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## *FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION*

### **RAV KOOK'S OROT HA-TORAH**

**T**he summer of 1940, as the scourge of Nazism devoured wide swaths of Europe, was a grim time for Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the son of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Although he lived in Jerusalem, R. Zvi Yehuda was not indifferent to what was happening in Europe. The world of European Jewry was a world that he knew well and loved.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the vision of Israel's national rebirth, once so bright, was undergoing troubled times. The British White Paper of 1939 asserted that the Balfour Declaration's goal to establish a national home for the Jewish people had been accomplished. Just as the Nazis were preparing to eradicate the Jewish people, the British government established a five-year restriction on Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine.

And there were more personal reasons for discontent. The 50-year-old scholar deeply missed his father, who had passed away five years earlier. Mercaz HaRav, the Jerusalem yeshiva his father had founded, was still functioning, but barely. With few students and a precarious financial situation, it was a far cry from Rav Kook's vision of a "Central Universal Yeshiva," an elite institution of Torah scholarship that would attract top students and scholars from around the world. And the political movement which both father and son had invested years trying to establish – Degel Yerushalayim, a Zionist alternative to Agudat Yisrael – was long forgotten.

<sup>1</sup> R. Zvi Yehuda, born in Lithuania, lived in Latvia until the age of 13, when he immigrated to Jaffa with his family in 1904. For a brief period of time prior to World War I, he studied and taught in Halberstadt, Germany. R. Zvi Yehuda spent the war in Germany and Switzerland. In 1921-1922, at his father's behest, R. Zvi Yehuda travelled extensively throughout Eastern Europe, speaking publicly and meeting with rabbinical and Hasidic leaders in order to promote Degel Yerushalayim.

In the years following his father's death in 1935, R. Zvi Yehuda worked intensively to publish his father's halakhic works.<sup>2</sup> But with the deepening tragedy of world events, R. Zvi Yehuda took a leaf out of his father's book. It was a time to temporarily set aside halakhic study and focus on the inner aspects (*penimiut*) of Torah. What resulted was the slim yet significant work, *Orot ha-Torah*, wherein R. Zvi Yehuda noted:

[This book] makes its appearance at this time, our end of days. . . in the midst of terrifying persecutions that have currently descended to the world on Israel's account, with the destruction of its dispersed flocks and the uprooting of its houses of study and assembly places there.<sup>3</sup>

R. Zvi Yehuda quoted his father's comments in *Reish Millin*, a mystical tract on the significance of the Hebrew alphabet, which Rav Kook composed in 1917 while stranded in London during the upheavals of World War I:

In order to maintain our spiritual status quo at a time when life has descended to pits teeming with the darkness of evil and ruin, the time has arrived for a burning thirst for hidden content, for inner perceptions soaring above and beyond life's revealed surface, to places where the hand of worldly troubles cannot sully. From this life-source [of esoteric content], we are able to "draw water with joy" and moisten the dry bones of the revealed spiritual realm [of conventional Torah study in halakha and Talmud], which stands dumbfounded when facing the scuffle of confused life.

In his preface, R. Zvi Yehuda openly states that he seeks to replicate the success of Rav Kook's most popular work, *Orot ha-Teshuva*.

Continuing the style and methodology of *Orot ha-Teshuva*, I have culled these selections from the treasures of his lights, still in manuscript. I have organized them in chapters by subject matter and assigned chapter titles as befits the texts themselves.

R. Zvi Yehuda culled nearly half of the material in *Orot ha-Torah* from entries that his father penned in the first three volumes of his spiritual diaries, known collectively as *Shemona Kevatzim*. Rav Kook wrote those three notebooks during the decade that he served as chief rabbi of Jaffa,

<sup>2</sup> *Mishpat Kohen* and *Ezrat Kohen* were published in 1937, *Orah Mishpat* in 1939, and *Da'at Kohen* in 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Preface to *Orot ha-Torah*, dated 1 Av 5700 (August 5, 1940).

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after making aliyah in 1904.<sup>4</sup> The final chapter, characterized by a more pragmatic tone, consists of selections from Rav Kook's letters.<sup>5</sup>

In *Orot ha-Torah* Rav Kook grapples with a number of pressing issues regarding Torah study, topics that are particularly relevant in our own day. In what way is Torah study a spiritual act? How does this intellectual activity refine and uplift one's character? What does it mean to study "*Torah lishmah*" (Torah for its own sake)? What is the purest motivation for studying Torah? How should a student relate to the study of seemingly endless details of halakha? How does Torah study express our connection to the Jewish people? How does it express one's individual interests and talents?

Like much of Rav Kook's writings, *Orot ha-Torah* also reflects on the connection between Torah and Israel on the national level: How does the state of Torah study – which areas of Torah are emphasized, and which are downplayed – parallel the state of the Jewish people during different stages of its history? How can our Torah study reflect Israel's current national renaissance and rebirth? What are the special characteristics of the Torah of *Eretz Yisrael*?

Rav Kook's ideas are not limited to abstract principles and lofty aspirations. They also include – especially in chapters 6, 9, and 14 – practical guidance. They contend with subjects such as: How does one become a Torah scholar? What are the correct methodologies for studying Gemara and Aggada? What is the correct balance between Talmudic studies and other realms of Torah? In which fields of Torah should one focus? Should we also study the philosophical works of non-Jewish authors? Who should study Kabbala and mystical works?

<sup>4</sup> Comparing sections found in both *Orot ha-Torah* and *Shemona Kevatzim*, we can determine that about 40% of the book comes from the first three notebooks, written in the period that Rav Kook served as rabbi of Jaffa (1904-1914). Curiously, it appears that R. Zvi Yehuda did not make use of any selections from the last five notebooks. This is not because those later volumes lacked relevant material. Most likely, R. Zvi Yehuda believed he had gathered enough material and felt compelled to publish what he had already selected and organized. As he noted in his preface, "Due to external factors, I am unable at this time to properly organize all of my father's writings that relate to this subject."

<sup>5</sup> R. Zvi Yehuda wrote in his preface that "to fortify Torah matters and provide practical guidance for Torah study, I have included at the end of this tract ten short paragraphs culled from letters not yet published." All but the last two paragraphs were subsequently published in *Iggerot ha-Re'iya* (six paragraphs in Volume 1, and two paragraphs in Volume 4). The last two paragraphs in the chapter appear to be a public message that Rav Kook publicized for the students of Mercaz HaRav at the start of an academic year in Elul.

### *Translating Orot ha-Torah*

Unlike other works of Rav Kook, such as *Orot* and especially *Orot ha-Teshuva*, we have not yet merited a complete English translation to *Orot ha-Torah*.<sup>6</sup>

As anyone who has attempted to translate Rav Kook's writings knows, it is not a task for the faint-hearted. Besides the problem of correctly understanding the author's intent in every phrase, there is the fundamental challenge in such a work: how to create a translation that is both accurate and readable, one that is faithful to the original text yet accessible to the average reader?

Regarding the former problem, there are fortunately a number of Hebrew commentaries to *Orot ha-Torah*. Since the volume deals with the importance of Torah study, it is naturally a popular text for lecturers in Religious Zionist yeshivot, seminaries, and *mehinot*.<sup>7</sup> Several excellent commentaries, based on the lectures of prominent Israeli rabbis, are available. Notable among these are the commentary by R. Haggai Lundin (*Rav Kook ha-Mevu'ar* series, published by Yediot Sefarim, 2016), and the published lectures of R. Eliezer Castiel, *Be-Nefesh ha-Torah*, 3 vols. (Eli, 2014).

In the following selections from *Orot ha-Torah*, I navigate the second challenge by presenting a literal translation, mediated through various aids to the reader and students of the text. Among these I have annotated the passages with footnotes, especially for referencing the sources on which Rav Kook was drawing. I have also broken up long sentences and paragraphs into smaller units, and added short introductions before each chapter as well as section titles.<sup>8</sup> Most significantly, I have added explanatory phrases into the text. To differentiate between this interpolated material and Rav Kook's own words, the latter are printed in bold.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Betzalel Naor has posted translations of selected passages from *Orot ha-Torah* on his website ([orot.com/lights-of-torah](http://orot.com/lights-of-torah)). *The Spiritual Revolution of Rav Kook* by Rabbi Ari Ze'ev Schwartz also includes a number of loosely translated selections. To the best of my knowledge, the only complete translation of *Orot ha-Torah* is Dr. Timotheus Ardt's German edition, *Die Lichten der Tora* (Berlin, 1995). Arndt, a Jewish Studies researcher at the University of Leipzig, recounted how his father, a former Nazi, repented at the end of the war and atoned for the rest of his life by assisting the Jewish community and promoting Jewish-Christian understanding.

<sup>7</sup> My own introduction to Rav Kook's writings was Rabbi Shlomo Aviner's weekly lecture on *Orot ha-Torah* at Mercaz HaRav.

<sup>8</sup> Rav Kook's disciple, the *Nazir* Rabbi David Cohen, inserted section titles to assist the reader when publishing *Orot ha-Kodesh* (see his preface to volume 3). The chapter titles in works published by R. Zvi Yehuda, including *Orot ha-Torah*, were inserted by him, as acknowledged in his preface.

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What follows are translations of chapters 6 and 14, chosen since they deal with a variety of topics and are of a more practical nature.

Together with the growing challenges of an open and global world, we live at a time when a record number of people are studying Torah. A well-executed translation of *Orot ha-Torah* will make Rav Kook's important contributions to the topic of Torah study accessible to English-speaking Torah students, providing direction and motivation so needed in our generation.



### Chapter 6: Torah Study

*This chapter addresses several topics: the connection between Torah and our spiritual and moral state (1 – 6); the relationship between Torah and prayer (8); the interplay between Torah and our ties to the Jewish people (10 – 13); the relationship between the Torah's ideals and its practical details (7, 9, 14, 15); and the value of Torah study, even when not fully understood (16).*

#### 1. *What is Special about Torah Study?*

**When we study Torah in holiness, we refine both our intellect and our desires. Divine illumination emanates from the soul's inner essence and permeates its entire being. Spiritual life spreads to all parts of our essence, like blood coursing to all parts of the body. Torah study is not just an intellectual pursuit. It fully engages all aspects of our soul in our aspirations for meaning and holiness.**

**Secular study of any worldly discipline, on the other hand, only vivifies the particular area of its focus. This distinction is the crux of the quantitative difference between holy and secular studies – besides the infinitely greater *qualitative* difference between them.**

#### 2. *Teshuva Enhances Torah Study*

**According to the clarity of one's penitence before Torah study, one's grasp of Torah becomes clearer. The intellect is elevated on the basis of the will's elevation, thus it acquires greater clarity according to the clarity of the will.** The process of *teshuva* refines our desires and elevates our will. This enables us to better identify with the Torah's moral and spiritual objectives.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This passage also appears in *Orot ha-Teshuva* 14:27. Cf. *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* 4:7: "It is proper to prepare yourself each time before you begin to study Torah. You should briefly contemplate with your Maker, in purity of heart and piety, and purify

### 3. Torah Study Based on Lofty Teshuva

**Elevated penitence, which ensues from great love and clear awareness—** a high-level *teshuva* that is based on love for God and His Torah<sup>10</sup>**—raises up all the content of Torah study to a level of prolific creativity that surpasses that of any study learned only on its own basis.** Studying Torah, not as a detached intellectual pursuit, but in the context of love for God and discovering His will in the world, stimulates an unequalled level of understanding and intellectual creativity.

### 4. Torah Study of the Righteous

**When an individual ascends to lofty ideas and succeeds, in the depths of his spirit, to align his conduct accordingly, then he has reached the very root of Torah in its highest form. This is because the goal of Torah is to elevate the world to its highest destined state.**

**As a result, every detail of Torah that he learns will not be new to him. On the contrary, it will remind him of that which already existed within, in a state of potential.** Since righteous individuals fully identify with the Torah, in thought and deed, the Torah's objectives and paths coincide with their own.

**This is the inner meaning of the Talmudic statement, “Since they are pious, their Torah knowledge is preserved”** (*Berakhot* 32b). As a result of their complete identification with Torah, the righteous have no difficulty remembering Torah topics that they have studied. Torah study is not the rote memorization of irrelevant and exogenous details, but the meaningful learning of methods to achieve higher goals.<sup>11</sup>

### 5. Awakening Our Inner Spiritual Side

**The Torah has one fundamental goal: to awaken the lofty, spiritual aspect of humanity.** When we study Torah, **our minds are occupied**

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yourself from sin with thoughts of penitence. Then you will be able to connect and cleave to God when you engage in the study of our holy Torah, God's word and will.”

<sup>10</sup> Zohar (*Ra'aya Mehemna* III, 122b) distinguishes between a higher and a lower level of *teshuva*. According to *Tanya* (*Iggeret ha-Teshuva*, chapters 7-9), lower *teshuva* is the result of remorse for specific deeds, while higher *teshuva* reflects a more fundamental change, as we seek to align ourselves more closely to God's will.

<sup>11</sup> *Berakhot* 32b relates that the pious of prior generations (*hasidim rishonim*) would spend nine hours each day in prayer. Despite the fact that they had fewer hours to devote to Torah study, their Torah knowledge was “preserved.” This is usually understood to mean that these pious individuals merited a special blessing that allowed them to retain their Torah knowledge. Rav Kook is noting that their success in study is due to their complete identification with Torah ideals.

with holy concepts. Torah distances us from sinking in animalistic physicality, which erodes the vitality of our inner essence.

With regard to their value as a preventive measure to reject evil, all Torah subjects are equal. Any Torah study will help extricate one from over-absorption in materialism. **But in terms of the self-revelation of Divine enlightenment that quenches the soul, there is a clear difference between “great matters” – philosophical and mystical studies that speak to the soul – and “small matters” – the specifics of halakha.**<sup>12</sup>

#### 6. *Food and Air for the Soul*

**Practical studies – Talmud and halakha – are food for the soul. They fortify the soul and its components – the intellect, emotions, imagination, etc. – in a way that satisfies its essential nature, just as physical food fortifies and nourishes the body, in all of its various parts and organs.**

**Lofty studies – philosophical inquiry, poetry, elevation of the spirit – comprise the air which the soul breathes. The more that an organism is nourished with healthier food, the more it will be receptive to the good Divine influence that comes from this pure air.** The spiritual realms of Torah are like pure mountain air for the soul. The practical studies of Talmud and halakha, on the other hand, are the staples of ethical and spiritual life. They are the basis, the prerequisite level that enables us to appreciate the “pure air” and properly absorb the loftier Torah subjects.<sup>13</sup>

#### 7. *The Laws of “Floating Towers”*

**While it is possible to pilot a “floating tower” at a high altitude, like a hot air balloon, it is difficult to navigate it in a specific route with any real accuracy. So, too, in the rarefied intellectual process of uncovering the underlying rationale for Torah laws, extraordinary effort is required to navigate them in specific paths.**<sup>14</sup> This is similar to technology’s attempts to establish precise routes in flight. Just as

<sup>12</sup> *Sukka* 28a explains: “‘Great matter’ is the [mystical] study of the *Merkava*, the Divine Chariot; ‘small matter’ refers to the legal debates of Abaye and Rava.”

<sup>13</sup> Rav Kook is apparently reflecting on Maimonides’ metaphor in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13: “And I say that it is not right to stroll through the ‘Orchard’ [of higher philosophical studies] unless one has first filled his stomach with bread and meat. Bread and meat is a metaphor for the [practical] knowledge of that which is forbidden and that which is permitted.”

<sup>14</sup> In *Bava Metzi’a* 115a, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Yehuda disagreed whether it is possible to derive practical ramifications based on our understanding of the rationale for Torah laws (*ta’ama de-ker*a).

it is difficult to navigate in flight, due to a lack of clear location indicators, and the technical challenges of navigating with complete precision, so, too, it is difficult to draw practical conclusions from the abstract analysis of Torah concepts.

**Do'eg and Ahitophel attained an extraordinary level in interpreting rationales for Torah laws, as they discussed the halakhic ramifications of a “tower floating in the air.”<sup>15</sup> Even though they did not reach any final conclusions, merely raising the questions is the first step towards solving the problem.**

#### *8. Prayer and Torah Study*

**Sometimes an individual finds that he is unable to study Torah, due to a powerful need to pray. As long as he has not properly prayed, his soul remains parched. An inner need to pray to God can make it difficult to focus on the intellectual pursuit of Torah. This phenomenon is like a person who is so thirsty that he cannot eat until he has first quenched his thirst. Only after drinking will he be able to eat. This feeling of a deep need to pray is well developed in individuals who possess great souls – souls that bear the inner light of the righteous.**

**In general, the core function of prayer in such a case is to prepare one for Torah study. Prayer readies us by refining our values and aspirations to be receptive to the ideals encountered in Torah study. It is like the biological phenomenon of drinking water to assist the digestive process of absorbing food nutrients throughout the body.**

**But if no food is available, water cannot provide any digestive benefits. If there is no Torah study, there will be no spiritual content for prayer to assist in absorbing and internalizing. As it is written, “One who turns his ear away from hearing Torah, even his prayer is an abomination” (Proverbs 28:9).<sup>16</sup>**

<sup>15</sup> Do'eg the Edomite, Saul's chief herdsman, and Ahitophel, a counselor of King David, were wise men mentioned in the Book of Samuel. *Sanhedrin* 106b describes them as brilliant Torah scholars, albeit with deeply flawed personalities, who analyzed the theoretical case of a “floating tower” – exploring the implications of such a structure, disconnected from the ground, being impervious to ritual impurity.

<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Zeira applied this verse to a scholar who interrupted his Torah study to pray (*Shabbat* 10a). For more on the contrast and interplay between prayer and Torah, see the introduction to *Olat Re'iyah*, vol. 1, 19-24.



*9. Torah Rooted in the Realities of Life*

The study of Mishna<sup>17</sup> and practical rulings of halakha serves the same function in the realm of the sacred as the study of geography does in the secular: it sharpens the mind and keeps one firmly rooted in reality.<sup>18</sup> It is like an effective starch for the highest and most abstract matters. Just as starch is used to stiffen collars and shirt sleeves, the concrete cases of halakha keep the mind grounded in the realities of life. In this way, we acquire the intellectual ability to grasp every lofty concept with absolute simplicity. No small, minor matter will be obscured due to the expansive scope of abstract study. Practical study prevents philosophical inquiry from becoming disconnected from real-life application.

This is similar to the workings of Divine providence above: the abstract idealism in the splendor of lofty grandeur looks at the finest resolution of the universe, perfecting it with the smallest and most minute details. This principle is similar to the way that the universal rule of Divine providence takes into account every detail in the universe.

*10. A Healthy Love for Torah*

A healthy person naturally wants to live. Healthy people do not look for reasons and proofs *why* to live. But a person with severe mental illness, who suffers from suicidal tendencies, is burdened with doubts about the purpose of living.

The same is true with regard to Torah. Those with a healthy soul will naturally love Torah and its study with their heart and soul. Every Torah topic, even a detailed ruling of the Sages, is more precious than all the riches of the world. It is only when the foundation

<sup>17</sup> The style of the Mishna is to record halakhic rulings in specific, practical cases (“If one places a jar in a public domain,” or “If an ox gored a cow”), not to offer abstract, general principles of Jewish law.

<sup>18</sup> For many years, German philosopher Immanuel Kant would lecture on geography more than almost any other subject. Kant believed that the study of geography contributes a practical knowledge of the world, thus ensuring an empirical basis for his thought. Rav Kook suggested that the study of practical halakha provides a similar benefit for the abstract study of philosophical and mystical Torah subjects. Rav Kook once commented: “When the philosopher Kant wanted to rest a bit from his philosophical pursuits, he would study geography, saying, ‘Since I am an abstract thinker, I feel relaxed and regenerated when I explore concrete matter, such as mountains, rivers, cities, and villages.’ The same is true of me. I am an intellectual and emotional [poetic] person by nature. So when I wish to rest a bit, I delve into Halakhah. Then I feel my feet standing on solid ground”; quoted in Simcha Raz, *An Angel Among Men* (Urim, 2003), 177.

of one's soul is impaired that he will come to complain, "This Torah tradition is reasonable, but this one is not" (*Eruvin* 64a).<sup>19</sup>

### *11. Torah Infuses Us with Jewish Life*

Torah study – whether in halakha, Aggada, Talmudic dialectics, or any other realm of Torah – infuses the radiance of Jewish life into our souls. It awakens the proper values and positive emotions that are secreted within the soul, due to Israel's unique character. Torah study brings out the latent traits, both intellectual and emotional, that are embedded in the Jewish soul.<sup>20</sup>

This is similar to the way that general academic disciplines – the arts and humanities – awaken the latent universal values and sensibilities that are common to all humanity. The Torah, however, gives us life; not just the national life that is particular to Israel, but also universal life. This is because we acquire the finest human character in the optimal fashion when it is shaped in the special cast of Israel. And that is obtained through diligent study of Torah.

### *12. Torah Scholars Build Jewish Life*

When we study Torah with dedication, this impresses the special character and qualities of the Jewish people on our souls. Thus, when there are many diligent scholars, Torah pervades the entire nation with authentic Jewish life. Each scholar, laboring in his particular field of expertise, contributes to building a complete world in that aspect of Jewish life, whether it be halakha, Aggada, Jewish thought, and so on.<sup>21</sup>

### *13. Studying Torah to Learn about One's Heritage*

There is an inner moral motivation to study Torah diligently that is based on love and respect for the Jewish people. Torah study may be motivated by a sense of national pride and identification. How could a member of Israel not seek to know, as much as possible, the entire Torah of his people, beloved and holy, in all of its details, out of loyal devotion to his people? A person who takes pride in his nation will want

<sup>19</sup> Cf. 7:4, where Rav Kook writes that estrangement from Torah is caused by character flaws and weak ties to the Jewish people.

<sup>20</sup> The Sages taught that the Jewish soul is characterized by innate traits of compassion, modesty, and kindness (*Yevamot* 79a).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Berakhot* 64a, where the Talmud refers to Torah scholars as "builders."

to know its language and culture, its history and legacy, its values and mores. And the optimal expression of Jewish heritage is the Torah.

**This motivation is a preliminary gate, one that leads to the highest form of Torah study for its own sake.** This impetus to study Torah can bring one to the elevated level of Torah *lishmah*, when one learns Torah in order to “enrich *Knesset Yisrael* with great spiritual forces” (*Orot ha-Torah* 2:4).

#### *14. Competing Demands for Practical and Abstract Study*

**When the soul reckons how much proficiency in the Torah of Israel we must acquire at the start of our path, and how much our spiritual life must be based on practical foundations, in both societal and private life, this reckoning awakens a powerful thirst to study practical Torah, halakhic study that guides our path in everyday life.**

**Our yearning for abstract spirituality, however, battles for its share of our time. It refuses to allow the quest for practical Torah knowledge to rule uncontested in our arrangements of study schedule, conduct, and thought. The clash between these two passionate demands generates a brilliant light that encompasses a hidden richness, braided from these two forces, the spiritual and the practical. Desolate souls are repaired from the synthesis of these two forces; and an eternal people, forging ahead to renew its youth on its ancestral land, establishes itself through them.** As the Jewish people renews itself in its homeland, it requires a renewed engagement in both halakha and Jewish thought in order to contend with the practical and spiritual challenges of nation-building.

#### *15. Screening Out the Universal Light of Torah*

**When we study the details of Torah and rabbinic law in all their minutiae, they fuse into a single torch: the overriding goal of foundations of faith and aspirations to holiness, and the loftiest aspect within.** As we study the details of halakha, we are exposed to their underlying objective: our aspirations for holiness and Divine service. **If, however, the light of this great torch obscures the shining light of the details, then the entire world of practical Torah will be lost.** If we are overwhelmed by the Torah’s ideals, we may lose sight of the importance of the specifics of halakha and come to neglect the practical application of Torah in everyday life.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Rabbi Yehuda Halevi explained that this mistake was the undoing of Elisha ben Abuya, who thought that the Torah’s laws are merely a vehicle to reach the spiritual

Therefore, we must spread out a “screen.” At times, we need to temporarily block out the brilliant light of the Torah’s ideals in order to focus on the details. **This allows us to clarify the particulars of each specific situation in a world that is dark, relative to the universal light. This labor of clarification, both in theory and in practice, perfects life,** as it facilitates the full expression of our spiritual aspirations in day-to-day life.

**And beyond this screen, the light radiates in all of its universal grandeur. As the light penetrates the screen, it showers a dew of light on each specific detail.** Every detail of halakha acquires vitality and meaning from the higher ideals. **Then the lower realm of halakha is nurtured from the higher realm, and the two realms – the lofty ideals and their practical application – are united.**

*16. The Impact of Torah Study, Even When Not Fully Understood*

**Intensive Torah study serves to bind the spirit to lofty holiness. This is true even when we do not fully grasp the topic studied.** There is a spiritual influence when we spend many hours in Torah study, even if the study is not in depth. **Sometimes Torah study will have an elevating influence even when we fail to grasp the plain meaning of what we have learned. We thirst for the word of God, we yearn to study much; so we slake our thirst with extensive study, and our soul is uplifted.** Sometimes, just the effort to comprehend the word of God and the occupation in holy matters, even if we lack complete understanding, is uplifting.

With regard to the mystical study of Torah secrets, we may fail to understand the matters in all of their details. It may even seem that we are dealing with obscure images that afflict the soul and confound our psychological need for understandable concepts. Nevertheless, after the study of Kabbala, its illumination appears over us. Despite a lack of full comprehension, we will still sense its uplifting influence.

About such study, the Talmud promises, “Whoever engages in Torah study at night, the Holy One extends over him a thread of kindness during the day that follows. As it says, ‘In the day, God will command His kindness; and in the night, His song is with me’

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level of “ascent to the mystical Orchard.” Having already attained that exalted state, he concluded that he had no further need for Torah observance (*Kuzari* III:65). Cf. Rav Kook’s essay contrasting the inspired vision of the prophet with the practical instruction of the sage (“The Sage is Superior to the Prophet,” *Orot, Zironim*).

(Psalms 42:9).<sup>23</sup> When we study at night – symbolic of a time when matters are dark and murky – we later merit a “thread of kindness,” a measure of illumination. The following day we gain a better understanding of what we failed to grasp at night.<sup>24</sup>

**To Bolster Torah Study**  
Selections from Rav Kook’s letters

*How does one become a Torah scholar? What is the correct balance between the primary studies of Talmud and halakha, and secondary subjects of ethics, Jewish thought, and other non-Talmudic topics?*

*1. Set Times to Study Ethics and Jewish Thought*<sup>25</sup>

**I encourage you, as a dedicated scholar, to study Torah diligently and review your studies well, for review is the fruit of your study.**<sup>26</sup>

**Make sure to also study works on moral conduct (*Musar*) and piety in the time you have available, for they are the primary objective of Torah study. Even though the hours dedicated to these studies are limited, they offer blessed fruit to all other activities and studies. They are like the human brain: it is a relatively small organ, yet it imprints the form of humanity on us. So, too, the study of Jewish thought and ethics, while qualitatively a small part of a scholar’s study schedule, gives direction and meaning to one’s Torah study and actions.**

*2. Review at Least Ten Times*<sup>27</sup>

**I was quite alarmed when I realized that you only review your Talmudic studies three times! I know from personal experience that it is**

<sup>23</sup> *Avoda Zara* 3b. The Torah is sometimes referred to as “song,” e.g., the commandment to write a Sefer Torah is derived from the verse, “Write for yourselves this song” (Deuteronomy 31:19). The term “song” may allude to a more emotional, experiential and less intellectual aspect of Torah (cf. *Shabbat* 113a, “Should we simply memorize the teaching, like a song, [without understanding it]?”)

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Sibot ha-Ran*, section 76.

<sup>25</sup> Excerpt from a letter written by Rav Kook to his younger brother Shmuel Kook on 2 Sivan 5659 (May 11, 1899), when Rav Kook served as rabbi of Bauska, Latvia (*Iggerot ha-Re’iya* I, letter 9).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Sanhedrin* 99a: “Rabbi Joshua ben Korha said: One who studies Torah and fails to review is like a farmer who sows but does not harvest.”

<sup>27</sup> Excerpt from a letter written to Shmuel Kook in 5658 (1898) (*Iggerot ha-Re’iya* I, letter 6).

impossible to attain mastery of Talmudic material with only three reviews. I implore you to accustom yourself to review each chapter of Talmud at least ten times before starting the next one.

*3. Greatness in Torah Scholarship is Acquired by Traditional Talmud Study*<sup>28</sup>

You should learn from the example of those prominent and esteemed Torah scholars<sup>29</sup> to increase your acquisition of wisdom, to study and analyze Talmud, to cheerfully and lovingly review your studies, and to acquire an orderly mastery of Talmud with its primary commentaries.<sup>30</sup> Make sure that you set the central works as your main focus, and minor works as ancillary studies. The majority of one's study schedule should be dedicated to Talmud, its major commentaries, and halakha. Less time should be spent on ancillary studies such as Hebrew language, Jewish thought, ethics, and so on.<sup>31</sup>

I have never met a truly great Torah scholar except those who devoted their principal efforts in the study of Talmud and the *Rishonim* (early authorities), learning and reviewing them in their proper order. This is especially true at the start of one's studies, in one's youth.

*4. Practical Advice on Torah Study*<sup>32</sup>

You should accustom yourself to in-depth Talmudic study. Occasionally, you should also peruse the analytical methods (*pilpul*) found in the works of the *Aharonim* (later authorities), so that you will become familiar with their style of novel interpretations (*biddush*) in halakha, using clear logic and fine reasoning.

Also, set an appropriate schedule to study works on ethics and philosophy; but take care that you do not expend too much exertion

<sup>28</sup> Excerpt from a letter to his younger brother R. Shaul Hana Kook in 5657 (1897) (*Iggerot ha-Re'iyah* I, letter 5).

<sup>29</sup> Rav Kook was referring to the Torah scholars of Smorgon (Smarho) in Belarus, "the town where I found, at the start of my path, a holy society filled with scholars and scribes, brilliant and erudite, God-fearing and pious" (*ibid.*).

<sup>30</sup> Literally: "Gemara, Rashi, and Tosafot."

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13: "Even though the Sages referred to these matters [of halakha] as 'a small matter'... it is proper to give them precedence, for they settle a person's mind. Also, they are the great good that God provided to establish a stable society in this world."

<sup>32</sup> Excerpt from a letter to his fifteen-year-old son Zvi Yehuda on 13 Heshvan 5667 (October 2, 1906). Rav Kook was Chief Rabbi of Jaffa at the time (*Iggerot ha-Re'iyah* I, letter 40).

in these studies, mental resources that should be reserved for **halakhic studies**.

*5. Expanding the Yeshiva Curriculum*<sup>33</sup>

The study of spiritual Torah subjects, in all of their width, depth, and breadth, must also have a place in the yeshiva curriculum. Aggada and Midrash, both exoteric and esoteric, works of philosophy and theoretical Kabbala, ethical tracts, Jewish thought, Hebrew grammar, *piyyut*, and poetry—of course, this refers to poetry written by true Torah scholars and the pious of earlier generations – these are also fundamental areas of Torah study. Yeshiva study should not be limited to Talmud and halakha, but expanded to include non-legal fields of Torah.<sup>34</sup>

It is impossible to dedicate as many hours or set fixed hours for these subjects as is done for the primary topics of study: halakha, Talmud, the works of halakhic decisors, and the writings of *Rishonim* and *Aharonim*. Nonetheless, it is clearly inconceivable to preclude them from securing a pivotal role in the yeshiva curriculum, especially in our generation. These studies are even more crucial in the Land of Israel, which demands that its children navigate spiritual paths, due to the nature of its unique holiness, permeating its entire atmosphere. Torah students nowadays, and particularly those living in the Land of Israel, have a special obligation to acquire proficiency in these spiritual areas of Torah.

*6. The Need for In-Depth Study of Aggada*<sup>35</sup>

The true richness of halakha is revealed when we examine all of the opinions expressed on a topic, both those accepted as the final ruling and those that were rejected. By acquiring broad knowledge and an awareness of the great variety of nuances, we gain greater wisdom.

<sup>33</sup> Excerpt from a letter to Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Halevy (Rabinowitz) (1847-1914; rabbi, historian, founder of Agudath Israel) on 17 Sivan 5668 (June 16, 1908) (*Iggerot ha-Re'iyah* I, letter 146).

<sup>34</sup> See *Orot ha-Torah* 9:6, where Rav Kook writes that some Jews abandoned the path of Torah because they felt compelled to dedicate themselves to traditional Talmudic and halakhic studies – subjects that did not suit their personal disposition and interests.

<sup>35</sup> Excerpt from a letter to R. Yitzhak Isaac Halevy (Rabinowitz) on 4 Av 5668 (August 1, 1908) while Rav Kook was vacationing in Rehovot (*Iggerot ha-Re'iyah* I, letter 149).

We transform ourselves into original thinkers who know how to sift and scrutinize, resolve and originate new ideas.

The same holds true for the richness of Aggada. Not in the superficial sense, like the academic research of European scholars and theological seminaries,<sup>36</sup> but in a profound, inner sense, one that is acquired through diligent effort and daily study, together with the sanctity and sincere piety of scholars who engage in Torah study for its own sake. This does not refer to the superficial analysis (common in academic research) that focuses on biographical, historical, societal, or linguistic factors, but rather one that delves into the philosophical underpinnings and spiritual message of Midrashic statements.

This in-depth study of Aggadah prepares one to lead a life of spirituality and holiness. It will enable us to innovate numerous lofty paths that illuminate, with the light of the Torah, all the aspects that our generation currently needs, just like the paths and initiatives of great Torah scholars of earlier eras, and the important *Aharonim* in their days. Serious study of Aggada will give us with the necessary tools to meet the spiritual needs of our generation, as was done by Torah giants in previous generations.<sup>37</sup>

### *7. The Importance of Daily Talmud Study*<sup>38</sup>

Do not belittle the value of a daily study session of Talmud and its major commentaries. This is a holy service, over which the greatest Jewish scholars throughout the generations toiled: study of the Talmudic text, clarification of the final halakhic decision, and the sound analysis of Talmudic discussions that sharpens the mind, gladdens the heart, and draws one to the love of Torah.

<sup>36</sup> This appears to refer to academic institutions such as the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, established in 1854.

<sup>37</sup> For example, the efforts of Maimonides and Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, who defended Judaism against the challenges of Aristotelian philosophy; Maharal of Prague, who defended the authenticity of Torah and especially Aggada; and Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, who battled the challenges of the Enlightenment and Reform movements.

<sup>38</sup> Excerpt from a letter to his son R. Zvi Yehudah on 3 Shvat 5680 (January 23, 1920), soon after Rav Kook's election as Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. R. Zvi Yehuda Kook, then 28 years old, was teaching at a yeshiva in Petah Tikva (*Iggerot ha-Re'iya* IV, letter 1:10).



### 8. *Practical Advice on Learning and Teaching Talmud*<sup>39</sup>

When organizing your Talmud study, make sure to first read the text carefully and precisely according to the commentaries of Rashi and the Tosafists. Then study the legal summaries of Rabbenu Asher and Alfasi, and the commentaries on their works. After that, you should examine the words of the halakhic decisors on that topic: the legal codes of Maimonides and *Shulhan Arukh*, and their commentaries.

When studying with younger students, you should outline, as much as possible, the different opinions and their primary categorizations. It would be good if you could also include the interpretations of the Vilna Gaon in these matters.

It is advisable to make a habit of writing down a summary of each Talmudic topic, together with the various opinions, even if you do not add any original thoughts of your own. And you should certainly record any new insights and explanations that come to you, as I hope will occur, with God's help.

If the students are receptive, make sure to familiarize them with the development of a noble idea and a fine sense of holiness; instill in them a love for the spiritual wisdom found in the light of Torah and holy knowledge. You should expose your students to classic works of Jewish philosophy and thought.

### 9. *Torah is the Source of our Spiritual Aspirations*

With the start of the coming month of Elul, the yeshiva students should recognize their unconditional obligation to maintain the "daily offerings"<sup>40</sup> as usual: the holy service of the study schedule in the yeshiva. They should aspire to redouble sanctity and purity in anticipation of the approaching days of holiness, with love of Torah and fear of Heaven, with the insightful knowledge of holy scholars, and uplifted spirits. This aspiration for holiness is the foundation of our precious and beloved gathering together in the yeshiva, an assembly of righteous, with God's help. The very basis of the yeshiva is our collective aspiration for holiness.

I wish to urge zealous individuals such as yourselves—may there be many like you in the Jewish people!—to remind you of the

<sup>39</sup> Excerpt of a letter sent to R. Tzvi Yehuda on 15 Tevet 5680 (January 6, 1920) (*Iggerot ha-Re'iyah* IV, letter 1:4).

<sup>40</sup> Here Rav Kook makes reference to the *Tamid*, the daily Temple offering, as a metaphor for the regular yeshiva study schedule, which should not be disturbed, despite spiritual preparations for the High Holiday season.

fundamentals, the types of preparations in which we must engage in order to attain our true spiritual goals at the end of the year; and also to prepare for the illumination of the coming holy days: Rosh Hashana, the Days of Repentance, the holy day of Yom Kippur, and the days of rejoicing, i.e., the holidays of Sukkot and Simhat Torah.

The foundation of all success—for each of us personally, for all of Israel, and for the entire world which we so yearn to illuminate with God’s light—is the yearning, fixed in our souls, for holiness and spiritual ascent; the aspiration for clarity of thought and greater lucidity. We aspire to integrity of the heart, the basis for all prized character traits. We aspire to purity of life: purity in our actions, in our speech, and in all aspects of our lives, both internal and external.

And from where do we draw all of this? From the repository of authentic life: the holy Torah, which is the wellspring of our lives and the lives of all worlds. True success is based on our innate aspirations to live a life of integrity and holiness. And the source for these aspirations is the study of Torah.

We develop our spiritual potential with every topic, in the wide range of Torah subjects, to which we cleave with the greatest devotion and clarity; with every halakhic ruling that we internalize, as we elucidate it in dedicated study; with every topic that we clarify with logic and insight in our intellectual labors; with every concept in halakha and Aggada, ethics and piety, that we integrate into our personality. Through all of these, we actualize ourselves; and we build up the entire nation and all of reality.

In this way, we come closer to our true perfection, to our purpose in life, to the true will of the One who gives life to the universe, blessed be He, the One who wishes to bequeath us the light of life, in all its strength and authenticity.