

Imitations and Semblances: How the Mitzvos Direct Our Exploration of Reality

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When we survey the philosophical works of certain Rishonim, we find a notable emphasis on the role of intellectual enlightenment in the quest for human perfection. More specifically, we learn that it is our knowledge of our Creator that elevates us and determines the quality of our immortality in the World to Come. As the Creator cannot be perceived directly, it is necessary to study His creation in order to arrive at a certain conception of Him. In the view of these Rishonim, our perfection is born from a deep and comprehensive study of the nature of reality.

Such an approach raises obvious questions about the function and utility of the mitzvos. If our perfection is fundamentally intellectual—grounded in subjects that we would today associate with the sciences and philosophy—what value remains for the study and performance of mitzvos? How do they aid our objective of a broad study of the natural world? Aside from a small minority that directly address belief, the mitzvos as a whole would seem to be focused on securing our ethical perfection, which is merely preliminary and subordinate to intellectual perfection. Though such a conception of the mitzvos seems to be embraced by Rambam and his followers,¹ it appears to fly in the face of explicit statements of Chazal regarding the primacy of the Torah and its status as a blueprint of reality.²

In this essay, we will explore the positions of Rambam and Rabbag, arguably the two most prominent members of this intellectualist school among the Rishonim. By analyzing their shared vision, we will arrive at a conception of the mitzvos that offers a more direct link between mitzvah

¹ See *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 4:13; *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:54; *Sforno, Kavanos HaTorah*.

² See *Bereishis Rabbah* 1:1; *Avos* 5:22. The conclusions of this essay may shed some light on how these Rishonim approached these sources. See also Meiri's comments to *Avos* 1:2.

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performance and human perfection, while avoiding various misconceptions that often plague the interface between Torah and science. This vision of the mitzvos seems to be more widespread than is commonly appreciated, and we will cite the writings of Rabbi Yehudah HeChasid in support. In the process, we might rediscover a Judaism that is dynamic, immanent, and endlessly adventurous.

The Quest to Know

How exactly did these Rishonim articulate the human ideal of intellectual perfection? Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim* is a classic of Jewish philosophy and an important starting point. It continues to influence modern discussions of Jewish thought and belief, but it is also a challenging work, and many of its passages have been the subject of intense debate and disagreement. Nevertheless, the *Moreh Nevuchim* was intended as a guide for the perplexed, and Rambam articulated many of his most fundamental positions with clarity and precision. In *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:8, we find one such instance:

וישים תכליתו תכלית האדם מאשר הוא אדם והיא ציור המושכלות (לא זולת זה) אשר החזק והנכבד שבהם – השגת האלוה והמלאכים ושאר פעולותיו כפי היכולת. ואלה האנשים הם עם האלוה תמיד והם אשר נאמר להם "אלוקים אתם ובני עליון כולכם"; וזהו המבוקש מן האדם – רצוני לומר שזאת היא תכליתו.³

And one should set as his purpose the intrinsic purpose of a human being—the cognition of intelligible concepts (nothing besides this), the firmest and noblest of which are the conception of the Almighty, the angels, and His other deeds, to the extent possible. Such people are with the Almighty constantly, and they are the ones to whom it was said, “You are *elokim*, and the children of the Exalted One are you all.” This is what is sought from man—I mean to say, this is his purpose.

Rambam identifies “the cognition of intelligible concepts” as man’s ultimate purpose. This is the purpose that is intrinsic to man as man, while all other goals—material, physical, and even moral perfection—are only means to this end.⁴ Rambam finds ample reason to set intellectual enlightenment as mankind’s ultimate perfection, and his discussion of this concept occupies the final chapters of the *Moreh Nevuchim*. Most essentially, we find that it is not tedious academic scholarship that Rambam is championing, but rather the impassioned pursuit of intelligible concepts that

³ Ibn Tibbon translation. All English translations from the Hebrew are my own.

⁴ *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:54.

constitute knowledge of our Creator.⁵ This pursuit reflects Moshe Rabbeinu's moving request that Hashem make known to him His ways, so that he might know Hashem Himself. Rambam discusses this passage in *Moreh Nevuchim* 1:54, highlighting the lesson that true knowledge of Hashem, the pinnacle of human perfection, may only be attained through knowledge of His deeds.

Ralbag is firmly aligned with Rambam in this respect. As one of the most systematic and transparent writers among the Rishonim, his works offer us a particularly thorough exposition of this approach to human perfection. We find perhaps its most clear and concise expression in his introduction to *Sbir HaShirim*:

מבואר נגלה מצד התורה והנביאים ומצד העיון שההצלחה התכליתית לאדם היא בשישכיל וידע הש"י כפי מה שאפשר לו. וזה אמנם ישלם לו כשיתבונן בענייני הנמצאות וסדרם וישרם ואופן חכמת י"י בשומו אותם על מה שהם עליו. וזה שאלו המושכלות יישירוהו אל הידיעה בש"י באופן מה. כי הפעולה מורה על הפועל הוראה מה. רצוני שהפעולה השלמה אשר בתכלית תורה על פועל שלם בתכלית השלמות מצד מה שהוא פועל. ומזה הצד לבד נשכיל ונדע הש"י רצוני מצד פעולותיו...

It is clearly evident—from the perspective of the Torah and the Prophets and from the perspective of logical analysis—that the ultimate fulfillment of man is in comprehending and knowing Hashem, may He be exalted, according to his ability. However, this will be fulfilled for him when he contemplates the subjects of existent things, their order, their alignment, and the manner of Hashem's wisdom in arranging them in the way that they are. These intelligible concepts will direct him to knowledge of Hashem, may He be exalted, in some manner, because the act provides some indication of the actor. My intention is that the absolutely perfect act indicates an actor who is perfect with absolute perfection, from the aspect in which he is an actor. From this aspect alone can we comprehend and know Hashem, may He be exalted—I mean to say, from the aspect of His deeds...

Ralbag asserts that this conception of human perfection is evident from both Scripture and logical analysis—two sources that lead us to the same ultimate truth.⁶ And as we learned from Rambam, this ideal knowledge of Hashem is attained through knowledge of His deeds. Ral-

⁵ *Hilchos Teshuvah*, chapter 10; *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:51.

⁶ See Ralbag's introduction to his *Milchamos Hashem*, in which this is a major theme.

bag explains further, emphasizing that the perfection of an action provides a certain indication of the perfection of its source. It is this principle that justifies an all-encompassing exploration of the created world, a major theme in Ralbag's thought.⁷

With this introduction, we can begin to analyze the issues with which we began: what value remains for the mitzvos if human perfection is entirely intellectual? How should we reconcile the seemingly subordinate ethical goals of the mitzvos with what we know of the Torah's encompassing wisdom?

The Nature of a Mitzvah

The writings of Ralbag are uniquely illuminating in this regard. However, a superficial reading suggests some serious contradictions within his thought. On the one hand, we find Ralbag confidently assuring us that the Torah teaches the most profound philosophical and scientific wisdom. In his introduction to *Mishlei*, he writes:

ומהנה נתחיל ונאמר שכבר התבאר מדברינו בבאור דברי התורה כי התורה מישרת האדם בתכלית מה שאפשר אל שלמות המדות ואל שלמות המושכלות, ותישיר עם זה אל הגדולות שבפנות העיוניות אשר ילאה שכל האדם להגיע אליהם אם לא יעזר במה שהישירתהו התורה מזה.

And here we will begin and state that it has already been clarified from our Torah commentary that the Torah guides man, to the greatest extent possible, to the perfection of character and the perfection of intellect. Additionally, it directs one to the greatest philosophical concepts, which the intellect of man would be overtaxed to attain, were it not assisted by the Torah's guidance.

Along these lines, Ralbag understands the various items and services in the Temple to be filled with scientific and philosophical significance.⁸ In general, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Ralbag reads large portions of the Torah as natural philosophy, cloaked in the symbolism of the mitzvos. At the same time, he expresses a profound humility and skepticism regarding our ability to understand the reasons for the mitzvos. In his commentary to *Devarim* 29:28, he explains:

ולזה אמר הנסתרות להשם אלקינו להורות כי אין יכולת באדם לעמוד על כונות התורה בשלמות הלא תראה כי גם במצות שביארה התורה תועלותם חטא שלמה

⁷ Besides his broad and penetrating Torah commentary, Ralbag was an accomplished scientist and polymath, writing works on mathematics, logic, physics, astronomy, zoology, and botany.

⁸ See, for example, Ralbag's *toalos* to *Parashas Terumah*.

המלך בחשבו שהוא ישמר ממה שכונה התורה במצוה ההיא להרחיקו, כי הוא הרבה לו נשים לחושבו שלא יטו לבבו מרוב חכמתו וגודל מעלתו ונכשל בזה. ובכלל הנה גם כן מה שזכרה התורה תועלת המצוה הוא אפשר שיהיה בה אצל השם יתעלה תועלת אחר. הלא תראה כי התורה זכרה במקום אחד במצות שבת תועלת אחת והוא שזכר לחדוש השם יתעלה העולם ובמקום אחר זכרה בו תועלת אחר והוא שהיא זכר ליציאת מצרים ולזה הוא מבואר שאין ראייה ממה שנזכר מהתועלת במצוה שלא יהיה שם תועלת אחר זולתו אצל השם יתעלה כל שכן במה שלא נזכר בתורה התועלת אבל עמדנו עליו על דרך החקירה והעיון. והבן זה השרש כי הוא מגדולי השרשים התוריים לשמור חכמת התורה שלא יבאו שועלים ויפרצוה.

And for this reason he states that the secrets are unto Hashem, our God, to indicate that man lacks the ability to fully understand the intentions of the Torah. Do you not see that even in the mitzvos whose benefits are explained by the Torah, Shlomo HaMelech sinned in thinking that he would guard against that which the Torah intended to distance with that mitzvah? For he amassed wives, thinking that they would not lead his heart astray due to his abundant wisdom and great stature, and he stumbled in this. And in general, even what the Torah mentioned as a benefit of the mitzvah—it is possible that by Hashem, may He be exalted, it has another benefit. Do you not see that the Torah mentioned in one place a particular benefit for the mitzvah of Shabbos—a remembrance for the creation of the world by Hashem, may He be exalted—and in another place it mentions a different benefit—a remembrance for the exodus of Egypt? For this reason, it is clear that there is no proof from what is mentioned as a benefit of a mitzvah that it has no other benefit by Hashem, may He be exalted. All the more so when no benefit is mentioned by the Torah, but we derive one through investigation and analysis. Understand this principle, as it is one of the great principles of the Torah for guarding the wisdom of the Torah, so that foxes will not come and breach it.

It seems surprising to find such skepticism and unease in Ralbag, who presents us with one of the most extensive and elaborate systems of mitzvah symbolism among the Rishonim. This tension becomes even more apparent when we understand Ralbag's position on the scientific grounding of the mitzvos. In his commentary to *Shemos* 12:2, Ralbag notes that the mitzvah of *kiddush habodesh* does not reflect a precise astronomical moment but rather an entire day that is established through human perception. The reason is simple:

ועוד, שהתורה למה שהיא מצווה בכל הזמנים שהיו אחר נתינתה לנו; והיה בלתי אפשר שיהיה שם בכל הזמנים מי שידע עת התדבקות השמש עם הירח לפי האמת — כי גם עד זמננו לא נשלמה זאת הידיעה לאחד מן הקודמים שהגיעו אלינו

דבריהם, כמו שנתבאר מדברינו בחלק הראשון מהמאמר החמישי מספר מלחמות ה' (פרק סד) — הגנה ראוי שיהיה קביעות החודש בלתי תלוי בעת זה הדיבוק האמיתי. ולזה הוא מחוייב שיהיה תלוי בחידוש הלבנה שהוא לפי הראות, כי זה אפשר שיושג תמיד בחוש.

Furthermore, since the Torah commands for all times that follow its being given to us, and it is impossible for there to be someone in every time who knows the conjunction of the sun with the moon accurately—for even up to our time, this knowledge has not been perfected in any of the earlier authorities whose words have reached us (as we explained in the first part of the fifth essay of *Milchamos Hasbem*)—it is therefore fitting that the month be established without being dependent upon the time of true conjunction. And for this reason, it is necessary that it be dependent upon the renewal of the moon, which is according to sight, for this is possible to comprehend at all times through perception.

Ralbag's position on the nature of the mitzvos seems unclear: the mitzvos are not grounded in precise scientific fact, yet studying them can somehow bring us to accurate knowledge of this world; the Torah contains the most profound philosophical and scientific truth, yet Ralbag made enormous efforts to study non-Jewish works of philosophy and science. How do we make sense of all this?

The answer may lie in understanding the *mechanism* through which the mitzvos teach us about the nature of reality. Ralbag does not believe that the laws of *kiddush haChodesh* reflect a scientifically accurate understanding of astronomy, nor would he claim that we can derive any scientific understanding of molecular diffusion through the laws of forbidden mixtures, for example. Instead, Ralbag repeatedly describes the manner in which the mitzvos force us to *notice* fundamental aspects of our reality. It is this steering of our awareness, this forced engagement with every facet of the created world, that lies at the heart of the Torah's educational program.

The Divine Tour Guides of Reality

Ralbag's Torah commentary is filled with examples of this vision of the mitzvos. At the conclusion of *Parashas Emor*, he presents his understanding of the mitzvah of *arba'ab minim*. After noting that this diversity of plant life alerts us to the existence of *tzurah*—the essential form that individuates a species—he explains how the mitzvah provides a more general lesson in our study of the creation:

ולא יקצר בזה ויחשוב כי אין ראוי לאדם שיחקור כי אם במציאות הדברים הנכבדים, כמו הבעלי-חיים ומה שלמעלה מהם, להיות הצעה ומבוא להשגת ה' יתעלה; אבל ראוי שישים חקירתו גם כן בצמחים, מהצמח היותר שלם, והוא

היותר גבוה ועושה פרי, כמו התמר, עד היותר שפל ופריז פחות, כמו ההדס. ולא יקצר מלעיין גם בשאר הצמחים שאינם עושים פרי, כמו ערבי נהל. וישתדל בחקירתו שיוציא פרים, רוצה לומר שישגי הסיבות אשר בעבורם נמצאו, וזה ביותר שלם שאפשר, כי זה יביאהו אל ההשגה בסיבה הראשונה; וזה כי מה שנדע יותר מנימוס הנמצאות וסדרם ויושרם, תהיה השגתנו בה' יתעלה יותר חזקה, כמו שביארנו בספר מלחמות ה'.

And one should not diminish this [investigation of nature] and think that it is improper for man to investigate anything but the noblest things, such as the animals and that which is loftier—they being a facilitation and entrance to the comprehension of Hashem, may He be exalted. Rather, it is appropriate for one to also investigate the plants, from the most perfect plant—which is the tallest and fruit-bearing, like the date palm—to the most lowly and with inferior fruit, like the myrtle. And he should not diminish his analysis of other plants which do not bear fruit, such as the willow. He should strive in his investigation that it should “bear fruit,” meaning to say that he should comprehend the causes for which they exist, and this in the most perfect way possible. For this will bring one to the comprehension of the First Cause, since the more we know of the lawful system of existent things, and their order and alignment, the stronger will be our comprehension of Hashem, may He be exalted, as we explained in *Milchamos Hashem*.

This fascinating approach to the mitzvah effectively preserves its philosophical/scientific value while sidestepping the issues raised by strong forms of Scriptural-scientific concordism.⁹ Ralbag perceives a coherence between our empirical investigations and our mitzvah observance but not because the mitzvos necessarily teach or depend upon scientific fact. Rather, he frequently refers to the Torah as a *beisharah*, from the root *yashar*—the Torah is that which aligns and directs us on the path to human fulfillment. It contains everything we need, not in the sense of raw data, but in the sense of guidance and orientation towards the phenomena of our reality. Additional examples will bring this to light more fully.

At the conclusion of his commentary to *Parashas Shemini*, Ralbag tackles the complex laws of ritual impurity. Systematically, he shows that the variation in these laws for different types of animals and objects reflects the relative perfection of their essential forms. Though the Torah does not highlight this hierarchical reality explicitly, Ralbag illustrates that these

⁹ To be sure, Ralbag often employs a stronger degree of concordism in his explanations of certain mitzvos, but this must be read in light of his fundamentally skeptical stance, as presented above.

legal distinctions lead us to contemplate the *natural* distinctions that underlie them. Once again, the mitzvos draw our attention to a fundamental principle of nature.

This principle also offers Ralbag a satisfying explanation for a particularly puzzling verse. In *Devarim* 4:6, we are told that the nations of the world will recognize Israel as “a wise and understanding nation” by virtue of the *chukim*—the Torah statutes which seem to lack clear benefits or rationales. Why should the *chukim*, in particular, lead to this recognition? Ralbag explains:

מי שישמור כל החקים האלה יכיר תכף אופן החכמה בהם מצד מה שהובדל הדבר בהם בקצת הדברים מקצת וכאלו תאמר שהיתה טמאת השרץ למטה מטומאת נבלת הבהמה וטמאת נבלת הבהמה למטה מטומאת נבלת האדם כי זה ממה שיביא להכיר כי בחכמה נפלאה סודר זה הנימוס התוריי.

One who guards all of these statutes will immediately recognize the wisdom in them from the aspect of the distinctions present in them. For example, from the fact that the impurity of the creeping creature is below the impurity of the animal corpse, and the impurity of the animal corpse is below the impurity of the human corpse—this will bring one to recognize that this lawful system of the Torah was ordered with wondrous wisdom.

Again, Ralbag points to the complex distinctions within the *chukim* as an indication of an underlying wisdom and rationale. A legal distinction between the impurities of two types of organisms indicates that there is something fundamentally different about them that we are meant to notice. But Ralbag is not transforming the Torah into a science textbook—the mitzvos may “bring one to recognize,” but it is up to us to investigate and discover the essential differences between these forms of life.

In even our most familiar mitzvos, Ralbag finds intellectual guidance that is, quite literally, astronomical. In keeping with his goal of analyzing even the halachic parameters of the mitzvos, Ralbag addresses the strict time frame for the mitzvah of *krias Shema*. In his *toalos* to *Devarim* 6:7, he comments:

ואמנם היתה הקריאה באלו העתים כי אלו העתים יורו על שיש לגלגלים תנועה כשיעוין אז בכוכבי לכת ובכוכבים הקיימים שיראו בו כוכבי לכת מתרחקים מהכוכבים הקיימים שהם קרובים אליהם או הפך או יעויין בשמש עם הנץ החמה כי ראה שמקום זריחתו ביום האחר וזה יורה על שהשמש מתנועה לא הארץ כמו שחשבו קצת הקודמים ולזה הוא מבואר שאלו העתים יורו שיש לגלגלים תנועות מתחלפות ויצטרכו מפני זה אל מניע קודם להם וזה יביא בהכרח להאמין שיש שם אלוה אחד שישודרו ממנו כל אלו התנועות אשר ישלם בכללם זה המציאות השפל.

However, the recitation is set for these times because they demonstrate that the heavenly spheres possess motion—when one observes the moving and fixed stars at those times, he will see the moving stars being distanced from the fixed stars that are near them, or the opposite. Or he will observe the sun at sunrise, seeing that the place of its shining has shifted, and this demonstrates that the sun moves, not the earth, as some of the earlier authorities thought. And for this reason it is clear that these times demonstrate that the heavenly spheres have alternating motions, and they therefore require a mover that precedes them. This will necessarily bring one to believe that there is a single God from whom are ordered all of these motions, which together consummate this lowly existence.

This approach is novel, even strange, unless we appreciate it within Ralbag's general vision of the mitzvos. First, we might ask, where in this mitzvah does Ralbag see an indication that we are meant to look up at the night sky and observe astronomical motions? This is certainly not a *legal* requirement of the mitzvah.

In truth, Ralbag has already addressed this type of objection in his introduction to his Torah commentary. There, he explains that the Torah's content may be divided into three categories: legal obligations (the 613 mitzvos), ethical lessons (taught through the Torah's characters and events), and philosophical/scientific conclusions that we would have difficulty reaching on our own.¹⁰ After noting that the mitzvos provide a foundation or preparation for the latter two categories, he turns to address a possible challenge: Can we really be expected to believe that the mitzvos somehow entail knowledge of the most difficult intellectual concepts? Ralbag assures us that this incredulity is unwarranted, and he highlights an important distinction between the overtly philosophical portion of the Torah and the intellectual guidance provided by the mitzvos:

שזה החלק מיישיר בעצמות וראשונה אל חכמת הנמצאות, והמצוות ההן הן מיישירות אליו בשניות, לפי שהם חיקוי והקמשל לסידור הנמצאות; עם שזה החלק מיישיר אותנו גם כן להבנת החיקויים ההם והקמשלים. ועוד, שמה שבא באלו המצוות מההערה אל חכמת הנמצאות, הוא מזה החלק השלישי. וזה, שהמצווה ההיא לא נצטוינו בה להבין ההערות ההן, אבל לעשות המעשים ההם אשר יש בהם אלו ההערות. והמשל, שהתורה לא צייתה אותנו שנבין מכלי המקדש ותכונתו הדברים אשר הם מעירים עליהם, אבל צייתה אותנו לעשות אותם בזה

¹⁰ For example, the first verse of the Torah allows us to settle the ancient debate regarding the eternity or creation of the universe. Similarly, Ralbag explains that *Bereishis* 2:19 teaches us that the human soul attains immortality through the cognition of intelligible concepts.

האופן. ובכמו זה האופן בעינו יקרה שיתערב החלק השני מהחלקים שזכרנו בחלק הראשון.

For this [philosophical] portion directs, essentially and primarily, to the wisdom of existent things, whereas the mitzvos direct towards it in a secondary manner, since they are an **imitation and semblance** of the order of existent things. Also, this [philosophical] portion directs us to the understanding of these imitations and semblances.¹¹ And furthermore, the aspect of these mitzvos which allude to the wisdom of existent things belongs to this third category [the overtly philosophical]. This is because a given mitzvah does not command us to understand these allusions—**only to do the actions which contain these allusions**. For example, the Torah does not command us to understand from the vessels of the Mikdash and its nature the matters which they allude to. Rather, it commands us to do them in this particular manner. In this same way, the second category [of ethical lessons] is combined with the first category [of mitzvos] (emphasis added).

Ralbag's answer is to draw a sharp line between the nature of philosophical inquiry and the performance of a mitzvah. Fulfillment of a mitzvah is in no way dependent upon our understanding of the lofty concepts it reflects. That being said, the structure of a mitzvah—the particular laws, parameters, and distinctions that it draws—must be understood as an “imitation and semblance” of the structure of reality. The mitzvah is not teaching science, but it is drawing our attention to real natural phenomena that should not escape our notice. It is this awareness that justifies an astronomical analysis of the unique timing of *krias Shema*.

This awareness allows us to address another powerful challenge: Given that much of the science that Ralbag saw in the mitzvos is no longer considered valid, can we still take his conception of the mitzvos seriously? We see here that Ralbag would be the first to remind us that the mitzvos are not bound to any particular paradigm of science or philosophy. The mitzvos provide a framework that encourages and guides our study of the natural world, but the conclusions we draw are our own responsibility. It is entirely possible that, were Ralbag alive today, he would happily adjust his scientific conclusions while maintaining his vision of the mitzvos.

¹¹ In this line, Ralbag is expressing a reciprocal relationship between our study of the mitzvos and our knowledge of philosophy: While the mitzvos direct us to a broad study of reality, our grasp of that reality can in turn awaken us to deeper levels of meaning and symbolism within the mitzvos themselves. This latter idea seems to be reflected by Rema in his *Mechir Yayin* 1:6:

שהשכל נתנו הקדוש ברוך הוא לאדם להיות מתבונן בדרכי הנמצאים ולעמוד מתוכן על סודי טעמי התורה.

So far, we have explored the mitzvos' function within the system of Ralbag. It seems likely that Rambam maintained a similar vision. In the third section of his *Moreh Nevuchim*, Rambam provides us with a highly systematic presentation of the mitzvos' goals and functions. In chapter 31 of the section, he explains that all the mitzvos revolve around three central goals: social, intellectual, and ethical perfection. As we have already seen, intellectual perfection constitutes our ultimate goal, while social and ethical perfection provide an essential and preliminary foundation. The Torah is a comprehensive program for the total perfection of mankind.

Overall, Rambam's reasons for the mitzvos focus on uniquely human goals and sensitivities; we do not find the broad scientific symbolism that characterizes Ralbag's explanation of the Temple service, for example. Nevertheless, just as a diet and exercise regimen would necessarily draw our attention to certain truths of human anatomy and physiology, the mitzvos unquestionably indicate certain realities that govern the relationship between man and his world. And given that human perfection lies in the "cognition of intelligible concepts" such as these, it seems unlikely that Rambam would fail to acknowledge this most fundamental benefit of the mitzvos.

Rambam's language in his *Sefer HaMitzvos* provides perhaps the strongest textual support for this view. In the third positive commandment, the obligation to love Hashem, Rambam explicitly includes the contemplation of the mitzvos as a path to its fulfillment. Paired with his conviction that love of God can only be attained through knowledge of Him,¹² it seems clear that the mitzvos must somehow lead us to such knowledge.

We find additional support for this understanding of Rambam from R' Wolf HaLevi of Boskovice, the illustrious son of the *Machtz'is HaShekel*. R' Wolf authored an extensive commentary on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, titled *Seder Mishneh*. In his commentary to *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 2:2, he addresses the inclusion of "mitzvos" in the *Sefer HaMitzvos*:

באמרו: מצותיו ר"ל אלה המצות והחקים והמשפטים אשר צוה ה' אלקנו אותנו
חלקי מ"ע וחלקי מצות ל"ת, שיש בכל א' וא' מהם מלבד טעמים הגלוי להמשכיל
המתבונן בהם אף זו יש בתוכם עמק הסודות של מעשה בראשית ומעשה מרכבה
ועצות מרחוק מגדול העצה ית' כמו שביאר רבינו סוף הלכות מעילה וסוף הלכות
תמורה ובסוף הלכות מקואות, ואז בעינינו יראה ובלבבו יבין מפעלות תמים דעים
ית'.

¹² See *Hilchos Teshuvah* 10:6. Similarly, in *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:28, Rambam stresses that this mitzvah can only be fulfilled through comprehending the nature of existence and the divine wisdom displayed therein.

In his stating: “His mitzvos,” his intention is that these are the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that Hashem, our God, commanded us: portions of positive commandments and portions of negative commandments. Within each and every one of them, aside from their reasons that are revealed to the enlightened one who contemplates them, they also contain the depth of the secrets of the Work of Creation and the Work of the Chariot, and counsels from long ago, from the great Counselor, may He be blessed, as Rabbeinu [Rambam] explains at the end of *Hilchos Meilab*, the end of *Hilchos Temurah*, and in the end of *Hilchos Mikvaos*. Then, with his eyes he will see and with his heart he will understand the deeds of the God of Perfect Knowledge, may He be blessed.

In his commentary to *Chagigah* 2:1, Rambam identifies the Work of Creation and the Work of the Chariot with the wisdom of nature and theology, respectively. According to the *Seder Mishneh* of R’ Wolf, Rambam believes that it is the mitzvos’ connection to these subjects that enables them to bring us to love of God.

For further corroboration, we can turn to R’ Dovid Pardo, an important Italian Acharon and author of one of the most comprehensive commentaries on the *Tosefta*. Additionally, R’ Pardo wrote a supercommentary to Rashi’s commentary on the Torah, titled *Maskil L’Dovid*. In his comments to *Devarim* 6:6, he offers his understanding of an important passage in the *Sifri*:

אימתי ואהבת וכו' בזמן שיהיו הדברים וכו' על לבבך שע"י עסק התורה ידע וישכיל מפלאות תמים דעים וישג כוח מעשיו אשר האציל ברא יצר ועשה ובזה ישתוקק נפשו לאהבתו והן דברי הרמב"ם ז"ל בפ"ב מהלכות יסודי התורה והיאך הוא הדרך לאוהבו שיתבונן במעשיו וכו' יע"ש.

When is “And you shall love...”? At the time “that these words shall be... upon your heart”—that through involvement with the Torah, one will know and conceptualize the wonders of the God of Perfect Knowledge, and he will comprehend the power of His deeds, which He emanated, created, formed, and enacted. And through this, his soul will yearn for His love. These are precisely the words of Rambam, ז"ל, in the second chapter of *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*: “And what is the path to love Him? One should contemplate His deeds...” See there.

R’ Pardo draws an explicit connection between the study of Torah and the contemplation of the natural world, and he identifies this position with Rambam—not in the *Sefer HaMitzvos*, but in the *Mishneh Torah*. R’ Pardo’s approach might shed light on an apparent inconsistency within Rambam: in the *Sefer HaMitzvos*, Rambam includes contemplation of the

mitzvos as a path to the intellectually-grounded love of Hashem, but this path is conspicuously absent from the *Mishneh Torah*, where he mentions only the contemplation of creation. What would justify such a major omission? Following R' Pardo, it seems likely that Rambam did not view these paths as substantially different: the mitzvos also direct us to an appreciation of Hashem's deeds in the natural world, albeit less directly.¹³ Indeed, it is evident that a desire for refined observance and deeper understanding of the mitzvos themselves will inevitably lead to a thorough exploration of the relevant natural subjects.¹⁴ Therefore, even the formulation in the *Mishneh Torah* is completely consistent with the intention of the *Sifri*, according to R' Pardo.

As stated above, Rambam and Ralbag stand at the head of a particularly intellectualist trend within Jewish thought. To be sure, many Rishonim shared a similar orientation, and together they could be considered a major philosophical school among the Jews of Spain and Provence. With a focus on intellectual enlightenment, articulating a conception of the mitzvos that aligned them with empirical inquiry was a natural and important component of their system. What is fascinating is that this conception seems to have extended far beyond their particular school of thought, gaining nuances of meaning and application among the Rishonim of foreign lands.

The Pious Ones of Germany

If one were to search for a Rishon who represents the antithesis of the Spanish intellectualist school, R' Yehudah HeChasid would certainly be a reasonable candidate. Known as a mystic, he stands at the head of his own school: the Chasidei Ashkenaz, an obscure group of German pietists. His

¹³ Though it is possible that the *Seder Mishneh* and *Maskil L'David* understood Rambam to believe that the mitzvos convey *accurate and precise* scientific knowledge, such a position would seem to have little or no basis in the words of Rambam himself. It seems more reasonable to understand Rambam along the same lines as Ralbag—the mitzvos reflect and draw our attention to the fundamental nature of our reality, even though they are not necessarily grounded in precise scientific fact.

¹⁴ Consider, for example, the actions of R' Shimon ben Chalafta (*Chullin* 57b), whose desire to evaluate certain halachic positions *empirically* and to *experience* the truth of the Torah earned him the title of an *askan b'davarim*, an experimenter or researcher of things. Similarly, see *Hilchos Kiddush HaChodesh* 11:1, in which Rambam highlights the value of the scientific knowledge that is gained through an exceptionally thorough involvement with this mitzvah. I am grateful to R' Asher Benzion Buchman for this insight.

primary work, the *Sefer Chasidim*, is a profound compilation of ethical, legal, and mystical teachings. R' Yehudah HeChasid quickly emerged as one of the great Ashkenazi Rishonim, and through his towering disciples—particularly R' Elazar of Worms (the Rokeach) and R' Yitzchak Or Zarua—he exerted a significant influence on the development of Ashkenazi halachah and custom.

In addition to his *Sefer Chasidim*, R' Yehudah HeChasid wrote other works, many dealing with theological and esoteric doctrines. One of these was recently published under the title *Imros Teboros Chitzonios u'Pnimios* by R' Yaakov Yisrael Stahl, who produced a critical edition with extensive commentary. At its core, this work is R' Yehudah HeChasid's attempt to address the fundamental questions of Jewish belief through the unique lens of the Chasidei Ashkenaz. Whereas Ralbag's approach to these same topics is grounded in dialectical arguments and demonstrations, R' Yehudah HeChasid leans heavily on parables, metaphors, and allusions to convey his ideas. Central to his approach is a fascinating principle that is widespread in the thought of the Chasidei Ashkenaz, as R' Stahl demonstrates in his thorough introduction: the concept of “*zecher asah l'niflesan*.” The idea is that various natural phenomena were created to serve as a *zecher*, a remembrance or allusion, for wondrous acts of the Creator. Since these wondrous acts defy simple understanding, we can turn to familiar natural occurrences in order to gain some semblance of their reality. We will see examples of this principle later.

Early in this work, R' Yehudah HeChasid addresses Hashem's motivation for the creation of the universe. His goal is to avoid the problematic assumption that creation served some personal benefit for the Creator Himself. He writes:

אמר ה' בלבו, אברא העולם. לא שאני צריך לו, אלא שישמחו בריותי בי בהגלותי להם בחכמתי; והיודעים אותי ועושים חפציי, אגלה להם יחודי ורזיי, ותעלוז נפשם בי... (סימן ז)

Hashem said to Himself, “I will create the universe—not because I have need of it, but so that My creations will rejoice in Me when I am revealed to them in My wisdom. And those who know Me and do My will—I will reveal to them My unity and My secrets, and their souls will exalt in Me...”

According to R' Yehudah HeChasid, creation is purely for the benefit of the created. This would seem to be the standard Jewish approach to the subject. However, he then goes on to explain the exact nature of this benefit, and it is here that his approach is particularly instructive.

If we read carefully, we notice that there are in fact two levels or aspects to the benefit that Hashem wishes to bestow upon us. At the first,

more general level, the creations will rejoice in the revelation of His wisdom. Seemingly, the purpose of the universe is our recognition and appreciation of this Divine wisdom, manifest in the creation as a whole. The second level is reserved for “those who know Me and do My will.” For these individuals, there is the additional reward of perceiving the Creator’s unity and His secrets, which culminates in a state of spiritual exaltation. In some way, the knowledge of Hashem and performance of His commandments brings us to a level beyond the basic recognition of His wisdom. But how does this work? Is it simply a Divine reward for our obedience, or is there a more natural relationship between the mitzvos and our recognition of His unity? A few lines later, R’ Yehudah HeChasid provides an answer:

ואם תאמר, אחר שלא ברא לצרכו, למה ציום לעשות מצות? – ויש לומר, בשביל הצדיקים שיש, כדי שיעבדוהו וישבחוהו מכל מין ומין שברא: נבראו יום ולילה—משבחים אותו ביום ובלילה; דרך כבוד הוא לתת לאדון מראשית שנתן לו, שנאמר: "וכבוד ה' מראשית". וצוה על הזרעת כלאים—להעיד שכל אחד לבדו, ומורה על יחודו; והמערב זרעים, כאילו מגנה מה שחפץ הבורא. וצוה בקרבנות—דרך כבוד הוא לעבד להיראות בדורון נאה לאדון; לזה הרחיק בעלי מומים מעבודתו, כמגשים ונגשים, שנאמר (מלאכי א, ח) "הקריבהו נא לפחתך". (סימן י)

And if you will say, since He did not create for His own need, why did He command them to perform mitzvos?—we can reply: It was for the righteous, so that they would serve Him and praise Him from every individual species that He created. He created day and night – we praise Him by day and by night. It is the way of honor to give a master from the first that he bestowed upon him, as it is said, “And you shall honor Hashem from the first.” And He commanded regarding the seeding of mixed species—to testify that each is separate, and this demonstrates His unity. One who mixes seeds is as if he denigrates that which the Creator desired. And He commanded regarding sacrifices—it is the way of honor for a servant to appear with a pleasant gift for his master. And for this reason, He distanced the blemished from His service, as in the priests and the sacrifices, as it is said, “Offer it now, if you please, to your governor.”

The first thing we notice is that the purpose of the mitzvos as a whole is tied to our recognition of individual species. We have already learned that the general purpose of creation is for us to rejoice in our comprehension of His wisdom. The question becomes: What comprehension of His wisdom would we be lacking if we did not have the mitzvos?

R’ Yehudah HeChasid seems to answer this question as well. Primarily, we would not properly notice these distinct species, and we would not

reverentially associate them with their Divine Source. Every human is already aware of the existence of day and night, but by mandating set prayers that address the nature of these daily cycles, we come to a refined appreciation of their Creator's wisdom. And now we also gain an understanding of the essential connection between the mitzvos and our perception of Divine unity, which R' Yehudah HeChasid alluded to earlier and which he mentions here in connection with the prohibition of seeding mixed species: The mitzvos testify to the essential distinctions between different types of things: species of plants may not be mixed because each has its own unique properties and purposes that the Creator desires to maintain.¹⁵ If the various elements of the natural world were essentially interchangeable, if they exhibited no unique qualities or functions, then we would find ourselves in a chaotic world, without structure or function. By affirming the unique role of each species, we testify to the existence of a unified order, and by extension, a unified Orderer.

R' Stahl notes in his commentary that R' Yehudah HeChasid has been intentional in including examples from every realm of our perceptible world. The celestial cycle of day and night, the world of plants, and the domains of humans and animals ("as in the priests and the sacrifices") are all alluded to in this brief passage. R' Yehudah HeChasid is thereby reminding us that this appreciation of natural species must be truly universal.

It seems likely that Ralbag and others of his school would embrace this description of the mitzvos' function. As we saw, the concept of essential form and the uniqueness of individual species are central points in his system. And like Ralbag, R' Yehudah HeChasid does not claim that we can learn scientific fact directly from the mitzvos, rather, the mitzvos merely "testify" to the differentiation of natural species. Nevertheless, it would be unwarranted to claim that the wisdom that Ralbag sought and perceived in the natural world was equivalent to that of R' Yehudah HeChasid. Ralbag was a scientist and philosopher, trained in the medieval Aristotelian tradition and committed to particular views regarding natural causation. The insights of R' Yehudah HeChasid, particularly in this unique work, are of an entirely different nature.

To Know and To Wonder

Throughout the *Imros Teboros*, R' Yehudah HeChasid's focus is on the wondrous and the supernatural. Even certain natural phenomena possess unique qualities that defy simple explanation. His goal is to demonstrate

¹⁵ See *Sefer Chasidim* 589 (Bologna; 14 in Parma), in which R' Yehudah HeChasid elaborates upon this theme and its importance.

how we can use these phenomena to arrive at an approximate understanding of various Divine activities. For example, how can we comprehend Hashem's universal presence and influence, despite the fact that we do not perceive Him at all? R' Yehudah HeChasid explains that to assist us with this, Hashem created the phenomenon of magnetism, through which we can relate to the nature of Divine providence. How can we conceptualize Hashem's performance of contradictory actions simultaneously? We need only consider the nature of fire, which can melt certain objects while simultaneously hardening others.

All of this seems to be a far cry from Ralbag's scientific methodology, in which natural objects are analyzed in order to grasp their unique causes and functions. Though both Ralbag and R' Yehudah HeChasid understand the mitzvos as guides to our perception of distinct natural phenomena, it seems that they are entirely at odds with regard to the *type* of wisdom we are meant to perceive: one investigates causation while the other contemplates mystery. However, difference does not necessarily indicate disagreement, and it seems profitable to approach these views as two complementary elements in a broader search for truth. Particularly for those with the spirit of exploration, knowledge and wonder go hand-in-hand.

We can imagine Ralbag bending over a magnetic stone, poking and prodding, devising experiments that will reveal the unique properties of its strange nature. What types of things does it attract? How strong is the attraction? Can this attraction be disrupted? As he chases a precise definition of this natural force, R' Yehudah HeChasid stands next to him and shares his enthusiasm. But he wants to emphasize another aspect of Divine wisdom that we see in this strange stone: No matter how fully we understand it, no matter how close we come to a complete theory of electromagnetism and its properties, we cannot deny the *unique experience of wonder* that accompanies our perception of the magnet. It seems to somehow "break the rules," even after we arrive at a better understanding of those rules themselves. This unique experience of wonder is as much a creation of Hashem as the phenomenon of magnetism itself, and it also conveys the Creator's wisdom in drawing us closer to a conception of Him.

In other words, Ralbag seems to emphasize the scientific, external structure of our physical world, while R' Yehudah HeChasid emphasizes the conceptual, inner structure of our lived experience. The former is an attempt to grasp an objective universe, while the latter is about our *relationships* with things: the psychological impressions that we form and the supernal truths that they represent. Of course, this distinction is overly

simplistic: Ralbag's commentaries demonstrate a profound grasp of human psychology,¹⁶ and R' Yehudah HeChasid clearly dedicated tremendous energy to a study of natural phenomena. Ultimately, both Ralbag and R' Yehudah HeChasid share an anthropocentric approach: Ralbag highlights the ecological structure of the universe, with mankind's enlightenment at its pinnacle, and R' Yehudah HeChasid points to the conceptual structure of the mind, with a focus on wonder and the limits of human understanding.

We see a similar debate between two Rishonim who knew each other quite well. R' Avraham ibn Ezra and R' Yehudah HaLevi were close friends and related through marriage. At various places in his commentaries, ibn Ezra will cite his good friend, often to disagree with him. In his commentary to *Tehillim* 139:14, we find such an example:

וטעם ונפשי יודעת מאד – על דעת ר' יהודה הלוי מנוחתו כבוד: נפלאים מעשיך
ממני אף על פי שנפשי יודעת מאד. ולפי דעתי: כי הוא קשור וכן הוא ונפשי יודעת
מאד והיא עדה כי נפלאים הם מעשיך.

And the meaning of “and my soul knows much”—according to R' Yehudah HaLevi, who rests in honor—Your works are wondrous beyond my comprehension, even though my soul knows much. And according to me, the clause is connected: And my soul knows much, and it testifies that Your works are wondrous.

According to R' Yehudah HaLevi, our appreciation of Hashem's wonders is grounded in what we do not know. Despite Dovid HaMelech's vast knowledge, it was only the intrinsic *limitation* of knowledge that enabled him to appreciate the magnitude of these wonders. Yet, for ibn Ezra, Dovid HaMelech was conveying the exact opposite: only *because of* his vast knowledge was he able to appreciate the magnitude of these wonders, by understanding them.

Though they are certainly divided on the reading of this particular verse, we can appreciate how both views might play an essential role in our human quest for truth. And as we learned from Ralbag and R' Yehudah HeChasid, there is abundant reason to accept both viewpoints as essential to the function of the mitzvos.

¹⁶ For example, in his commentary to *Devarim* 12:21 (*toeles* 12), Ralbag notes that besides the efficiency and humanity of *shechitah*, its intricate and complex laws serve another purpose. They shift our focus from the violent act of killing an animal, which could easily engender negative character traits, to a dutiful performance of God's will. The mitzvos not only teach us what to *notice* in this world; they enable us to *properly navigate* this world by maintaining the ideal psychological orientation to even our most base activities.

The Beginning of Enlightenment

We have attempted to establish a major trend incorporating two of the most disparate schools of Jewish thought: the Spanish intellectualists and the Chasidei Ashkenaz. There is substantial reason to believe that both viewed the mitzvos as guides to an exploration of the natural world. Through this exploration, we come to perceive the wisdom of our Creator: our only path to knowledge of the Creator Himself. Though these schools tended to emphasize different aspects of this wisdom, there is no reason to believe that either was fundamentally opposed to the other. On the contrary, we can appreciate how both approaches might function in tandem to produce a balanced, comprehensive vision of reality.

Historically, there have been evolving challenges to producing such a balanced, comprehensive vision. The 16th century was a time of substantial cultural and intellectual change. Renaissance scholars and the burgeoning Scientific Revolution fundamentally shifted the way people saw and studied a world that was rapidly expanding through exploration. At the same time, the Protestant Reformation struck a blow to the prevailing authority of the Catholic Church. All of this laid the groundwork for the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, in which bold new ideas required Western civilization to rethink its integration of various political, scientific, and religious systems.

For Judaism, the 16th century marked the transition from the period of the Rishonim to the earliest generations of Acharonim. Recognizing not only the social but also the spiritual catastrophe of the Spanish Expulsion of 1492, these rabbis sought to provide Jewry with a stable and enduring foundation. It is likely for this reason that the period saw the production of major halachic codifications that remain essential to this day. Simultaneously, new efforts were made to nurture the inner world of Jewish experience, and various intellectual and mystical trends in Judaism find their roots in this century. In the relative security and opportunity of Poland's Jewish community, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, Rema, provided a tangible and integrated model of these efforts. A leading halachic figure of his generation, the author of indispensable glosses to the *Shulchan Aruch*, he was also an expert in the philosophical and esoteric works of Chazal and the Rishonim. He remains a guiding light for our times.

Rema's *Toras HaOlah* is not well-known. It is an exploration of the Temple structure and service, deriving profound spiritual lessons through its symbolism. It also provides a general overview of various fundamentals of Jewish thought, which Rema articulates clearly and authoritatively. Among others, Rema addresses the question of belief: is it preferable to draw our beliefs from received tradition or to ground them in rational

analysis? In *Toras HaOlah* 3:7, after affirming that the Torah brings a Jew to the most profound spiritual and philosophical truths, Rema concludes:

והנה מכל מקום עדיף טפי לחקור על הדברים ולדע אותן במופתים ובמושכלים
על ידי חקירה וזהו תכלית האדם.

Nevertheless, it is better to investigate things and to know them through demonstrations and rational principles, by way of investigation; this is the purpose of man.

Rema saw no contradiction between received tradition and rational investigation. On the contrary, our tradition illuminates subjects that history's greatest philosophers failed to clarify or even consider. But Rema cautions that to simply lean on these traditions is a denial of our human purpose and our ultimate fulfillment. Mankind was meant to explore.

Much like the Rishonim we have seen, Rema understood the Torah to be guiding us to profound scientific and philosophical knowledge. For example, he states that the seven divisions of the Temple correspond to the seven geographical zones of the planet (1:2) and that the *Ezras Nashim* with its four chambers alludes to the Active Intellect with the four domains of existence that emanate from it: inert, vegetable, animal, and human (1:8). In Rema's vision, the Temple is truly a microcosm of reality: not in a purely abstract and intangible manner, but in a way that aligns with our empirical investigations.

In a fascinating responsum to R' Shlomo Luria, Rema further defends his involvement with these investigations and his citation of non-Jewish philosophers (*Teshuvos HaRema* 7). He writes that "it is an old disagreement among the sages, and I do not need to reply to it," citing the famous debate between Rashba and the Sages of Provence, who upheld these investigations as essential to the Torah system. Clearly, even centuries after the debate, Rema viewed these as two legitimate and enduring approaches, noting that even Rashba only forbade these studies during one's youth. Rema goes on to explain that although there are certainly problematic works from the Greek philosophers that must be avoided, their writings on nature and reality were not forbidden. On the contrary, "through this we know the greatness of the Creator, may He be blessed." And even if we were to say that the valuable works were forbidden on account of the dangerous ones, Rema argues, no one ever conceived of forbidding the works of Torah sages, like Rambam and others, who served as Rema's sources in these topics. In his efforts to provide a vision and foundation for the emerging Jewish communities of the 16th century, Rema chose to ground himself in the great Rishonim we have cited, describing a Judaism in which the traditional study of halachah and the empirical study of nature are firmly joined.

Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel spanned the periods of the Rishonim and early Acharonim, himself an exile of the Spanish Expulsion. He had a panoramic lens on the era that was coming to a close and an aspiration to provide intellectual guidance for the era that was about to commence. In his commentary to *Avos* 3:18, Abarbanel begins by emphasizing that the lessons of the Torah contain an intrinsic value, even when involved with lowly subjects, and the sciences must take a secondary position, even when involved with lofty subjects. But according to Abarbanel, R' Eliezer ben Chisma, the author of this Mishnah, also intended to explain *why* we should not denigrate even the strangest and most obscure aspects of the Torah. What value should we find in *pischei niddab* and *kinin*, given their confusing and uncommon nature? Abarbanel's explanation of the Mishnah is illuminating:

כי הנה עם כל זה "הן הם גופי הלכות" עד שראוי להיותם תורה אלהית שיהיו חביבות בעינינו. ועוד כי גם יש בהם שורשי חכמות, כי פתחי נדה הם כפי ה'תקופות' כהלכתם וכחזרתם, והקנים יש בו 'גימטריאות' שהוא שם נאמר על שעורי ההנדסה והתשבורת, ומלבד כוח זה יש בהם ממתיקות החדוד והפלפול. ועל זה אמר: "פרפראות לחכמה".

והמאירי כתב שכיון החכם הזה להדריך האדם בסדר למודו, שלא יכנס לחכמות המחקריות עד שימצא כרסו בשר ויין שהוא—התלמוד. ותפש בזה "קנים ופתחי נדה", שהם בסדר קדשים ובסדר טהרות לומר, שראוי שילמד ראשונה כל התלמוד מתחלה ועד סוף, ואחר כך יעיין בחכמת התכונה והתשבורת וההנדסה, והוא אומר: "תקופות גימטריאות", ומהם יבא לטבעיות ולא להיות ועליהם אמר: "פרפראות לחכמה". רוצה לומר, שהם התחלות לחכמה הטבעית והאלהית, כי היא הנקראת חכמה בהחלט.

Because despite all of this, "they are essential laws"; being Divine Torah, they are fitting to be precious in our eyes. And additionally, because they contain the roots of the sciences: for *pischei niddab* are according to the astronomical periods, as per their movement and revolution, and *kinin* contain *gematrios*, which is a word referring to geometry and measurement. And aside from this strength, they contain the sweetness of intellectual precision and dialectics. Regarding this he says, "delicacies for wisdom."

And Meiri wrote that this sage intended to direct a person in the order of his studies, i.e., one should not enter the sciences until his belly finds meat and wine, which is the Talmud. And he chose for this "*kinin*" and "*pischei niddab*," which are in the orders of *Kodshim* and *Taboros*, in order to convey that one should first learn the Talmud from beginning to end, and afterwards he should study the science of astronomy and measurement and geometry, which is [R' Eliezer ben Chisma's] statement, "*tekufos v'gematrios*." From them, he

will come to natural and Divine subjects, about which he said, “*par-paros l’chochmah*.” Meaning to say, they are introductions to the science of nature and the Divine, for that is what is called “*chochmah*” in an absolute sense.

Abarbanel understands the Mishnah to be offering three reasons to value these laws. Firstly, they are components of our Divine Torah, and as such, they are intrinsically deserving. Secondly, they contain “the roots of the sciences,” in the sense that even these obscure laws will direct us to study and understand lofty subjects, such as astronomy and geometry. Thirdly, there is great intellectual enjoyment in analyzing complex law. When properly appreciated, these reasons will cause us to cherish even the most strange and challenging areas of the Torah.

The second of these three reasons is very much aligned with the approach we have been investigating. Again, we find that a fundamental intention of the mitzvos is to guide us through a study of the natural world. This reading of Abarbanel is suggested by his conflation of the Mishnah’s halachic subjects with its scientific subjects: *kinin* and *pischei niddah* incorporate *tekufo*s and *gematrios*. It is also bolstered by his citation of Meiri, whom he quotes without further comment. Meiri explains clearly that our study of the Torah and Talmud must be followed by a study of the sciences, of which astronomy and mathematics are the most introductory. By bringing Meiri in this context, especially without dissecting or challenging his interpretation,¹⁷ it is possible that Abarbanel seeks to build a bridge between the two domains of knowledge: It is not that we simply complete the Torah and then move on to science, as one might have interpreted Meiri. Nor is it correct to say that we can learn all science directly through Torah study, for the mitzvos contain only the “roots of the sciences.” Rather, the mitzvos guide us organically through an exploration of the sciences by obligating our involvement with associated topics.

While the Western world was undergoing its own “Enlightenment”—a phenomenon that spawned an increasingly reductionary and materialistic worldview—many of the early Acharonim were busy developing a truly enlightened Judaism. Recognizing the essential connection between the wisdom of the Torah and the wisdom embedded in the universe, they articulated a paradigm that would maintain the primacy of Torah while

¹⁷ Though it is conceivable that Abarbanel is merely citing Meiri as an alternative interpretation, he seems generally willing to express any personal disapproval with Meiri’s interpretation, even if only to say that it does not align well with the language of the Mishnah (see *Nachlas Avos* to *Avos* 2:2; 5:19). Given his total lack of critical evaluation here, it seems very likely that Abarbanel sees a degree of confluence between Meiri’s understanding and his own.

highlighting the necessity and nobility of intellectual exploration. In this effort, they remained firmly grounded in the philosophy of the Rishonim. But it is worth considering to what degree they were successful in transmitting this vision to future generations.

We are accustomed to viewing the Torah as a system of law or as a system of beliefs and values. But there is a great deal to be gained by viewing the Torah as a system of *exploration*. Such a vision neither denies nor diminishes the legal weight of the mitzvos. On the contrary, it is only because the mitzvos impose themselves so forcefully and comprehensively upon our lives that they are successful in awakening us to the beauty and wisdom that surrounds us. The mitzvos teach us to view these natural phenomena through a uniquely *human* lens, emphasizing each creation's distinct and essential role in facilitating human perfection. These advantages, along with the many unknowable benefits of the mitzvos, are not available to one who attempts an exploration of this world without the Torah's guidance.

Embracing this exploratory vision of the mitzvos yields a Judaism that is passionately and pervasively curious. In study and in practice, the laws of *mezuzah* could awaken us to much more than the geometry of our living spaces and doorframes; we might begin to explore the ways in which the dwellings we shape have a role in shaping us, and we might investigate why our doorposts, the interfaces between our inner and outer lives, serve as the ideal encounter with the contents of *Shema*. Similarly, the laws of *hashavas aveidah* could be more than a religiously mandated system of lost and found. We might wonder about the role of trust in society, the psychological connection between a person and his property, and what it means to truly give up hope of recovering what we've lost. Even the ever-present mitzvah of *tzitzis* has the potential to spark original and surprising investigations into the nature of concrete symbols, the structure of mnemonic devices, and the mystery of human memory. Our Torah study and mitzvah observance invite us on a journey of endless exploration. It is an invitation that we may accept at any time. ❧