

Apprehending the Divine Through the Religious Act: Rabbi Yaakov Anatoli's Introduction to Malmad HaTalmidim

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Rabbi Yaakov Anatoli's (RYA) introduction to his *Malmad HaTalmidim* explains in great detail his purpose of writing down and publishing his sermons. To do that he lays out a summary of his understanding of Jewish religion and theology. As is his style in the rest of the book, he interprets and explains verses in Tanakh especially in the *Wisdom Books* *Iyov*, *Mishlei*, *Kobelet* and *Shir HaShirim* as well as *Tehillim*, and many times deciphers the sometime cryptic and obscure comments of the rabbis on the verses he quotes.¹

The book of *Kobelet* at first glance seems to be a nihilistic commentary on human existence. It negates any value in man's actions, deriding wealth and possessions, pleasure and happiness. Even knowledge and wisdom are presented as meaningless. It is reported in TB Shabbat 30b that during the debate on canonization of Tanakh, the Rabbis considered not only not canonizing but even banning *Kobelet* notwithstanding its authorship being traced to Shlomo Ha-Melech. They relented when they realized that "the beginning is Torah language as is the end." Explaining this cryptic report Rabbi Yanai points to *Kobelet* 1:3 "What gain is there for man for all his toil that he toils under the sun,"² noting that under the sun there is no gain but above³ the sun there is. This according to him is the meaning of "Torah language at the beginning." To explain "Torah language at the end," he points to *Kobelet* 12:13, the penultimate verse in *Kobelet*, "the last word all being heard: fear God and keep His commands, for that is all humankind."⁴ A cryptic explanation to a cryptic comment!

¹ For a short introduction to RYA see my article in *Hakirah* 22, Spring 2017, "Malmad HaTalmidim: A Suppressed Medieval Provençal Groundbreaker" p. 195. In the Hebrew section of this edition you will find the introduction in its original text edited and annotated.

² מה-יתרון, לאדם: בכל-עמלו--שיעמל, תחת השמש.

³ Before, according to a variant text

⁴ סוף דבר, הכל נשמע: את-האלהים ירא ואת-מצותיו שמור, כי-זה כל-האדם.

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