



Parashah Insights
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Parashat Nitzavim
Revealed and Hidden Torah

Hidden Torah

“What is hidden is for Hashem our G-d, and what is revealed is for us and our children forever, to fulfill all the words of this Torah” (*Devarim 29:28*).

Understood literally, this verse refers to the Torah’s earlier statement concerning the prohibition against idol worship: “Lest there is among you a man or woman or family or tribe whose heart turns away from Hashem our G-d today, to go serve the gods of those nations, lest there is among you a root growing gall and wormwood” (29:17). The earthly courts are obligated to administer justice in revealed matters: when it becomes apparent that an individual, a tribe, or a family has strayed from Hashem, it is the court’s responsibility to handle the case. In contrast, no one can gauge man’s private, inner thoughts and know if he is truly loyal to Hashem – thoughts are “hidden.” Only Hashem is aware of them and only He can judge them.

However, on a profound level, we can understand this verse as an allusion to the study of the wisdom of *Kabbalah*, usually referred to as *Hochmat HaNistar*, literally “the hidden wisdom,” or *Torat HaNistar*, “the secrets of the Torah.”

When the *Zohar*, the definitive Kabbalistic work authored by Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, was revealed about 700 years ago, some Torah authorities approved its publication. Others objected, saying that we are not permitted to dabble in the Torah’s hidden secrets, and should confine ourselves strictly to achieving correct and accurate understanding of *halachah* and the commandments. To prove their point, they cited the verse, “What is hidden is for Hashem our G-d” (referring to the *Zohar* and its secrets), “and what is revealed is for us and our children forever” (the Talmud and its halachic teachings), “to fulfill all the words of this Torah.”



Rabbi Yitzhak Dilatas wrote a famous responsa, reprinted in every edition of the *Zohar*, refuting this argument and justifying the publication of the *Zohar*. He writes that the hidden Torah is an integral part of the Oral Torah. The *Zohar*, the ultimate authority on the secrets of the Torah, corresponds to the Talmud, the ultimate authority on *halachah*. As the *Mekubalim* teach, the Torah can be interpreted on the four levels known as *pardes*, an acronym for *pshat*, *remez*, *drush* and *sod*.¹ We fulfill our obligation to study Torah by exerting ourselves to the best of our ability to learn on all four levels. The Arizal teaches that it is specifically when we learn with all the elements of *pardes* to the maximum of our capabilities that we fulfill the *mitzvah* of Torah study to perfection (Introduction to *Shaar HaMitzvot*).

Rabbi Dilatas explains that the very verse cited as proof by those opposing the publication of the *Zohar* in fact refers to the study of the wisdom of *Kabbalah*. The Torah's wisdom encompasses three stages. Of the two in the realm of *Kabbalah*, one is permitted, and one is forbidden. The third is Talmud and *halachah*.

There are certain very elevated levels of G-d's revelations which are entirely beyond human comprehension and perceptions. It is forbidden for us to delve into these matters at all. They are "what is hidden is for Hashem our G-d." The highest levels are not for us – they are only for Hashem Himself.

On a somewhat lower level are those Kabbalistic concepts which are still very lofty, but are nonetheless related to us and our service of Hashem, such as the topics discussed in the *Zohar*. They are "what is revealed is for us and our children forever."

The third level is "to fulfill all the words of this Torah." This is the study of *halachah*, our Sages' revealed teachings, basic to our fulfillment of the *mitzvot*. However, as we shall explain, even our study of *Kabbalah* should be geared to the practical purpose of enhancing our service of Hashem and fulfillment of *mitzvot*.

Who Should Learn?

Obviously, the words of Rabbi Yitzhak Dilatas encouraging the publication and study of the *Zohar* are only directed to those on the proper level to undertake this study. *Kabbalah* is *not* for everyone. As our great rabbis warn us, not every mind is capable of comprehending it.²

¹*Pshat*: literal meaning of the text. *Remez*: proofs of explanations of Torah opinions based on allusions to Scriptural verses. *Drush*: explanations based and developed upon Scriptural verses and teachings of the Sages. *Sod*: esoteric interpretations of Torah unrelated to literal meaning.

² This matter is discussed at length in my work *Petah Shaar HaShamyim*.



The Torah tells us, “And you will know today and take to your heart that Hashem is G-d” (*Devarim* 39:4). In order to fulfill this commandment, we must first instill in our hearts pure, wholehearted faith, like that of the women and children who were willing to give up their lives to sanctify Hashem’s Name, not because they were great philosophers or Kabbalists, but solely for the sake of their beliefs. Only after we “know Hashem,” or in other words, have perfect, implicit belief and faith, can we go on to the next stage of “take to your heart,” by learning *Kabbalah*. The wisdom of *Kabbalah* teaches us profound inner understanding of belief in Hashem, impressing its lofty concepts on our minds and hearts.

The great *Mekubalim* established criteria to define who is worthy of learning *Kabbalah*. A candidate must be a Torah scholar of the highest caliber, who learns Torah in depth, has extensive knowledge of the Talmud and responsa literature, and is meticulous in his observance of *halachah*. He must be a person who is striving and growing in Torah, and whose *middot* and dealings with others are correct and refined.

The scholar who attains high levels of piety and learning is in fact obligated to study *Kabbalah*, as we learn from our Sages’ account of the questions we will be asked on the ultimate Day of Judgment (*Midrash Mishle* 10).

“Rabbi Yishmael said, come see how severe is the Day of Judgment...woe to that shame, woe to that humiliation.” Our Sages describe the scene. A Jew who has learned Scripture but not *Mishnah* approaches for judgment. Because he has not studied *Mishnah*, “the Holy One, blessed be He, turns His Face away from him... Next to approach is one who has learned two or three [of the six] Orders [of the *Mishnah*]. The Holy One, blessed be He, says to him, ‘My son, all the *halachot* (meaning the *Mishnayot*), why did you not study them?’ Then one approaches who has learned *halachot* (the entire *Mishnah*). He says to him, ‘My son, why did you not study *Torat Cohanim*’ (the *Midrash* on the Book of *Vayikra*)?”

This line of questioning continues until a Torah scholar fluent in the Talmud approaches. Hashem says to him, “My son, since you engaged in Talmud, did you also study the *maaseh merkavah* (the secrets of the Divine Chariot)?”

The sequence here is significant. The simple fellow who knows some *humash* is not taken to task for his failure to engage in esoteric Kabbalistic studies vastly above his own basic level of learning. He is asked why he did not attempt to advance just a bit further, to the study of *Mishnah*. But the accomplished scholar with extensive knowledge of all fields of Torah, Talmud included, will be asked why he did not also learn *Kabbalah*.



Out of Bounds

It is a *mitzvah* for us to attempt to comprehend the greatness of the Al-mighty. King David instructed his son Shlomo, “Know the G-d of your father and serve Him” (I *Divre HaYamim* 28:9). “Knowing G-d” means knowledge of what the human mind is capable of comprehending concerning the Creator. Since the writings of the *Zohar* were not revealed to earlier generations, the great Early Authorities, like the Rambam (in *Moreh Nevuchim*) and Rabbenu Behaye (in *Shaar HaYihud*, the first chapter of *Hovat HaLevavot*), attempted to explain these lofty concepts through the wisdom of philosophy.

Our great Torah scholars in ancient times had to avail themselves of the study of philosophy in order to understand G-d and explain the fundamentals of faith. However, at that time in history they did not have access to Kabbalistic tradition, so they had no avenue other than philosophy. Now, after we have merited the revelation of the wisdom of *Kabbalah*, which embodies the ultimate truth concerning G-d and faith, we no longer have permission to engage in philosophical study as a means of clarifying our beliefs. Bottom line, philosophy is no more than manmade wisdom, rendered obsolete by the revelation of the *Zohar*. This is why the Vilna Gaon was so vehemently opposed to the study of philosophy (*Biur HaGra* on *Yoreh Deah* 179:13).

And yet, as Rabbi Yitzhak Dilatas explains, there are boundaries which we may not cross in our quest for knowledge of the Al-mighty. Our Sages instruct us that the profound topic of Creation should not be taught even to two students at a time, only one-on-one. The restrictions on teaching *maaseh merkavah* are stricter still; even on a one-on-one basis, it can only be taught to “one who is wise, and can develop an idea which was conveyed to him in a vague, obscure manner.” They continue, “One who looks into these four concepts, it would have more merciful for him not to have been born: what exists above the boundaries of Creation; what is below those boundaries; what existed before Creation; and what will exist after Creation ceases to be. And one who does not respect his Master’s honor, it would have been more merciful for him if he had not come into the world to begin with” (*Hagigah* 11b). Of these secret matters they said, “We should not uncover what Hashem has concealed” (*Pesachim* 119a), because “It is Hashem’s honor to conceal those matters” (*Mishle* 25:2).

Our Sages also tell us, “Until this level, you have permission to understand and discuss. From here and above, you do not have permission to discuss. For this is what it says in the Book of Ben Sira: ‘What is above you, do not inquire into, and what is covered up for you, do not investigate. Reflect on what is permitted for you; you have nothing to do with hidden matters’” (*Hagigah* 13a). In other words, there are topics in the wisdom of



Kabbalah which are strictly off limits. They are “hidden,” and they are only “for Hashem our G-d.”³

The *Zohar* discusses at length which levels of esoteric knowledge are permitted to us, and which are forbidden. The Arizal explains the words of the *Zohar* (*Etz Hayyim, Shaar Alef, Anaf Heh*):

The *Zohar* cites the verse, “Raise your eyes on high and see Who created these (*eleh*)” (*Yeshayahu* 40:26). The Sages derive from this verse that there are levels of Creation up to which we may “raise our eyes,” meaning that we may investigate and study them. Beyond them are those which are forbidden. We may go up to the level implied by the word “*eleh*,” but no higher (see Introduction to the *Zohar*).

The verse “If you inquire, into the early days” (*Devarim* 4:32) teaches us that if we have questions, we may inquire up to the level implied by the term “early days” (*yamim rishonim*). The level of *yamim rishonim* is the same level as *eleh*; that is as far as we may pursue understanding of the Divine (see *Zohar, Pekude* p.232a).

Our Sages explain that the verse “A path unknown even to the eagle” (*Iyov* 28:7) refers to Moshe Rabbenu. Moshe reached the most exalted heights of G-dly knowledge man can achieve, but there is one level that even Moshe could not attain. The *Sefer HaYetzirah*, composed by Avraham Avinu, teaches that there are fifty Gates of profound hidden knowledge. The highest level is the *Shaar HaNun*, the fiftieth Gate. Moshe was held back from this one ultimate level of Divine knowledge. This is the meaning of the verse, “And You made him a little less than G-d” (*Tehillim* 8:6). Lacking this one last Gate, Moshe fell slightly short of total comprehension of the Creator.

As our Sages tell us in *Hagigah*, we may not search out what is above us and has been concealed from us. There are levels of knowledge which no human being will ever be able to attain, and even those which we can attain should be applied to enhancing the level of our service of Hashem.

The ten spiritual levels of Divine revelation, both the hidden and the revealed, are represented in the Name of Hashem which is composed of the letters *yud-keh-vav-keh*. The three highest levels are represented by the “crown” above the *yud*, the *yud* itself, and the *keh*. Below them are another seven levels. Six of these levels are represented by the letter *vav*, which has the numerical value (*gematriya*) of six. The last level is in the final letter *keh*.

³ In my work *Shorshe HaYam, Shaar Alef, Anaf Heh*, p. 14d, I elaborate further on the question of topics which we are not permitted to discuss.



The Torah tells us, “What is hidden is for Hashem our G-d.” “What is hidden,” meaning what is concealed completely from man, refers to those levels above the crown of the *yud*. The levels of *yud-keh* are those which we are allowed to discuss concisely, but not extensively. These levels are all considered *nistarot*, “what is hidden.”

“What is revealed is for us and our children forever” refers to the seven lower levels of the letters *vav-keh*, which we are allowed to discuss at length. Through the knowledge revealed to us in these seven levels, we are able to “fulfill all the words of this Torah.” The *Zohar* and other Kabbalistic writings explain this extremely profound concept, some concisely, and some at great length. These teachings comprise the wisdom of *Kabbalah*.

As we see, then, through the study of *Kabbalah*, our faith is reinforced, and we learn how to achieve perfect, complete fulfillment of the *mitzvot* as expressed in the words, “to fulfill all the words of this Torah.”

The Beauty of Torah

We can understand this verse in another sense as well. Rabbi Hayyim Vital explains that the glory and beauty of Torah lies in comprehension of its profound esoteric meaning (Introduction to *Etz Hayyim*). He writes, “Our Sages tell us that when Rabbi Akiva died, the glory of Torah was lost’ (*Sotah* 9:15). Our Sages explain that Rabbi Akiva knew how to expound mounds upon mounds of *halachot* on every single tip on the letters (*Menahot* 29b).”

Certain letters in a Torah scroll are topped with tiny “crowns.” Rabbi Akiva derived thousands upon thousands of *halachot* from every last stroke of the pen in these tiny crowns. This is in addition to the explanations and novellae he derived from the chapters, sentences, and words of the Torah, and even from the letters themselves, all the way down to the crowns. Some commentators explain that his novellae on the crowns were in fact the secrets of the Torah which, appropriately enough, are hinted at in the crowns atop the letters (*Leshem, Sefer Hade’ah*, p.172). “This is the glory of Torah and its beauty,” which was lost with the death of Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Hayyim Vital goes on to explain the meaning of our Sages’ teaching in *Avot*: “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, each and every day a Heavenly voice emanates from Mount Horev and proclaims, woe to mankind because of the insult to Torah’ (*Avot* 6:2). Learning Torah only on a strictly literal level, relating to it merely as simple words and stories, is undoubtedly a great affront to the dignity of the Torah. The nations confront us, saying, ‘What difference is there between your Torah and ours? Your Torah is also only a collection of stories about worldly frivolities.’ There can be no greater insult to



the Torah. This is why our Sages say, 'Woe to mankind because of the insult to Torah.' They do not study the wisdom of *Kabbalah*, in order to bring honor to the Torah by explaining its words according to their hidden secrets as well. This is the reason that our exile is prolonged, and the reason for all the evils that befall the world."

Enhancing our *Mitzvot*

Rabbi Hayyim Vital writes that the wisdom of *Kabbalah* is also essential for understanding and correct fulfillment of *mitzvot*. It is only through the study of *Kabbalah* that the myriad details involved in the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* are explained and clarified, and their true inner reasons are revealed. Our ultimate intent in fulfilling *mitzvot* is to rectify the higher spiritual worlds and bring them to perfection. This can only be achieved through the wisdom of *Kabbalah*. Without it, it is impossible for us to understand the full meaning of the commandments.

We can appreciate this by considering the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*. By studying the revealed Torah, we can come to know some of the basic reasons behind the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*. For example, the hand *tefillin* is worn facing the heart in order to subdue the desires of the heart and the evil inclination which dwells in the heart, while the head *tefillin* subdues and purifies the thoughts of the brain. However, this does not explain the reasons behind the countless other details of the laws of *tefillin*. Why must the boxes be perfectly square and black, and why must the straps also be black? What is the significance of the way we knot the *yud* in the hand *tefillin* and the *daled* in the head *tefillin*? Why is the letter *shin* on the head *tefillin* embossed on one side with three branches, and on the other side with four? Why do we wrap the straps around our arm and middle finger a specified number of times? The revealed Torah does not answer all these questions. However, the teachings of *Kabbalah* do explain the lofty spiritual meaning of these and many more details of the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*. The same is true of all the *mitzvot*.

Unifying and Separating

Our Sages cite the verse, "And he said, the Hand is on the Throne of G-d. Hashem has a war with Amalek from generation to generation" (*Shmot* 17:16). The words *kes Y-ah*, "the Throne of G-d," are written in a shortened form rather than with the usual full spelling. *Kes* does not have an *alef* at the end (*kisse*) and the Name of Hashem is written with only with the first two letters, *yud* and *keh*, rather than as *yud-keh-vav-keh*.

Our Sages explain why Hashem's Name is written incompletely in this verse. "Rabbi Levi says in the name of Rabbi Aha bar Hanina, as long as the descendents of Amalek exist in



the world, the Name is not complete and the Throne is not complete. When the descendents of Amalek perish, the Name will be complete” (*Tanhuma Ki Tetze* 11).

The Arizal explains that the *mitzvot* we do bring perfection into this world. When we fulfill a *mitzvah*, we bring together the letters of Hashem’s Name. This is called *yihud*, unifying. When we sin, we tear them apart, causing *pirud* (separation),⁴ a concept alluded to in the verse “A sinner separates the Ruler” (*Mishle* 16:28; see Rashi). This idea is expressed in the *l’shem yihud* prayer instituted by the Arizal, recited before fulfilling a *mitzvah* (*Shaar Ruah HaKodesh* 12b). In this prayer, we declare that we are doing the *mitzvah* “For the unification (*yihud*) of the Holy One, and His holy Name, blessed be He, with fear and love, and with love and fear, to bring together the letters of the Name *yud-keh* and *vav-keh* in perfect unification, in the name of all Israel.”

As we explained, the first two letters of the Name, *yud-keh*, refer to the three higher levels of Divine revelation, which transcend total human comprehension. The letters *vav-keh* are the seven lower levels more accessible to man. When we transgress the word of G-d, the sin wrenches asunder the letters *vav-keh*. Evil can only affect the lower levels related to these two letters, but not the higher levels related to the letters *yud-keh*. This is why our Sages tell us that “as long as the descendents of Amalek are in the world, the Name is not complete and the Throne is not complete. When the descendents of Amalek perish, the Name will be complete.” The evil of Amalek separates the *yud-keh* from the *vav-keh*. The power of evil can reach the levels of *vav-keh*, but no higher. The *yud-keh* remains untouched. Now, while Amalek is still powerful, Hashem’s Name and Throne are not complete; the *vav-keh* is blemished because of Amalek’s negative impact. In the future, when the *yud-keh* and *vav-keh* are once again reunited, Hashem will be One and His Name will be One (*Zechariah* 14:9), perfect and unblemished.

Every *mitzvah* that we fulfill rectifies this separation of the letters of Hashem’s Name, and unites the *yud-keh* and the *vav-keh*. While the complete annihilation of Amalek will only take place when *Mashiah* comes, every *mitzvah* nonetheless brings salvation on an individual level, bestowing perfection on the particular person, day and hour. In the future, when the name of Amalek will be eradicated, we will merit universal salvation, and the verse “death will be eliminated forever” (*Yeshayahu* 25:8) will be fulfilled. Evil will no longer have any power, and the world will achieve complete rectification.

For Ourselves and For Him

Understood on a simple level, the fulfillment of *mitzvot* is only for our benefit. They rectify us, perfect us, and guide us through life in this world. By fulfilling them, we merit the material benefits which the Torah promises us in this world, among them rain in

⁴ These terms speak figuratively, and are not to be taken literally.



season, bountiful harvests, peace and security, as well as spiritual bliss in the World to Come.

Our Sages teach us that *mitzvot* have a much more profound purpose as well. They say, “Who is a saintly person (*hassid*)? One who is saintly (*mit’hassed*, literally ‘does *hesed*’) with his Creator” (*Zohar, Helek Bet*, p. 114b). Surprisingly, they also said, “Prayer is for the sake of the Al-mighty (mentioned in the writings of many Early Authorities; see Rabbi Natan Shapira’s Introduction to *Pri Etz Hayyim*).

In other words, man’s deeds have a more elevated purpose than merely his own needs, whether physical or spiritual. The true, deeper purpose of *mitzvot* is to increase Hashem’s honor in the world and to reveal His unity, making it known that “there is none other than Him” (*Devarim* 4:35). Let us try to understand what this means.

Hashem in His wisdom has chosen to conceal Himself from the vision of flesh and blood. As a result, our perception is, “G-d spoke one and I heard two” (*Tehillim* 62:12). In the words of our Sages, ‘Everything is foreseen, and [even so], freedom of action is given (*Avot* 3:15). Because we have Free Will, we imagine that evil is a force with its own power. In this sense, we “hear two” – we think that there are two ruling forces, the good and the evil. In actual fact, Hashem “spoke one”; there is only one truth, and evil is only a tool in the Hands of G-d to try us and test our loyalty to Him. It is our task in this world to reveal that there is only One absolute force, Hashem alone, and that everything is from Him. When we fulfill *mitzvot* with the proper intent, Hashem’s honor is revealed in the world, dispersing the darkness and causing illumination and comprehension.

Every *mitzvah* has two aspects, the hidden and the revealed. The hidden aspect, alluded to in the words “What is hidden is for Hashem our G-d,” is the impact of our *mitzvot* in the higher worlds, which we cannot see. This brings about the revelation of Hashem’s honor and the revelation of His Oneness in the higher spiritual worlds. The revealed aspect alluded to in the words “what is revealed is for us and our children” brings about the revelation of Hashem’s honor and His Oneness in our lowly world. Thus, the *mitzvot* benefit us both in this world and in the World to Come.

Walking Humbly Before G-d

The Munkatcher Rebbe provides additional insight into our understanding of the verse “What is hidden is for Hashem our G-d, and what is revealed is for us and our children forever, to fulfill all the words of this Torah” (see *Divre Torah, Helek Alef, Ot Heh*). He discusses the proper balance between concealed and revealed conduct for a Torah scholar and leader, explaining that there is a right and a wrong way to “walk humbly before Hashem your G-d” (*Michah* 6:8).



A well-meaning Torah scholar may decide to go to great lengths to conceal his spiritual accomplishments. He makes sure never to be seen learning or praying, and does silly, childish things in public. His intentions may be sincere and pious – he wishes to conduct himself with humility and conceal his true level. However, he is making a mistake. His strange behavior causes a desecration of Hashem’s Name, much like the *Amora Rav*, who knew that for him, something as simple as buying meat on credit instead of paying for it immediately would be a desecration of Hashem’s Name (see *Yoma* 86a). He must also consider that his students are watching him, observing his actions and learning from them. If his behavior is less than commendable, what sort of example is he setting for his followers? This too is a desecration of Hashem’s Name.

He may hit upon a solution: he will reveal to his students that his behavior is actually motivated by a very pious desire to hide his virtuous ways, and that there is profound meaning behind all the surprising things he does. If they observe him carefully, he says, they will pick up on how truly holy he is. While this might sound good, announcing that he is a great hidden *tzaddik* certainly does not qualify as “walking humbly before Hashem!”

There is a way to walk humbly before the Al-mighty without desecrating His Name by boorish, inexplicable behavior. A rabbi and leader especially must conduct himself strictly in keeping with the Torah and *halachah* at all times. His dealings with others must be impeccable, and he must defend Hashem’s Torah faithfully, serving as the finest possible role model for those around him. Meticulous observance of *halachah* is not something to conceal, it is something to demonstrate and teach. At the same time, while his exemplary actions are easily observed, his profound thoughts and pure intentions remain his private domain. His actions may be directed by the deepest of Kabbalistic intents (*kavanot*), but that is his own business. Others can see what he does, but will never fathom what he thinks. Only Hashem knows of his true greatness, because Hashem alone can read his heart. This is the proper way to “walk humbly before Hashem your G-d,” hiding what should be hidden and revealing what should be revealed.

This principle is alluded to in our verse. “What is hidden is for Hashem our G-d, and what is revealed is for us and our children forever.” “What is hidden,” such as profound intents in prayer and fulfillment of *mitzvot*, as well as in seemingly mundane matters such as eating, remains concealed from view. These matters are entirely between us and “Hashem our G-d.” Careful observance of *halachah*, on the other hand, must be “revealed,” precisely because it is “for us and our children.” It is up to us to sanctify the Name of Heaven through our behavior, and educate our children in the ways of the Torah. If we humbly hide our Torah and *mitzvot* from them, how will they know how a Jew should live? We must show them that we care deeply for the most minute detail of every last *mitzvah*. Thoughts, on the other hand, are private, and need not be displayed.



Halachah and Kabbalah

We may also understand this verse in the context of the role of *Kabbalah* in *halachah*. Although the rulings of our Sages in *halachah* and ethics are based on the foundation of *Kabbalah* (Rabbi Hayyim Vital's Introduction to *Etz Hayyim*), there is absolutely no question that we may not deviate from the simple and literal meaning of the Talmud in our fulfillment of *mitzvot*. The Vilna Gaon writes that anyone who says that the Talmud and the *Zohar* disagree is mistaken either in his understanding of the Talmud, or in his understanding of the *Zohar* (*Keter Rosh, Ot Tet-vav*)

We may not alter the accepted manner of fulfilling any *mitzvah* in order to conform with what we imagine to be Kabbalistic teachings. This is a critically important warning for all generations, which should be taken very, very seriously. "Presenting interpretations of Torah which are not in keeping with *halachah*" (*Avot* 3:11) leads to sanctioning transgression of Torah ordained prohibitions supposedly in the name of *Kabbalah*. A tragic instance of this phenomenon was the fall of the followers of Shabbtai Tzvi, who allowed themselves to transgress very severe prohibitions, justifying their actions as "*Kabbalah*."

The *Nefesh HaHayyim* writes that from the day the Torah was given onwards, no one may deviate from the literal meaning of the Torah and *halachah*. Our Forefathers lived before the Giving of the Torah, and fulfilled the commandments through Divine inspiration. They had a profound understanding of the roots of the various commandments, and of the root of their own souls. As such, in certain instances, they understood that it was appropriate for them to conduct themselves in manner which was not in keeping with the literal meaning of a commandment. A well known example is Yaakov's marriage to two sisters. Once the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai, no one has permission to do this, even if he has prophetic insight. All Jews are subject to the authority of the Torah and the words of our Sages, literally and plainly understood (*Shaar Alef, Chapter 21*).

He goes on to explain that from the time Moshe brought the Torah down to earth, it is no longer "in the Heavens." No one can dare to say that he alone has a special, profound knowledge and understanding of the hidden, esoteric Divine reasons and intents of the commandments, and as such, knows what is right for him in keeping with the root of his soul. Nor can anyone claim to know that according to the root of some other individual's soul, it is appropriate for him to transgress any one of the commandments, G-d forbid, or to do away with even the smallest rabbinical decree, or change the time when a *mitzvah* is to be fulfilled.



This is why the Torah concludes with the words, “And there never arose another prophet like Moshe” (*Devarim* 34:10). Our Sages, citing the verse, “These are the commandments” (*Vayikra* 27:34), teach that once the Torah was given, no prophet will ever be authorized to introduce innovations. For this reason, the verse, “Keep the entire word which I command you... do not add to it and do not deduct from it” (*Devarim* 13:1) is immediately followed by the Torah’s warning against the blandishments of a false prophet (13:2-5). Even if a prophet, complete with miraculous predictions and wonders, attempts to convince us to add or subtract commandments, we should not be swayed: “Do not listen to the words of that prophet... After Hashem your G-d you will follow” (see *Nefesh HaHayyim, Shaar Alef*, Chapter 22).

In my opinion, there is a deep reason behind the Vilna Gaon’s policy against the mingling of Kabbalistic concepts and halachic matters. He did not encourage the adoption of practices based solely on Kabbalistic sources, insisting on total obedience to the rulings of the *Shulhan Aruch*. This is very surprising, as the Gaon himself was the pre-eminent Kabbalist of his time; in fact, most of his writings are in the field of *Kabbalah*. And yet, where *halachah* was concerned, he did not permit Kabbalistic teachings to override the literal meaning of the words of our Sages as recorded in the *Gemara*.

It is clear that the Gaon was not opposed to *Kabbalah*, G-d forbid – as his closest students testified, his entire body would literally tremble when he mentioned the very name of the Arizal (Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin’s Introduction to the Gaon’s commentary on *Safra D’tzeniuta*). However, in his great wisdom, he felt that granting the stamp of legitimacy to any opinions other than those of the Sages of the Talmud and the *Shulhan Aruch*, especially those derived from “mystical secrets” not easily verified, opened the gates wide for unscrupulous individuals to invent a whole body of unfounded rulings and leniencies – purportedly based on *Kabbalah* – which would eventually undermine the foundations of *halachah*. To prevent this, the Gaon reinforced the supremacy of the *Shulhan Aruch*, even at the expense of the more stringent Kabbalistic rulings.

The Gaon’s concern was not farfetched. In 1815, Moshe Kunitz, an “enlightened” student of Moses Mendelssohn, composed a work entitled *Ben Yohai*, which defends the *Zohar*, answering all the questions raised on it by Rabbi Yaakov Emden in his work *Mitpahat Sefarim*. Realistically, this does not make sense. Why would a *maskil* like Kunitz bother to defend the *Zohar*, with all its halachic strictures? Secular intellectuals of his ilk were interested in discrediting the early authorities, not in defending them. If anything, their objections to esoteric teachings which do not comply with logical, scientific, academic systems of thought were particularly virulent.

We can discern that Kunitz’s concern was not for stricter standards of *halachah* or the honor of the sacred words of the *Zohar*; to the contrary. As the Gaon had anticipated, by



defending the *Zohar* and *Kabbalah*, setting them up in opposition to the binding authority of the *Shulhan Aruch*, he sought to enable others like himself to introduce outrageous changes in *halachah* in the guise of deep, esoteric Kabbalistic secrets.

On the other hand, our great Sefardic Torah authorities did encourage the adoption of Kabbalistic practices. At the same time, their rulings certainly did not deviate from *halachah* in any way; they were knowledgeable enough to incorporate both *halachah* and the opinions of *Kabbalah* in their rulings. The Hidda, the Ben Ish Hai and others carefully defined the borders of *halachah* and *Kabbalah* in every instance, and we are guided by their words to this day.

The Torah tells us, “What is hidden is for Hashem our G-d.” We study the hidden wisdom of *Kabbalah* only “for Hashem our G-d,” to clarify and reveal the truth of His Oneness in our dark world. “What is revealed is for us and our children.” In all matters of actual practice, we must behave strictly according to revealed *halachah*, without hidden meanings and interpretations, to avoid the risk of error. Never may we alter or deviate from the sacred words of our Sages and their halachic rulings. They are immutable Torah, to be cherished and obeyed by “us and our children, forever.”

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.