

Introduction to Tanach Education – specifically the study of Chumash Bereshit (Emuna 101)

Chapter 2

"The Torah is One"

In the same way that we may mistakenly think that the world is a collection of details, we might likewise mistake the Torah for a collection of rules and instructions – a long list of dos and don'ts, divided into categories with no connection between them.

However, the mitzvot are an expression of a general truth that preceded them. They are branches of a single truth, the sounds of a single melody.

That's why Chazal say (Berachot 13, page 1): "Why do we say the first paragraph of Shema before we say the *Vehaya Im Shamo'a* section? So that a person first accepts the yoke of Heaven and only then takes on the yoke of the mitzvot."

In the first paragraph of Shema, a person accepts the yoke of Heaven: he contemplates the basis and roots of faith — that a single truth underlies the myriad forces and tendencies of life. Only through this awareness can one reach *Vehaya Im Shamo'a*, which addresses the requirement to fulfill many mitzvot.

Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook emphasized that **this** is the order – first accept the Yoke of Heaven and only after that, fulfill the mitzvot.

Shema Yisrael is the general rule; *Vehaya Im Shamoa* contains the details.

The mitzvot are not a mere collection of dos and don'ts whose purpose is to organize our lives to make everything pleasant. Rather, they are multiple, varied expressions of a single general truth that is embedded within them. The function of the mitzvot is to reveal the neshama (soul) of our nation in all aspects of life.

Ki ner mitzvah ve'Torah or (Proverbs 6:23) – “For a mitzvah is a candle, and the Torah is light”. The mitzvot are the candles, the rays that reveal and spread the great light of the Torah, which is the infinite truth embedded in it. “The Torah is in its entirety the name of G-d” (Zohar, Emor, 8) – That is, one G-dly truth, and therefore “The Torah is One” (*Maharal, Netivot Olam 1, Netiv HaTorah 1*). Rav Kook says, “She [referring to Knesset Yisrael throughout the generations] knows that the entire Torah is only one name of Hashem, one sound, one utterance — there is nothing else, and everything is contained within it.” (*Orot HaTorah 4:1*). The Torah is a single idea, a single vision, one neshama. It is the neshama of the entirety of Israel that yearns to be revealed in all aspects

of life – through many actions, laws, and mitzvot.

Rav Kook also explains, “To properly express itself, the great Jewish neshama requires many different actions that are great and holy. These are: learning Torah, performing mitzvot, our holy customs, and prayer.”(*Orot, Orot Yisrael* 7:3)

It bears repeating that, at their core, the mitzvot are not instructions for solving psychological, social, or health problems. Their purpose is to reveal the Name of Hashem — the G-dly spark of life embedded in creation, and to enable the neshama to appear in all of creation through moral and noble values that produce order, harmony, pleasantness, and joy.

In the brachot before the morning Shema we say *Emet Veyatziv Venachon Vekayam Veyashar Vene’eman Veahuv Vechaviv Venechmad Venaim...* – “**True** and stable, and established, and enduring, and upright and faithful, and beloved and **cherished, and desired and pleasant...**”

G-dly truth is true pleasantness — the pleasantness that comes from holding fast to truth for its own sake. All

other “pleasures” are superficial, even illusory — hollow and fleeting.

Mitzvot aren’t merely action points but rather actions that spread light and give expression to holiness; they therefore impact the doer and lead him to a higher moral level of humility and fear of heaven – *Asher kideshanu b’mizvotav v’tzivanu* – “Who made us holy with His mitzvot.” In this way, all of reality is elevated.

Rav Kook writes in Orot (Zeronim, Chapter 4, page 123): The mitzvot contain holy energies of light, life, goodness, and heroism. These energies enter a person who performs the mitzvot with faith, for the sake of heaven (not for an ostensible reward). And those who fulfill the mitzvot unwaveringly draw out the life force hidden at the core of Torah. And over time, such a person experiences their own moral and spiritual elevation.

We need to ask why this awareness that the mitzvot reveal the single G-dly truth is so critical. Surely, the main thing is that the Jewish people fulfill the mitzvot — that we do what is correct and avoid what is forbidden. What difference does it really make if one is aware of the fact that the Torah is one or not?

The more aware a person is that the mitzvot he does are a conduit through which the truth of Torah appears, the

more those mitzvot will elevate him, and, as a result, this general light will appear in all aspects of his life, and the influence he has in elevating the world increases.

If a person thinks that the mitzvot are a collection of rules, “manufacturer’s instructions” to organize one’s life optimally and to bring him to wholeness, the mitzvot will only influence the person and reality in a limited way.

Let’s give an example to understand this better: “Love your neighbor” – a person can love his fellow Jew for many reasons. We all know that we can’t provide everything we need by ourselves. We need friends and society. So we love our friends and society for beneficial reasons. Our love for others stems from our love of self.

A person on a higher level whose entire worldview comes from faithfulness to the word of Hashem is very strict about fulfilling mitzvot, but it’s still possible that he loves his neighbor to get a heavenly reward.

There is an even higher level of loving one’s neighbor, and this is the ideal. “Rabbi Akiva said, Love your neighbor as yourself; this is a great **general** principle of the Torah.”

This teaches us that the Torah includes general principles and specific details. A general principle is a single idea that encompasses many particulars — loving your

neighbor, keeping Shabbat, and living in Israel are all such principles, while other mitzvot are the specific details that branch out from them. Rabbi Akiva teaches us that loving one's neighbor is one of these foundational principles.

Why?

Let's clarify: How can a person reach such a high moral level that he is capable of loving his neighbor so completely that he can't even harbor a negative thought about them, never mind speak badly of them? How can he succeed in sharing in their joy without a trace of jealousy? How can he truly share their pain and perform acts of loving-kindness with his physical and financial means – all of this sincerely meant?

The answer is: "Love your neighbor as yourself – **I am Hashem**" (Vayikra 19:18). "I am Hashem" refers to the G-dly neshama in Am Yisrael. This neshama encompasses the whole nation – meaning that each individual is connected to all others by this neshama. Once I recognize this neshama's existence, both my neighbor and I are parts of the same entity.

The Gemara (Yerushalmi, Nedarim 30:1-2) explains that if the right hand accidentally hurts the left, the left obviously wouldn't retaliate because they are two parts of one body. A person who loves his neighbor because *Ani*

Hashem realizes that the two of them are parts of the same body.

And so, we understand that Am Yisrael isn't unified for practical or politically mutually beneficial purposes. Rather, we reflect the G-dly neshama that unites us into a single entity, and our altruism is therefore natural.

In this way, the mitzvah to love our neighbor is a general one – it expresses a wide perspective of *Hashem Eloheinu Hashem Echad*. The name of Hashem appears in each individual in Am Yisrael. This is the positive aspect of the mitzvah. The negative aspect can be explained through Rabbi Akiva's statement – "Love your neighbor as yourself, that's a great principle of the Torah" – meaning that if a person is stringent about certain mitzvot, regardless of their difficulty, but doesn't respect others or even behaves improperly towards them – this isn't a minor lapse in some detail of the mitzvot — it's an essential flaw in the person's spiritual foundation. He's missing out on expressing the "general" aspect of the Torah.

This moral weakness stems from a lack of understanding that the purpose of all the mitzvot is to elevate a person to the point where he sees value in all of Hashem's creations. Loving one's neighbor is such a basic mitzvah that the Hafetz Hayim wrote:

“If there is a person that always does mitzvot and good deeds but has a bad nature – that is, he finds fault with all others, when this person reaches the next world, he will discover that he has nothing” (*Shemirat HaLashon* 2:1). And so, the fulfillment of the mitzvot from this “general life” perspective creates an internal level in us in which all that we do reflects *Hashem Elohenu Hashem Echad*.”

There are mitzvot for which it’s obvious how they release us from the clutches of egoism – tithes, gifts to the poor, etc. There are other mitzvot in which this is not as clear – for instance, how does tying my left shoe before my right help me be better and holier, gentler and more loving toward others?

Historically, Am Yisrael understood and experienced all the mitzvot as notes in a single melody, expressions of a single truth. This happened at Har Sinai, as it is written, “Moshe will speak, and Hashem will answer with sound.”(Shmot 19:19)

How did this happen?

Did this happen literally — Moshe spoke, and Hashem answered?

Rav Bleicher explains: “Moshe will speak” – *Dibbur* (speech) refers to defined sounds, words, sentences, and

instructions. It expresses defined mitzvot. Moshe gave all the practical details of the mitzvot.

“Hashem will answer with sound” – sound is abstract and unifying. Hashem’s sound is the general music heard in all of the mitzvot – the pure, holy, moral content embedded in all the action points.

When Am Yisrael heard the mitzvot at Har Sinai, they were so elevated that they both heard and experienced the depth of G-dly life that encompasses the entire spectrum of the mitzvot. They felt, directly and tangibly, how each detail contributed to expressing the neshama of the world. The nation understood how each detail is essential – it’s not possible to skip over anything, for without each detail, the moral structure is flawed – *Mishpetei Hashem Emet Zadku Yachdav* (“the laws of Hashem are true and just together” – Tehillim 19:10).

Let's explain this concept through a ray of light. Today, we know that light is not single-faceted as it appears. When we use a prism, we discover that a ray of light is composed of many colors that unite in the ray of light, and the many colors and the ray become one.

At Matan Torah, Am Yisrael was elevated to see all the details of the mitzvot become a single holy ‘ray’ — revealing that the mitzvot are really a single unit.

During the reign of King Shlomo, Am Yisrael again reached a spiritual height similar to what it experienced at Sinai. The Torah was truly a Torah of life. It encompassed all aspects of life and filled it with holiness: holy aspirations, gentle character, and pure actions. It was possible to experience Hashem not only in yeshivas but also in government offices, the army, and the marketplace. Torah governed national and public life. Reality openly proclaimed the name of Hashem. Those were unique days in the history of our nation – days that will never be forgotten. Rav Kook taught that Shlomo's era was a golden age.¹ During the First Temple period, Hashem's name's majesty and resplendency were revealed in daily life. Spiritual elevation and physical abundance existed in perfect harmony.

Our national life fully expressed a G-dly life. The life of the kingdom was completely committed to revealing Hashem's name.

Rav Kook continues, explaining that at this time, physical wealth did not cause Am Yisrael to sink into materialism and forget Hashem. Rather, the wealth added strength and

¹ Abraham Isaac Kook, "Le-Mahalach Ha-Ideot Be-Yisrael," chap. 3, in *Orot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1993),

courage to our spirituality. The harmony between the physical and spiritual lives was clear.

The Midrash says: “In the past (referring to the First Temple period), the Torah was “general,” and people wanted to study both Mishna and Talmud. Now, during exile, the Torah isn’t ‘general’; people want to learn about Tanach and emunah.”²

Mishna and Talmud – these are parts of the Torah that deal with actions and instructions. They include halachic discussions and decisions. It can seem very action-oriented and dry, which is why people are drawn instead to the study of Tanach and emunah, which express moral depth, ideals, emotions, and a sense of necessity – things that elevate the soul.

During the Golden Age, people felt equally attached to halachic learning and to more emotionally driven learning. People were equally happy to learn both. Halacha was not seen as “dry” or technical because its pure, holy, moral content was not hidden. There was therefore absolutely no difference between different parts of Torah.

Rav Tzvi Yehuda explains the midrash: “When the Torah is seen as one living general rule, all the details are part of

² Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:16.

the life-flow that encompasses the whole Torah. However, when there is a period of weakness (exile) – individualism, lack of revealing general abundance – people run for the ‘emotional learning’ (Tanach and Emunah), searching for meaning in life. *Torat Hashem Temima Meshivat Nafesh* – When the Torah is whole, it restores (calms) the neshama. The general dimension of the Aggadah (emunah) is really found within the Halachot.”³

³ Tzvi Yehuda HaKohen Kook, *HaTorah HaGo'elet*, transcr. and ed. Chaim Avihu Schwartz, sec. 1, chap. 2 (Jerusalem: A. Schwartz, 1989), 4.