

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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RYA explains that the verse used to explain “Torah Language at the end” is easy to understand. After showing that all material experience is valueless, Shlomo ends with a very conservative resolution that can be summed up in a few words: virtuous action makes man. It is after all exactly what the exoteric understanding of the Torah teaches, a life filled with virtuous acts, the 613 Mitzvot, is man’s goal. Seeing that the ending, the conclusion, agrees with the Torah, the rabbis then looked back to the beginning for a hint of what he was getting at. There he implied that the nihilistic analysis that he embarks on is only based on what is “under the sun,” intimating that if one looked elsewhere, above the sun, we would find value. To understand the meaning of this explanation one must enter the mind of a medieval Jewish thinker.

Medieval Jewish thinkers believed that the prophets and rabbis of old were well versed and acquainted with Aristotelian science and regarded the demonstrable parts of it as fact.⁵ One of the accepted ideas was that all objects are composed of Form and Matter,⁶ where Form is the concept of the object and Matter is the basic material component that has been “formed” and shaped into the object. All Matter is a combination of some or all of the four basic elements, Air, Fire, Water and Earth. The element that should be included and in what proportion depends on the final object that is defined by its Form. Form is the definition of the object, what differentiates it from others and thus is its essence. Humankind differentiates itself from other living things and is thus defined by this difference which is its ability to think, conceptualize, introspect and apprehend abstract ideas namely consciousness.⁷ After all, a human being is no different from an animal nor are animals inherently different from each other in their biological makeup. What differentiates one living entity from another is its function. The ability to think is the function that differentiates a human being from all other entities in the animal kingdom and is thus the essence of humankind and unique to it. That ability also allows the physical mechanism that generates thought, namely the brain, to connect with a non-physical universal entity, the Active Intellect. What we call natural science, the concepts, formulae and everything that is responsible for our physical existence, was visualized as existing eternally, considering it

⁵ See MN 2:19 where Rambam argues that only the demonstrable parts are reliable. Opinions of Aristotle are debatable. See also *Hilkebot Kiddush Ha-Hodesh* 17:24.

⁶ See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/form-matter/> and references there.

⁷ For a summary of consciousness see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consciousness>. Rambam discusses the meaning of נפש which is probably the closest to modern consciousness in his introduction to *Avot, Shemoneh Perakim*, chapter 1.

emanates from God's so-called mind and was referred to as the Active Intellect. A way of looking at it is as the Form of all Forms, the Master Form. Man has the ability to connect with that Active Intellect and that is how we get knowledge. Man is also born with the ability to develop his soul to bond deeply with the Active Intellect to the point of becoming one with it by deciphering not only the mechanistic aspects of that knowledge but also the deeper how, why and wherefores of existence and through this bonding become part of eternity. That is the ultimate goal of man and that is the metaphor "before (or above) the sun" that Shlomo alluded to when he said that under the sun all is in vain but not above or before it. The Active Intellect and the human mind that bonded with it are visualized as being outside the material world, "above the sun," the eternal part of existence and that which has real value. This understanding prevented the rabbis from banning *Kobelet* and allowed it to enter the canon of Tanakh.

RYA then explains the structure of *Kobelet* and the argument it lays out. Physical existence can be seen as made up of two parts, the universe around us and humanity that inhabits it. The first part is described and understood using the exact sciences such as physics, chemistry and biology. One cannot assign any eternal values to that because it is mechanistic and ultimately has no meaning from a moral, ethical, theological or spiritual standpoint. Furthermore, it is subject to the cycle of birth and death that all material things have in common. That point is made in the first 12 verses of *Kobelet* and there is not much more to be said about it notwithstanding all its complexities. The second part is human existence. That is much more complex and subjective if one were to try to evaluate and assign meaning to it. It deals with humanity's development, its accomplishment in shaping its environment, its social advances, its scientific advances and all that civilization has accomplished over millennia and the individuals that make up humanity. That takes up the rest of *Kobelet* and ultimately concludes that the physical part of human existence indeed has no real value. Even the greatest accomplishments of humankind in the physical and material realm have no real **eternal** meaning or value. It is all temporal and ultimately pointless. Thus the two hints at the beginning and the end of the book are hints that the subject is not exhausted and that there is a way man can bring real value to existence. The beginning verse hints that the ultimate goal is to take man above the sun, for him to develop his potential and connect with the Active Intellect, apprehending the ultimate Truth and joining Eternal Life. The ending verse admonishes man that to attain that goal he must first improve himself, overcome the unnecessary physical urges whose attainment distracts from the intellec-

tual life and the quest for the ultimate truth about existence. That is accomplished by “fearing God,” a synonym for keeping His edicts, which perfect man and allow for an unbiased and objective assessment of philosophical and metaphysical speculation.

RYA goes on to explain that *Kobelet*, *Mishlei* and *Shir HaShirim* are a trilogy written in exactly this order by Shlomo to present his argument. Starting with *Kobelet*, Shlomo lays out the problem of how little value there is to material existence, and hence the lack of meaning of physical or material reward and punishment. He follows up with *Mishlei* where he lays out a program of self-improvement and self-awareness that lets man develop his ultimate potential to apprehend metaphysical truth and thus bond with Eternity. *Shir HaShirim*, which the Rabbis say is the Holy of the Holies, describes that ultimate bliss which results from bonding with the infinite and eternal. As part of this discussion RYA points out that the observation—that at times, good deeds are not rewarded nor are evil ones always punished—is addressed and resolved. For if material existence has no eternal meaning, material reward or punishment has no more than temporal value. The only real reward is the intellectual accomplishment of the individual, and the punishment is the lack thereof.

The question that jumps out at us is why tell this in such convoluted language and cryptic messages rather than laying this out clearly? RYA explains that the understanding—that reward and punishment is something that is within a person, a non-physical non-material reward—cannot be appreciated by the general public. Without the belief in reward and punishment, a material and physical one, rules would not be followed. That would bring about a social, ethical and moral catastrophe, and therefore the discussion of these matters has to be guarded and cloaked in esoteric language.⁸

⁸ Rambam in MN 3:28 writes (Friedlander translation): “Scripture further demands belief in certain truths, the belief in which is indispensable in regulating our social relations: such is the belief that God is angry with those who disobey Him, for it leads us to the fear and dread of disobedience [to the will of God].” The question that has agitated many readers of Rambam is whether Rambam believed that reward and punishment exists considering this statement. The exoteric understanding of reward and punishment is meant for the masses and prompts the question of how to reconcile it with reality, while the esoteric meaning, being the true explanation of that belief, resolves the issue. In my mind that is exactly what Rambam means by “demands belief in certain truths,” namely for the sake of the masses one must promulgate the exoteric understanding. See *Hakirah* vol. 11, pp. 239-240 in Rabbi Buchman’s response to Prof. Kellner where he offers an alternate interpretation to Rambam’s statement disagreeing vehemently with this interpretation.

RYA reads the closing comments of *Kobelet* as the introduction to Mishlei and a description of its style and purpose. *Kobelet* 12:9 reads, “And more than being wise, *Kobelet* further taught knowledge to the people and weighed and searched out and framed many proverbs.”⁹ The Hebrew for “weighed” is **זָכַל**, which also connotes (lending an) “ear.” The Rabbis pick up on this choice of words and suggest that before Shlomo the Torah was like a basket without “ears” or handles. The proverbs, the “*meshalim*,” that Shlomo composed and published in *Mishlei* were meant to be handles for the Torah. They are meant to give meaning to the Torah so that people can grab on to it, understand it and make sense of it. This proposition is repeated with a variation at the beginning of *Mishlei*.¹⁰ The idea that Torah requires interpretation, that it cannot be read simplistically and the Mitzvot have a deeper meaning than just doing them, is exactly what *Kobelet* and *Mishlei* teach. *Kobelet* in plain language lays out the problem, the nihilistic analysis of life but hints at a resolution. *Mishlei*—using proverbs to obscure its real deep message so as not confuse the masses—presents the solution by hinting at the real purpose, meaning and goal that the Torah and the mitzvot are teaching us.

This idea itself is presented by the rabbis in the form of a quite obscure allegory and RYA uses it to teach the method of deciphering it and other such allegories. In the introductory segment of *Mishlei* where Shlomo describes the purpose of the book, reiterating the message at the end of *Kobelet* referred to earlier, we read in verse 1:6: “To understand proverbs and adages, the words of the wise and their riddles.”¹¹ The rabbis explain this with a metaphor, comparing the words of the Torah to a deep well that contains cold water at the bottom and to reach it a person attaches one string to another and one cable to another long enough to reach the depth of the well so that he can draw the water with the pail that is attached to the string and cable combination. RYA explains that the cold water the person is trying to reach is the same water mentioned in *Mishlei* 25:25: “As cold waters to a faint soul, so is good news from a far country.”¹² The cold water is a metaphor for good news from a far country, implying that the news affects the faint soul just as cold water would. What is the cause of the faint soul? What does the news coming from a far country as opposed to from nearby allude to? Good news from a far country travels a long way, so too understanding the Torah’s real

⁹ וַיִּתֵּר, שְׁהֵיָה קִהְלֵת חֲכָם: עוֹד, לַמִּד-דַּעַת אֶת-הָעַם, וְאִזְוֹן וְחִקָּר, תִּקְוֹן מִשְׁלִים הַרְבֵּה.

¹⁰ See further for more about this.

¹¹ לְהַבִּין מִשָּׁל, וּמְלִיצָה; דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים, וְהִידְתָּם.

¹² מִיָּם קָרִים, עַל-נֶפֶשׁ עֲצִיפָה; וְשִׂמוּעָה טוֹבָה, מֵאַרְצֵי מְרֹחֵק.

intentions, which the lack thereof is the cause of the faintness of soul, requires many steps. The deep well in which the waters are lying at the bottom, as used by the rabbis in their metaphor, alludes to *Mishlei* 20:5: “Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.”¹³ The Torah, which counsels man, is deep and hidden and requires a man of understanding to bring it out. That is the water deep in the well for which the man of understanding uses the cables and strings to fashion a tool that helps draw out the water. The mechanism used to draw the deep water from a well is composed of a pail to which a cable is attached, and the cable is kept from falling into the well by strings that are attached to it. The strings which are attached indirectly to the pail represent the questions posed by *Kobelet*, which are the first step in the process of research and are what compels us to look for answers to those questions. The cable which is attached directly to the pail represents *Mishlei*, which in its exoteric reading lays out an analysis of human traits and a process of moral and ethical self-improvement that are necessary for societal and family life to be peaceful and productive.¹⁴ The act of using the pail contraption for drawing the water from the depth of the well by pulling on the strings, which then pull the cable and lift the pail, represents the research and study that allows one to decipher the hidden meaning of the metaphors of *Mishlei*. Those hidden meanings deal with the internal life of the wise man that understands and uses the mitzvot and the teachings of the Torah to develop methods that help him acquire as much knowledge as possible, developing his analytical and critical thinking leading to the apprehension of metaphysical truths about existence and God. The result of that process brings man the ultimate bliss which is represented by the cold water at the bottom of the well which is described in the third book of the trilogy, *Shir HaShirim*.

This method of interpretation of rabbinical metaphors and allegories integrates the Rabbis’ sayings with their thorough knowledge of Tanakh. Their metaphor of deep waters is based on a verse in *Mishlei* 12:15 which is also a reference to Torah, the cold water is a reference to deep philosophical ideas as used in *Mishlei* 25:25 and the Hebrew word for cable, חבל, is a reference to *Mishlei* 1:5¹⁵ where a similar-sounding word, תחבולות is used in the same sense. As I point out in a note to the Hebrew, this idea

¹³ מים עמקים, עצה בלב איש; ואיש תבונה ידלגה.

¹⁴ RYA sees the stories in *Sefer Bereishit* as metaphors that are deciphered in *Mishlei*. He understands the stories as descriptions of good and bad behavior. See for example the sermon on *Parasbat Va-Yeshuv*.

¹⁵ ישמע חכם, ויוסף לקח; ונבון תחבולות יקנה. The wise man may hear, and increase in learning, and the man of understanding may attain unto wise counsels.

is based on Rambam in his *Moreh HaNevukhim* but taken one step further. While Rambam uses this idea of plays on words for the interpretation of the Prophetic literature, RYA applies the same methodology to rabbinic *aggadot* and *midrashim*, crossing back and forth between the two categories of literature.

Considering that the trilogy and its message are not supposed to be disseminated to the general population as evidenced by the allegorical style and at times misleading language, why publish it at all? RYA explains that Shlomo addresses that question in *Kobelet* 12:11: “The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well fastened are those that are composed in collections; they are given from one shepherd.”¹⁶ The words of the wise are referred to in this verse in three ways, as goads, as nails and as collections. A goad that controls the oxen when pulling the plow to keep them straight is composed of a long stick that has a nail embedded at its end and is used to prod the animals and maintain them in a straight line. The stick part of the goad refers to the exoteric explanation of the metaphors and allegories in *Mishlei* that addresses the masses, teaching them proper behavior. The embedded half-hidden nail refers to the real meaning of the text, which requires goading and prodding to be revealed and ultimately leads the plow and the animals on the proper path. The collection refers to the plain text received at Sinai and the sayings of the prophets, which is the source that is being interpreted and reveals its message after prodding and digging. Shlomo is laying out his goal: to teach the different members of the community the real purpose of the Mitzvot, each according to his level of intellect. The basic source and text that is used for these lessons is the Torah and the prophetic writings, which all have the same divine provenance thus being just different aspects of the same theology from different perspectives.

RYA sees himself as continuing Shlomo's work. He bemoans that his contemporaries are so focused on the minutiae of the Halacha, whether the Shofar looks good, sound nice, the blower performs nicely, but at the same time are missing the real message the Shofar is meant to teach—deep introspection and genuine repentance. People are so involved in the look of the *tallit* that they forget that *tzitzit* are meant to remind us of the real meaning of the mitzvot as the *parashah* lays it out: “And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and that you go not about after your own heart and your own eyes, which you use to go astray.” The Rabbis based on this statement declare that the value of the mitzvah of

¹⁶ דברי חכמים כדרכונות וכמס[ש]מרות נטועים בעלי אסופות נתנו מרועה אחד.

tzitzit outweighs all other mitzvot. RYA explains that the *tzitzit* are a reminder of the real underlying purpose of the mitzvot. The eyes represent unbridled appetite, which many mitzvot such as sexual and food prohibitions are meant to restrain, and the heart, a biblical allusion to thought, represents uncontrolled philosophical speculation where mitzvot such as Shabbat, *Shema* etc. inculcate true beliefs as a prelude to speculation. These two explanations summarize the purpose of all the 613 mitzvot. If one does not realize this, mitzvot lose their effectiveness and do not accomplish their original intended goal. Unfortunately, even the scholars who are well versed in Halakhic discourse are ignorant of this and most of them are resistant to exploring along this path. RYA also points out how Prayer has become mechanistic where there is no awareness of the real meaning of the words we say, words that are filled with deep meaning and thought-provoking statements.

Interestingly, RYA blames this deficiency for the low regard the Jewish community and its practices have in the eyes of their Christian neighbors. The Christians see themselves as the torchbearers of the original word of God and claim that they follow the internal goal of the mitzvot while we focus on the outward manifestations, ignoring the real meaning and purpose of the same mitzvot. They reinforce this belief by preaching public sermons to that effect and we don't have the intellectual wherewithal to repudiate these falsehoods.¹⁷ He blames it on our being in exile and points out that in our previous experience with exile, after the destruction of the first temple during our sojourn in Babylonia, we had the same problem. It was Ezra the Scribe who at the time resurrected the proper practice and understanding of the Torah's goals.

The solution to this deficiency in our community is to encourage the study of the theological and philosophical underpinnings of the mitzvot. However, great caution is required so as not to deviate and lose the proper perspective. It is not enough to study the sources; one has to acquire general knowledge of the sciences and humanities which, at first glance, are not necessarily compatible with religion. That knowledge is speculative and the proposed scientific theories for explaining observations and data are not always the only possible interpretation—they are no more than theories. If one is not aware of that point one can easily stray and come to conclusions that contradict religious belief. It is therefore incumbent that at first a scholar get a strong grounding in traditional beliefs and laws,

¹⁷ In my first article published in *Hakirah* 22, in the annotated Hebrew section of *Parashat Shemini*, RYA gives us an example of how Christianity has misapplied the laws that deal with forbidden foods and forbidden sexual practices and how superior the Jewish Rabbinical practice is.

the park or gambling when I make the supreme effort to take time from my busy work schedule to study with the above scholar...”

As mentioned earlier RYA deplors the sermons preached in local churches attacking the Jewish religion. Apparently he already witnessed the incitement of the church against the Jews which culminated in the destruction of many communities in the following century. Interestingly however this does not deter RYA from developing a close relationship with Michael Scotus, a famous Catholic thinker, and defends his using Michael’s interpretations of Biblical texts “for I do not plan to take credit for borrowed tools so that I can be seen as a scholar, and scholars should not criticize me for that nor look down on his ideas, him not being a compatriot, for matters should be judged by their content and not by who authored it...”

See the Hebrew Section of this issue of *Hakirah* for the text of the introduction with my added references and notes. 