

TEACHINGS OF THE RABBIS



As I've said before, *Kabbalah* and Jewish mysticism didn't suddenly appear out of nowhere. Instead, there was a continuous evolution from scripture to *Wisdom Literature* to deeper mystical perceptions.

Consequently, in this slide show we are going to look at several teachings from rabbinic literature that have become part of the basis and fabric of later *Kabbalah*.

And because there are many such rabbinic teachings, this will be a very long, but important, slideshow. Enjoy!

ECCLESIASTES

In my opinion, *Ecclesiastes* is one of the deepest and most fascinating books in the Hebrew Bible. It is also one of the most easily misunderstood.

In particular, the phrase “*vanity of vanities, all is vanity*” is just a really bad translation.

The corresponding Hebrew is, “*Havel havelim, hachol havel.*” The word “*hevel*” that appears in various forms here really means “*steam*” or “*vapor.*” In other words, it is referring to something that is lacking in substance.

Thus, better translations of *Ecclesiastes 1:2* would be:

“Futility of futilities, all is futile,”

or,

“Vapor of vapors, all is vapor.”

There are other passages in the *Bible* that link the Hebrew word for *vapor* with the word for *shadow*.

*“For who knows what is good for man in his life, all the days of his vain life which he spends as a shadow?”
(Ecclesiastes 6:12)*

*“Man is like a breath (la-hevel); his days are like a passing shadow.”
(Psalm 144:4)*

This association caused the rabbis to speculate about which *shadows* have substance and which don't.

“If life is like the shadow cast by a wall, there is substance in it; if like the shadow cast by a date-palm, there is substance in it! David came and explained, “His days are as a shadow that passes away (Psalm 144:4).” Rav Huna said in the name of Rabbi Aha, “Life is like a bird which flies past and its shadow passes with it.” Samuel said, “It is like the shadow of bees in which there is no substance at all.”
(Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3)

In other words, most things in life are like *shadows* cast by passing conditions. The rabbis, in this case, say that the situation is like *hevel, vapor* – totally lacking in substance. In that sense, it is really not very important.

On the other hand, there are other conditions that are like *shadows* cast by that which is *permanent* and *eternal*. Those are the things which are enduring and really important in life. For example, chaos and anger are often fleeting conditions and, therefore, lacking in substance. However, love, beauty, art, truth, and unity seem to be reflections of a more eternal truth. Hence, those are the things that matter in life. Most of the rest is just *hevel* or *vapor*, totally lacking in meaningful substance.

This is really very deep and mystical. The rabbis like *Rav Huna* are telling us that most of what we experience in this world is like a passing illusion with no substance. Thus, pay attention to what is really important!

Like other parts of *Wisdom Literature*, *Ecclesiastes* addresses what seems to be injustice in the world.

“All things have I seen in the days of my vanity; there is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness.”

(Ecclesiastes 4:15)

The explanation of *Ecclesiastes* for this seeming injustice is the cyclic nature of reality. Change from good times to bad times and back again is just part of life.

“The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; it whirls around continually, and the wind returns again according to its circuits.”
(Ecclesiastes 1:6)

However, *Ecclesiastes* also offers remedies such as finding joy in the present moment. As we'll see later on when we study the *Sefer Yetzirah*, this forms the basis for a type of mindfulness meditation.

*“And I commended mirth, because a man has no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry; for this will go with him in his labor during the days of his life, which God gives him under the sun.”
(Ecclesiastes 8:15)*

Another verse from *Ecclesiastes* that has mystical import is given below.

“He has put a world/eternity/enigma in their heart so that man cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end.”
(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

In this verse, there is a Hebrew word “*olam*” which is spelled strangely. It is written as *ayin-lamed-mem* instead of the usual *ayin-vav-lamed-mem*.

“He has put a world/eternity/enigma in their heart so that man cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end.”
(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

This gives the word “*olam*” a double meaning. It can be translated as either *world* or *eternity* or as something *hidden* within people’s hearts.

“He has put a world/eternity/enigma in their heart so that man cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end.”
(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

Furthermore, “*olam*” when spelled as *ayin-lamed-mem* has a *gematria* of 140. This is the same as the *gematria* of the Hebrew verb “*hikahel*” (*hey-kuf-hey-lamed*) which means “*to assemble.*”

“He has put a world/eternity/enigma in their heart so that man cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end.”
(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

In other words, there is a hidden *assembler* in our hearts that creates the world of time and space that we perceive. And unless we turn our focus inward, that *assembler* remains hidden from us.

“He has put a world/eternity/enigma in their heart so that man cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end.”
(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

An additional importance of this connection is that the very opening verse of *Ecclesiastes* addresses *King Solomon* as “*Kohelet*.”

“The words of Kohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.”
(Ecclesiastes 1:1)

The name “*Kohelet*” is derived from the verb “*hikahel, to assemble,*” and the rabbis explain that this is because *Solomon* was able to assemble the teachings in such a way that the people could literally get a handle on them.

“And more so because Kohelet was wise, he also taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs (Ecclesiastes 9:12).” He pondered the words of the Torah and investigated the meaning of the words of the Torah. He made handles to the Torah, making it easy for the people to grasp.”
(Song of Songs Rabbah 1:8)

There is much more to *Ecclesiastes* than meets the eye!

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Another important passage in *Ecclesiastes* is one which at first glance looks very innocuous.

*“This against this made Elohim (God).”
(Ecclesiastes 7:14)*

However, the mystical understanding of this passage is that while *God* is one and unknowable, perceived reality is based upon a pattern of three – a thing, its opposite, and the interaction between the opposites.

*“This against this made Elohim (God).”
(Ecclesiastes 7:14)*

This pattern of three forms the basis for the *Sefer Yetzira*, the *Book of Creation* that we will discuss in great detail later.

*“This against this made Elohim (God).”
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There are many more lessons from *Ecclesiastes* that lead to a deeper mystical understanding of the universe, but for now I suggest that you read the text, ponder the words, and discover them for yourself. One bit of advice, though. The text is out of order! Hence, a good way to study *Ecclesiastes* is to print out the entire text, cut up your printout into separate verses, and then group the verses by theme. That exercise will help you understand what *Ecclesiastes* is really trying to say!

JOB

The *Book of Job* is also referenced a lot in Jewish mystical literature, and like *Ecclesiastes*, it is part of the *Wisdom Literature*.

Whereas *Ecclesiastes* blames the seeming inequities of life upon the cyclic nature of reality, *Job* suggests that we perceive certain things as unjust only because our understanding of reality is limited.

“Then the Lord answered Job from the stormy wind, and said, Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now your loins like a man; for I will demand of you, and you will answer me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have understanding. Who determined its measures, do you know? Or who has stretched the line upon it? Upon what are its foundations fastened? Or who laid its corner stone? ... Declare if you know it all.”

(Job 1:1-18)

Another lesson from *Job* that becomes very important in later *Kabbalah* is that the creation of this world involves *God* putting boundaries upon things. This is explained also in *Genesis Rabbah* where the rabbis state that one of the meanings of the appellation *El Shaddai* (*God Almighty*) is “*the God who says enough (dai).*” This is also a reference to the limits that *God* puts upon every element of the creation so that it does not continue to infinity.

Furthermore, in *Job 26:7* we read that He “*hangs the earth upon nothing.*” The word that is often translated as “*nothing*” is *belimah*. This is the only place in the *Bible* where this word occurs. However, *belimah* appears to also be related to the verb *balam*, *to restrain*. Thus, this verse could be translated as He “*hangs the world upon restraint.*” This interpretation is supported by the verses that follow that explicitly discuss the boundaries that *God* places upon creation. The bottom line: In order for a finite world to exist, every component must be finite.

“He stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth upon nothing/restraint. He binds up the waters in his thick clouds; and the cloud is not torn under them. He closes in the face of his throne, and spreads his cloud upon it. He has surrounded the waters with bounds, at the boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at his reproof. He stirs up the sea with his power, and by his understanding he struck Rahab. By his wind he has made the heavens fair; his hand slew the fleeing serpent. Behold, these are but parts of his ways; but how terrifying is the thing that is heard of him! And who can understand the thunder of his power?”

(Job 26:7-14)

“R. Ila'a said: The world exists only on account of the merit of him who restrains himself in strife, for it is written: He hangs the earth upon belimah (restraint).”

(B. Chullin 89a)

THE BLUEPRINT OF THE UNIVERSE

At the very beginning of *Genesis Rabbah*, we find a discourse that declares that the *Torah* existed before the creation and was essentially the blueprint for creation. This is a teaching that has become part of the mainstream folklore of contemporary *Judaism*. Additionally, notice how this declaration elevates the *Torah* even further beyond that of being simply a set of divinely given laws.

As usual, though, we have to ask ourselves what is the agenda? Why did the ancient rabbis feel compelled to argue that the *Torah* has an even more exalted status? My best guess is that this occurred as a response to *Christianity* which was gaining ground and beginning to usher in another round of persecution against the Jews.

So how does this work? Think about it. In *Christianity*, *Jesus* is the carpenter and, as such, he is a builder of new things. However, what is even more important than the carpenter? The blueprint!

“Rabbi Oshaya Rabbah commenced his exposition thus: Then I was by Him, as a nursling (amon); and I was daily all delight (Proverbs 8:30). 'Amon' means tutor; 'amon' means covered; 'amon' means hidden; and some say, 'amon' means great. 'Amon' is a tutor, as you read, As an omen (nursing father) carrieth the sucking child (Numbers 11:12). 'Amon' means covered, as in the verse, Ha'emunim (they that were clad-i.e. covered) in scarlet (Lamentations 4:5). 'Amon' means hidden, as in the verse, And he concealed (omen) Hadassah (Esther 2:7). 'Amon' means great, as in the verse, Art thou better than No-amon (Nah. 3:8)? which is rendered, Art thou better than Alexandria the Great, that is situate among the rivers?3 Another interpretation: 'amon' is a workman (uman). The Torah declares: 'I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.' In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED), BEGINNING referring to the Torah, as in the verse, The Lord made me as the beginning of His way (Proverbs 8:22).”

THE MANY WORLDS INTERPRETATION OF RABBINIC LITERATURE

There are a few ways in which *Genesis Rabbah* argues that there were other worlds before this one. One way is that the text notes that early in *Genesis* it is written “*there was evening*” and not “*let there be evening.*” This implies that time already existed before the creation of the universe that we know. Otherwise, if time were being created for the first time (no pun intended), then the text should have read “*let there be evening.*” In other words, let evening exist! But of course, it doesn’t say that, and so the rabbis concluded that time was already in existence.

Furthermore, they continued their argument by stating that other worlds existed before this current one. However, the balance between mercy and justice was not quite right, and so those earlier worlds were destroyed. And as happens frequently, a verse from *Ecclesiastes* was used to justify this.

“R. Tanhuma commenced: He has made every thing beautiful in its time (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Said R. Tanhuma: The world was created when it was due, and the world was not fit to be created earlier. R. Abbahu said: Hence we learn that the Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created these [heaven and earth], and then He said: ‘These please Me; those did not please Me.’” (Genesis Rabbah IX:2)

The appropriate question to ask now, however, is why did the rabbis want to conclude that there were multiple worlds? Again what was their agenda? My theory is that the rabbis wanted to show that only *God* is unchanging and eternal and that everything else is subject to the cycles of time as described in *Ecclesiastes*. Otherwise, if the universe was just as eternal as *God*, then one could argue that the universe should be worshipped! I suspect that it was just this sort of conclusion that the rabbis wanted to avoid. If other universes have lived and died before this one, then surely this one is also going to exist for only a finite amount of time.

It is amazing to me that doctrines such as parallel worlds and multiple universes have now, more or less, become part of mainstream physics. Consequently, contemporary physics is reaching a conclusion similar to that of the ancient rabbis. However, their motivations for doing so are entirely different. On the one hand, physicists simply follow mathematics and their ingenuity to come up with the best possible explanations for their many observations, and if such logic leads to the supposition of multiple universes, then so be it! The rabbis, on the other hand, had their own agenda, and yet quite frequently, their conclusions dovetail with those of modern science.

As a final note, the doctrine of multiple universes is yet another of those early rabbinic theories that will undergo elaboration and mutation in later *Kabbalistic* literature, but remember that its origin is found in the earlier rabbinic writings of *Genesis Rabbah*, the ancient rabbinic commentary on *Genesis*.

LIGHT IS SOWN FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

Light is a very mysterious thing in both the *Bible* and in modern science. In science, experiments have shown that matter can never travel faster than the speed of light, and this means that time and space often have to bend to make it so. This is the cornerstone upon which *Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity* rests.

In the *Bible*, light is equally mysterious as we read in *Psalm 104* that *God* is wrapped in light. By the way, *Psalm 104* is like a *Cliff Notes* version of the whole of creation. Read it!

In *Genesis*, we read that light is created on the first day, but this results in an obvious problem since the stars and the sun and the moon aren't created until the fourth day. So how did the rabbis deal with this? They decided that the light on the first day was a spiritual light that is stored away for the righteous.

“Light is sown for the righteous.”
(Psalm 96:11)

“And God said: Let there be light and there was light (Genesis 1:3)? That still does not connote joy, he replied, since the world was not privileged to make use of that light. R. Judah said: By the light which was created on the first day man could have seen from one end of the world to the other; but when the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw the wicked, He hid it away for the righteous, as it is written, ‘But the path of the righteous as the light of dawn, that shines more and more unto the perfect day (Proverbs 4:18).’”
(Genesis Rabbah 42:3)

Furthermore, we read in the *Zohar* that when we study *Torah*, a thread of this light enters us through the top of our skull. For me, this is that little tingly sensation I get in my brain as it engages in activity and suddenly goes “Aha,” when it gets a really good insight.

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(Genesis Rabbah 42:3)

IN THE BEGINNING

One could write a whole book on just the first few verses of *Genesis!* There is just so much to say. One particular story is a legend from ancient times that the world was created with the Hebrew letter *bet*, ב. This is a natural thing to say because the very first letter of the *Torah* is *bet*. Also, since the glyph for *bet* is closed on three sides, the rabbis used this shape to give us a warning that we are not to focus on what's below (what happens when we die), what's above (in the heavenly realms), or what's behind us, i.e. what there was before the creation. Instead, our job is to focus just upon what is in front of us. In other words, we're here to do the task that is at hand. What we need to know and what we need to work on are basically right in front of our eyes. In later *Kabbalah*, however, it was said that the world was created with a *bet* because it stands for *bracha*, a blessing.

“IN THE BEGINNING (BE-RESHITH) GOD CREATED (Genesis 1:1). R. Jonah said in R. Levi's name: Why was the world created with a bet? Just as the bet is closed at the sides but open in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above and what is below, what is before and what is behind.”
(Genesis Rabbah 1:10)

Another lesser known tradition is that the world was created with the letter *hey*, ה. The rationale here is that the letter *hey* is like the sound created when we expel a breath, and that takes no effort. Likewise, for *God* the creation of the world was just as effortless. The text reference for this argument is the phrase *when they were created* from *Genesis 2:4*. This phrase can also be read in Hebrew as *with 'hey' they were created*, and in a traditional *Torah* scroll, the letter *hey* in this passage is written smaller to perhaps emphasize this interpretation.

*“WHEN THEY WERE CREATED—BEHIBBARAM
(Genesis 2:4). R. Abbahu said in R. Johanan's name:
He created them with the letter hey. All letters demand
an effort to pronounce them, whereas the hey demands
no effort; similarly, not with labor or wearying toil did the
Holy One, blessed be He, create His world, but By the
word of the Lord, and The heavens were already made
(Psalm 33:6).”
(Genesis Rabbah XII:10)*

Another story of creation that becomes prominent in later *Kabbalistic* literature is that the world was created out of opposites, fire and water. This is based on a passage in *Ecclesiastes 7:14*, which we mentioned earlier, that says the *God* made one thing opposite another.

*“This against this made Elohim (God).”
(Ecclesiastes 7:14)*

“AND THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH WERE FINISHED. How did the Holy One, blessed be He, create His world? Said R. Johanan: The Lord took two balls, one of fire and the other of snow, and worked them into each other, and from these the world was created.”

(Genesis Rabbah X:3)

Yet another story of creation that is found in rabbinic literature is that *God* created the world with *ten utterances*. The ten utterances refers to the ten times that we read “*And God said*” at the beginning of *Genesis*.

Well, actually there are only nine times that this phrase explicitly occurs, but you can see why the rabbis would want to argue that it is really ten. After all, there are the *ten commandments*, *ten generations* from *Adam* to *Noah*, *ten generations* from *Noah* to *Abraham*, *ten miracles and plagues* that occurred in Egypt, *ten fingers* and *ten toes*. Ten is obviously a very important number, and so to arrive at *ten utterances* the rabbis argued that *In the beginning* was also a creative utterance.

“R. Johanan said: The ten utterances with which the world was created. What are these? The expressions ‘And God said’ in the first chapter of Genesis. But there are only nine? — The words ‘In the beginning’ are also a creative utterance, since it is written, By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth (Psalm 33:6).”
(B. Megilah 21b)

In the *Talmud*, though, we also encounter the doctrine that the world was created not with *ten utterances*, but with the *twenty-two letters* of the Hebrew alphabet.

“Rab Judah said in the name of Rav: Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created.”

(B. Berachot 55a)

We can reconcile these two doctrines by realizing that letters are to words like prime numbers are to the rest of the counting numbers. In other words, the letters of the alphabet are the building blocks for the *ten utterances*. Hence, to say that the world was created using *ten utterances* implies that the world was also created using the letters of the alphabet.

In practical terms, though, we might elaborate by saying that letters and words create the worldview of the left brain. In other words, they create our interpretation of reality, the world as we know and understand it. That worldview dominates in humans, but I doubt that my dog has such a sophisticated interpretation. Instead, other creatures probably have a more unfiltered, right brain view of the world around them.

Yet another aspect of creation is that *God* created people with *two inclinations* in their hearts, the *inclination toward good* and the *inclination toward evil*. The former is called the *yetzer hatov* and the latter is called the *yetzer hara*. This doctrine in rabbinic literature is justified by *Genesis 2:7* where it says, “*Then the Lord God formed man.*” The word for *formed* in Hebrew is *vayyitzer*, and it is spelled in this verse with two consecutive occurrences of the letter *yud*. This repetition of *yud* is then taken as symbolic of the *two inclinations* that man is created with.

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“*VAYYITZER: two formations, the good and the evil.*”
(*Genesis Rabbah XIV:4*)

THE DOWNSIDE TO CREATION

On the one hand, the creation of the world seems like a good thing, and the rabbis wrote that *God* even intended for humans to be partners with Him and to be participants in the creative process.

“R. Samuel b. Ammi said: From the beginning of the world's creation the Holy One, blessed be He, longed to enter into partnership with the mortals.”
(Genesis Rabbah III:9)

In particular, it is important to realize that we are supposed to engage in creation just as *God* does. According to the ancient rabbis, *God* left parts of the creation undone so that we could complete it.

“Whatever was created in the first six days requires further preparation, e.g., mustard needs sweetening, vetches need sweetening, wheat needs grinding, and man too needs to be finished off.”
(Genesis Rabbah XI:6)

So the upside of this world is that we get to be partners and co-creators with *God*. Nonetheless, the rabbis noted that at the end of the second day of creation, *God* fails to say, “It is good.”

The rabbis go on to say that as wonderful as creation is, it was also brought about through a process of division and separation from absolute Unity. This “expulsion” from oneness is the downside.

“Why is ‘that it was good’ not written in connection with the second day? ... R. Hanina said: Because in it schism was created, [as it is written,] AND LET IT DIVIDE THE WATERS. R. Tabyomi said: If because of a division made for the greater stability and orderliness of the world, ‘for it was good’ is not written in connection with that day, then how much the more should this apply to a division which leads to its confusion!”

(Genesis Rabbah IV:6)

THE FIVE SOULS

An interesting doctrine in *Kabbalah* that originates in earlier rabbinical literature is that we have more than one soul. The *Zohar* identifies three souls, and it says that we can also think of them as different aspects of one soul. Later *Kabbalah*, though, extends the number back up to five.

This doctrine has its origin, though, in a passage from *Genesis Rabbah* that states that there are five names for the soul.

“THE BREATH OF (NISMATH) LIFE. It has five names: nefesh, neshamah, hayyah, ruah, yehidah. Nefesh is the blood: For the blood is the nefesh (life, Deuteronomy 12:23). Ruah: this is so called because it ascends and descends: thus it is written, Who knoweth the ruah (spirit) of man whether it goes upwards, and the ruah of the beast whether it goes downward to the earth (Ecclesiastes 3:21)? Neshamah is the breath; as people say, His breathing is good. Hayyah (living) because all the limbs are mortal, whereas this is immortal in the body. Yechidah (unique): because all the limbs are duplicated, whereas this is unique in the body.”
(*Genesis Rabbah XIV:9*)

The first soul is the *nefesh*. This is the lowest level that everyone is born with and the soul that keeps us alive. However, the main concern of the *nefesh* is itself. It is like a little kid that is always saying me, me, me! It's selfish, selfish, selfish! As it says in *Genesis 8:21*, *“Man’s heart is evil from his youth.”*

The second soul is the *ruach*. I think of it as a moral soul that enters us around the age of responsibility (puberty). Suddenly, we can understand the difference between right and wrong, and we can be held accountable for our actions. Additionally, we begin to become more aware of others and we develop *rachamim*, compassion, for other living beings.

The third soul is the *neshamah*, and it is that part of us that is always spiritually connected. Some people are able to really embrace their *neshamah* and incorporate it into their lives, but there are probably many more that live their lives at a much lower level of enlightenment.

The last two souls are so big that they cannot be contained within the body. The *chayah* is the living soul, and it represents an even higher state of spiritual evolution than the *neshamah*. It can surround our physical being, but it can't be contained within it. As I often say, blessed are those who can reach this level of understanding and have communication with this very evolved part of one's being! And finally, the last soul is the *yechidah*. This is the part of us that is always connected with *God* and that has never left that original unity.

WHITE FIRE AND BLACK FIRE

Another piece of ancient rabbinic text that has become part of modern Jewish folklore is that the *Torah* is comprised of *black fire* written on *white fire*. To some, in modern times, this is also a message that the silent, unmanifest part of reality (the *white fire*) is just as important as the more visible parts of reality (the *black fire*).

However, in more ancient times it appears that this doctrine was developed just to explain a piece of text in *Deuteronomy* where it says, “*From His right hand went a fiery law for them.*”

“R. Simeon b. Lakish said: The scroll which God gave to Moses was of white fire and its writing of black fire. It was itself fire and it was hewn out of fire and completely formed of fire and given in fire, as it says, At His right hand was a fiery law unto them (Deuteronomy 33:2).”
(Song of Songs Rabbah V:15)

“Resh Lakish said: When Moses wrote the law he acquired a lustrous appearance. How did this come about? Resh Lakish said: The scroll that was given to Moses was made of a parchment of white fire, and was written upon with black fire and sealed with fire and was swathed with bands of fire, and whilst he was writing it he dried his pen on his hair, and as a result he acquired a lustrous appearance.”

(Deuteronomy Rabbah III:12)

JUSTICE AND MERCY

Yet another ancient doctrine that has been incorporated into both the folklore of mainstream Judaism and *Kabbalah* is that the name *Elohim* (*God*) represents *God's* justice while the name *Adonai* (*Lord*) represents *God's* attribute of mercy. This is based upon passages where *God* is dispensing justice while being referred to as *Elohim* and other passages where *God* is being merciful and is addressed as *Adonai*.

“Wherever the Tetragrammaton (Lord/Adonai) is employed it connotes the Attribute of Mercy, as in the verse, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious (Exodus 34:6), ... Wherever Elohim (God) is employed it connotes the Attribute of Judgment: Thus: Thou shalt not revile Elohim- God (Exodus 22:27); the cause of both parties shall come before Elohim-God (Exodus 22:8).”

(Genesis Rabbah 33:3)

*“When I am judging created beings, I am called Elohim, ... When I am merciful towards My world, I am called "Adonai", for "Adonai" refers to the Attribute of Mercy, as it is said: The Lord, the Lord (Adonai, Adonai), God, merciful and gracious (Exodus 34:6).”
(Exodus Rabbah III:6)*

*“For this reason did the Attribute of Justice seek to attack. Moses, as it says: And Elohim spoke unto Moses (Exodus 6:2). But when God reflected that Moses only spoke thus because of Israel's suffering, He retracted and dealt with him according to the Attribute of Mercy, as it says: And he said unto him: I am Adonai (Exodus 6:2).”
(Exodus Rabbah VI:1)*

“Said the Holy One, blessed be He: ' If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, its sins will be great; on the basis of judgment alone, the world cannot exist. Hence I will create it on the basis of judgment and of mercy, and may it then stand!’ Hence the expression, ' THE LORD GOD (Adonai Elohim) (Genesis 2:4).” (Genesis Rabbah XII:15)

THE HIDDEN RIGHTEOUS ONES

You might recall from *Genesis* the story of how *Abraham* argued with *God* over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. As part of his argument, he claimed that if there are even a few righteous men left in the town, then the whole place must be spared for their sake. And *God* agreed. This story has led to the belief that in order for the world to exist, there have to be a minimum number of righteous people on the planet at all times.

This idea is really not all that farfetched when you think about all the great advances that have been made by just a handful of people. For instance, calculus was discovered independently by just two people, *Newton* and *Leibniz*. Relativity was discovered by one person, *Einstein*. And all the great religions of the world were started by just a very few great individuals. Thus, much of what the rest of us enjoy is due to the efforts and breakthroughs of a very small portion of humanity, and, hence, we depend upon that small proportion for many of our great leaps forward.

In *Proverbs* we read that *the righteous is an everlasting foundation*, and in the *Talmud* the rabbis conclude that a minimum of thirty-six righteous individuals are the foundation of the world. These are known in Hebrew as the *lamed-vav tzaddikim* or the *tzaddikim nistarim*, the hidden thirty-six righteous ones. As a consequence of a derivation found in the *Talmud*, the number thirty-six is today a symbol for righteousness.

*“The righteous is an everlasting foundation.”
(Proverbs 10:25)*

*“The world never has less than thirty-six righteous men who are vouchsafed a sight of the Shechinah every day, for it is said (Isaiah 30:18), Happy are they that wait ‘lo’ (for Him) and the numerical value of ‘lo’ (lamed-vav) is thirty-six.”
(B. Sukkah 45b)*

LIKE WATER, LIKE TORAH

One metaphor that everyone should know is that water is a symbol for *Torah*. You could base this connection on a passage in *Deuteronomy* where it says that “*My doctrine shall drop like rain,*” but instead the prooftext usually given is from *Isaiah 55* where it says, “*Let all who are thirsty come and drink.*” I used to wonder why the rabbis chose the proof passage from *Isaiah* rather than *Deuteronomy*, but then it occurred to me that, as is often the case when the rabbis quote a single verse, they really want you to read the whole chapter. It’s just like we might quote the date of some ominous event, and that is enough to invoke all the critical things that happened at that time. In this case, all of *Isaiah 55* is pretty phenomenal and definitely a must read!

This is one of those symbols that has been carried further into current Judaism, and in the *Midrash Rabbah* collection they even have a very wonderful discourse on all the many ways in which *Torah* is like water.

“My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass.”

(Deuteronomy 32:2)

“Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters.”

(Isaiah 55:1)

“The words of the Torah are compared to water, to wine, to oil, to honey, and to milk. To water: Ho everyone that thirsteth come ye for water (Isaiah 55:1). Just as water stretches from one end of the world to the other, as it says, To him that spread forth the earth above the waters (Psalm 136:6), so the Torah goes from one end of the world to the other, as it says, The measure thereof is longer than the earth (Job 11:9). Just as water is a source of life for the world, as it says, A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters (Song of Songs 4:15), so the Torah is a source of life for the world, as it says, For they are life unto those that find them and health to all their flesh (Proverbs 4:22); and it is also written, Come ye buy and eat (Isaiah 55:1)

Just as water is from heaven, as it says, At the sound of His giving, a multitude of waters in the heavens (Jerimiah 10:13), so the Torah is from heaven, as it says, I have talked with you from heaven (Exodus 20:19). Just as [the downpour of] water is accompanied by loud thunderings, as it says, the voice of the Lord is upon the waters (Psalm 29:3), so the Torah was given with loud thunderings, as it says, And it came to pass on the third day when it was morning that there were thunders and lightnings (Exodus 19:16). Just as water restores the soul, as it says, But God cleaved the hollow place which was in Lehi and there came water thereout; and when he had drunk... he revived (Judges 15:19), so does the Torah, as it says, The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul (Psalm 19:8).

Just as water purifies man from ritual uncleanness, as it says, And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean (Ezekiel 36:25), So the Torah cleanses an unclean man of his uncleanness, as it says, The words of the Lord are pure words (Psalm 12:7). Just as water cleanses the body, as it says, He shall bathe himself in water (Leviticus 17:15), so the Torah cleanses the body, as it says, Thy word is purifying to the uttermost (Psalm 119:140). Just as water covers the nakedness of the sea, as it says, As the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11: 9), so the Torah covers the nakedness of Israel, as it says, Love covereth all transgressions (Proverbs 10:12).

Just as rain water comes down in drops and forms rivers, so with the Torah; a man learns two halachahs today and two tomorrow, until he becomes like a flowing stream. Just as water has no taste unless one is thirsty, so the Torah has no taste unless one labors at it. Just as water leaves a high place and flows to a low one, so the Torah leaves one whose spirit is proud and cleaves to one whose spirit is lowly. Just as water does not keep well in a vessel of silver or gold but in the commonest of vessels, so the Torah resides only in one who makes himself like a vessel of earthenware. Just as with water a great man is not ashamed to say to a lowly man, ' Give me a drink of water,' so with the words of the Torah, a great scholar must not be ashamed to say to a lesser one, 'Teach me one chapter, or one statement, or one verse, or even one letter.'

Just as with water, if one does not know how to swim in it, he will be drowned, so with the words of the Torah, if one does not know how to thread his way in them and to instruct in accordance with them, he will ultimately come to grief. Said R. Hanina of Gesarea: Seeing that water is conducted not only to gardens and orchards, but also to baths and privies, am I to say that it is the same with the words of the Torah? Not so, since it says, For the ways of the Lord are right R. Hama b. 'Ukba said: Just as water makes plants grow, so the words of the Torah nurture everyone who labors over them as they require."

(Song of Songs Rabbah I:19)

SEVENTY INTERPRETATIONS

Another item that everyone who studies *Torah* should be aware of is that there are meant to be multiple interpretations for every passage in *Torah*, more specifically, seventy interpretations. There are at least two ways in which this number is derived. One is from a passage in *Jeremiah* that says that the word of *God* is like a hammer that splinters a rock into several pieces. From this, the *Talmud* concludes that every word that came from *God* was split up into seventy languages for the seventy nations that were felt to exist at that time. This, of course, is just a stone's throw (no pun intended) from saying that there are seventy interpretations of every passage in the *Torah*.

This doctrine is finally made more specific in the *Midrash Rabbah* where *Torah* is first likened to *wine*, and since the numerical value of the Hebrew word for *wine* is seventy, the final conclusion is that every verse in *Torah* has seventy meanings.

“Is not my word like a fire? says the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?”
(*Jeremiah 23:27*)

“The School of R. Ishmael taught: And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces., just as a hammer is divided into many sparks, so every single word that went forth from the Holy One, blessed be He, split up into seventy languages.”
(*B. Shabbat 88b*)

“ONE SILVER BASIN (MIZRAK) was brought as a symbol of the Torah which has been likened to wine; as it says, And drink of the wine which have mingled (Proverbs 9:5).¹ Now because it is customary to drink wine in a mizrak, as you may gather from the text, That drink wine in bowls--mizreke (Amos 6:6), he on that account brought a MIZRAK OF SEVENTY SHEKELS, AFTER THE SHEKEL OF THE SANCTUARY (Numbers 7:19). Why? As the numerical value of yayin (wine) is seventy, so there are seventy modes of expounding the Torah. (Numbers Rabbah 13:15-16)

GOD CAN AND CAN'T BE KNOWN

Paradoxically, in the *Bible* we find *God* presented both as a being that is like us and as a being that is totally different from us and beyond our comprehension. Probably most familiar is the statement in *Genesis* that we are made in the image of *God*. Also, familiar is the opening of the *Holiness Code* in *Leviticus* where it says that we shall be holy because *God* is holy. Both of these passages point to a similarity between ourselves and *God*.

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female He created them.”
(Genesis 1:26-27)

“For I am the Lord your God; you shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy.”
(Leviticus 11:44)

However, the other side of the coin is that we are not the same as *God* and we can never fully understand what *God* is. Again, in *Genesis*, *God* tells *Moses* that no one can see the face of *God*, and, thus, *God* will show *Moses* his backside as he passes. This has been interpreted as meaning that while we cannot see *God*; we can see the effects of *God's* existence.

This is reminiscent of the difficulty that occurs in trying to understand our conscious awareness. In many ways both the body and the mind appear to be machines, and we can reduce functionality by damaging any part of the machine we wish. However, we have not, yet, been able to explain how conscious awareness can arise from a machine. Also, scientists have never been able to isolate consciousness to a single part of the brain, and while we have never been able to observe consciousness directly in same way that we look at, for example, a chair, we, nonetheless, experience the effects of our consciousness awareness at every single moment of our lives.

In *Isaiah* we are told more explicitly that *God's* thoughts are not our thoughts and *God's* ways are not our ways. Similarly, in *Job*, *God* highlights in a very dramatic discourse that there are fundamental differences between *God* and *Job*. These passages speak of our inability to ever fully comprehend of *God*. This view is highlighted further in *Genesis Rabbah* where *Rav Huna* tells us that all we can comprehend are but parts of *God*; never the entire thing. And this is a motif that is further elaborated upon in the *Zohar*. However, as with many *Kabbalistic* concepts, its origin is found in earlier *Biblical* and rabbinic literature.

“You can not see my face; for no man shall see me and live. And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and you shall stand upon a rock; And it shall come to pass, while my glory passes by, that I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with my hand while I pass by; And I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

(Exodus 33:20-23)

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and returns not there, but waters the earth, and makes it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater; So shall my word be that goes out of my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

(Isaiah 55:8-11)

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have understanding. Who determined its measures, do you know? Or who has stretched the line upon it? Upon what are its foundations fastened? Or who laid its corner stone, When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth, as if it had issued from the womb, When I made the cloud its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, And prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors.”

(Job 38:4-10)

“Lo, these are but parts of His ways; and what blemish of aught is heard of Him! But the thunder of His mighty deeds who can understand (Job 26:14)?” Rav Huna said: “Whatever things you see are but parts of the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says: ‘Lo, these are but parts of His ways.’”
(Genesis Rabbah XII:1)

As a final note, I've never been fully comfortable with the term *God* for the very reason that *God* is incomprehensible, and, yet, my very use of the term suggests it is something that I can, indeed, comprehend. Thus, I often prefer somewhat vaguer and less anthropomorphic terms for *God* such as the *Life of the Worlds*, a term used by *Rav Huna* that is also found in the *Sefer Yetzilah*.