

Introduction

The Torah is the guide map for life. It shows me not only how to live my life but how to make the most of my life. This map, however, is useful only to the degree to which I know myself and appreciate my self-worth. Knowing myself enables me to navigate the roads of life with confidence, arrive at all of my desired destinations, and avoid getting lost with no GPS signal.¹

People today talk a lot about the need to “find themselves,” “discover their voice,” and “carve out their own paths.” In order for us, parents and teachers, to raise happy, resilient, and confident Jewish adults, we have to appreciate that these are much more than cultural fads and New Age slogans. They are vocalizing the deepest desire we have as human beings: to lead the life that we were each uniquely born to lead. To whatever degree people do not find their paths within Torah, either their personalities become suppressed or they look to express their

1 The Radak in *Sefer Hashorashim*, shoresh Y-R-H, translates “Torah” to mean “guidance.” See also the first *Gur Aryeh* on the Chumash. As for the centrality of self-knowledge for orientation within the landscape as described by the Torah, see the opening line of chapter 1 of *Mesilas Yesharim*: “The foundation of piety and the root of the complete service [of Hashem] is that a person should clarify and make real to himself what is *his* obligation in *his* world...” (emphasis added). This principle is developed throughout *Mesilas Yesharim* but can essentially be boiled down to the following summary: people’s ability to make the right decisions, which bring them closer to Hashem, and their inner sense and feelings with respect to their relationship with Hashem, depend entirely on how attuned they are to their personal sense of mission and obligation (as explained by Rav Beryl Gershenfeld).

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individualities elsewhere. We must therefore guide our children and students in knowing themselves and finding themselves in Klal Yisrael, in addition to guiding them generally in the landscape of life. In short, we must help them recognize and celebrate their gifts and teach them how to nurture their natures.

It is for this reason that Hashem orchestrated the events leading up to the receiving of the Torah—so that all Jews would know their place within the Jewish People, and the Jewish People’s place within humanity. Once we know our place, we are able to be guided by the Torah to help us find our way.

The Goal of This Book

Our goal in this book is to equip parents and teachers with this paradigm, which Hashem revealed to us in those exalted days as we encamped around Mount Sinai, and which laid the foundation for the receiving of the Torah.

In the hustle and bustle of the Pesach Seder, we normally do not have enough time to meditate on all of the lines in *Dayeinu*, including the one about the value of the preamble to receiving the Torah:

אלו קרבנו לפניו הר סיני, ולא נתן לנו את התורה, דיינו.

If He would have brought us close to Mount Sinai, but not given us the Torah, dayeinu—it would have been sufficient for us.

Even minimal consideration provokes the question: What could have possibly been the benefit of freeing us from slavery, taking us out of Egypt and through the sea, and schlepping us all the way through the desert to bring us to the foot of Mount Sinai—only to *not* give us the Torah? A national camping trip?

To answer this question, many of the commentaries on the Haggadah point to the statement of the Sages that the confusion that entered humanity at the hands of the serpent in the Garden of Eden

was dispelled upon our arrival at the mountain, even before we received the Torah itself.²

We would like to better understand what the nature of this confusion was so that we can address whatever remnant of it is within our own hearts and minds today. In order to do so, we need to look at the context of this sublime moment of spiritual elevation and clarity. Let us first look at where, exactly, the Torah speaks about this moment of preamble to *kabbalas haTorah*.

After weeks of trekking through the desert, still reeling from a terrifying attack by the army of Amalek, facing the almost absolute unknown ahead of us, our fears and anxieties gave way to arguments and divisiveness between us. Without a vision of what our national destiny looked like, leaders rose and factions formed. Each one claimed to know the way forward—pretending they knew exactly what Klal Yisrael was meant to look like.³

All of this changed as we came through a clearing and raised our eyes to see that the place that Hashem had chosen to reveal His path for us was a small, unimposing mountain whose unique beauty was precisely in its not eclipsing any of the other mountains around it.⁴ One might have expected that the Glory of Hashem would descend on one of the more dramatic and imposing peaks in that vast wilderness. But as it dawned on us that His Presence was pointing to this modest mountain, we collectively breathed a sigh of relief. Just as this unassuming

2 *Orchos Chaim*, *Avudraham*, *Alshich HaKadosh*, and *Rashbatz* (among others), quoting the Gemara in *Shabbos* 146a, emphasize that the change occurred through our mere standing at Mount Sinai, even before the Torah was given: “בשעה שבא נחש על חוה הטיל בה זהמא; ישראלי שעמדו על הרים סיני פסקה זהמתן”—When the serpent engaged Chavah, he injected pollution into her [mind]; [the nation of] Israel, when it stood at Mount Sinai, their [mental] pollution vanished.”

3 The narrative described here is based upon the poignant comments of the *Kli Yakar* on *Shemos* 19:2. The verse transitions from the plural, “וַיִּחְנוּ בְמִדְבָּר”—They encamped in the desert,” to the singular, “וַיֵּחֶן שֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הַהֲרָן”—Israel encamped there opposite the mountain,” specifically as they arrived at the mountain. The *Kli Yakar* understands that it was the moment of arrival itself that catalyzed this radical internal transformation of our perspective.

4 As Chazal tell us, Mount Sinai was chosen for its humility (*Megillah* 29a, *Bereishis Rabbah* 99:1).

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mountain did not pretend to be any more or any less than what it was, we realized that we could do the same. All we had to do in life was rise to the challenge of being *ourselves*. Simultaneous to feeling relief, we were uplifted with exhilaration at its sight. All of sudden, “being part of the Jewish People” took on new meaning. We set up camp with a newfound sense of unity “opposite the mountain.”⁵

Perhaps for the first time in our lives up until that point, we felt that *each of us had a place* in this grandest of projects called “the Jewish People” upon which we were about to embark.⁶ Additionally, any sense of competition or jealousy toward the people on either side of us melted away with the knowledge that *they too had their own places*, which in no way threatened ours. With this outlook, a spirit of peace like none other descended upon us. We had discovered a vista of life that was a prerequisite to our keeping the Torah and its mitzvos. Our identity was revealed to be a nation of individuals who work in harmony, united in our relationship with Hashem. For this awesome revelation, in and of itself, we say “*Dayeinu*.”

The question that remains is, how is it that Mount Sinai’s “humility” imbued us with confidence?⁷ Aren’t humility and self-confidence opposites?

The secret to answering this question is in the concise phrasing of Chazal, which describes our experience at that time “כְּאַישׁ אֶחָד בַּלְבֵד אֶחָד”—as one person with one heart.”⁸

This does not mean that we were a single-minded mob, but rather, quite the opposite—we were like the human body composed of vastly

5 *Vayikra Rabbah* 9:9.

6 Contrast this to the mentality of a slave who is pushed to the brink with back-breaking and soul-crushing labor that bears no pride, and lends no expression to one’s individual contribution.

7 Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch, asks the question (*Likutei Torah, Bamidbar*, p. 16): If Hashem wanted a place that exuded humility, why not give the Torah in a valley? Why a mountain at all? Our approach here is consistent with his answer.

8 *Rashi* on *Shemos* 19:2, quoting *Mechilta*. See also the *Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim* 9:4, which states: “כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל נָفָא אֶחָד הָמָן”—All of Israel is one body.” See also the comments of the *Radvaz* on *Hilchos Mamrim* 2:4, who understands even halachic ramifications of this concept.

diverse cells, organs, and systems with their own specialized functions, yet all serving the greater good of the health of the organism as a whole.⁹ We, as individuals, were uplifted to discover that we were much more vital to the whole, and therefore to the destiny of the world, than we could have possibly conceived prior. At the same time, this realization was humbling. We realized that no single person or people could do everything necessary for the larger organism. Overall health requires specialization, and specialization requires that one be unspecialized in many other areas. Moreover, like healthy blood vessels, everything we are given is solely in order for us to pay forward.¹⁰ Nothing is for us to keep for ourselves.¹¹

The confusion that had plagued humanity until that point was rooted in the loss of the perspective that each of us is a unique and vital part of the whole. The serpent had made Chavah feel that she was unimportant, and only if she would eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil “would she be like God—*וַהֲיִתְם כָּלֹקִים*.”¹² Then she would be important, the serpent promised. This lie vaporized in the

9 The *Shem MiShmuel* (Pesach 12) points out that this is the precise distinction between the unity-amidst-diversity achieved by the Jewish People on the eve of receiving the Torah and the apparent unity of the mob of Egyptians who chased us when we were on the banks of the Sea of Reeds. There, the unity of the Egyptians is described as “**בָּלֶב אֶחָד כָּאֵישׁ אֶחָד**”—with one heart like one person” (where the emphasis is that they were “**בָּלֶב אֶחָד**”—single-minded in their hatred of their escaped former slaves). In contrast, the Jews are described as being “**כָּאֵישׁ אֶחָד בָּלֶב אֶחָד**”

10 This notion of every person as an individual who must serve the *klal* is expressed concisely by Chazal in at least two places:

- “If I do not take responsibility for myself [as an individual], who will do so for me? If I [serve] myself alone, what am I?” (*Avos* 1:14).
- “What is the correct path that a person should choose [for himself]? The one that is harmonious (*תפארת*) for him and harmonious for others” (*ibid.*, 2:1). The *Bartenura* uses the word *נה* to explain the meaning of harmonious (*תפארת*) in this context. Rav Reuven Leuchter explained that this is the intent: a person needs to do, within the framework of Torah, that which comes naturally and comfortably to him, and, at the same time, brings benefit to others. He was created to play precisely this role within the larger organism in which he exists.

11 Cells that serve themselves without regard to the health of the organism are considered malignant.

12 *Bereishis* 3:5. See *Rashi* who explains that the serpent was introducing jealousy by making Adam and Chavah think of themselves as deities, equal to God.

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face of the truth when we experienced our irreplaceable place within our people and prepared to accept our awesome national mission.¹³

At the foot of Mount Sinai, Hashem facilitated our grasping this paradigm in order for us to receive His Torah as it was meant to be received. **Our goal in this book is to recreate this sublime sense of personal and national purpose for our readers so that they, in turn, can cultivate it for their children and their students.** We therefore set out to prepare a “guidebook for guides”—a guidebook for parents and teachers, the people whom we all look toward to help us find our way in life, and whom we trust to help us do so in a way that is in tune with who we uniquely are. Every parent knows how important a child’s self-esteem is. Every teacher knows that the ability to inspire self-confidence in his or her students is not merely an important tool among other teaching skills; it is a teacher’s primary mission as an educator.¹⁴

Our Role as Parents and Educators

Among the discoveries that come from seeing Klal Yisrael “as one person with one heart” is that the Torah as a guidebook does not present us with a single leader we are meant to singularly emulate. Avraham, Sarah, Yitzchak, Rivkah, Yaakov, Rachel, and Leah, using their totally different spiritual gifts, built the family that became our nation.¹⁵ The twelve tribes embodied a full spectrum of creative powers blessed by Yaakov Avinu and, later, by Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe, Aharon, Miriam, Betzalel, Yehoshua, Calev, and Pinchas each led us in the desert in ways that no one else could. We needed *all* of their examples to become the people we became through the challenges of those forty years. The prophets, judges, kings, and sages of *Nach* expand the mosaic of examples that guide our lives. It is no accident that the teachings of

13 See *Alshich*, *Vayikra* 9:1, פ"ה אמן הנה על הקישיא השנית.

14 As we will see throughout this book, true “self-esteem” and “self-confidence” are concurrent with humility and an openness to learn from others. As the educator empowers students to trust themselves to use their unique abilities and perspectives, they simultaneously open their minds to appreciate their limitations and how much they do not yet know. It is only this combination of confidence and humility that produces life-long learning.

15 It has been noted by many that ישראַל can be seen as an amalgamation of the names of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs: יצחק, יעקב, שרה, רבקה, רחל, אברהם, לאה.

Chazal, whether the Mishnah, Gemara, Midrash, or *Zohar*, all weave together tapestries of the teachings of many teachers in dialogue with one another. Here, too, we hope to hear from a broad spectrum of voices—from the Midrash and the Gemara to Rishonim and Acharonim (medieval and post-medieval authorities), and all the way down to twentieth-century *mashgichim* (spiritual guides) and Chassidic rebbes. We will see for ourselves how all of them in harmony, in their own styles and with their own emphases, point to the same magnificent picture of how cosmically significant each and every person is, and how we all fit together into a picture so much larger, richer, and more beautiful than any one of us is alone.

It goes without saying that in order to guide others, parents and educators must find themselves first.¹⁶ It follows that the lessons we will present here are not simply for our children and students; they are, first and foremost, for us. We are first charged to know, appreciate, and embody our own strengths as individuals and as educators. To whatever degree we succeed in doing this, we are equipped to recognize what makes our children and students special and help them know, appreciate, and embody their strengths.¹⁷

Additionally, our experience in education and outreach for a decade and a half has taught us that people are attracted to individuals who are genuine and comfortable in their own skin. Moreover, people attract others who are similar to them. Therefore, knowing ourselves and being true to ourselves will help us attract those who can identify with us on deeper levels. Embracing our unique *kochos*¹⁸—aside from the intrinsic benefits—multiplies our effectiveness as parents and as educators.

16 In the same way as the *Ramchal* describes in his metaphor of the maze of hedges (at the end of chapter 3 of *Mesilas Yesharim*): “Those who have already left [the maze] can perceive reality clearly and can [thereby] advise other people [on how to navigate it].”

17 We can truly love and appreciate others only to the degree to which we love and appreciate ourselves: “ואהבת לרעך כמוך”—Love your fellow as [you love] yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18).

18 The word “*kochos*” is a broad term that we use to refer to personal strengths, including character traits, spiritual strengths, and innate talents and abilities.

How This Book Happened

We, the authors, both grew up in a society in which individuality was counted among its highest values. “Dare to be Different” and “Be Unique” were some of the many slogans that were drilled into us from a young age. The pursuit of originality was reinforced in us through countless essays, art projects, science fair experiments, talent show performances, CD purchases, fashion statements, and poster selections for the walls of our room—all of which had to bespeak our one-of-a-kind-ness. And yet, paradoxically, so much of the unspoken messaging of the 1990s’ version of the “American Dream” was homogenizing. We all had to work hard in high school, get good grades, play at least two sports, participate in extracurriculars, attend the best college we could get into, milk our networks for promising internships, and become either a doctor, a lawyer, or a banker. Neither of us could identify this paradox at the time, but on some level, we both felt that we had more inside of us that we had to find a way to bring out. Each of us intuited that Judaism could help us with our self-expression in a way that pop culture could not.

Six years apart, and still never having met, we headed to Israel to study in yeshiva. We did not know exactly what we were getting ourselves into, but our expectations were that we would learn some Aramaic, sharpen our logic skills through Talmud study, and hopefully glean a few mystical ideas that would radically deepen our experience of life and improve the quality of our relationships with others. Thankfully, these expectations were met, and exceeded. What we did not expect was that we would be plunged into a two-month curriculum with the Rosh Yeshiva studying the Torah’s vision of self-awareness, self-esteem, and the importance of individuality.

Rav Beryl Gershenfeld was our guide on our journeys to locate our GPS and was our mentor in coaching us on how to use it. As he took us on a journey through the Torah on these subjects, a journey we have chronicled here, his goal was not simply that we be exposed to the ideas, but that they would transform our lives so that we could live more authentically, confidently, and happily.

This was not something we had expected to learn while living in what we had understood at the time to be an ostensibly homogeneous Orthodox Jewish community. This counterintuitive context amplified the magic of the experience. Discovering how uniquely irreplaceable every person is—from a rabbi dressed like pretty much everyone else in the neighborhood—was itself a revelation to our twenty-something-year-old selves about how much deeper the individuality of the soul ran than what we had ever imagined.

This paradigm merits to be shared beyond the walls of the small yeshiva in which we were blessed to have first learned of it. Many can benefit from it, whether they are on the outside of the Torah community looking in, or they are fortunate to find themselves already on the inside but do not yet realize the wealth of gifts that they possess inside themselves. In our studies outside of yeshiva, including the University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Center and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, we have not seen anything even remotely like it. The secular world, despite offering innumerable options for expressing one’s individuality, can plumb a person’s individuality only as deeply as psychologists and career counselors have words for.¹⁹ Even some elements in the Torah world have a tendency to skip the **וַיֵּחֶן שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נִגְדַּה הַדָּר** in the excitement to receive the Torah. In so doing, young people, whether enthusiastic to become *talmidei chachamim* or not, do not realize how critical it is to appreciate their own unique contribution to Klal Yisrael and uncover their one-of-a-kind portion in Torah. For these reasons, we are committed to bringing these ideas back into the conversation of Torah education.

חֲנֹוך לְגָעֵר Probably the most often quoted verse about education is: “**עַל פִּי דַּרְכוּ גַם כִּי יַזְקִין לֹא יִסּוּר מִמְּנָה**”—Educate the youth according to his way, [for] also when he becomes old, he will not veer from it.”²⁰ We

19 See the *Malbim*’s comments on *Mishlei* 17:24: “**אֵת פְּנֵי מִבֵּין חַכְמָה וְעַיִן כִּסְיל בְּקַצְחָה אֶרֶץ**—Within the [one] who understands exists wisdom, [but] the eyes of the superficial thinker [look] toward the ends of the earth.” We have been trained to look everywhere but inward to find answers to our questions. Certainly when it comes to self-knowledge, no search engine is equipped to help us with our query.

20 *Mishlei* 22:6.

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will see together that Shlomo HaMelech was summarizing a wealth of wisdom in this one line. Our twenty-first-century way of even further summarizing is *nurture their nature*. While scientists debate whether nature or nurture is more influential, we as educators can give the most to our children and students by helping them recognize and celebrate their God-given natures, and then help them know how to nurture their strengths in practice.

Summary

In order to give us a sense of the road ahead, here is a summary of the flow of ideas in the six sections that follow:

Section I introduces us to how crucial knowing our self-worth is, especially in this generation.

Section II illustrates how, since the times of Avraham Avinu, the Jewish approach to education has always demanded a profound recognition of the individuality of the child or student, and customization of the individual's education accordingly.

Section III is a deeper study of where our individual spirituality stems from. There, we will look at the three totally independent spiritual "roots" of *Chesset*, *Yirah*, and *Emes* from which all of our *neshamos* find their sources.

Section IV is about maintaining a positive outlook in general. This will help us further grasp why self-awareness must start with knowing our strengths, even before we attain an acute self-awareness of our weaknesses.

Section V helps us see that building a life based on one's strengths is no simple task and demands perseverance to stay the course. In this section, we explore the sense of responsibility that comes with knowing who we are, the hard work required to actualize ourselves, and the pitfalls to be wary of along the way.

Section VI demonstrates how the primary areas of a full Jewish life help us identify our individual strengths and how those areas serve as the canvases upon which we can give them full expression.

Throughout the book and in the **Conclusion**, we show that the idea of knowing oneself is not so that we live in our own private, secluded

bubble. Rather, every person must come to appreciate where he or she fits into the larger picture of the Jewish People, as well as the world at large. We should also come away with a greater appreciation for the irreplaceable contributions of all those around us, and hopefully with much improved collaboration.

How to Use This Book

In terms of **how to use this book**, there are a few moving parts to keep in mind. The primary showcase of the book is the collection of Torah sources on self-esteem and individuality, and their accessible, contemporary English translations. This itself is an invaluable asset, which is found almost nowhere else in one place. Second, our narration throughout the book is meant to weave everything together and bring out what we believe are the essential points within these sources. The third component are the footnotes and the occasional shaded text boxes. The footnotes, of course, contain references for further reading, as well as insights that we think are relevant to our discussion but would have derailed the flow of the main text. In terms of the shaded text boxes, think of them as footnotes that got promoted. The content in them demanded more development than a footnote could have contained, but we did not consider it to be essential to the main thrust of the section. With these points in mind, please use the book in whichever way works best for you.

Our Hope

We very much believe that if there is anyone who can change lives, it is you, the reader. You are entrusted with the holiest mission in the world: to help others actualize their potential, one person at a time. We want to further empower you to serve our people by better understanding the awesome power of every person. If you picked up this book, it is because you already care. We have found that the more you engage with the content herein with both mind and heart, the more you will shine as a role model, and the more you will be able to help your children and students shine themselves.²¹

21 It is only natural that the concepts that surround individuality must be internalized by each

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Every person believes on some level that he or she is one of a kind. And this is the truth.²² The Torah instructs all of us to look at ourselves in this way, and to realize that we are entrusted with a special mission that only we can fulfill.²³ In short, this mission is to nurture the nature with which we were created in order to become the people we were born to be, and to support and guide those within our realm of influence to do the same. In this book, we hope to give a fresh voice to this timeless mission by calling upon you, the reader, to help your children and your students grow in this way. If our students remember anything that they learned from us, it should be that Hashem created them with unique greatness that is theirs to joyously actualize.

person in his or her own way. In his introduction to the *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe notes that all *sefarim*, even those composed by Chazal, share an important limitation. Every reader is different, and not everyone can relate naturally to every *sefer*. Moreover, many people are not *zocher* to develop the skills necessary to penetrate to the depths of Torah literature and gain access to their unique *chelek* in Torah. He then seems to contradict himself by stating that he wrote a *sefer* that would be able to speak to everyone. How can this be? One resolution to this paradox, which one of the authors heard from Rabbi Ben Tzion Krasnianski, is that his intent was to produce a *sefer* that would give people the spiritual self-awareness that would enable them to come to know themselves on their own and, in turn, help others come to know themselves.

The written word has significant limitations, but we believe that if readers use this book to catalyze their own efforts of self-exploration, this will ultimately be better than any parent, teacher, mentor, or *rebbe* telling them who they are. They will then be able to facilitate similar self-exploration journeys for others as well.

22 *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 8:3, quoted in *Sanhedrin* 38a: [Adam HaRishon's being created alone serves to] declare the greatness of the supreme King of kings, Hakadosh Baruch Hu. A person stamps several coins with one seal, and they are all similar to each other. But the Holy One, blessed be He, stamps all people with the seal of Adam the first man, and not one of them is similar to another. As it is stated: "It is changed like clay under the seal, and they stand as a garment" (*Iyov* 38:14).

23 Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 37a: "Every person is required to say, 'The world was created for me'—*כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר בשבי נברא העולם*'."