

# Toronto Torah

## Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshat Kedoshim

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in honour of Ralph and Shana Ginzburg

### Seek Reasons, But Keep Mitzvot Anyway

Rabbi Adam Friedmann

“You shall keep My laws (*chukotai*) and My rules (*mishpatai*) and do them, I am G-d.” (Vayikra 19:37) A midrash (Sifra, Kedoshim 8:11) explains that this verse is making an equation between the two types of mitzvot mentioned. *Mishpatim* are the mitzvot whose reasons seem obvious. *Chukim* are mitzvot that we don’t understand. The Torah is telling us that just as we must observe the *mishpatim*, so too must we observe the *chukim*. This midrash implies that without the Torah’s clarification we might have made an error that would have led us to assume that there is no need, or at least a diminished need, to keep the *chukim*. Why would we have thought this?

One possibility is that it’s a mistake to believe that the mitzvot have reasons, and this error might lead us to ignore mitzvot which don’t have clear reasons. Within this view, the Torah is telling us that in reality the *mishpatim* are just as unintelligible as the *chukim*. Our sole motivation for and intention while performing mitzvot should be that they are G-d’s will. This line of thinking fits well with the positions of several medieval Jewish thinkers.

The Rambam, however, presents an alternative understanding of the Torah’s lesson. His view begins with his assertion that there are reasons for the mitzvot. In the Guide for the Perplexed (3:25-26), he argues that G-d would not do anything or decree anything with no purpose. Therefore all the mitzvot *must* have reasons. The *chukim* are just those mitzvot whose reasons

we haven’t discovered yet. According to the Rambam, then, the mitzvot encode G-d’s wisdom and each one has something new to teach us.

This fits together with another feature of the Rambam’s philosophy. He believes that the fundamental point of contact between us and G-d is intellectual contemplation. [See Guide of the Perplexed 3:51.] Consequently, the Rambam holds that we cultivate a love of G-d by contemplating His acts and trying to discern the great wisdom in them. These acts include G-d’s statements and the creation of the natural world. But based on what we saw above, they should also include the mitzvot, since these too embody G-d’s wisdom. This is exactly what the Rambam writes in his Sefer HaMitzvot when describing the third positive commandment:

He commanded us to love Him, may He be exalted. This means that we should contemplate and gain insight into His **commandments** and His actions, until we grasp Him and draw pleasure from grasping Him, at the height of pleasure. This is the required love.

This citation describes a process. I contemplate the mitzvot *until* I am enlightened by some new understanding. Apparently, this process is critical, perhaps because without it the conclusions aren’t properly understood or can’t carry the appropriate psychological weight. Perhaps the comprehensions of G-d achieved here are unique to each individual. In any case, we can understand why the Rambam might think it important for Jews to consider the reasons

for the mitzvot. He confirms this in the Mishneh Torah (Hilchot Meilah 8:1), where he writes that every Jew ought to try and understand the reasons for mitzvot to the best of their abilities. The goal is to engage in the contemplation that leads to a connection with and a love for G-d.

It’s at this point that a pitfall appears, which the Rambam warns against by citing the midrash we saw above. In the pursuit of understanding the mitzvot, one may confuse the reasons for mitzvot as a source of intellectual connection with G-d and the reasons as the rationale for observing the mitzvot altogether. A person who is deeply involved with understanding the mitzvot may find it hard to suddenly retreat from them and keep mitzvot without a clear reason. According to the Rambam, this is what our parshah is warning us about. There are reasons for the mitzvot. We can and should pursue them. But ultimately, our observance of the mitzvot is not based in their reasons, but in fealty to G-d’s will.

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**Summary**

At the end of the previous chapter, King Tzidkiyahu of Judea revolted against Nevuchadnezzar, king of Bablyon. Our chapter begins with the Babylonian king laying siege to Jerusalem on the tenth of Tevet. After eighteen months of siege and starvation, the walls were breached on the ninth of Tammuz. King Tzidkiyahu tried to flee but was caught near the plains of Yericho and taken to Rivlah, the Babylonian base camp, for judgment. Tzidkiyahu's sons were slaughtered before his eyes. He was then blinded and brought in chains to Babylon. (1-7)

Beginning on the 7<sup>th</sup> of Av, Nevuzaradan, the Babylonian general, burnt down the Beit HaMikdash and the rest of the homes in Jerusalem before destroying the city walls. He then exiled most of the remaining nation, leaving only a few poor people to maintain the orchards and fields. (8-12)

Nevuzaradan looted the Beit HaMikdash, dismantling the bronze pillars, *kiyor* and all of the utensils made of bronze, gold, or silver, as well as the ornate columns erected by King Solomon. (13-17)

Nevuzaradan rounded up S'rayah the

Kohen Gadol, Tzefaniah, and other members of the nobility. He brought them to Rivlah, where Nevuchadnezzar had them executed. (18-21)

Gedaliah ben Achikam was then appointed as ruler of the few remaining Jews in Judea. The remaining soldiers and officers gathered around Gedaliah in Mitzpah, and Gedaliah swore to them that they had nothing to fear as long as they stayed and served Nevuchadnezzar. (22-24)

In Tishrei, either on the third of the month (Rosh Hashanah 18b) or on Rosh Hashanah itself (Ibn Ezra), Yishmael ben Netanyah, a descendant of royalty, took ten men and assassinated Gedaliah, before proceeding to kill the rest of the Jews and Babylonians in Mitzpah. The rest of the nation headed to Egypt because of their fear of Babylon. (25-27)

The Babylonian King Eveel Merodach freed Yehoyachin, the exiled king of the Judean Kingdom, from jail, twenty-seven years after the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed. Merodach placed Yehoyachin in a favourable place above other kings conquered by Babylon, and supported Yehoyachin for the rest of his life. (27-30)

**Insight**

As Sefer Melachim concludes we see the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash and the Jewish community. We also see a tale of two kings: the cruel end of Tzidkiyahu and the optimistic freeing of Yehoyachin. Why do we see both these kings' ends?

Tzidkiyahu represents what happens when we break our promises and ignore prophecies. While he receives a cruel and unusual punishment, Rashi explains that it fulfills a prophecy of Yechezkel 12:13, in which G-d said that Tzidkiyahu would be caught and brought to Babylon but he would be unable to see and he would die there. Professor Joseph Angel suggests that Nevuchadnezzar's choice of punishment may relate to Tzidkiyahu breaking his treaty of subservience, based on similar curse treaties found such as the [Sefire Inscription 1a](#) where blinding is listed for oath-breaking.

Yehoyachin's eventual partial emancipation indicates that there is still hope for rebuilding despite the dark path that the book Melachim has trod. As long as we maintain our faith in G-d and follow Torah and mitzvot, G-d can and will fulfill His covenant with us.

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**It Happened in Israel: The Death of Rabbi Akiva's Students**

Biblically, the days of the Omer, those between Pesach and Shavuot, are joyous. As Ramban suggests (see his comment to Vayikra 23:36), this period is the *chol hamoed*, the intermediate holy period between these two major holidays. Nevertheless, since the Geonic period, certain mourning practices have been maintained, partially due to the death of Rabbi Akiva's students during this period. (Teshuvot HaGaonim Shaarei Teshuvah 278, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 493:1)

The story of their death is recorded in several places, including the Talmud (Yevamot 62b), Bereishit Rabbah (61:3) and Kohelet Rabbah (11: 6). The Talmud records:

**"In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both alike shall be good"** (Ecclesiastes 11:6)...**Rabbi Akiva says** that the verse should be understood as follows: If one **studied Torah in his youth he should study more Torah in his old age; if he had students in his youth he should have additional students in his old age, as it is stated: "In the morning sow your seed, etc."** They said by way of example that **Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students** in an area of land that stretched **from Gevat to Antipatris** in Judea, **and they all died in one period of time, because they did not treat each other with respect**....With regard to the twelve thousand pairs of Rabbi Akiva's students, the Gemara adds: It is **taught** that **all of them died** in the period **from Passover until Shavuot**. (Koren tr., bold words are the Talmud, non-bold are added explanatory words)

The justification for their punishment differs slightly between the sources. According to the Talmud, they "did not treat

each other with respect." Bereishit Rabbah accuses them of "narrowed eyes," or stinginess. In Kohelet Rabbah, they are described as being "stingy in Torah" towards one another. Commentators have offered a variety approaches to the different explanations:

- Without citing the midrash, Rabbi Yehudah Loeb (Maharal, Chiddushei Aggadot to Yevamot 62b, second answer) seems to combine the talmudic issue of lacking respect with the midrashic issue of Torah study. He argues that the lack of respect refers specifically to failing to give the honour warranted by their Torah learning. As this was the sin, they died during the Omer, a time which celebrates the honour of the Torah. In Netivot Olam (Netiv HaTorah 12) Maharal adds that as Torah grants us life, failing to honour the Torah warrants the shortening of life.
- Rabbi Shemuel Eidels (Maharsha, Chiddushei Aggadot to Yevamot 62b) seems not to understand the sources together, and interprets the Talmud as saying that they gossiped about each other. They died during this period because it is a season which contributes to health, making the Divine origin of their deaths more evident. [See also the first answer in Maharal.]
- Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (Siftei Chaim Vol. 3, pages 44-48) argues that the Talmud lists the crime, and the midrash shows the root of the crime. The stinginess, the inability to see others have good, led to the lack of respect. In this case, this expressed itself in stinginess over success in Torah.

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**Biography**  
**Rabbi Avraham Y. Kook**  
**Rabbi Netanel Javasky**

[The following is excerpted from a longer biography by Rabbi Netanel Javasky.]

Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook was born in Latvia in 1865. Recognized as a prodigy at a young age, he joined the famed Volozhin Yeshiva, and developed a fond relationship with the Rosh haYeshiva, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv). His stay in Volozhin was under two years, but the Netziv is quoted as saying that had the entire Volozhin Yeshiva been founded just to teach Rav Kook, it would have been a worthwhile endeavour. His brilliance and inquisitive nature combined to lead him to the study of subjects not commonly explored in the traditional Yeshiva settings of the time, including Tanach, philosophy, Hebrew language and mysticism. Becoming a Rabbi at the age of 23, Rav Kook, in his early years, served the communities of Zaumel and then Bausk.

In the early years of the 20th century, immediately before emigrating to Israel, Rav Kook published three articles on the topic of Israel; the ideas in these articles would form a basis for his philosophy on this subject. In 1904 Rav Kook became Rabbi of Jaffa, and his broad impact was instantly felt. He had great respect and love for all Jews, and considered them all as pioneers in the spiritual redemption. Rav Kook explained that the Jew was made up of two components: the inner *pintele yid* and the route which he has set out upon with his actions. Even if one was weak in the latter, there was still the heart and soul of a Jew that could be loved and encouraged. Rav Kook's love and affection towards the secularists was often seen by his opponents as compromising Halachah, supporting those who were anti-religion.

Rav Kook was in Europe during the outbreak of World War I, and he used the opportunity to spread his desire that religious Jews settle the Land and influence its development. Soon after his return home, he was appointed as the first Chief Rabbi.

Rav Kook wrote prolifically on Jewish thought and the development of the Jewish land; new works of his writings continue to be published today. In 1924 he founded Yeshivat Merkaz haRav - named posthumously in his honour - known today as the bastion of Religious Zionism and as a place which has become synonymous with the teachings of Rav Kook. Rav Kook passed away in 1935, but his influence continues to be felt to this very day.

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**Torah and Translation**  
**Our Time is Coming**

**Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Orot haMilchamah 3-4**  
**Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner**

עזבונו את הפוליטיקה העולמית מאונס שיש בו רצון פנימי, עד אשר תבא עת מאושרה, שיהיה אפשר לנהל ממלכה בלא רשעה וברבריות; זהו הזמן שאנו מקוים. מובן הדבר, שכדי להגשימו אנו צריכים להתעורר בכחותינו כולם, להשתמש בכל האמצעים שהזמן מביא: הכל יד קל בורא כל עולמים מנהלת. אבל האיחור הוא איחור מוכרח, בחלה נפשנו בחטאים האיומים של הנהגת ממלכה בעת רעה. והנה הגיע הזמן, קרוב מאד, העולם יתבסס ואנו נוכל כבר להכין עצמנו, כי לנו כבר אפשר יהיה לנהל ממלכתנו על יסודות הטוב, החכמה, היושר וההארה האלקית הברורה. יעקב שלח לעשו את הפורפירא ('יעבר נא אדוני לפני עבדו') אין הדבר כדאי ליעקב לעסוק בממלכה, בעת שהיא צריכה להיות דמים מלאה, בעת שתובעת כשרון של רשעה. אנו קבלנו רק את היסוד כפי ההכרח ליסד אומה, וכיון שנגמל הגזע הודחנו ממלוך, בגוים נתפורנו, נזרענו במעמקי האדמה, עד אשר עת הזמיר הגיע וקול התור ישמע בארצנו.

לולא חטא העגל היו האומות יושבות ארץ ישראל משלימות עם ישראל ומודות להם, כי שם ד' הנקרא עליהם היה מעורר בהן יראת הרוממות, ולא היתה שום שיטת מלחמה נוהגת, וההשפעה היתה הולכת בדרכי שלום כבימות המשיח. רק החטא גרם ונתאחר הדבר אלפי שנים, וכל מסבות העולם הן אחוזות זו בזו להביא את אור ד' בעולם, וחטא העגל ימחה לגמרי וממילא "כל רואיהם יכירום כי הם זרע ברך ד'". והעולם יתוקן באורח שלום ורגשי אהבה, ונעם ד' יוחש בכל לבב, לענג רוח ולעדן נשמה ולכל בהם תחיה נפש כל חי.

We left global politics due to compulsion which contained an inner intent, until the time of good fortune would come, when it would be possible to govern an empire without wickedness or barbarity. This is the time for which we long. It is understood that in order to realize it we need to be aroused with all of our powers, to use all of the means which time brings, all that the Hand of G-d, Creator of Worlds, brings about. But the delay is a necessary delay. Our soul rejected the terrible sins involved in governing an empire in a wicked time. But behold, the time is arriving, very soon. The world will have a sweet scent, and we can already prepare ourselves, for it will already be possible for us to govern our empire on the foundations of the good, of knowledge, of righteousness, of clear Divine illumination. Yaakov sent to Esav the [royal] purple (cf Bereishit Rabbah 75:4), "Let my master go before his servant. (Bereishit 33:14)" It was not appropriate for Yaakov to involve himself in government at a time when it required being full of blood, when it demanded talents of wickedness. We received only the necessary foundation to establish a nation, and when the root was mature we were pushed out of government, we were scattered among the nations, we were planted in the depths of the soil, until the time of bird song would arrive and the sound of the turtledove would be heard in our land (Shir haShirim 2:12).

If not for the sin of the Golden Calf, the nations living in the Land of Israel would have made peace with Israel and acknowledged them, for the Name of G-d called upon them would have aroused awe of greatness, and no philosophy of war would have been conducted, and the [Divine] influence would have travelled paths of peace, as in the time of the Messiah. But sin was a catalyst and the matter was delayed for millennia, and all of the world's catalysts are interlocked in bringing G-d's light to the world, and the sin of the Calf will be entirely erased, and as a result, "All who see them will recognize that they are the progeny whom G-d has blessed. (Yeshayah 61:9)" And the world will be repaired in the path of peace and feelings of love, and the pleasantness of G-d will be felt with the entire heart, to provide pleasure for the spirit and to rejuvenate the soul, and in all of them will live the spirit of all who live.

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### Monday-Thursday

10:00 AM - Noon: Adult Seder Boker with Rabbi Moshe Yeres on ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/sederboker> (men)  
Monday/Wednesday: Talmud Succah, Orot of Rav Kook  
Tuesday/Thursday: Parshah, Tanach: Sefer Melachim

### Shabbat May 6-7

After hashkamah R' Yehuda Mann, Halachah from the Parshah, Clanton Park

After minchah Idan Rakovsky, Weekly shiur, Shaarei Tefillah

After minchah R' Mordechai Torczyner, Gemara Ketuvot, BAYT (Gruda Beis Medrash) (men)

### Sunday May 8

9:00 AM R' Zev Spitz & R' Yehuda Mann, Semichat Chaver Program, Clanton Park (men)

9:15 AM Idan Rakovsky, The Torah of Rav Shagar, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university)

### Monday May 9

A New Parshah Podcast: Parshat Emor

Apple <http://tiny.cc/apodcast>, Google <http://tiny.cc/gpodcast>, Spotify <http://tiny.cc/spodcast>

8:45 AM Idan Rakovsky, Likutei Moharan of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university)

2:15 PM Idan Rakovsky, Ethical Issues & Pirkei Avot #1 of 3, Beth Tikvah & ZOOM <http://tiny.cc/idanrak>

### Tuesday May 10

1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, King Solomon's Arc, Shaarei Shomayim & ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt>

5:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, SY Agnon's Lag ba'Omer, Father-Daughter Learning at Ulpanat Orot

7:00 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel (Chap. 14), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (men) *not this week*

### Wednesday May 11

6:15 AM R' Jared Anstandig, Talmud: Avodah Zarah, ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/idolsarebad>

10:00 AM R' Mordechai Torczyner, S. Y. Agnon's "Circles of Justice" #2 of 3

Fee: \$30; Register at <https://torontotorah.com/wednesdays>; On ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt>

12:30 PM The Ethical Challenge (with CPD credit for accountants), Week 1  
R' Mordechai Torczyner, Blood and Money: Conflict of Interest for Family Members  
On ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/bmlunch>, Register (free) at <http://torontotorah.com/business>

8:15 PM Idan Rakovsky, The Laws of Shabbat, Shaarei Tefillah

8:45 PM R' Chaim Metzger, Introduction to Midrash, BAYT (Library) & ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/chaimmetzger>

### Thursday May 12

1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel (Chap. 25), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (women)

### Friday May 13

9:00 AM R' Jared Anstandig, Parshah, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university)

10:30 AM R' Jared Anstandig, R' Mordechai Torczyner, R' Yehuda Mann, Bava Batra Perek 2 *advanced*  
In-person at Yeshivat Or Chaim, on ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/frishiur>

### COMING UP

SHABBAT MAY 13-14

KIBBUTZ GALUYOT: THE INGATHERING OF THE EXILES  
A Shabbaton of Thought and Inspiration  
Clanton Park Synagogue & the Or Chaim Minyan

9:30 AM SUNDAY MAY 15

Nusbaum Family Medical Ethics and Halachah Program  
FAMILY PLANNING IN JUDAISM  
Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner  
With CME credit; Laypeople welcome  
In person at BAYT or ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/mtethics>