

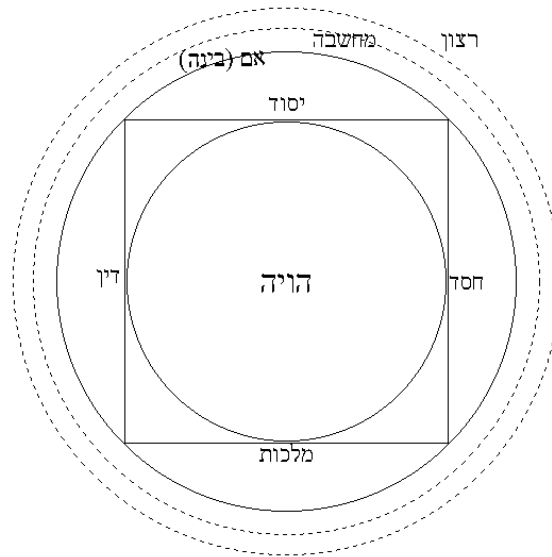
Facing Hashem - The Way of Kabbalah

תשס"ו

The Sefirot as Psyche

Our first and most basic framework for interpreting the Sefirot has been the psyche: the Sefirot and the complex relationships between them are a "mapping out" of the psyche. The claim is not that this sefirotic description of the psyche is the only possible one, or that it contains every aspect of the psyche, but only that it is a useful, creative and compelling description. Understanding the sefirot as a reflection of the mind is helpful in a number of ways: it explains the source of kabbalistic symbolism in a rational manner, it dispels the question of the "existence" or "truth" of the sefirot, and it relates the symbols of kabbalah directly to what is important to us: what we experience and what we value.

There are many different models of understanding how the sefirot map out the mind. The following diagram presents one possible model.



Ratson (will) is the outermost sefirah and something like the abstracted essence of life: will - movement towards - telos. We as actual beings don't have access to Will, because we always want something specific. The Sefirah Will is the essence, the abstract, of all our actual wills. It might be understood as the most fundamental difference between mind and inanimate matter. After Will is Thought (Chochmah). Thought stands in relation to our regular thoughts as Will stands in relation to our regular wills. Human thought reveals a basic internal lawfulness, as in the principle of

contradiction, or in our understanding of the laws of nature. Chochmah may be understood as the principle of fixed lawfulness which is present wherever the lawfulness of our minds (and of the world) is manifest.

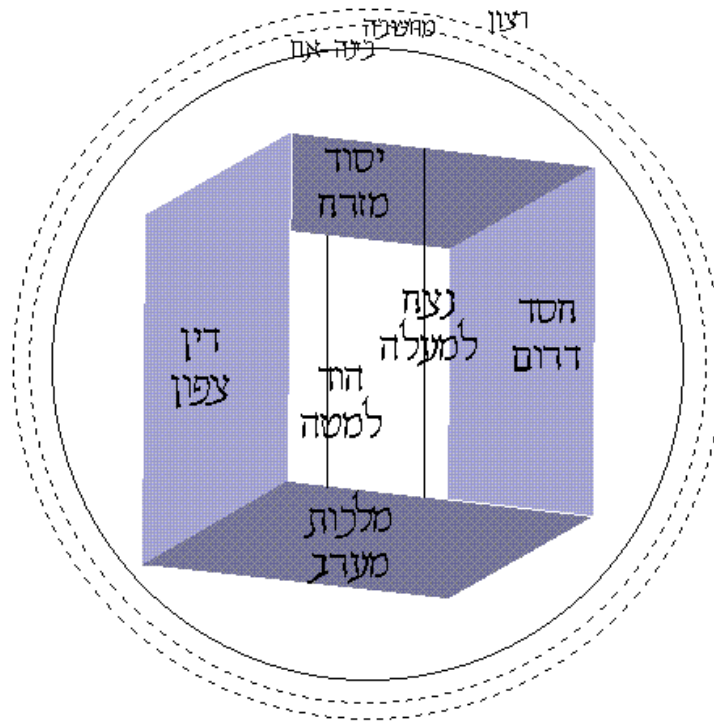
Next is Binah or Understanding. Binah is the place where Ratson and Chochmah expand into the structure of human consciousness in which there are actual wills and actual thoughts. As we will see, Binah expands into the actual contents of consciousness which consist of dynamic opposites. Binah is the unity from which both sides of these dynamic opposites emerge.

Next in this explanation come Hesed and Din, and Yesod and Malchut. These sefirot (like all the seven lower sefirot) are manifestations of Binah. If Binah is the place or unity of actual consciousness, where there are actual wills and actual thoughts, then these four sefirot are the dynamics of how consciousness works: the inner structure of what we experience and what we value. They form two pairs of dynamic opposites: yesod (male) and malchut (female), chesed (love) and din (justice). I suggest that these two pairs of opposites not be understood as the only two pairs of dialectical opposites which constitute our psyche, but as a paradigm for a possibly infinite number of such elements which all together make us up. Other examples of such pairs of opposites could be active and passive, force and limitation, actuality and potentiality and so forth.

Assuming we are dealing with a healthy psyche, a soul that cleaves to God, then at the center of the pairs of opposites in the lower sefirot is YKVK. We have understood YKVK as something like the Jungian "self". This is a balance or harmony produced by the dynamic opposites (yesod/malchut, hesed/din) standing in healthy relationship. The appearance of YKVK is like the arising of harmony among many voices or like when a relationship between two people produces more power, love and happiness than the combined sum of what the two people had within them individually. When YKVK appears as the center of the psyche the divine flow of life and love (חיים וחסד), shefa, is present. Achieving this harmony and receiving this shefa through Love of God and cleaving to Her as individuals, families, the People Israel and finally as all humanity is the purpose of Torah and Mitsvot. (In this context, note that this model of the sefirot applies to a group of people, such as the People Israel, just as it applies to each individual).

Now, no two psyches are alike, and thus no two human manifestations of YKVK are alike. All of the above descriptions of the sefirot relate to every(wo)man. The irreducible individuality of each creature is represented by Nestach and Hod. These sefirot are the third dimension of the sefirotic

structure. They are the variables that differentiate each human manifestation of YKVK from the others:



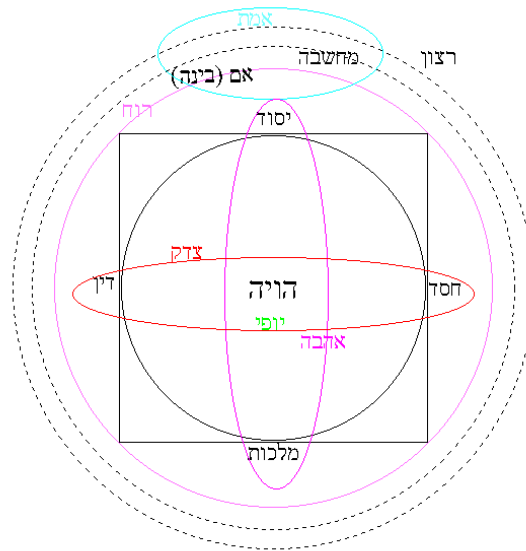
(The circles should be spheres. YKVK should be floating in the middle.)

This is a seforitic depiction of an actual psyche - it has "three dimensions". In reality, beneath the upper three sefirot the shapes would not be perfect. The lower sefirot appear slightly different in each creature - thus the circles would not be perfect circles and the squares not perfect squares. And YKVK is not exactly in the middle as the balance between the particular dynamic opposites present in a given individual is not necessarily the mean between them. The metaphor of YKVK being the "center" of each psychic organism expresses the fact that this is a healthy balance and not a bad one, that the "heart" (also not exactly in the center of the body) of the creature is YKVK and not...Sitra Achra or evil.

But before we discuss the sitra achra we need to review another aspect of the above approach. The divine shefa appearing when YKVK appears as the "center" of the psyche is the life energy, motivation and meaning that we experience in our lives. The sefirot, in correct balance, may be understood as the source of such life energy as they come together to form the following six categories: Freedom (free will, creativity), Truth (reason and logic), Spirit (existential wholeness, feeling a part of the whole), Love (human relationships), Justice (morality and social justice) and Beauty. Its not just the sefirot, but the sefirot in correct constellation, which produce the shefa

which appears in the form of these values. The correct constellation is that of a psyche whose center is YKVK, that is, who imitates God by making her "self" YKVK.

These six categories of value are not meant to exhaust all possible human value, for they may be dynamic, infinite and paradoxical, but only to suggest some useful categories for mapping out what has value for us. There are many possible models of the relationship between the sefirot and these sources of value. Here is one:



(Ratson: Will or Freedom, Chochma-Binah: Truth, Yesod-YKVK-Malchut: Love, Hesed-YKVK-Din: Justice, Binah: Spirit, Tiferet: Beauty).

Thus the appearance of YKVK, and the divine flow of energy which it signifies, refer to the actual sources of energy and meaning which we experience. In the healthy soul, the relationship between its various elements is such that the divine flow is full and powerful.

The actual balance which is YKVK, and the path to it, are individual to each creature. This individuality is expressed, as we saw, by Netsach and Hod. Thus the prophets of Israel, paradigms of reaching the heights of shefa, drew their visions from Netsach and Hod: Adonai Elohim Tsvaot. This signifies that the path to reaching the universal and eternal divine, which contains the sources of energy and meaning, is not through eliminating individuality but through fully exploring it, fully manifesting it. It is in the individual stuff of the real creature that the divine powers are located. This idea will be critical to understanding the meaning and unique significance of Israel's Oral Torah, as we will see.

But there is another source of energy and meaning left out in the above six categories. We know from unfortunate experience that people don't only draw energy and meaning from the good, but also from hate, anger and violence. If the sefirot were meant to map out all of the parts and sources of value, meaning and energy in the soul, there would have to be a sefirah of שינאה - sefirat hate/anger. And in a sense there is: it is the sitra achra, the Other Side. But the sitra achra is not a sefirah but outside the system. The sefirotic system is not a neutral description of the psyche but includes a value *judgment*: only those sources of energy which are compatible with Love and Justice are part of the system. God is righteous in all Her ways.

The sitra achra is sometimes described as containing parallels to all the sefirot, or at least the lower seven. We can make sense of this if we address the sefirot as sources of value, meaning and energy as suggested above. In place of Love, Hate or perhaps Narcissism, and in place of Justice, Anger or perhaps Sadism. That is the heart of the change. Beauty and Spirit seem to fit as well with Hate and Anger as they do with Love and Justice (as in high aesthetics of German death camps or the sense of duty and spiritual meaning that the Nazis found in their endeavor). I'm not sure if Truth goes "both ways" as easily (the Nazis lied to themselves about the nature of the Jews). But perhaps a different form of evil could make use of truth.

Thus Sitra Achra emerges as an alternative to YKVK as the center of the system. A psyche may focus itself and draw sustenance from such a center just as from YKVK. Then why choose YKVK over the Sitra Achra? This is similar to the question "why be moral?". Many answers have been suggested, but it seems to me that there is no reason to choose Justice/Love over Anger/Hate that is not outside the discourse of these categories themselves. That is: the reason to be moral is that not being moral is "bad". What does "bad" mean? It means "not moral". Choosing the side of Justice/Love may be justified only in the terms of Justice/Love: it is a fundamental act of Will (Ratsion) and no external justification may be found for it. Thus the choice to cleave to YKVK and not to the Sitra Achra is the most fundamental existential act of will that a human being makes, and it is in a sense inexplicable and irrational. Torah is predicated, of course, on choosing YKVK.

It follows from the above that YKVK, as the "center" of the sefirot, is ultimately the name for all value and meaning in human life. Value and meaning are of course a multifarious lot. They are the excitement of passion and the response to beauty. They are the command of justice and the rigor of truth. They are both the search for transcendent meaning and the search to be part of a whole. They are the experience of love in all its forms. They are both the actual force of energy accompanying certain human pursuits and activities and the logic of moral and rational judgment which declare

certain such pursuits "wrong" or "bad" in spite of the energy accompanying them. Above we suggested that the categories of Will, Truth, Spirit, Justice, Love and Beauty might designate much of what we value and find meaningful. If so, YKVK is the inner logic and heart of these categories.

Defining YKVK in this way is not to claim that all human value and meaning form a coherent whole. What we understand as ultimately valuable and meaningful reflects a complex process of reflection, analysis, interpretation and judgment of the total contents of our minds. It is likely that even for one individual at one time no one coherent theory of value could contain all that is truly meaningful and valuable in his eyes. In the vast complexity and dynamism of our values there is much paradox and contradiction. None the less, in every context and from every perspective that we identify some balance, relationship or structure as valuable and meaningful, we are identifying an aspect of our understanding of YKVK. It should come as no surprise that we cannot offer one inclusive and coherent theory of our values. YKVK may be the heart of the self, but it is also the unfathomable Self of She who creates us in Her image.

The Sefirot as the World and God

Above we described the sefirot as a model of the psyche. But they are also a model of the world and the revealed side of God. Stated in short hand (as we've discussed this at length), this makes sense in the following way:

The Kabbalah may be understood as adopting a non-dualistic or pantheistic approach: Everything is God. Thus the world, including people, are all divine. God is greater than the world, but the world is God. (Note that this is definitional and is not a truth-claim. One cannot dispute the pantheist's definition that "everything is God" anymore than one can dispute the Hebrew speaker's statement that the four legged structures in the beit midrash are called "shulchanot".)

But describing the world in terms of the sefirot seems counter-intuitive: the world as it appears to our senses and to the sciences seems mechanistic, impersonal, material-spatial and so forth. The sefirot describe the psyche, which is willful, personal, mental-spiritual (not spatial) and so forth. Isn't describing the world in terms of the sefirot a categorical mistake?

Kabbalah's answer is "no", and the reason for this may be understood as a certain kind of response to the mind-brain/spirit-matter/psyche-body paradox. This paradox is quite complex but simply put: if the psyche/mind is separate from the material body, how do they interact? And if they are one whole, two aspects of the same thing, then how is it, for example, that the psyche/mind seems to

function according to teleological (goal directed) concerns arising from its feelings and ideas, while the brain/body seems to function according to mechanistic causality (not seeking goals but responding to causes) which arise from purely material processes in the body?

A common response to this paradox (particularly in the "secular West") is to remove the psyche from the idea of the real. That is, the qualities of mind such as Will, Truth, Love, Justice and so forth aren't "real". Our thoughts and feelings are *really* physiological processes in our brain. The Kabbalah has, in a sense, the opposite response: the physiological processes in our brain are *really* manifestations of Will, Truth, Love, Justice, Spirit and Beauty. Both directions are predicated on the shared assumption that reality as a whole forms a coherent unity and thus the logic governing one aspect of it (matter and the natural sciences) cannot contradict the logic governing a different aspect of it (the mind and inner experience). It seems to me that both directions are equally rational. If it makes sense to understand the spiritual world of mind in terms of the material world of the brain, then it must, necessarily, make sense to do the opposite. In any case, the Kabbalah understands the material world in the categories of the sefirot which we suggested reflect the structure and content of the mind.

And thus the World, which is the revealed side of God, functions according to the same laws of nature that the psyche does: everywhere the sefirot are manifested. And thus the All, all of existence addressed as One, may be understood as a S/He and not as It. Science envisions the All as a giant mechanistic machine, whereas the Kabbalah envisions the universe as one huge divine psyche, a manifestation of the great Personal Will of God.

It follows that what was said above about YKVK and the Sitra Achra describes not only the human mind but reality as a whole. When an individual human being chooses YKVK and achieves it in her/himself, reality as a whole is that much closer to YKVK being One and His Name One.

The Word of God and Written and Oral Torah

Written Torah

What could the "Word of God" be? All things are God, and thus all words are the words of God. But what is *The* Word of God? It is the most important thing that God has to *say* to human beings: the meaning and purpose of their lives, which is the imitation of God, or, the achieving of YKVK in each person. The Word of God is the command, and the telling of how, to do that. (Again, note that these are definitions and not truth-claims.)

Where and when does God tell us the meaning and purpose of our lives? Where is this knowledge located? Above we suggested that all value and meaning arise from the content and structure of our minds and experience through a process of reflection, analysis, interpretation and judgment. If so, then the Word of God is located in that part of God we call *human consciousness*. More specifically, the Word of God is located in that principle of the psyche called YKVK, as we discussed above. Another name for the sefirah of YKVK is Written Torah. Thus the Written Torah is the meaning and purpose of human life, that is, the Word of God.

The Written Torah in this sense is ultimate value. It is, by definition, the meaning and purpose of human life always. Of course, human beings have different conceptions of value and meaning at different places and times. If these conceptions are **true** they are faces of the Written Torah, for the Written Torah contains all *true* understandings of value and meaning. However, since the Written Torah contains all value, and any given human understanding of value is partial and particular, no statement of value is the Written Torah itself but rather is always one partial interpretation of the Written Torah. (That is why above, when discussing YKVK as the name for all value and meaning, we specified that any conception of value and meaning is an *understanding* of YKVK, not YKVK itself). The name for interpretations of the Written Torah is Oral Torah, about which we will speak later.

Here arise two questions: first, if the Written Torah contains all *true* interpretations of value and meaning", how do we know which these are? Second, if all conceptions of value and meaning are interpretations of the Written Torah, but not the Written Torah itself, does the concept Written Torah have any reality of its own?

Regarding the first question, the answer is that we never know. We only have our best considered judgment. If so, what does it mean to talk about "true" understandings? The idea that the Written Torah contains all true understandings of meaning and value expresses an important aspect of the process through which we discover value, or in other words, of the process in which The Word of God is revealed *through* Written Torah and *in* Oral Torah.

Let's return for a moment to the categories we suggested above for our values in a general sense: Will, Truth, Love, Justice, Spirit and Beauty. It's relatively straightforward to understand talk about what's really true, as opposed to what we understand as true, in relation to Truth. We accept that there is truth in physics, for example. People can understand something of this truth but can also get it wrong. Any actual statement about the nature of the material world, the subject of physics, is a

human understanding and may be wrong. But none the less it makes sense that there's still a true (if partial) description of the material world, even if we can never know for sure if it's the one we've encountered. The truth of any statement of physics is included in the Written Torah, for the Written Torah contains all truth, scientific and otherwise. Any actual statement about physics is always an interpretation, and attempt at understanding, the Written Torah, but not the Written Torah itself. So we can meaningfully say that any statement about physics is a part of the Written Torah in so far it is true even though we can never know for sure what's true and what's not.

A similar, but more difficult, explanation may be offered regarding Justice/Morality. The Written Torah is absolute Justice/Morality while all of our actual judgments are only interpretations of that absolute. At minimum, this expresses an aspect of the experience of moral reasoning. On the one hand, we have a sense that certain moral judgments are absolute, such as murdering the innocent. But actual moral judgments involve navigating deep divides of value and culture, including disagreements about other related subjects such as the nature of rationality and its importance, or about the nature of reality itself.

If we conclude from these difficulties that there are no absolutes in morality and that everything is relative, there may be no significance in distinguishing between true and false moral statements. If, however, in spite of the difficulties, we accept as true in some sense our basic intuition that some acts are truly wrong, then it is meaningful to distinguish between our judgments and what is really true. The truth in any statement about morality is included in the Written Torah, for the Written Torah contains all that is Moral. Any actual statement about morality is always an interpretation of the Written Torah but not the Written Torah itself. So we can meaningfully say that any statement about morality is a part of the Written Torah in so far it is true, even though we can never know for sure if a given statement is true in this sense or not. In this context, The Written Torah is the name for the absolute ground of morality, or at least for our *experience* of some such absolute ground, that we intuit but can never grasp directly.

The second question regards the *reality* of Written Torah. Given that we never directly perceive Written Torah, is it real? If what we mean by real is concrete material reality, then the answer is no. But if that's our definition of what's real, then many other things we take for granted as real are in fact not real, such as "color". "Color" is an abstraction, it is a name for the similarities of the way we experience certain concrete entities, but it is not a concrete entity itself. Color can be in two places at the same time. It has no weight or size. One never meets "color" as such, but has visual experiences which one categorizes as experiences of "color". Another example of an unreality like

color is the truth of physics discussed above. Such a "truth" reflects something about the patters of structure and behavior we see in the material world, but it is not itself a concrete entity but rather an abstraction we make based on our experience.

If concepts like "color" and the "truth" of physics are "real", then we mean by "real" not only concrete material things, but also abstractions we offer as names for aspects of our inner lives and experience in the world. These abstractions are *real* in that they refer to things, or aspects and patterns of things, which we *really* experience (and our experience is really part of the world). Above we suggested two examples of such aspects or patters that the sefirah of YKVK or Written Torah is the name for in regard to Truth and Morality. Examples for the other general values could be offered. In this sense, the Written Torah *really* exists.

The actual Written Torah: The Chumash

The next stage is to understand that the Written Torah in the arc, the actual Chumash, is in fact the Written Torah we are speaking about. Understanding how this is so depends on a certain conception of the nature of the human mind and of the nature of written language or texts. We will now present these conceptions.

The mind may be potentially infinite in content and perhaps ultimately malleable in structure, but like the universe as a whole, all its parts and processes are connected. For example, consider a given moment of your experience. This would consist, among other things, of some momentary constellation of cognitive thought and emotional content. Reflecting on the larger context and meaning of this experience, step by step, connection after connection, will lead you to the totality of all your thoughts and values, experience, memory, emotional structure, personal history and so forth. Each and every moment of your experience is an instance of the totality of everything you are.

And you, by extension, contain the totality of human consciousness at all times and places. If you reflect on the larger context and meaning of the total contents of your mind, you will find, step after step, connection after connection, that it will lead you to the totality of human consciousness in all times and places. Thus each moment of your experience is an instance of the totality of all human experience. In fact, if you continue expanding out in this reflection, you will find that each moment reflects the universe as a whole. This movement from the individual to the whole expresses the idea that all things are one and thus connected. But our interest here is particularly in the connection between each instance of human consciousness and the totally of human consciousness.

As we have argued above, human consciousness is the location of the meaning and purpose of human life, that is, the Word of God or the Written Torah. This is another way of saying that the part of God in which the Word of God to humanity is located is the human mind. The location of the Word of God in the human consciousness, and the fact that each instance of human consciousness contains, by extension, the whole of it, mean together that the Word of God is contained, by extension, in each instance of human consciousness. A text, written language, is an instance of human consciousness. And thus all texts by extension contain the Word of God. That is, if one reflects on the larger context and meaning of a text one will reach, by extension, the totality of the contents of the human mind where the meaning and purpose of human life is located.

The Chumash is a text, and thus the Chumash contains, by extension, the Word of God. But in the context of Torah life we need to argue more than that. We need to understand how the Chumash itself, every pasuk and every word, is the Word of God to Israel. The Rambam puts it this way:

“The eighth principle is Torah Min HaShamayim (Torah from God)...that the whole Torah was given to us through Moses our Teacher entirely from God...There is no distinction between verse[s] of scripture like “The sons of Ham were Kush and Mizrayim and Put and Kena’an” or “and his wife’s name was Mehetav’el, daughter of Matred” [and verses like] “I am the Lord your God (Ex. 20:2) or “Hear O Israel” (Deut. 6:4). All are from the mouth of God, and all are the Torah of God, perfect, pure, holy and true”.

We have explained how any text contains, by extension, all of human consciousness where the Word of God, the meaning and purpose of human life, is located. However, we have not explained what it would mean to access the Word of God through a text. Furthermore, a text contains, by extension, all of human consciousness, including all that's not the Word of God, even that which is immoral and false. So we need to explain how the Chumash doesn't just contain, by extension, the Word of God along with everything else, but actually constitutes the Word of God and not that which is immoral and false. Lastly, we haven't explained how the Chumash is different from any other text.

First we will address what it means to access the Word of God through a text. We have argued that all meaning and value arise through a process of intuition, analysis, judgment, interpretation and so forth in regard to the contents of human experience. Accessing the Word of God through a text would mean going about this process while addressing human experience through the prism of that text. We have already established that a text, by extension, contains the totality of human consciousness, and thus there's no corner of human experience which can't be accessed ultimately through the prism of the text. For example, one can reflect on all of one's experience of family life

through a close reading of the family stories in Genesis. So too, one can reflect on the essential questions of government and politics through analysis of Moshe's difficulties with establishing Torah government or Korach's challenge to his leadership.

The text is not limited to its cognitive content. Equally important is the way it sounds, looks and feels. In this way each and every detail of the text becomes an invitation to explore the totality of one's own mind. When reading a text this way, all of one's associations and responses are relevant material in the process of interpretation. One reflects on the myriad interconnections within the text and between the text and the world. Each interconnection creates a new context and each new context holds new meanings. Through this method of learning one can see how the text contains, by extension, the totality of human consciousness just as each moment of your experience does. There is no boundary between the text and the rest of the world but rather the text extends out and includes all that there is. The way of learning a text in this way is the way of *midrash*, as in the Talmud and Zohar.

This is what it means to access the totality of human experience, and within that the Word of God, through a text. But how could a text such as the Chumash be regarded not as containing the Word of God along with the rest of human consciousness but rather as being the Word of God itself?

When we access all of human experience through a text we're involved in a kind of expansion. We disregard the limitations we normally place on the meaning of a text, like the author's intent or its simple meaning, and allow the text to extend out to all human experience through the interconnectedness of all the elements of that experience. Understanding a text such as the Chumash as the Word of God and nothing else requires an opposite process, one of limitation. Here we determine the nature of the text and then regard as relevant interpretations of the text only those which are in keeping with that character. A text may be regarded as the Word of God when the only relevant interpretations of it are the meaning and purpose of human life.

For example, if when asked as to the contents of a recipe in a cook book, one responds "a great flurry of activity expressed through a series of highly physical verbs forming a semi-circle around a sensuous illustration", one can expect a surprised look in response. This is so because while this may be a true description of the contents of a given page, it is not an interpretation of that page as a part of a *cook book*. Similarly, a response concerning the possibility that a given part of a recipe was actually added by the publisher and was not present in the author's original manuscript is also

not relevant to the book *as a cook book*. Approaching the text *as a cook book* means interpreting it in a way that involves *cooking something*.

In the same way, understanding a text as the Word of God means that only interpretations involving the meaning and purpose of life are relevant to its meaning. It is possible to discuss, for instance, the history of the Chumash, who its authors might be, in what ways it reflects various ancient cultures and so forth. However, if one seeks to address the Chumash as a cook book, one needs to learn something about cooking. And if one seeks to address the Chumash as the Word of God, one needs to learn something about the meaning and purpose of our lives. Its not that the other descriptions of the Chumash's contents aren't significant in some other context. The point is that only descriptions involving the meaning and purpose of life are relevant to the Chumash as a revelation of God's Word¹. If one systematically learns the text in this way then the text doesn't simply contain by extension the Word of God, the text is the Word of God and nothing else.

Now, above we argued that no actual statement of value and meaning is ever the Written Torah but rather always an interpretation of it.. Here we are arguing that the Chumash itself is the Word of God because we access the totality of human consciousness through it and then determine that only those meanings which we understand as the meaning and purpose of life, that is the Word of God or Written Torah, are what the text means. If so, it seems to follow that we can never understand the Chumash completely but can only have partial understandings of it, and never can we be certain that our understandings are correct. This exactly is the situation.

The infinity of meaning in the Chumash (the actual text of the Written Torah) as Written Torah (YKVK in the Kabbalistic sense) is expressed by the midrash that the Torah was given black fire on white fire. The white fire is Hesed, on which the specific contents of Torah were written in black fire or Gevurah. Together they are Tiferet, Written Torah or YKVK, given *mipi hagevurah*, from the mouth of Gevurah. Just as Gevurah is a more limited, and thus more comprehensible, manifestation of Hesed, so too the letters in black fire of the Torah are a more limited, and thus more comprehensible, manifestation of the white fire behind them. The totality of meaning in the Chumash is in the whiteness behind the letters. Any understanding of the Chumash as Written Torah, if its true, is one partial reflection of the totality of God's Word.

¹ In the context of Torah life, understanding a detail of Yaakov's relationship with his sons or, of course, a detail of one of the Commandments, certainly constitutes a part of the meaning and purpose of our lives.

The Ramban expresses this idea in his introduction to his commentary to the Chumash:

“Also we have a true received tradition that the entire Torah is the Names of the Holy One Blessed Be He...and it seems that the Torah written in black fire on white fire that we mentioned related to this point, that the Torah was written continuously, not broken up into words, and it was possible when reading it to read in accordance with the Names, [and it was possible] for you to read according to our reading relating to the Teaching and the Commandments, and it [the Torah] was transmitted to Moshe Rabbeinu in accordance with the way of reading according to the Commandments, and the way of reading according to the Names was transmitted to him orally.”

The Chumash as the Names of God cannot be fully grasped by any human mind. The Chumash as we normally read it, according to the "Teaching and the Commandments", is only one partial reflection of its truth.

Oral Torah and Knesset Yisrael

The last question we presented above was in what way is the Chumash different from any other text. The Chumash may be a prophetic, miraculous and brilliant work unlike any other. But this is not necessary for the approach outlined here. Everything we said above is, in principle, true about any text, even a cookbook. Why then do we regard the Chumash as the Written Torah and not any other text?

The most simple and general answer to this question is that we approach the Chumash, and only the Chumash, in this way because we are the People Israel. While its true that any text could in principle reveal the Word of God, no two texts reveal that Word in the same way. The approach outlined here could equally well justify building a civilization around learning a different text, the Koran for example, as the Word of God. There is no necessary reason why the resulting religious civilization would be in any way inferior to that of Israel, but it would not be the unique revelation of God's presence in the world which is Knesset Yisrael. The unique perspective on God's Word revealed in the Chumash is the essence of Israel. And the totality of Israel – peoplehood, religion, language, land, history – is the unique pattern of light shed by God's Word shining through the prism of the Chumash.

The significance of the unique face of God revealed through Knesset Yisrael may be better understood through consideration of the meaning of Oral Torah. Above we defined any actual interpretation of Written Torah, itself infinite and unknowable, as Oral Torah. If Written Torah is the true meaning and purpose of one's life then Oral Torah is the actual understanding of that meaning and purpose throughout one's life. But if that was the total content of Oral Torah, then the response to the Chumash as God's Word would be an individual and even momentary affair. One moment one might hear God commanding Tefillin and the next moment forbidding them. Such a

situation would not contradict in principle the idea of Chumash as the Written Torah as described above, but it would compromise the possibility of establishing a coherent life of meaning in response to that Word.

The inner logic of Oral Torah expresses the way we respond to the Chumash as the Word of God in a sustained and collective manner. The two central avenues of Oral Torah are Midrash Halacha and Midrash Aggadah. Midrash Halacha constitutes our response to the Written Torah in regard to what we do. Midrash Aggadah constitutes our response to the Written Torah in regard to what things mean. These two avenues provide coherency in our response to the infinity of God's Word in the Chumash so that we can build our lives around it. Thus our response is sustained. They also create Israel as a community of response to the Chumash. First, this is so because midrash, like language, creates a common public sphere where Jews explore the meaning of God's Word in ways that make communal, rather than only individual, sense. Second, because the Oral Torah is *Oral*.

The Oral Torah, the authoritative meaning of the Written Torah to Israel here and now, is the Torah alive in each generation of Israel. The transmission of this living Torah from generation to generation is the continuity of Israel's identity. Thus the Torah *means* what we receive from our teachers. True, it is transformed in the receiving, and again in the transmission, but it is the Torah we're taught from the mouths of the living that we transform, and it is that flesh-and-blood reality we pass on. Just as the totality of one's inner life could not be set down in writing, so too it is an impossibility to write down the Oral Torah. The prohibition to write that which is oral safeguards against *the illusion* that one could by-pass living teachers and yet remain Knesset Yisrael. Attempting to do so would be parallel to the attempt to "erase" one's previous years of personal history. The result could only be a dismembering of identity.

The significance of Oral Torah may be further understood by returning to the model of the sefirot. Written Torah is Tiferet or YKVK. Oral Torah is Malchut. Between the universal and eternal Written Torah and the particular and temporal Oral Torah lie Netsach and Hod. Above we described these two sefirot as the principle of individuality in each psyche. Shaarei Orah describes them as something like the unique DNA of each creature, or the *very* of "until this very day". The Divine Overflow of Shefa passes through Netsach and Hod in order to flow from Tiferet to Malchut. This reflects the fact that the path in which the infinite and incomprehensible Written Torah is revealed in the concrete and humanly meaningful Oral Torah must pass through the principle of individuality. The Oral Torah reveals God's Word to us because it speaks to us in our embodied

particular selves. We cannot understand all seventy faces of Torah at once. It is only in the particular that the universal is revealed.

And thus it is in the actual details of Torah life that God's universal Word is most clearly revealed. The deepest meanings of human relationships are revealed not in general verbal formulations of love and commitment but in actual instances of intimacy and care. So too the presence of God in Israel is revealed not in the general formulations of 'comparative religion' but in Hebrew spoken on a corner in Jerusalem, the feel of Tefillin on one's arm and the rhythm of voices in a beit midrash. But the meaning of these details cannot be isolated from the totality of Israel as a unique face of God in Her world. Each detail, each moment is a cross reference in the intertextuality of living Torah. Knesset Yisrael is like a musical or literary creation: the parts constitute the whole but only in light of the whole is the deeper meaning of each part revealed.

We may highlight another aspect of Oral Torah's meaning by returning again to the model of the Sefirot above. Organizing one's inner and outer life so that YKVK stands at the center is the realization of our potential to imitate God, to be in Her image. At the same time, YKVK only becomes comprehensible as manifest through Netsach and Hod, the principle of our individuality. Here we might return to our comparison of YKVK to the Jungian self, the principle of realizing one's individuality in the fullness of a life. Thus Torah in its entirety, that is Written Torah (YKVK) as revealed *through* Netsach-Hod and *in* Oral Torah (Malchut), is the *collective self* of the People Israel we seek to realize. It is the structuring of our collective lives, from the beit Knesset to the IDF to social welfare, so that YKVK stands at our center as a People, so that we are in the image of God. That is why the Shechinah, the presence of God unique to Israel, is also called Knesset Yisrael, the name of Israel herself (both are names of Malchut, as is Oral Torah). And that is why the Kabbalists say "Israel, the Torah and the Holy One Blessed Be He are One". Really that means they *should* be one, for only when we realize our *collective self*, Written Torah as revealed in Oral Torah (YKVK – Tiferent, pronounced Adonai – Malchut) are we truly a nation of priests and holy people, a nation manifesting the image of God.

Choosing Torah

It is clear from the above that while there are or at least could be equally valid and meaningful paths to God's Word other than that of Israel, there is no universal path. If one were to truly read the Koran, for instance, as the Word of God, one would have to immerse oneself in the totality and details of the particular civilization that is Islam. Even "Western secularism" is just another

particular path. The choice to leave the path of Knesset Yisrael and enter onto a different one is not to choose the universal over the particular but simply to choose a foreign way.

Furthermore, while it is true that reading the Chumash as the Word of God is an interpretative act of limitation, as discussed above, that does not imply narrow-mindedness. While the essence of Israel is a reflection of the unique prism onto God's Word that is the Chumash, nonetheless the Torah, Written and Oral, is God's Word precisely because through their particular lens they contain the total universe of human experience. There are no objective perspectives on the meaning and value emerging from human consciousness. All lenses are particular.

But only one lens, or *aspeklaria*, reveals the Shechinah. And this, finally, is the real meaning of choosing Torah. In the model of the sefirot above, the relationship between Yesod and Malchut manifests the universal value Love. But as we have seen, universal value only becomes manifest for us *through* Netsach and Hod, the passage to the particular, to the individual. Thus we as human beings do not know abstract "love-ness" devoid of an actual object of love. Love is manifest to us only in relation to *he or she that we love*. Our choice to seek God through Torah embodies our love for *Knesset Yisrael*: the touch, face and breath of *Shechinat HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.