults who were punished and that their children survived, for what could these infants and small children have done wrong to deserve to die? Consequently, four-fifths of the Jewish children were orphaned.

If so, these orphans became the responsibility of the remaining one-fifth of the Jewish people who left Egypt, who then adopted them and cared for them. In other words, each family left with their own children plus the orphaned children from four other families. Therefore, we find that each couple left with “five children,” meaning five families’ worth of children.

This is the intention of the Torah [when it uses the term *chumashim*] to publicize the righteousness and kindness of the Jews who adopted the children of their fellow Jews who died in Egypt.

This is also the intention of the Targum

מה שפי' בתרגום יונתן כאן ובפ' בא, תמוה הדבר מאד, שכל אחד מישראל היו להם חמשה ילדים.

גם התרגום ירושלמי צריך ביאור, מה שתרגם מזיינין בעובדא טבא סליקו, וכו', איזה מעשים טובים הי' להם עכשיו תיקף ביציאתם ממצרים, והלא על יום אתמול, יום ארבעה עשר בניסן, נאמר עליהם (יחזקאל ט"ז) ואת ערום ועריר, היינו שלא הי' להם שום מצוות להתעסק בהם כדי שיגאלו, ולכן נתן להם אלו שתי מצוות "דם פסח ודם מילה"

אולם הענין יבואר ע"פ מה שאמרו כאן במכילתא והובא ברש"י, וחמושים עלו, אחד מחמישה עלו וארבעה חלקים מתו בשלושת ימי אפילה, ע"כ והיינו שהיו בישראל באותו הדור רשעים שלא היו רוצים לצאת, ומתו בשלושת ימי אפילה, כמו שהביא רש"י בפ' בא (י' כב),

והנה בודאי נראה דאע"פ שהגדולים שהיו רשעים נענשו, אבל הילדים של אלה הרשעים נשארו בחיים, כי אלה הצאן הקטנים העוללים ויונקים, מה עשו ומה פשעו שימותו במצרים, ואם כן היו ארבעה חלקים של ילדים קטנים מכלל ישראל, שנשארו בלי הורים.

א"כ בודאי שהיו מוטלים כל אלו הטפלי, ילדיהם של ארבעה החלקים שמתו – על החלק החמישי שיצא ממצרים, שהם לקחו אותם וטפלו בהם, והעלו אותם יחד עמהם בצאתם ממצרים, והיינו שכל אחד מישראל לקח עמו מלבד טפלו ובני ביתו שלו, עוד ארבע משפחות של ילדים מאלו שהוריהם מתו, נמצא שכ"א מישראל הלך עם חמש טפלי, היינו חמש משפחות של ילדים.

שכוונת התורה היא ג"כ לפרסם בזה את צדקת בני ישראל וחסדם, שעשו עם ילדי אחיהם שמתו במצרים.

וזהו ג"כ הכוונה של התרגום ירושלמי שכתב, מזיינין

Yerushalmi that writes that the Jewish people left Egypt armed with good deeds – each adopting four families of children and then journeying into the great and awesome desert.

Consequently, we now see how the various Midrashim all fit together.

בעובדא טבא סליקו בני מארעא דמצרים, היינו המעשים טובים והחסד שעשו בהוליכם עמהם כ"א חמשה טפלא, במדבר הגדול והנורא.

נמצא שהמדרש שדרש... כולם עולים בקנה אחד.

Now that we have examined some literal and homiletic explanations of the verse, let us move on to a mystical interpretation, on the level of *sod*.

#### 9. **Ohr Gedaliyahu, Shemot, Parshat Beshalach, p. 64 – The sod level of *chamushim*.**

The Zohar teaches that the phrase, “The Children of Israel went forth from Egypt *chamushim*” means that they left fifty times. This means that they went out from all fifty levels of spiritual impurity, and each time they left one level of spiritual impurity, it is called “leaving Egypt.” And each of the [fifty] days that they traveled in the desert until they received the Torah was part of the Exodus from Egypt, for each and every day they removed one level of impurity of Egypt until they arrived at Mount Sinai and received the Torah, when they were totally and completely freed from the enslavement of Egypt.

As the Vilna Gaon explains, at the moment when the Jews heard the First Commandment, “I am the Lord your God Who took you out from the land of Egypt,” the Jewish people finalized their Exodus from the spiritual impurities of Egypt. Receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai was the Jews’ certificate of freedom, for at that moment the Jewish people’s connection to the Egyptians was completely severed. And not even the smallest imprint of the spiritual impurity of the Egyptians remained among the Children of Israel.

ומצינו בזה"ק שאמרו "וחמשים עלו בני ישראל", שחמשים פעמים יצאו, פי' שיצאו מכל החמשים שערי טומאה, וכל יציאה משער של טומאה נקרא יציאת מצרים, ובאלו הימים שהלכו בדרך המדבר עד קבלת התורה, בכלום היתה יציאת מצרים, שבכל יום ויום יצאו משער טומאה אחד של מצרים, עד שבאו למתן תורה ואז יצאו לגמרי מכל שעבוד להמצריים,

וכמו שמפ' הגר"א כי בעת ששמעו אנכי ה' אלוך אשר הוציאתיך מארץ מצרים, אז הי' גמר היציאה מטומאות מצרים, וזה הוא השטר חירות של בני"י, כי אז ניתק הקשר עם המצריים לגמרי, ולא נשאר רושם מהם אף כנקודה קטנה בבני ישראל.

(It is interesting to note that the Tikkunei Zohar points out that the phrase “leaving Egypt” is mentioned fifty times in the Chumash – Rabbi Reuven Kamenetsky).

Why did receiving the Torah enable the Jewish people to become truly free?

#### 10. **Pirkei Avot 6:2; Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Vol. I, p. 45 – The study and performance of Torah are the means to gain true freedom by perfecting our character.**

Pirkei Avot 6:2  
Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said ... “The verse

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ו משנה ב  
אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי... ואומר "והלוחות מעשה



states: 'The Tablets of the Ten Commandments were made by God. The words thereon are the writing of God, engraved onto the Tablets' [Shemot 32:16]. Do not read it as *charut* (engraved); rather read it as *cheirut* (freedom), for there is no one as free as one who engages in Torah study."

Rabbi Friedlander

Those people who regard themselves as "free" from mitzvot are really not free at all. On the contrary, they are held in chains, each one a servant to his base desires.

The study and performance of the Torah is the only means to gain freedom and control over one's base desires [which would otherwise guide all of one's decisions]. Therefore the Mishnah states, "Do not read it as *charut* (engraved), rather read it as *cheirut* (free), for there is no one as free as one who engages in Torah study" [Pirkei Avot 6:2].

אלהים המה, והמכתב מכתב אלהים הוא חרות על הלוחות". אל תקרא חרות אלא חירות, שאין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתלמוד תורה ...

ר' חיים פרידלנדר

אלו החשים עצמם "חופשיים" מן המצוות אינם חופשיים כלל, אדרבא, הם כבולים חזק מאוד, כל אחד מהם הוא עבד נרצע לתאוותיו.

התורה היא – ורק היא – נותנת את החירות והממשלה על התאוות. "אל תקרא חרות אלא חירות" (אבות ו, ב).

Since the Torah is the source of Divine wisdom, its study is the essential guide to life.

#### 11. Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:22 – All wisdom is contained in the Torah.

Delve into [the Torah] and continue to delve into it, for everything is in it.

הפוך בה והפוך בה דכולה בה.

#### 12. Maharal, Derech HaChaim, ibid. – All the world's wisdom is concentrated in the Torah because God created the world by looking into the Torah.

This warrants explanation: what does it mean "for everything is in it" – how does it [the Torah] contain everything? This [idea] is hinted to in the Midrash: "God looked into the Torah and created the world" (Bereishit Rabbah, Ch. 1) ... God set up the world according to the order of the Torah, so that everything that happens in the world follows the order of the Torah ...

This is the meaning [of the Midrash] that God looked into the Torah and created the world, for the order of the world follows the order of the Torah. This is the meaning [of the Mishnah]: "Delve into the Torah for everything is in it," meaning that when one delves into the deeper meanings of the Torah one can come to an understanding of the entire universe, since all that occurs in the universe stems from the Torah, i.e. *all* comes from the Torah, which is the manifesto for mankind.

דבר זה צריך פירוש איך נמצא בתורה הכל שאמר דכולה בה. ודבר זה רמוז במדרש (ב"ר פ"א) ... שהיה הקב"ה מביט בתורה וברא את העולם עד כאן ... ולפי סדר התורה סידר הש"י סדר העולם עד שהכל נמשך אחר התורה....

וזה שאמר שהיה מביט בתורה וברא העולם כי אחר סדר התורה נמשך סדר העולם. וזה שאמר הפוך בה דכולה בה, כלומר כאשר ישיג בתורה הנה הוא משיג בכל סדר המציאות, אחר כי דרכי העולם הזה יוצאים מן דרכי התורה ..... עד שהכל יוצא מן התורה שהיא סדר האדם, נמצא כי הכל הוא בתורה.

## PART B. KABBALISTIC EXPLANATIONS OF THE COMMANDMENTS

Kabbalistic explanations of mitzvot can provide additional insight into the reasons for the commandments. We will look at a few examples: the significance of the numbers of seven and eight, dressing the right side of the body before the left, and the all-night Torah study on Shavuot.

We find that the numbers seven and eight feature prominently in the mitzvot of the Torah. Shabbat is the seventh day of the week, and beginning with the second day of Passover, we count seven weeks of seven days each and then celebrate the festival of Shavuot. Circumcision is done on the eighth day of a child's life and Chanukah is eight days long. The number seven teaches us that we have the ability to sanctify and find spirituality within the physical world in which we live. The number eight signifies that we are capable of rectifying the physical world.

### 1. Rabbi Yaakov Hillel, *Shabbat: The Central Light from Ascending Jacob's Ladder*, Mesorah Publications – Shabbat, the seventh day, enables us to fully express our spirituality.

To get full value out of Shabbat in terms of benefits and enjoyment, we need to understand what resting on Shabbat really means. Some people think it means working hard six days of the week and taking it easy on the seventh. Asked to explain Shabbat in brief, they might say, "As long as you don't work, you're observing the Sabbath." Taken to an extreme, a person might think, "No problem. I'll lounge around in pajamas all day. That's rest, isn't it?" Would he be keeping Shabbat? Far from it.

Whenever the Torah speaks about Shabbat, the phrase "Shabbat la'Hashem" appears - Shabbat is a day for God. During the other six days of the week, people are obviously involved in the physical world. Motivated by positive goals and good intentions, they earn a living, raise their children, and run good Jewish homes. With the right attitude, the workweek is elevated to a higher level. Even so, during those six days, we are involved in the physical world. On Shabbat, our involvement is with the spiritual world. During the six workdays, we're active in the marketplace; on Shabbat, we spend time with our family. Shabbat is a day for looking into the depths of our soul, for taking stock of the spiritual side of our lives.

The physical and spiritual components of a person are locked in an ongoing battle for supremacy. When one dominates, the other submits. If you build up your spiritual side, your physical side will lose its power over you. Conversely, if you empower the physical side and make it the most important thing in your life, your spiritual side will be neglected.

God wants a balance. For six days of the week, we're out there earning a living. These days can also be filled with many wonderful spiritual activities such as prayer, mitzvot, and giving charity – but they are basically days of physical action. On Shabbat, everything stops. The physical side is put on hold, allowing the spiritual side to soar to its highest levels. This is the idea of resting on Shabbat. We stop our involvement in the physical world to immerse ourselves in the spiritual world ...

### 2. Maharal, *Gevuros Hashem*, Ch. 40 – The eighth day takes the circumcised child beyond nature.

Milah, which God gave to Israel, is above nature, and therefore it is performed on the eighth day, because the seven days of the Creation are the seven days of nature, for the natural world was created in seven days. The eighth, however, is above nature – for according to the natural course, a child should remain uncircumcised, but Milah is above nature.

המילה שנתן הקב"ה לישראל היא מדריגתה על הטבע, ולפיכך המילה היא בשמיני כי ז' ימי בראשית הם ז' ימים של הטבע, כי בז' ימים נברא עולם הטבע, אבל השמיני הוא על הטבע כי לפי הטבע יש לו להיות ערל שיהי אדם נולד ערל, והמילה היא על הטבע.



### 3. **Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael, Ch. 2 – The reason for Milah on the eighth day is that mitzvot rise above the natural world.**

The reason why Milah is performed on the eighth day is that man, according to nature, was born with a foreskin, which represents the lowliness and deficiency of nature. Milah represents the rectifying of nature, and therefore is performed on the eighth day, since it is beyond the order of nature, which was created during the six days of Creation.

Thus you must know that through the human performance of Divinely commanded mitzvot, a person will achieve a level that is beyond nature. It is fitting that this should be so, because the deeds of man, who has a spiritual aspect, are on a higher level than the natural world, for nature is purely a physical force, whereas mankind is also spiritual.

וזה טעם מילה בשמיני כי האדם מצד הטבע נברא עם הערלה והוא פחיתות הטבע, והמילה היא תיקון הטבע ולפיכך תיקון הזה הוא ביום השמיני לפי שהוא אחר הטבע שנבראת בששת ימי בראשית.

ומעתה תדע כי המצות שהם הפעולות האלהיות והם מעשה האדם יגיע בהם האדם למדרגה שהוא על הטבע. וראוי שיהיה כך כי מעשה האדם במה שהוא בעל שכל הוא יותר במעלה מן הטבע שהרי הטבע הוא כח חמרי בלבד ואלו האדם הוא שכלי.

We find that in many areas, halachah gives preference to the right side over the left. For instance, a person should attempt to put on the right side of a garment before the left side. Kabbalah enlightens us as to why this is so.

### 4. **Mishnah Berurah 2:4 – One should dress the right side of the body first.**

It is appropriate for a person to hold both sides of a garment in his right hand and first put on the right side and then the left side.

טוב שישים שני צידי המלבוש ביד ימינו, וילבש הימין ואחר כך השמאל.

### 5. **Pele Yoetz s.v. yamin – The right side is given precedence in many respects.**

Our Sages of blessed memory have said (Yoma 15b): "Wherever a person turns, he should always turn to the right." For instance, when putting on shoes, one should put on the right shoe first, and when donning one's clothing, particularly on Erev Shabbos, he should take both sides of the garment in his right hand, place it behind him, and pass the left side to his left hand, and he should dress his right hand first and only then his left hand.

Similarly, one should be careful with the tallit used for a mitzvah that he should hold both sides in his right hand and pass one side from his right hand to his left hand, and then he should put it on. Similarly, when a person wants to wash his hands, he should be careful to take the cup in his

אמרו רבותינו זכרונם לברכה (יומא טו ב) כל פניות שאדם פונה לא יהיו אלא לצד ימין. כגון כשלושב מנעליו, ינעל של ימין תחלה, וכשלושב מלבושו, ובפרט בערב שבת, יקח שני צידי המלבוש בצד ימין, ויקף דרך אחוריו, וימסור הצד שמאל ליד שמאלו, וילבש היד ימין תחלה, ואחר כך היד של שמאל.

וכן יש לזהר בטלית של מצוה שיתפוס שני הצדדין ביד ימין, והיד ימין ימסר הצד האחד ליד שמאל, ואחר כך יתעטף. וכן יש לזהר כשרוצה לטול ידיו, שיקח הכלי ביד ימין וימסרנו אל השמאל כאומר לאחר שמשני, ויטל יד ימין תחלה. וכן בכל דבר יש להקפיד מאד לתן כבוד וקדימה לימין.

right hand and pass it to his left hand, as if telling [the left] to serve him, and he should wash his right hand first. Similarly, with regard to everything else, one should take care to give honor and precedence to the right hand.

Why is it so important to honor the right? What is significant about the right side? Returning to the ten *sefirot*, Kabbalah teaches that the right and left hands represent the *sefirot* of *chesed*, kindness, and *gevurah*, power, respectively. We honor the right in order to place *chesed* before *gevurah*.

6. **Rabbi Shimon Leiberman, Kabbalah 101: “Chesed and Gevurah: The Two-Sided Approach,” Aish.com – The right and left hands represent the sefirot of chesed and gevurah.**

Different parts of the body can be used to represent different sefirot. Whereas the first three sefirot of intellect find their corresponding metaphor in the brain, the sefirot of *chesed* and *gevurah* find their representation in the hands. The reason is that they are the primary vehicles for God’s “actions” in the same way that the hands are the primary vehicle for human activity.

The metaphor is more specific in the sense that there is a correspondence between the “right” and “left” aspect of the human limbs, and the interaction of *chesed* and *gevurah*.

Imagine both hands pushing a cart, or hauling a bucket. In such a case there is no difference between the two hands. It is basically two “times” one hand, the correlation of right/left is inconsequential. True the right hand is a little stronger, but the job is the same for both and as such it would not be appropriate to use the correlation as a metaphor for the *chesed* and *gevurah* relationship.

But let us now take a different case. A person is hammering a nail into a board. The right hand pounds in the nail, whilst the left one holds the board down. A person screws in a screw with his right hand, and the left one pressures a nut in the opposite direction. Or a sculptor’s right hand chisels stone, while his left hand holds the stone steady. In these examples, the right and left hand are cooperating – by acting in a counter fashion!

We see from this that *chesed* and *gevurah* are acting simultaneously towards the same goal – by exerting forces in opposite directions.

Let us be a little more specific regarding the specific roles of *chesed* and *gevurah*. When the sculptor chisels the stone, his right hand naturally takes the chipped stone along with the motion of his chisel. His left hand, however, holds the stone in place, and through the resistance to the movement of the chisel gives the stone its sense of “self.” Thus, the stone is not taken along with the chisel, but rather it stands its own ground. Although the right hand has acted upon it, it has retained its own properties, while bearing the right hand’s “message.”

This describes exactly the relationship of *chesed* as the “right hand” and *gevurah* as the “left hand.”

Why, in fact, is the attribute of *chesed* considered the dominant of the two?

7. **Ibid. – The purpose of God’s deeds is kindness, but gevurah is necessary to prevent the recipient of the kindness from losing his identity.**

The main purpose of God’s deeds is kindness. Thus *chesed* is the stronger and more dominant of the

two sefirot. And it is performing the act that God really had in mind.

But we have previously described the problem inherent in chesed. If a person lives as a beneficiary of someone else's largesse, then he loses his own identity. He becomes a vessel of the benefactor. This would be similar to the board being swept up in the motion of the hammer.

Therein, the sefirah of gevurah assists. It is the "left hand" that pushes in the opposite direction and gives the board its own existence. Whereas the right hand pulls along, the left hand pushes back. Whereas the attribute of chesed draws things into God's sphere of being, gevurah pushes the object away and proclaims: "Away from me, stand on your own two feet; earn your own keep."

Sefirot are not straightforward principles. Nevertheless, loosely understood, by dressing our right arm or leg first, we honor and are cognizant of God's tremendous kindness and primary role in running the world. Afterwards we dress the left arm or leg to illustrate man's opportunity to assist in developing the world.

Our last illustration of a mitzvah discussed in the Zohar relates to the custom of studying Torah the entire night of Shavuot.

#### 8. **Mishnah Berurah, Shulchan Aruch, Aruch Chaim 494:1 – Learning Torah all night on Shavuot.**

It is written in the Zohar that diligent people would learn Torah the entire night [of Shavuot], and this is the practice nowadays among the majority of those who study. The Magen Avraham writes that the explanation for this custom is to rectify the fact that the Jewish people went to sleep the evening before they were to receive the Torah (at the base of Mt. Sinai) and God Himself had to awaken them!

איתא בזוהר שחסידים הראשונים היו נעורים כל הלילה ועוסקים בתורה וכבר נהגו רוב הלומדים לעשות כן... והטעם כתב מ"א ע"פ פשוטו שישאל היו ישנים כל הלילה והוצרך הקב"ה להעיר אותם לקבל התורה [כדאיתא במדרש] לכך אנו צריכין לתקן זה.

There is an additional reason why the Shavuot night learning is critical – for our spiritual growth throughout the year.

#### 9. **Rabbi Shimshon Pinkus, Sichot on Shavuot, pp. 224-225 – Planting the seeds for Torah study and connecting with God.**

The Arizal teaches that the entire year depends on the night of Shavuot. Through proper Torah study or the recitation of the "Tikun," the "Tree of Life" will grow throughout the year. One's aspirations and desires on the night of Shavuot will influence one's learning the entire year. The focus on the night of Shavuot is the planting of great aspirations, that a person's inner desire is to dedicate his abilities to Torah; this is by connecting with God to request and strive for greatness in Torah.

בשם האר"י הקדוש הביאו שכל השנה תלויה בליל שבועות... ע"י לימוד כראוי בעיון או... של "התיקון", יצמח במשך כל השנה ה"עץ חיים" של התורה. כפי השאיפות והרצון של ליל שבועות כך תושפע כל שנת הלימוד של האדם... עבודת ליל שבועות היא זריעת השאיפות הגדולות, שרצונו הפנימי של האדם להקדיש את כוחותיו לתורה, זוהי הדביקות עם הקב"ה לבקש ולשאוף לגדלות בתורה.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ≈ The Torah can be understood and explained in a multitude of different ways, all of which can be divided into four categories: *p'shat* (the literal meaning), *drash* (exegetical derivations), *remez* (hints or allusions), and *sod* (mystical meanings). Kabbalah reveals the *sod* interpretation.
- ≈ Kabbalah also yields profound insights into the meanings and significance of the Torah's commandments. For instance, many mitzvot based on the numbers seven and eight can be understood based on the principle that the number seven represents nature, while the number eight represents something above nature. The number seven teaches us that we have the ability to sanctify and find spirituality within the physical world in which we live. The number eight signifies that we are capable of rectifying the physical world.
- ≈ The Torah's preference of right over left can also be explained Kabbalistically; the right represents kindness, while the left represents power. Loosely understood, by dressing our right arm or leg first, we honor and are cognizant of God's tremendous kindness and primary role in running the world. Afterwards we dress the left arm or leg to illustrate man's opportunity to assist in developing the world.

## SECTION II. REINCARNATION

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From a Torah perspective there is no doubt as to the presence of a spiritual soul which transcends the material body and which continues to exist even after the body, the earthly vessel of the soul, "returns to the earth." Reincarnation is simply an extension of the continued existence of the soul whereby a soul reenters the physical world and occupies a different body than it did in its previous earthly life (see the Morasha class on Reincarnation).

While some Torah laws and verses hint to the process of reincarnation, the concept is only made explicit by Kabbalistic authorities such as the Zohar, Sefer HaBahir (attributed to the first century Sage, Rabbi Nechuniah ben Hakanah), Ramban, and the Arizal (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria).

The foundation of reincarnation is based on the principle that God created each person with the goal of reaching perfection by using his free will. If the soul did not achieve perfection in one lifetime, reincarnation affords additional opportunities to perfect the soul using free will (in contrast to those cases necessitating transmigration into animals, plants, or inanimate objects, which purifies the soul independently of free will).

### 1. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Ner Le'Elef – Assisting an individual to reach perfection.

The concept of reincarnation is very profound. As taught in Derech Hashem (see below), each human being was placed by God in this world to earn *perfection*. We need to appreciate how great each person can actually become. Perfection means the "fulfillment" of every atom that comprises a human being. God has faith that every individual is able to achieve this goal and does not give up on anyone. Reincarnation can assist a person to reach perfection by perfecting different components of the soul that was not achieved in a previous lifetime; which explains why souls can be reincarnated as either human beings, animals, flowers, or inanimate objects.

In order to appreciate what benefit reincarnation offers the soul, one must have a general understanding of the purpose of Creation in the first place.

2. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Derech Hashem 1:2:1-1:3:2, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan translation, Feldheim Publishers – Man must earn his perfection through the correct application of his free will, which can only happen in a physical world.**

God's purpose in Creation was to bestow of His good to another ... His wisdom therefore decreed that the nature of this true benefaction be His giving created things the opportunity to attach themselves to Him to the greatest degree possible for them.

God's wisdom, however, decreed that for such good to be perfect, the one enjoying it must be its master. That is, he must earn it for himself ... man must earn his perfection through his own free will and desire ... It was necessary, therefore, for man to be given free will, to be balanced between good and evil and not compelled toward either.

In order that God's goal best be achieved, the Highest Wisdom decreed that man should consist of two opposites. These are his pure spiritual soul and his unenlightened physical body. Each one is drawn toward its nature, so that the body inclines toward the material, while the soul leans toward the spiritual.

The two are then in constant battle. If the soul prevails, it not only elevates itself but the body as well, and the individual thereby attains his destined perfection.

הנה התכלית בבריאה היה להיטיב מטובו ית' לזולתו...  
על כן גזרה חכמתו שמציאות ההטבה האמיתית הזאת  
יהיה במה שינתן מקום לברואים לשיתדבקו בו ית',  
באותו השיעור שאפשר להם שיתדבקו...

ואולם גזרה חכמתו, שלהיות הטוב שלם, ראוי שיהיה  
הנהנה בו בעל הטוב ההוא. פירוש - מי שיקנה הטוב  
בעצמו... ואולם צריך שיהיה זה בבחירתו ורצונו... על  
כן הוכרח שיונח הדבר לבחירתו, שתהיה נטיתו שקולה  
לשני הצדדין ולא מוכרחת לאחד מהם...

ואולם להיות הדבר הזה נשלם כראוי, גזרה החכמה  
העליונה שיהיה האדם מורכב משני הפכים, דהיינו  
מנשמה שכלית וזכה, וגוף ארצי ועכור, שכל אחד  
מהם יטה בטבע לצדו, דהיינו הגוף לחומריות והנשמה  
לשכליות,

ותמצא ביניהם מלחמה, באופן שאם תגבר הנשמה,  
תתעלה היא ותעלה הגוף עמה, ויהיה אותו האדם  
המושתלם בשלימות המעותד...

The physical world provides the battleground for man's free will, providing the soul with an opportunity to perfect itself. As the sources below demonstrate, reincarnation offers a second chance at earning perfection.

The Arizal, in his introductory chapters to *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, mentions several reasons for which a soul may be reincarnated. These include:

1. Repairing spiritual damage that was incurred through transgressions in a previous life
2. Achieving a level of perfection that was not achieved previously
3. One may be reincarnated for the purpose of helping others to reach spiritual perfection.

The common denominator of these reasons is that a person may return to this world in order to complete his essential calling, which he had not accomplished in his previous life or lives.

3. **Zohar, Vol. I, p. 186b – Replanted to complete one's purpose.**

As long as a person is unsuccessful in fulfilling his purpose in this world, the Holy One, Blessed be He, uproots him and replants him over and over again.

וכל זמנא דבר נש לא יצליח בהאי עלמא, קב"ה עקר  
ליה ונטע ליה בכמה זמנין כמלקדמין.

**KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:**

- ≈ The existence and nature of reincarnation is revealed by the science of Kabbalah. Since God created man to reach perfection in this world by exercising his free will, his soul may be returned to the world multiple times to further perfect himself or to rectify wrongs that he committed in a previous lifetime.
- ≈ A soul can be repeatedly replanted in the world until it fulfills the purpose of its existence.

## SECTION III. THE USE AND ABUSE OF KABBALAH

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We have seen that Kabbalah describes an elaborate framework by which God interacts with the world and through which man's actions influence the Divine emanations. One must be careful, though, not to get carried away and lose sight of the purpose of Kabbalistic teachings.

Divorcing Kabbalah from its roots results in a perverted understanding of what it is all about. When it is understood that Kabbalah is actually an extension and continuation of the basic concepts of morality and service of God laid down by the Written and Oral Torahs, its study can greatly enhance our Jewish living. Unfortunately, though, Kabbalah has a long history of abuse.

### 1. **Rabbi S. R. Hirsch. The Nineteen Letters, Letter 18 – Kabbalah failed to inspire the masses because it was misunderstood.**

A discipline arose...which...is an invaluable repository of the spirit of Tanach (the Bible) and the Talmud, which has unfortunately been misunderstood ... Had Kabbalah been properly grasped, practical Judaism might perhaps have become pervaded with its spirit. Since it was misunderstood, however, it became thereby a magic mechanism, an operation or rejection of theosophic worlds and anti-worlds.

Kabbalah does not seek to supplant the moral and ethical underpinnings of the mitzvot; on the contrary, it seeks to bring these concepts to yet a higher level. The bad PR Kabbalah has sometimes received is due to the misunderstanding of this very idea.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Torah cannot be divorced from its simple explanation.

### 2. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Ner Le'Elef – The mystical meaning of the Torah and its straightforward meaning are one and the same.**

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Shklov explains that when Rabbi Akiva entered the orchard in peace and emerged in peace [see Kabbalah I, Section III, Part A, Source 1] it means that he perceived that the secrets of the Torah and its most straightforward meaning are one and the same. If a person thinks that the sod of Torah consists of understanding it based on gematrios [the numerical values of the letters] and acronyms – this is a sign that he does not understand.



3. **Rabbi Josef Elias, Editor's Notes to The Nineteen Letters, p. 155 – The effect of man's actions on the universe that Kabbalah stresses cannot be separated from the effect it has on his own personality; it is merely a magnification and extension of that effect.**

All too many people exposed to a smattering of Kabbalistic ideas understand its language in a literal sense, fail to grasp the deeper meaning and profound perceptions hidden behind it, and are left with simplistic and crude materialistic and anthropomorphic ideas about matters that are purely spiritual. Prayers and practices that are designed to lift the individual to great heights become mere incantations and mechanical efforts to manipulate God's universe. It was these concerns that caused Torah leaders to prohibit the study of Kabbalah before a man had reached a mature age ... Both (the rationalistic, ethics-based approach to mitzvot) and the Kabbalistic approach stress that all human acts produce effects. They differ only in that the Kabbalistic approach emphasizes the effect on the whole universe, whereas the other approach underlines the effect on the doer and his world.

There is a tendency for people to think of Kabbalistic wisdom purely in terms of the way it explains that human actions can have far-reaching, potent effects. This is undoubtedly an appealing perception of Kabbalah because it lends great power to a human being to influence worlds. However, the focus of Kabbalah is on the spiritual growth of the individual, and the cosmic effects of his actions are merely results of his own spiritual growth.

4. **Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Midot HaRa'yah, p. 93 – The contrast between the understanding and misunderstanding of the cosmic effect idea lies in one's attitude toward the concept of elevation of the universe through man's deeds.**

Someone who imagines that he is "rectifying worlds" through his religious devotions, without understanding the essence of his own soul and its workings, is full of fantasies and imaginations.

Let us imagine, on the other hand, an individual who knows that through every ethical advance, every positive character trait, every advance in wisdom and every good deed, even the most minute – even just speaking in a more refined manner – he is elevating the spiritual content of his soul. The spiritual level of one's soul is after all its essence, so he has elevated his very soul itself. Now one's personal soul is bound up intricately with existence at large, so that the most seemingly minute moral/ethical advance of one individual actually elevates all of existence. This individual truly "rectifies" countless worlds through his every good deed.

מי שמצייר בדעתו שהוא מתקן את העולמות בעבודתו ואינו יודע את ערך נפשו ואת סדר הרוחניות הנפשית בכללה, הוא מלא הזיה ודמיונות כוזבים.

אבל מי שיודע שבכל תיקון מוסרי, וכל מדה טובה, כל למוד הגון וכל מעשה טוב, גם הקטן שבקטנים, אפילו שיחה נאה, הוא מרומם את הרוחניות שבנפשו, והרוחניות הלא היא יסוד כל מציאותה, ונמצא שע"י הרמת הרוחניות שבנפשו מתרוממות כללות נפשו בהיותה, והיות נפשו הפרטית מתיחסת בקשר אמיץ מאוד אל ההויה הכללית וממילא מתרוממת חלק אחד של ההויה מתעלית היא ההויה כולה, ובזה מתקנים באמת עולמות עד אין חקר בכל דבר טוב.

So what then is the purpose of knowing Kabbalah? It is surely not in order to use spiritual powers to "manipulate the universe." So, is it merely an abstract study? No. The wisdom of Kabbalah is immensely practical, in that it teaches us how to perform God's Will.

5. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Introduction to Sha'arei Ramchal, p. 2 – Kabbalah is supposed to be practical.**

[Kabbalah] is not just about enlightening us in

היא לא רק להחכים אותנו בהבנת הדברים, אלא ללמד

the understanding of things. Rather, its purpose is to teach us practically how to serve God ... Everything that God has revealed to us about His ways and His world ... is a lesson for us ... We can understand His Will in creating different levels of worlds ... and what is our purpose in relation to all these worlds.

אותנו הלכה למעשה את דרכי עבודת השי"ת. כל מה שמגלה השי"ת לנו מדרכיו ומעולמו... הוא למוד עבורנו... ונבין מה היה רצונו בבריאת השלבים השונים של העולמות... ומה התפקיד שמוטל עלינו ביחס לעולמות אלה.

What should our intention be when approaching the study of Kabbalah?

6. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Introduction to Kabbalah, Simpletoremember.com – Purposes of studying Kabbalah.**

We can enumerate several purposes of studying Kabbalah. First of all, the study of Kabbalah helps us to internalize and strengthen our belief in God, which is a natural result of understanding more about the way God runs the world and how the world reflects His sovereignty. Secondly, the study of Kabbalah can inspire good actions. When a person appreciates the far-reaching consequences of his own conduct, this knowledge should move him to being a better person and performing mitzvot. Thirdly, the more a person understands the consequences of his actions, the more he will work on his relationships with God and with other people in order to bring about the correct consequences.

**KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:**

- ⌘ Even though Kabbalah describes the world in mystical terms of spiritual worlds and Divine emanations, we must be careful not to lose perspective. Kabbalah is not a distinct discipline from mainstream mitzvah observance. On the contrary, the knowledge imparted by Kabbalah is meant to heighten our sense of responsibility for perfecting ourselves and the world through the vehicle of performing God's Will as commanded in the mitzvot.
- ⌘ The sum total of Jewish "mysticism" is perfection in the areas of morals and spiritual character development, and growth in our relationships with both God and His creations. Far from serving as an escape, Jewish mysticism brings with it ever-increasing levels of accountability and service to God and man.

## CLASS SUMMARY:

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### HOW DOES KABBALAH ENHANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE TORAH AND ITS COMMANDMENTS?

Kabbalistic wisdom constitutes the fourth of the four levels on which the Torah can be understood. (The four levels are *p'shat*, *remez*, *drash*, and *sod*.) The verses and stories of the Torah can be interpreted in many ways, all of which are true, and the mystical interpretations fall into the category of Kabbalistic teachings.

Kabbalah also sheds a tremendous amount of light on the mystical underpinnings of many of the Torah's mitzvot. Many mitzvot are based on profoundly deep principles that can be understood and elucidated only in the context of Kabbalah.

### WHAT DOES KABBALAH REVEAL ABOUT REINCARNATION?

Although other Torah sources may allude to the phenomenon of reincarnation, it is discussed explicitly only in Kabbalistic works. Kabbalah reveals that the soul may be returned to the world over and over in order to fulfill its purpose of achieving perfection, to repair spiritual damage from a previous lifetime, or to advance further in ways that it failed to do in its previous existence. Reincarnation can even be more effective in this respect than the punishments of Gehinnom.

### WHAT IS THE DANGER OF STUDYING KABBALAH IN THE “WRONG” WAY?

In order to achieve true benefit from Kabbalah, it is important to approach it with the proper understanding and not to misuse its study. Kabbalah is not intended to transform the Torah's mitzvot into “secret rites” or magical rituals with supernatural powers. Divorcing the moral significance of the Torah's laws from their mystical explanation is a distortion of what Kabbalah is all about. Kabbalah must be studied with the attitude that it is another dimension of understanding of the Torah, but its fundamental underpinning is the Will of God.

### WHAT CAN THE STUDY OF KABBALAH ADD TO MY LIFE?

The study of Kabbalah can have many beneficial effects. It can help us understand God's Will and thus become better servants of God. It can improve our faith and belief in God, which is a natural consequence of our developing a greater understanding of how God interacts with the world and how the world represents His Will. It can also inspire us to positive actions and behavior, since a person who appreciates the cosmic impact of his own actions will be more likely to conduct himself in accordance with the Torah's dictates. This will also cause the person to improve his relationships with God and with other people.

## ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

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Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, *Siftei Chaim*, *Emunah U'Bechirah*, Vol. II, *Mamarei Pardes HaTorah*

Ramchal, *Da'at Tevunot* (The Understanding Heart) with the Gloss of Rabbi Chaim Friedlander