



***Authentic Kabbalah - Sephardic Studies
Benei Noah Studies - Anti-Missionary/Anti-Cult Materials***

May 9, 2002; Iyar 27 5762

In Honor of My Father On his 25th Yahrtzeit

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It is one of the most unfortunate human shortcomings that we do not recognize the most important and special moments of our lives as they are happening. Life moves forward with blinding swiftness. Loved ones can come into and out of our lives with a blink of an eye. How many of us can recognize one who is destined to become a life long friend/partner on first sight? How many of us recognize the last time that we see a loved one before he/she suddenly dies? When faced with life's sudden occurrences and the benefits and losses they provide, we more than not do not know how to react, what to say and how to feel.

Our Sages of blessed memory have taught us, "who is wise, one who has foresight to see what is coming." If we could only recognize the precious moments of our lives as they happen, we would appreciate them so much more. Yet, alas, we lack this foresight. We react to our present circumstances based upon our immediate surroundings. We always base our present behavior upon our past. We do not have the ability to see the future. For example, if we were cheated in the past, we act with suspicion in the present. Yet, the one whom we deal with in the present can be the most honest of persons and not worthy of our suspicions. Alas, our present suspicions can spoil what could become the best relationship in our lives. How are we to know? Our Sages answer us; we are to acquire wisdom. With wisdom, we can see the unseeable and perceive the special moments as they happen.

So, what stops us from growing wise? Most likely, the same thing that stops us from going to a gym or health club to get healthy. We are either lazy or claim that we are too busy. In other words, life is passing by around us too fast for us to slow down and pay attention to the real important things.

Physical and mental health are two by-products that one achieves when one is truly in full compliance with all the mitzvot. While the mitzvot of Talmud Torah, Kashrut, Shabat, and Tefilah are the foundations of a Torah life; there are still other mitzvot of the Torah that one need perform.

If one observes the mitzvah to “safeguard our souls,” one would then not overeat and would exercise daily to maintain optimum health and strength. This is not simply good advice; this is the Halakha as outlined by RaMBaM in his Hilkhot Deot. Unfortunately, these Halakhot are not taught in the yeshivas today alongside the Mishneh Berurah or the Ben Ish Hai. And people often ask me why there are so many sick people and so much disease in the frum (religious) communities!

Hillel so wisely said, “if I am not for myself, who will be?” If we do not take care of ourselves, who else will? Physical and mental health are often tied together. When one is physically strong, one’s mind can be clear and function with relatively little stress. However, when the physical body is weak, imbalanced, and unhealthy, this takes a toll on the mind. Weakness and ill health weigh down the mind, disabling it from the highest levels of clear and lucid thinking.

It is no wonder then that we lack wisdom? We do not have clear enough minds to perceive matters too far beyond the “ends of our noses.” We are all too often all too busy. Our lives slip by and years are gone, wasted, before we even notice. What a shame that we do not adhere to the advice of our holy Sages and learn to appreciate all the good things in life that G-d gives us every day.

Our Sages have taught that, “the safeguard to wisdom is silence.” Silence is one of those rare elements that not many of us have “time” to enjoy. How can any of us even cultivate an appreciation of silence, all the more so for the wisdom it cultivates when we are constantly bombarded by TVs, radios, advertisements and all other types of intruding noises continuously attacking all of our physical senses?

These intrusions have even successfully invaded the ultra-Orthodox communities. For although most ultra-Orthodox do not watch TV or movies, they still nonetheless are exposed to the modern day “noises” in all too many other forms. Indeed, the reason why the ultra-Orthodox cling so vehemently to the yeshiva world lifestyle is specifically because it provides some sort of insulation from the encroaching “noises” of the secular world. This in itself is a good thing and should be applauded by all. However, even this attempt at isolation comes at a price.

Cutting out the “noises” in life can never be limited to merely turning off outside external things. Noises also come from within us, from our oldest inner neighbor, the Yetzer HaRa (evil inclination). This old “busy-body” wants to keep us so busy and occupied that we fail to recognize the ravages that it is doing to our minds and souls.

Turning off a TV is relatively easy. Turning off the evil Yetzer is much harder to do. Yet, if we fail to contain the evil Yetzer and ignore its growth, then like a cancer, it will slowly overtake us. In the end, all that will be left will be an outwardly observant person, with a lousy temperament, bad midot (personality traits), and ill health. Thus, while such a person looks frum (religious) on the outside, his/her heart and soul is far away from G-d.

Ask yourselves a question. Would you perform the mitzvot if you were not commanded by G-d to do so? Would you pray three times a day if it were not required? Let me ask you this. Although you do pray three prayers a day as required by Halakha, do you pray with Kavanah (concentration/devotion)? In other words, are you really having a conversation with G-d? Are you really talking to Him? Are you really aware of His Presence? I recently asked a class of mine these questions and was disappointed (although not surprised) by the answers.

Yes, inner silence leads to wisdom. Wisdom is the recognition of the truly important times and things in life, in their moment, when they are happening. In essence, wisdom is rather a simple, down to earth thing, although on the Sefirotic Tree of Life, it is the second highest sefirah. Now, that I have mentioned a Kabbalah concept let me address some points about Kabbalah study.

For over a decade I have been approached by all kinds of students seeking direction in kosher Kabbalah. I have had midnight visits from Rabbis from Israel seeking my direction and solicitations from non-religious Jews and even from non-Jews. In others words, I have "seen them all."

There are very clear and defined Halakhot about who can study Kabbalah. These are not to be found in any mystical textbook, they are found in the Shulkhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, Hilkhot Talmud Torah (246:7). One of the prerequisites for accepting a student into any type of Torah study is that they have good midot (personality traits). In others words, BEFORE you can be accepted as a student of Torah ANYWHERE you must first be a "mensch" (a good person).

All too many times I am inundated with students who want to learn about the supernal, invisible worlds above us, or about what the future holds. This type of student will not be blessed by Kabbalah study. A Torah life does not have us focus upon what is above or what is beyond. The Torah that G-d gave Moshe Rabbeynu on Mt. Sinai never mentions anything about supernal worlds or the life here after. The reason for this omission is clear and evident. Torah wants us to focus on the here and now. Torah wants us to learn to keep our eyes focused on where we are at and not over the horizon looking away from the present moment.

This lesson is so important that our Sages forbade one from studying about the other worlds until they grasped a good sense of reality about this world in which we live. This is why Talmud study must always precede the study of Kabbalah. The lesson is simple: learn to live here, before you begin to explore "over there."

Alas, far too many aspiring students reject this message. They seek the sweetness and intoxication of mysticism, all the while ignoring the stable diet of practical living that keeps them grounded to this earth. Far too often this type of individual becomes so “heavenly minded” that they become no earthly good.

When all is said and done, a true student of Kabbalah (and of Torah in general) is one who is quiet on the inside and minimizes intruding noises from the outside. A true student slows down and shuts ups. He/she does not let life run by. He/she does not watch life as a bystander. Such a one participates in life, enjoys the precious moments for what they are and is never too busy to stop what he/she is doing to take that moment and to thank G-d for such a precious opportunity. In this way all the mitzvot that one performs take on the meanings that they were supposed to. One’s religious life becomes what it is supposed to be: a joy and a blessing from G-d.

My father was 56 years old when a sudden heart attack ended his life. All his life, he did his best to take care of us, his family. He was there for us when we needed him, whether we liked it or not. He worked hard and long, but he never missed having dinner with the family and he never was too busy to take us all on a Sunday outing. My father, upon him be peace, did not watch his diet like he should have. This contributed to his early passing.

It has been now 25 years since he left us and now, as a father myself, I recognize his wisdom, and appreciate ever so much his sacrifices. When my father died, I was too young to have appreciated what he taught me. Yet, you my readers have benefited from the lessons he has instilled in my heart. For although I no longer hear his voice in my ears anymore, I still remember the man he was. Granted my father was not perfect. I have never met the perfect man. However, one thing my father was, he was a mensch! He was a good husband to my mother and a good father to my siblings and me. That was the greatest inheritance that he left us.

Looking back over the years, I am sorry that my father never lived to see me become a Rabbi, he never met my wife, and he never saw his grandchildren. I wonder how things might have been different if he had lived. Nevertheless, life, death, and the paths all men must walk are in the hands of our Creator. He has taught us how to live in this world. For by perfecting our experience of this world do we properly prepare ourselves for the World to Come.

I still see all too many members of our frum community dying at young ages because of a lack of wisdom. Poor wisdom leads to poor health. Being too busy leads to poor wisdom.

Therefore, in conclusion, slow down; enjoy the good things in life that G-d has blessed you with. Don’t study a full “Daf-a-day” of Gemara if it is too much for you. Slow down, learn it slower. You are not in a race to finish. If you slow down and spend more time IN your studies instead of ON them, you will find that you will enjoy them ever so more.

Spend more time with your loved ones. For when G-d blesses you with old age you will not sit around and reminisce about this or that business deal. You will sit and remember the good times with family and friends. In Heaven, you will not be rewarded for how successful you were in business; you will be judged how successful you were in life. Heaven does not care how many dollars you have, but rather how many mitzvot you have.

Are you a mensch? If not, how then can you stand before G-d? How can you daven and talk to G-d when all you are doing is merely reciting words? How do you expect G-d to hear and answer your prayers, when you are barely praying?

When one practices silencing the evil Yetzer within himself, wisdom develops consequently. The evil Yetzer is silenced when one guards one's health and pays attention to one's heart. Love of HaShem, love of Torah, love of mitzvot and love of family all have one common ingredient, and that is love. Love, in Hebrew is Ahava, numerically equal to 13, the number of Ehad (one). Thus, one who expresses the love of HaShem proclaims his Unity.

HaShem gave us other people in our lives, with all their problems and demands, to teach us to be patient and long suffering. As HaShem is patient and loving with us, so must we be loving and patient with others.

Think about this, would you want HaShem to neglect you the way you sometimes neglect others? If not, then contemplate that the next time your spouse or children wants some of your time just for the sake of being with you. Never be too busy for members of your own household. Do not use Torah as an excuse to be absent as a person. At the same time, do not use your pursuit of shalom bayit as an excuse to not study Torah. There is a balance to all things. Seek it out. For if you search for it, it will find you, even as the pasuk says, "surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me."

To sum up all, be a mensch, a decent and good person. Do all the mitzvot that you can, not just some of them. Make sure your heart and your actions are one and not split. Serve HaShem, love Him, love your family, and love Klal Yisrael. This is what a mensch does. Study Torah for the sake of understanding it, not just to cover as much as you can in as little time possible. When your heart is right with HaShem, you will feel it, and others will see it in you. Remember the K.I.S.S. rule – keep it simple, son.

In honor of Aharon ben Hayim ben Shmuel ben Atar, my father, on this his 25th yahrtzeit. May his memory continue to be a blessing.