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Arriving in a Foreign Land - The Torah World

Let us begin with a parable. When someone wants to travel from one country to another, he has several options. One possibility is to travel by land. Countries that are divided by borders, with no oceans in between, can be reached via a journey on solid ground. The second option, when there are oceans between two countries, is to travel by ship across the open seas. The third way of getting from one country to the next, is to fly by plane.

What is the difference between all these methods of travel? When someone travels over land or across the sea - even while he's in transit - he is always standing on solid ground. Even if he travels by ship across the ocean, he is still basically down here on this earth. Though the waters may be deep in places, he is still travelling over land. When someone travels by plane, as he enters the territory of his destination country, he is up in the air. Yet, we are well aware of the fact that eventually, the plane lands. After a 20 - 30 minute descent there is a familiar jolt, as the plane shakes and shudders, and finally touches ground.

The elements of this parable exist in reality, and serve as a parable. What we are interested in is the message. When a person makes the transition from one world to another, he must leave one world, and through yearning and struggling and great effort, he reaches another world. May we all merit reaching a truer world.

There are many ways of going from one world to the next. There are people who have made the journey calmly and carefully. They have studied intensively and clarified their concerns. They have carefully considered all that they have learned, and worked their way, step by step, towards their goals. When they felt truly ready, they made the auspicious move to a new and better place.

This can be compared to someone who buys a new home. Every day, he loads up his little car with some items from the old house, and brings them over to the new one. Slowly, but surely, he sets up his new place, in an organized and logical fashion.

On the other hand, there's another poor fellow who is informed, "Your lease is up. In three days you must be out of your apartment!" He and his wife stay up all night, throwing all their stuff haphazardly into boxes, breaking glasses, and turning their home into one big storage room. After three days, they pack up all that they own, and move into their new apartment. The movers walk in and dump all the boxes into the living room. That night, our friend is looking for a towel to dry his hands, but he can't find a thing! It's total chaos! Worse yet, if he's a disorganized type, he starts opening up all the boxes,

throwing everything on the floor, and creating a bigger mess!

Our world traveler can travel by land, in an organized way. He can ride a train, with scheduled stops, and predictable arrival times, or he can drive on smooth asphalt. On the other side of the coin, he may choose to travel by ship across the ocean. Endless waves fill the seas. In the past, many ships have capsized and sunk in the raging waters. Nowadays, that is less common, but it still happens. One who travels by boat, although he may not be suspended in the atmosphere, still encounters a great deal of turbulence. There are some who literally become ill from the rocking of the waves; seasickness is a common concern aboard ship. Thus, our traveler may arrive at his destination, but that does not mean he is healthy. In fact, he may be quite ill from the trauma he encountered on the way, when he enters his port of arrival.

Lastly, we have the air traveler. He went off to the Far East. He feels very 'spiritual,' like he is floating in the upper worlds, but in the end he lands in a completely different place.

The first thing to be aware of is that in order to go up into the clouds, there has to be some sort of shaking. Once he is up in the air and he is passing from one place to another, he must realize that he will have to come back down to earth at some point. It is impossible to live for any length of time suspended in the skies. There is no such thing. Even those who go to the moon or into outer space eventually come back down. Even though landing is a shock to the system, one must still come down. It's not possible to live in a plane. The oxygen supply is not good. No matter how much food one might take along, eventually it'll run out. The fuel supply will be exhausted sooner or later. One must come down. The question is, how does one land safely? There are times when a plane lands incorrectly and does not come in contact with the ground at the precise point that it should have; and it shatters. We need to learn how to come down to earth.

We've discussed three types of people, and how they traveled from one world to another. Hopefully, everyone recognizes which of these descriptions fits them. The common denominator between them is that they have all arrived in a new land. It looks different. There's a different reality. The climate is different. The temperature is different. The facial features of the locals are different. When someone travels to India, or to China or the Philippines, he sees different faces. Someone who travels from one country to another sees different faces. People's characters are different. They have different ways of behavior. It's a whole different world!

One must get to know the new country. If he doesn't familiarize himself with the new environment, he'll go out one night from his home, and he won't know how to get back. He'll be like a person with amnesia, not knowing how to return from where he came. He has to get to know his way around, to be familiar with the territory in which he finds himself.

If someone come to a new country, and see a sign on the road. He looks at it, and decides that the sign is useless! He takes a saw and he chops down the sign. But does he have any idea why they put the sign there? Does he work for the local municipality?!

There is a well-known story of someone who went to shul one Shabbos, and he was watching what was going on with the *aliyos* during *kriyas haTorah*. He saw how the *gabbai* got up at the beginning and went over to one corner, and then he went and called someone up for an *aliya* from another area of the shul.

The newcomer couldn't understand what was going on. How does it all work? He went over to the *gabbai* after *davening* and he said, "Excuse me, my friend. I help disorganized people. That is my area of expertise. I want to help you. I noticed when you were giving out the *aliyos* - you look like you have ADD! Something here doesn't make sense!

“Let me tell you how you should call people up to the Torah. You take the first person in shul in the first row. He goes up first. The one beside him is next, then the third one goes up third, and so on.”

The *gabbai* answers him, “I’m sorry, but it seems like you don’t know anything about Judaism. The first one who goes up has to be a Cohen. Does the Cohen have to be sitting in the first row, specifically in the first seat?! The second one who goes up, is a Levi. How do you expect us to do this? Do you know who got the third *aliyah*? The third *aliyah* went to the Rabbi! It doesn’t go the way you think it should!”

Secular Logic versus Torah Logic - Small is Really Big

When someone comes from college, he has been taught a certain logical way of thinking. He comes into the middle of things, and wonders why we act this way. There are those who come to the conclusion that certain things seem unnecessary. They are superfluous. If it really seems, according to his understanding, that there is no need for it, either he’ll mock in his heart those who abide by it, or if he is more extreme, he’ll skip it.

Every once in a while I meet people at all sorts of stages of *Yiddishkeit*. They claim, “Listen, this part, it’s not for me, it doesn’t fit in with who I am, it just doesn’t seem right for me.” Let’s say someone were to say that it just didn’t seem right to him to keep the commandment of, “Thou shalt not murder.” Would we say, “Okay, if it doesn’t feel right to you, so go ahead and murder!?”

We all understand that’s not what would happen. Do you know why it ‘just doesn’t feel right’ to you? Because you are not familiar with this world. If you would live there, if you would spend time there, if you would understand how it works, you would understand the foundations upon which it is built.

One Shabbos we had a Jewish, but not observant guest. . He had his own way of living his life, with some unclear spiritual meaning that he felt comfortable with, and that was where he was at. I told the kids that they had touched a stone on the way home from shul, and the stone was *muktze*. Unless you set aside the stones before Shabbos, they are *muktza*, because they have no use on Shabbos. Something that does not have a proper use on Shabbos is *muktze*.

There are four types of *muktze*. One of these categories is *muktze machmas gufo*. Something that is not useable on Shabbos has the law of *muktza*, that is, it is forbidden to move it on Shabbos. To touch it is questionable and to move it is definitely forbidden. So I told my kids, “You touched the stone. That was forbidden.”

The guest said, “You don’t have to teach the kids about such small stuff. There are bigger things in life.”

The response to that argument is, based on the verse, “This small one, will be great”^[1] – This ‘small’ one, let us not say ‘he will be great’, but rather, ‘he is great’. This can be compared to an atom bomb. How large is it? Someone might say, we don’t have to attach any importance to such a small thing. The whole world sees how Iran is trying to develop nuclear weapons, but he doesn’t understand what the big deal is. How big is this problem that we’re talking about? Such a tiny little thing?! There’s no need to make a fuss over such a small thing. Until that small thing explodes, destroying the world, he will sit quietly!

Why does he see things as small? The answer can be found in Hashem’s rebuke to Shaul *Hamelech*, “Because you are small in your eyes.”^[2] This sin led to him losing the kingship to David *Hamelech*. “Though you may be small in your eyes – you are the head of the tribes of Israel.”

Why is it small? It is small in your eyes! You see it as small. And why do you see it as small? Because

you don't understand its power! If you would realize that it's a nuclear bomb, you would not consider it something small. The fact that something is physically small, a small stone on Shabbos, does not mean that it's a small thing. It looks small when you look at it through your glasses! "You are small – in your eyes you are small!" But the thing you are looking at is actually not small at all!

Who can tell if something is big or small? The more Torah you know, the more the small things begin to grow large in your eyes.

The Chazon Ish said that he doesn't know of anything that is small. There is no such thing as a small thing! Everything in creation is a tremendous power! The *passuk* says, ^[3] "All of them with wisdom, You made." This means that even if there is a tiny thing, barely visible to the eye it has wisdom in it. Whose wisdom is it? It is the wisdom of Hakodosh Boruch Hu! Is it a great wisdom, or small wisdom? How much wisdom is there in such a tiny thing? Who can consider anything to be small? Only someone who does not understand that the entire creation has within it awesome wisdom!

Most people, obviously, don't understand this. How could they possibly understand?! Where is this wisdom to be found? Is it in the universities? Only the lowest of the lowest levels of wisdom can be found there!

"All of them with wisdom, You made." Everything in creation has tremendous depth! Awesome depths! A privileged few understand the deepest secrets of Creation, but no one comprehends all of it (the full extent of the depths). "Very, very deep are Your thoughts."^[4] The thoughts of the Creator, as we mentioned, contain endless wisdom. One can become wiser, and wiser, yet, the wisdom in Hashem's world is endless. One can never grasp all of it, nor reach the end of it.

Most people who have not learned this wisdom do not even understand that such wisdom exists, and they don't even know a small amount of it. Talmidei *chachamim* who merit sitting in the tent of Torah, can achieve an understanding of a small portion of this wisdom if they put in enough effort. But there is one thing that they understand deeply. There is no such thing in Creation as a small thing! Such a thing simply does not exist!

Man's Structure: Actions, Feelings and Thoughts

We will try to explain how a person is built, in order to understand the necessity of realizing that there is nothing small in Creation. Our Rabbis, who wanted to describe the structure of man, divided it into three parts: action, feelings and thoughts. These three aspects comprise, in a general way, the structure of a person.

His structure is similar to that of a building. The floors are built one on top of the other. The second floor is built on top of the first floor, the third floor is built on top of the first and second floors together. If there is no first floor, then it is not possible for there to be a second floor.

A cab driver once told me the following story. Twenty years ago he bought an apartment from a well-known contractor, who shall remain unnamed. The apartment was on the top floor of the building where there was a ladder leading up to the roof. Most buildings do not have regular stairs to the roof – rather they have a built-in ladder.

I asked him, "So what's the problem? It sounds like everything was fine."

He said, "No! The ladder didn't start from the floor! The first few rungs were missing! Only the upper rungs were there!" He continued, "I called the contractor. I said, 'How can you make such a ladder?'"

What was the logic of the one who built it such a ladder? The answer is: there was no logic! Like most

things in life, it made no sense!

What is the obvious lesson here? If there is no first step, it's impossible to go up to the next step! But I need to first be aware that this is the first step! When a person is not aware that he is standing on the first step, he thinks he has no need for it!

There could be a person who lives on the second floor. In his opinion, perhaps it would make sense to remove the steps leading up to the first floor. He lives on the second floor. How would he get up and down?

The reason why people sometimes drop the first step, is either because they don't realize such a thing even exists, or they think they've already passed it.

A person is convinced that he is already on a higher level. It's not meant for him. He doesn't need it. He's on the second floor already, so he thinks that he doesn't need the stairs leading up to the first floor.

But the truth is that a person needs that first step. What is the first step, as we mentioned? A person is made up of three things: action, feeling and thoughts. What is the first step then? Action.

Halachah: Details are Important

Before a person becomes a *baal teshuvah*, he thinks, what do I have to do? Performing acts of kindness, perhaps doing good deeds, keeping Shabbos, and a few other things. In the right time, he becomes observant and he enters the Beis Medrash. He begins learning *halachah*. He sees that they've brought him a really thick book. He asks, "Why is there so much? What do we need all this for?"

They say to him, start learning and you'll see. Then he begins to learn, and he discovers that these are waters that have no end!

When a *baal teshuvah* begins learning *halachah*, he might wonder, how many laws could there possibly be? He opens up the sefer, and he discovers that there are countless laws in the Torah! There are those who recognize that although they never expected it to be this way, this is the reality of what Torah is about. Such an individual begins to learn, and tries to observe the laws.

There are others, however, who start asking all kinds of questions. Why, they wonder, does Hashem care if I do this or I do that? There are well known questions that are asked constantly. For example, someone might point out that in days gone by, lighting a fire was hard work. You had to vigorously rub two stones together until a spark emerged. That is why it says in the Torah,^[5] "Do not light a fire." Nowadays, when all we have to do is flick a switch, surely that's not what Hashem intended (to prohibit). That's a very well-known question. And so on and so forth. You could publish a thick volume full of such questions. If we would sit and answer every single question, the time would run out, but the questions would not end, and the answers would not suffice either!

If You Believe in the Creator, You Must Obey His Laws

We have to understand the basic structure of Torah of Jewish law and how it is constructed.

This can be compared to the person who says, "There are so many veins and arteries in the body! Let's take one out!" What would happen if we did that? We have to understand how things are built.

Who gave us the holy Torah? Hakadosh Boruch Hu. Who wrote it? The Creator of the World. Whose

wisdom is it? It is the wisdom of Hakadosh Boruch Hu! Can a little two year old boy understand a bright and intelligent forty year old man? No, obviously he cannot. Even if the man would sit with him for ten hours straight and he would explain things to him, would the two year old understand him? The child may put all the powers of his mind to work, but that won't help him. In another thirty-eight years, perhaps he will succeed, because the boy will be forty years old by then. But at this point in time, there is no point in trying to explain it.

A person, first of all, must try to think and contemplate. Can I understand Hakadosh Boruch Hu, or not? (Can I understand Him, or not?) Regarding this matter, the Rebbe of Kotzk said, "If He was a Hashem that I could understand, I would not want Him to be my Hashem." He would not be Hashem; he would still be a human being.

He is Hashem, because He is above us. We can't grasp Him. So we see, that the wisdom that exists is a wisdom that can never be fully comprehended. We can but only catch a glimpse of a small part the outer edge of His wisdom.

If we question Hashem's laws, we ask "Why do we need this?" and "Maybe we can manage without it?" Rather we must begin with a simple premise. The One Who commanded this, the One Who wrote it in His holy Torah, is the Creator. Can I understand the Creator? No! If I believe in Him, I must fulfill His commandments. If I wish to understand them, even if I live the long life of Mesushelach, ^[6] I will not succeed.

People often think, 'I don't understand why this is necessary. I'll go to a Rav and ask him to explain it to me. If the Rav will convince that it's necessary, I'll do it. If he doesn't have a convincing explanation, I suppose I don't need to do it.'

This approach stems from the mistaken assumption that a person can understand the reasons for everything. Why did Hashem command, "Thou shall not murder?" Is it for the same reason that people think it is forbidden to murder? That is not the real reason. No one truly understands why we must not murder. Certainly the simple reason that everyone can sense and understand is true. But is that the entire depth of the reason? No. Why not? Because who commanded us not to murder? The Creator! Since it was the Creator who commanded that we may not murder, we cannot understand the deeper significance of the commandment.

If we want to be true to ourselves, we must answer the question: Do we believe that there is a Creator? Do we believe that He gave us the Torah? So everything He commanded in it, we must fulfill - it makes no difference if we understand it or not. I believe that the Creator commanded, therefore I must fulfill. I learn and I understand what He wants from me, and I must comply because I believe in Him. Not because I understand the reason for the commandment and if I don't understand I don't fulfill it. That is the first step.

If a person does not internalize the first level, he will get stuck on the subsequent steps. Often people do not understand why fulfilling *halachah* is the most fundamental aspect of Torah observance that one must be careful about.

People say to themselves, "Listen, I believe. I'll try. I do what I can. Why is it so crucial to keep the halacha?" The answer is very simple. Is it possible for someone to become a *baal teshuvah*, without believing that there is a Creator? To Whom has he returned? If he doesn't believe that there is a Creator, he hasn't returned.

When a person becomes a *baal teshuvah*, he believes that there is a Creator. Are you truly able to transform that belief into action? If not, it is a sign that you do not believe! It's no great feat to

become a *baal teshuvah* and keep the basic general foundations of Judaism. To do only that is a proof that a person is lacking in his belief that he has actually returned to the Creator. If I have returned to the Creator, and he has given me a commandment to fulfill, this is where I reveal whether I truly believe in Him, or not.

If my father were to come to me and ask me, "Could you please go down to the basement and get me a bottle of something to drink?"

I think to myself, "Oh, yeah, right. My father is thirsty, so I want to help him. I'll bring him a drink." But if I see that he just had four cups to drink, I say to him, "What do you need this for? You're not thirsty! It seems to me that you don't need it, so if you don't need it, I don't want to get it for you."

This makes no sense. If he asked you, obviously he had his reasons. If he wants he'll give you his reasons, if not, he won't give any explanations. He is not mentally ill, thank Hashem, he is perfectly sane. He has his reasons for doing things.

When someone becomes a *baal teshuvah*, he believes that there is a Creator. The first measuring rod that reveals whether you truly believe is - if you believe that He has given you instructions that tell you how to live, live your life in accordance with those instructions! If you do not lead your life according to Hashem's instructions it is like admitting that you do not truly believe in Him! If you truly believed in Him, then, when He told you to do certain things, you would believe that that is the best, and only good way to do it!

There are many details in *halachah*, but fulfillment of all the details lead to one goal. None of us can understand the reasons for all of the detailed laws, and neither do we grasp the depths of their significance. Nevertheless, if you truly believe in Him, you will fulfill all of the details of the laws. The foundation of the entire Jew, is first and foremost, active fulfillment of *mitzvos*.

The Proper Way to Learn Halachah

A person learns a *halachah*. He thinks to himself, "Do I behave in this manner, or not? If I already do this, great! But if I do not act this way, I will change my behavior as of this moment."

My brother once told me that he was studying the laws of Shabbos with a study partner. One of the laws of Shabbos is that it is preferable that the head of the household, when he sits down for the Shabbos meal, should be able to see the Shabbos candles from where he is sitting. It often happens that the Shabbos candles are behind the head of the table.

In homes with young children, it is common practice to put the Shabbos candles up on a shelf against the wall, to avoid the dangers of fire around small children. So we choose whichever corner works, and that's where we set up the candles. If the table is set up a certain way, it could be that candles are set up behind the back of the head of the household, preventing him from seeing them while he eats the Shabbos meal.

When my brother's chavrusa learned that the head of the household should preferably see the candles during his meal, he stopped for a minute and thought, "What's going on in my home? Next week, I'll sit on the other side of the table."

This is the proper way to learn *halachah*. He sees what it says. With Hashem's help, he understands what he has learned. He thinks to himself, "Do I do this, or not? If I do this; Boruch Hashem, great. If not, 'the past is nothing, the future is not yet, and the present is like the blink of an eye.' Right now, at this very moment, I will begin."

But all this is rooted in a deep *emunah*, that the Creator of the world is the One Who commanded me regarding this Torah and the fulfillment of all of these detailed laws. This detailed law has infinite wisdom. The Infinite One, Blessed is He, wants me to do this. If the Infinite One desires this, certainly according to His Infinite wisdom, that is how it must be done. Therefore, I must act that way, even if I do not understand.

Based on everything we've said, learning *halachah* and putting it into actual practice, is the root of everything. If a *baal teshuvah* thinks there are laws that are not necessary to fulfill, then, to put it bluntly, he hasn't truly done teshuva. He doesn't understand what it means to be a *baal teshuvah*.

It is possible that every one of us has sometimes forgotten a *halachah*, and stumbled. There is no one who remembers everything and does everything perfectly throughout his entire lifetime. Every person sometimes doesn't follow the *halachah*, because he forgets. But we cannot say that I don't understand why it's necessary or that it seems unimportant and therefore I don't fulfill the mitzvah, *chas ve'shalom*.

In a deeper sense, a person who makes these claims has not returned to the Creator; he has returned to someone else. Perhaps he has returned to himself. If we understand that there is a Creator and we believe in Him, then we believe that we must fulfill all of His commandments. This brings us back to the idea we mentioned earlier, that there is no such thing as something small, "If you are small – in your eyes, it is small." But every detail is really big. When you look at it with your eyes, it may seem small, but if you take a microscope you will see how great it truly is. Then you will want to fulfill it, and you will merit fulfilling it. This is the first step, the level of learning *Halachah*.

Thoughts and Feelings: The Torah Teaches Us How to Think

There are two more levels. As we mentioned, a person is divided in general, into three parts: actions, feelings, and thoughts. Often a person's feelings seem very positive to him, even as his outward actions tell a different story. How many secular Jews say, "In my heart, I serve the Creator. I am a good Jew." He helps everybody, even thieves. In his heart a person thinks that if he has good feelings, everything is fine.

Chazal said,^[7] "Anyone who is compassionate to those who are cruel, will end up being cruel to those who are compassionate." But what can I do if I feel in my heart that it's good to be kind to those who are cruel as well? Is that a good feeling, or not? According to my logic, is it good to have mercy on a cruel person? Sure. Such a person is the most miserable person around. He is cruel! He is terribly unfortunate.

But *Chazal* teach us that a person should not always go where his natural instincts may lead him. The emotions need another source of direction. How do I know which feelings are positive and which are negative? According to how it seems to me? Not at all. If there is no brain, then the heart is not a true heart either. The emotions, too, are not the proper emotions. In order to know whether our feelings are correct, we need to learn, and if we learn, we will know what our feelings should be. In that case, let us begin with the learning.

An average person living in our world, whose place is not in the *beis medrash*, who is not part of the Torah world, barely uses his mind. A majority of people, obviously, think about what to do, what not to do, when to get up, when to buy things and what to buy, but the brain is barely put to use. A small percentage of people study in various institutions of learning, and their brains are also at work. But how long do they "stay in" learning? Two or three years, maybe even four or five? During the course of a lifetime, are they constantly learning? It is very rare to find, in the outside world, people whose

brains are working at learning during their entire lifetimes. In the best case scenario, they may be learning for several years.

On the other hand, a person who sits in the *beis medrash*, his brain must continue to toil until his dying day. There is never a time when he is exempt from studying Torah. Whether he is young or old, whether he is healthy or ill, as the Rambam^[8] says, he must learn Torah until the day he dies.

In order to understand this, we first need to understand the power of Torah learning. So long as a person is on the outside of the Torah world, he has no inkling that to become part of that world involves building a world of the intellect.

He thinks that to become a *baal teshuvah* means to do whatever must be done. Whatever the Rav tells him to do, he'll do. It would be wonderful if everyone did that! But that's only a small part of becoming a *baal teshuvah*. You cannot remain bound to the Rav like a child tied to his mother's apron strings; obeying everything he says. In the beginning he will tell you what to do, but little by little, you must build and begin to think yourself.

When you enter the world of Torah, it's not only a change in what to do and what not to do, as we mentioned earlier. An additional, basic change (that must be made) is to understand that "Yisroel were His first thoughts to be created."^[9] Chazal said, "Who did Hashem, so to speak, think of to create first? The Jewish Nation."

In other words, the power of the Jewish nation is that they are 'the first of the thought.' They are the true power of thought that exists in Creation! That is the secret of the holy Torah; that it is the wisdom of the Creator, given specifically to the Jewish nation.

The Torah is made up of three parts. One part of Torah is the commandments that a Jew must fulfill. That is the aspect of fulfilling the Torah in action. The second part of Torah is to study it. The Torah is wisdom, it is a body of knowledge. The third part of Torah is to build the emotions based on true thought patterns.

Entrance into the world of Torah is, on the one hand, entrance into a world of action. What must I do, and what is forbidden to me? That is true. But another part of the world into which he has entered, which is often unclear at the beginning of the path, and is also often unclear in the middle of the way, and even sometimes until the end, is that he has entered a world that builds the power of thought in a person.

It is clear that entrance to the world of Torah means building something new in the brain. This is similar to building a new home. Everyone, upon entering the world of Torah, whether he is a young child growing up, or someone who has led a superficial existence, and then enters into it, must understand one principle. On the one hand, we must build up our active fulfillment of the laws-- what is permitted, what is forbidden, what are we obligated to do. On the other hand, he is building a new home! In the words of the *passuk*,^[10] "Through wisdom is a house built." In a deep sense, building the mind of a person is like building a home inside of him.

To build a brain means that a person understands, first of all, that the business of Torah is not only to learn in order to do, although it is the main thing. In addition, however, he understands that he learns in order to build his intellect.

Studying Gemara: Building Closeness to Hashem by Learning to Think Like Him (so to speak)

There are those who take a *Gemara* and they think it's a book of good luck charms. They've been told

that it's something holy, 'it lights up the soul.' I am not saying that it does not bring light to the soul. Boruch Hashem, it creates a lot of light. But if they find that there is less light than they were hoping for, they will take a Zohar which creates more light. Everything creates light. It's an incredible thing! But does a person really learn *Gemara* only because it makes lights for him?

The main reason he learns *Gemara* is so that he should have a brain! The holy Torah is certainly a Torah of light, and it lights up for a person. Yet, the light of Torah is a structured, organized light. It is the enlightenment of the mind.

Someone who has never studied *Gemara* lacks an organized method of thinking. When he is fortunate enough to begin studying Talmud, he suddenly discovers an organized way of thinking. There's a certain amount of discomfort at first. It's hard to understand what's going on. What difference does every detail make? Why must we discuss every nitty-gritty point so much? To avoid this confusion, we must be aware of one basic premise: learning *Gemara* is not the same as learning *halachah*.

Halachah teaches a person what he should do. When one learns *Gemara*, however, he can spend the whole morning studying. Will he get something practical out of it, something he can act upon? Usually not. It is actually forbidden to go ahead and do something one learns about in the *Gemara*. We need to investigate what is actually written in the Shulchan Aruch. It could be that there were many details that were relevant to the subject, that lead to a different conclusion than the one that we may understand from the text in the *Gemara*.

A person arrives at the *beis medresh* in the morning, with Hashem's help, and he merits learning *Gemara*. What should he hope to achieve? First of all, knowing the holy Torah is an end in itself. But in addition to that, and much deeper, he must build his intellect!

There is a Divine wisdom the Creator revealed in the holy Torah. We want to receive, so to speak, the Creator's way of thinking.

Knowing what to do and what not to do is not enough. Imagine a married couple, where the wife says one thing, and the husband says the exact opposite. Each of them has a totally different way of thinking. Finally, the wife gives in, quoting the *Chazal*,^[11] "a kosher woman does the will of her husband." He says to her, "Okay, do whatever I want. But I cannot live together all the time with someone who always thinks the opposite way."

In the words of *Chazal*,^[12] "the understanding of those who have never learned Torah is the opposite of the understanding of the wise ones (who study Torah)." It makes no sense that a person wants to be close to the Creator, he wants to return to Him, and the Creator, so to speak has one way of thinking, while he takes a position that is diametrically opposed.

The Minister of Defense has a certain set way of thinking. He may fire the General. Why? It's not that he's no good. The problem is that his way of thinking is totally different than the Minister's. They can't work together.

A person wants to be close to the Creator. He has returned to Him, he wants to cling to Him. He must, so to speak, harmonize himself with the Creator. How can he do that? One way is to think like the Creator thinks, so to speak. How do I know what the Creator thinks? Am I a prophet? Does the Divine spirit rest upon me? How can I know?

Hashem gave man the holy Torah, and within it, He revealed His thoughts. When a person reads the *Gemara*, he discusses the *Gemara's* question, and without reading further he thinks of an answer. If he thought of the correct answer on his own, it's a sign that he is already beginning to think the way

the Creator thinks.

What can this be compared to? A person was once walking in the forest, and he got lost. He didn't know how to get out of the forest in the direction of the city. He met someone else in the forest who was deaf and mute and seemed to know where he was going. At first, the poor fellow didn't notice the other man's deafness. He asked him, "How do you get to the city?"

The deaf man couldn't hear that he was being spoken to! Slowly, he noticed the man's lips moving. He looked at him, but he couldn't answer him. The lost individual stood there and debated with himself. 'How do I know that this is the way? He's not talking.' After a minute, he thought to himself, 'He's not talking, but if he himself is going in that direction, it's a sign that this must be the way to get out of this forest.'

If I discover that the *Gemara* says something similar to what I thought, that means I'm going in the right direction. To build the right thinking in Torah means that as a person learns, he tries to see, little by little, whether he thinks like the *Gemara*. That is not to say that he reads the answer and says, "Ah, that's what I thought!" He studies the text. He reads a question in Rashi, for example, on *Chumash*, or in the *Gemara*. He tries to think of an answer. What kind of answer does he come up with? In the beginning, I assure you, he may suggest many different possibilities, but he will definitely not suggest Rashi's explanation!

There's no need to despair. This is the path. Slowly but surely, you match yourself to the Torah's way of thinking. Gradually, you will see, one time you will merit reaching the same conclusion as the *Gemara*. You will merit getting the same answer as *Tosafos*. Eventually you will notice that your thinking is growing closer and closer to the holy Torah. It is no longer your own way of thinking, but the Creator's way of thinking, so to speak!

When we merit, with Hashem's help, learning *Gemara*, we must want, first of all, to simply understand the *Gemara* in order to know the Torah. The Torah is the truth. But it goes much deeper than that. We must try to match our way of thinking with the Torah. When we want to see, after a period of time, whether we've improved or not, we check to what extent our thinking corresponds with the Torah's teachings, and how our thinking differs from the Torah.

Anyone who is familiar with people who have come closer to Judaism discovers that at first, when one learns *Gemara* with them, they come up with logical deductions that are preposterous. Why? Because it's not the Torah. But give them a week, and then another week, and suddenly, to the contrary, he begins to speak the truth! Another week, and he says even more truth!

After two years of such learning, there are young men in Yerushalayim who transfer to regular kollelim, made up of people who have already been learning for twenty years. Gradually, they match their thinking to the thinking of the holy Torah! They learn, but they don't just learn, they attach their intellect, their way of thinking, to that of the Torah. What is the outcome of this?

This can be compared to a child. Anytime he doesn't know what to do, he asks his father. But as is the way of the world, everything must come to an end. One day, the father is gone, it's all over. The son sits and says to himself, 'What should I do now? I have no one to ask!'

He takes a stick, and bangs on the grave. He cries out, "Abba! Help me! Abba! Help me!" He lights a memorial candle. But his father obviously does not get up from the grave. He has no choice. He cries out to his father, "I beg of you, appear to me in a dream. I have a question."

The father comes to him in a dream and says to him, "Nu, what's your question? When I was alive, and I answered your questions, you didn't understand what I wanted. I did not intend merely to

answer your questions! My intention was to teach you my way of thinking, and slowly but surely, you should be able to answer yourself, when I will no longer be here! If you want an answer to every question from me, I will not come every night in a dream to answer your questions.”

Rabbi Chaim Vital writes that during the first twenty years after the death of the Arizal, his Rebbi, he would come to him at night and reveal secrets to him. Not all of us merit being on the level of Rabbi Chaim Vital, who merited the revelation of the holy Arizal. We don't always have someone to ask.

When a person asks a Rav, or learns the holy Torah, what is the purpose of doing so? It is not only to get an answer, but to understand what the method of thinking was that led him to reach that conclusion.

What do I gain from doing this? First of all, I match myself to that method of thinking, as we said. But on a deeper level, I cannot possibly be connected to a world while I am dependent on others in every minor detail. I need someone to teach me the right way of thinking, and then, after several years, I can think on my own. At that point, I can build myself.

Often people enter the world of Torah, and consider themselves *baalei teshuvah* until their dying day. It would be wonderful if all of us would merit being *baalei teshuvah* until the day we die! But we are referring to the fact that they always have a feeling of insecurity. 'I haven't learned Torah, I don't know enough, I need to ask.' That's obviously a positive thing, but it has a negative aspect as well.

First of all, where does it come from? It comes from the fact that a person learns Torah, but he doesn't try to match his thinking to the Torah. Therefore he always feels as though he's on the outside.

Our job is to understand that we learn Torah in order to match our thinking to the world of Torah, to the holy Torah, to Hashem's thinking, so to speak. When a person attaches himself to the Torah's way of thinking, he feels good. He feels at home. A guest feels out of place, whereas a homeowner feels at home. When a person senses that his thinking is similar to the thinking of the holy Torah, then he has an internal connection to Torah. It's about a way of life, not just the details of life.

I will repeat, and attempt to explain again. Becoming a *baal teshuvah* is not only about what to do and what not to do which is the basic prerequisite, as we mentioned earlier. To become a *baal teshuvah* is to completely change the way of thinking, and to accept a different way of thinking. It is about learning Torah, and understanding that it builds my way of thinking in a whole new way.

A normal person would surely assume that showing compassion to those who are cruel is a positive character trait. Yet, our holy *chachamim* teach us, 'Whoever has compassion for those who are cruel, in the end he will be cruel to those who are compassionate.'^[13] How did they come to this conclusion? Their way of thinking was different than that of a person who did not learn Torah.

Torah True Thinking Leads to Torah True Feelings/Emotions

The third world that we spoke about is when a person wants to build the world of his emotions. If he hasn't yet aligned himself with the Torah's way of thinking, he will build his emotions in the way of a non-Jew. If he wants to build a true world of feelings, it is imperative that he have the correct knowledge of how to create a true thought process. If he has a true way of thinking, the Torah's thinking, then it will lead to an awareness of which feelings are good, and which aren't.

If we don't understand that becoming a *baal teshuvah* is not just about what to do, even though that is the most important thing, but about matching myself to the Torah's way of thinking, then our entire

lives will be superficial. We will be lacking the heart and the intellect of the holy Torah!

Constant In-depth Learning is a Necessity

Once we grasp this concept, we must be aware of the next step. A person becomes a *baal teshuvah*, with Hashem's help. Baruch Hashem. He tries to fulfill the laws. He learns in a yeshiva, and after that, he gets married, in the right time. Life is what it is. Hashem leads every person to a different place. Sometimes a person reaches a point where he is learning an hour at night, or a quarter of an hour in the morning.

I will try to explain what the problem is with the above scenario. If doing *teshuvah* consisted only of knowing what to do and what not to do, then setting aside a quarter of an hour at night as a set time to learn *halachah* would be enough. But this is not what doing *teshuvah* is about.

A person was walking down a muddy road in winter. He walks through the front door of his home, wipes his feet off on the mat and goes right in. After he's gone into the house, and he is already in the living room, he suddenly notices that he's left muddy footprints on the floor. He realizes he hadn't cleaned his shoes well enough, and there was still mud on them. Now, he has messed up the entire house.

We have to leave all the previous thoughts and habits we have accumulated before our return outside. Our previous way of thinking must remain outside! In Torah, there is a different way of thinking. This thinking is hidden in the *Chumash* and in *Navi*, and it is revealed in the *Gemara*. In order to acquire it, one must sit and learn, and connect with it, each person to the best of his ability.

A person becomes a *baal teshuvah*, and learns for half a year or even for two years in yeshiva. Then he gets married and goes out to work, while continuing to set aside a small amount of time for Torah learning. Though we do not make light of even a moment of learning, without his realizing it he is gradually disconnecting himself from the Torah's way of thinking. Or in a deeper sense, he has not yet connected properly.

To become a *baal teshuvah* means to be constantly performing deeds, and connecting to Torah by learning actively, every day, for a generous portion of time, everyone according to his ability. It's not just about what to do and what not to do; it is to develop a completely different way of thinking! Just as in America we speak English, and in Eretz Yisroel, we speak Hebrew, a completely different language, so too, the thinking that exists in the outside world, and the thinking that exists in the holy Torah are completely different from each other.

Therefore it is impossible, at a certain stage, to learn only for a limited period of time and then afterwards to deepen one's knowledge of Torah. It is crucial that we build a foundation for our lives with the active pursuit of Torah learning. We must realize that if we do not establish that kind of thinking method, then we do not understand what it means to become a *baal teshuvah*! This is not an insignificant detail - it is a basic description of what it means to 'return.'

Time is Running Out - Do it Now!

Every year on Rosh HaShanah, everyone must reach a conclusion. What does he want out of life? What is his purpose?

This can be compared to a person who wants to take out a mortgage. He fills out an application for the loan. It takes time for the bank to approve the loan, but eventually, they do. Our friend has his mortgage approved, and now he has to activate the loan.

Four months later he returns to the bank, having already signed a contract to buy a house. He already has a loan that's been approved, and he is ready to borrow the money. When he gets to the bank, they tell him there is no loan for him! He is shocked! "You told me there was a loan for me. I signed a contract!"

They answer, "The loan was approved for a period of three months. The three months are over, your time is up. The mortgage is gone."

Someone told me that he bought land here, and he took out bank loans to cover part of the cost of the property. Afterwards, as we all know, real estate prices fell, and he was in deep trouble.

I asked him, "What's the problem? So don't sell the land right now, what's the big deal?"

"No, you don't understand," he argued.

"You're right, I really don't understand. Explain it to me!"

He explained, "I took a loan from the bank for two years. Fifty percent was my principle, fifty percent was the bank's investment. Now that the price of the land has gone down, the bank is demanding that I return a portion of the money."

"I don't understand. For how long was the loan? If it was for twenty years, and the land's value decreased, then just extend the length of the mortgage."

He countered, "No, it doesn't work like that! It's not that. The loan was only for two years. At the end of every two years, I need to renew the loan again. This time the bank told me that they don't want to renew it. As long as it was worthwhile for them, they were willing to renew. Now, they're afraid that people are in a tight spot, and won't be able to pay back their loans. So what happens? I'm left with land that is half mine.

"I bought the land for a million dollars. Half a million was my money, half a million from the bank. Now the land is worth six hundred thousand dollars. I owe the bank five hundred thousand, and when you add the interest, it's even more. So I'm left with nothing at all! If they are not willing to renew the loan now, I don't end up with half of the present value of the property, which would give me three hundred thousand according to the new price. I get nothing at all!"

Everyone understands this scenario. What is the lesson here? When we understand that this is the way of life, we can't wait any longer. How many people have wonderful intentions, but every time you nudge them about it, they say they'll do it next month, next year. After they deal with a specific problem or as soon as such and such event occurs. They'll do it when the children grow up, or at the end of the school year. They just need to clear up the current debt. All of these excuses, and then they will do what they intended! Everyone knows that 'afterwards' never comes!

Several months ago someone told me that with Hashem's help, in honor of the month of Elul, he has decided to leave his business for one month, to sit and learn. All year he's involved in business matters. At least one month of the year, he should have Torah!

I met him a while later and I asked him, "Nu, nu, what's happening?" He said, "Well, in the end we decided to renovate the house."

I said to him, "Fine, so renovate in Cheshvan!"

He said "No, it's urgent! Listen, my wife... she really wants to do this."

I said to him, “Never, in your entire lifetime will you learn in Elul!”

I wasn't trying to tell him that that's what would happen. I simply wanted to shake him up. If you decided to renovate now, and pushed off learning to next Elul, next year you'll decide to renovate the garden and after you renovate the garden you will push off renovating yourself!

If a person is at a certain point in his life journey, and he has made certain decisions, he needs to act on it them right away. Now! This minute! This second! If he starts pushing things off, he'll continue to push them off. In the end, who knows if he will ever actually bring them to fruition? If he had the long life of Mesushelach, meaning that he lived many hundreds of years, then he would have the time. But no one knows how much time he has, and even if he knows when his time will come, life is very short.

Therefore, you must realize that, Boruch Hashem, you merited coming to a place of Torah, a place, where, with the help of Hashem, you will be directed towards the truth. Everyone must sit with himself and make a cheshbon *nefesh*, asking himself what he wants out of life, and to reach the true conclusion.

What is his purpose in life? What are his obligations and merits in his world? After he has reached that conclusion, through deep contemplation and self examination, he should joyfully enter into the world of Torah.

^[1] – verse recited at a Bris Milah

^[2] – Shmuel Aleph 15:17

^[3] – Tehillim 104:24

^[4] – Tehillim 92:6

^[5] – Shemos 35:3

^[6] – Bereishis 5:25 Mesushelach died seven days before the Flood; his lifespan of 969 years makes him a byword for longevity.

^[7] – Yalkut Shmuel Aleph Remez 121

^[8] – Rambam, Hilchos Talmud Torah 1:10

^[9] – Zohar Chadash Megillas Ruth 49b

^[10] – Mishlei 24:3

^[11] – Eliyahu Rabbah Parsha 10

¹²² — S'ma, Choshen Mishpat 3:12

¹²³ — Yalkut Shmuel Aleph Remez 121

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/droshos-path-bt>