



Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah Basic Principle of Torah

Chapter 1

1 The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to realize that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being. All existing things, whether celestial, terrestrial, or belonging to an intermediate class, exist only through His true existence.

2 If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist.

3 If, however, it were supposed that all other beings were non-existent, He alone would still exist. Their non-existence would not involve His non-existence. For all beings are in need of Him; but He blessed be He, is not in need of them nor of any one of them. Hence, His real essence is unlike that of any of them.¹

4 This is what the prophet means when he says, “But the Eternal is the true God” (Jer. 10:10); that is, He alone is real, and nothing else has reality like His reality. The same thought the Torah expresses in the text: “There is none else besides Him” (Deut. 4:35); that is: there is no being besides Him, that is really like Him.

6 To acknowledge this truth is an affirmative precept, as it is said, “I am the Lord your God” (Ex. 20:2; Deut/ 5:6). And whoever permits the thought to enter his mind that there is another deity besides this God, violates a prohibition; as it is said, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7), and denies the essence of religion—this doctrine being the great principle on which everything depends.

8 That the Holy One, blessed be he, is not a physical body, is explicitly set forth in the Pentateuch and in the prophets, as it is said “(Know therefore) that the Lord, He is God in Heaven above, and upon the Earth beneath” (Deut. 4:39); and a physical body is not in two places at one time. Furthermore, it is said, “For you saw no manner of similitude” (*ibid.* 4:15); and again it is said, “To whom then will you liken Me, or shall I equal?” (Is. 40:25). If He were a body, He would be like other bodies.

9 Since this is so, what is the meaning of the following expressions found in the Torah: “Beneath His Feet” (Ex. 24:10); “Written with the finger of God (*ibid.* 31:18); “The hand of God” (*ibid.* 9:3); “The eyes of God” (Gen. 38:7); “The ears of God” (Num. 11:1); and similar phrases? All these expressions are adapted to the mental capacity of the majority

¹ Guide 1:69

of mankind who have a clear perception of physical bodies only. The Torah speaks in the language of men. All these phrases are metaphorical, like the sentence “If I whet my glittering sword” (Deut. 32:41). Has God then a sword and does He slay with a sword? The term is used allegorically and all these phrases are to be understood in a similar sense. That this view is correct is proved by the fact that one prophet says that he had a vision of the Holy One, blessed be He, “Whose garment was white as snow” (Dan. 7:9), while another says that he saw Him “with dyed garments from Bozrah” (Is. 63:1). Moses our Teacher himself saw Him at the Red Sea as a mighty man waging war (Ex. 15:3) and on Sinai, as a congregational reader wrapped (in his *tallit*)—all indicating that in reality He has no form or figure. These only appeared in a prophetic vision. But God’s essence as it really is, the human mind does not understand and is incapable of grasping or investigating. And this is expressed in the scriptural text “Can you, by searching, find out God? Can you find out the Almighty to perfection?” (Job 11:7).*

12 This being so, the expressions in the Pentateuch and books of the prophets already mentioned, and others similar to these, are all of them metaphorical and rhetorical, as for example, “He that sits in the heavens shall laugh” (Ps. 2:4), “They have provoked Me to anger with their vanities” (Deut. 32:21), “As the Lord rejoiced” (*ibid.* 28:63), etc. To all these phrases, applies the saying “The Torah speaks in the language of men.” So too, it is said “Do they provoke Me to anger?” (Jer. 7:19); and yet it is said “I am the Lord, I change not” (Mal. 3:6). If God were sometimes angry and sometimes rejoiced, He would be changing. All these states exist in physical beings that are of obscure and mean condition, dwelling in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust. Infinitely blessed and exalted above all this, is God, blessed be He.

Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah 2:1-2 & 9-12

1 This God, honored and revered, it is our duty to love and fear; as it is said “You shall love the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:5), and it is further said “You shall fear the Lord your God” (*ibid.* 6:13).

2 And what is the way that will lead to the love of Him and the fear of Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of his wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightway love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great Name; even as David said, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 43:3). And when he ponders these matters, he will recoil frightened, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge. And so David said “When I consider Your heaven the work of Your fingers—what is man that You are mindful of him?” (Ps. 8:4-5). In harmony with these sentiments, I shall explain some large, general aspects of the works of the Sovereign of the Universe, that they may serve the intelligent individual as a door to the love of God, even as our sages have remarked in connection with the theme of the love of God, “Observe the Universe and hence, you will realize Him who spoke and world was.”²

9 All beings, except the Creator, from the highest angelic form to the tiniest insect that is in the interior of the earth, exist by the power of God’s essential existence. And as He has self-knowledge, and realizes His greatness, glory, and truth, He knows all, and nothing is hidden from Him.

10 The Holy One, blessed be He, realizes His true being, and knows it as it is, not with a knowledge external to Himself, as is our knowledge. For our knowledge and ourselves are separate. But as for the Creator, blessed be He, His knowledge and His life are One, in all aspects, from every point of view, and however we conceive Unity. If the Creator lived as other living creatures live, and His knowledge were external to Himself, there would be a plurality of deities, namely; He himself, His life, and His knowledge. This however, is not so. He is One in every aspect, from every angle, and in all ways in which Unity is conceived. Hence the conclusion that God is the One who knows, is known, and is the knowledge (of Himself)—all these being One. This is beyond the power of speech to express, beyond the capacity of the ear to hear, and of the human mind to apprehend clearly. Scripture, accordingly says “By the life of the Eternal.” The phrase employed is “As God lives”; because the Creator and His life are not dual, as is the case with the life of living bodies or of angels. Hence too, God does not apprehend creatures and know them because of them, as we know them, but He knows them because of Himself. Knowing Himself, He knows everything, for everything is attached to Him, in His Being.+

² Guide 1:26;33;46

11 What has been said on this topic in these two chapters is but a drop in the ocean, compared with what has to be elucidated on this subject. The exposition of all the principles alluded to in these two chapters forms the so-called *Maaseh Merkavah*—“Account of the Divine Chariot” (Ezek. L).

12 The ancient sages enjoined us to discuss these subjects privately, with only one individual, and then only if he be wise and capable of independent reasoning. In this case, the chapter headings are communicated to him, and he is instructed in a minute portion of the subject. It is left to him to develop the conclusions for himself and to penetrate to the depths of the subject. These topics are exceedingly profound; and not every intellect is able to grasp them. Solomon, in his wisdom, said, in regard to them, by way of parable: “The lambs will be for your clothing” (Prov. 27:26). Thus have the sages said, in the exposition of this parable, “matters that deal with the mystery of the universe shall be for your garment, that is, for you alone; do not expound them in public.” So too, Solomon said concerning these topics “Let them be for you alone and not for strangers with you” (*ibid.* 5:17).

And he further said concerning these subjects, “Honey and milk are under your tongue” (Song of Songs 4:11). This text the ancient sages have thus explained, “The things that are like milk and honey shall be under your tongue.”

Hikhot Yesodei HaTorah Chapter 4:10-13

10 The matters just discussed are like a drop in a bucket, and are very deep, but are not as deep as those treated in the First and Second Chapters. The exposition of the topics dealt with in the third and Fourth Chapters, is termed *Maaseh Bereshit* (cosmogony). Our ancient sages enjoined us that these matters are not to be expounded in public, but should be communicated and taught to an individual privately.

11 What distinction is there between the *Maaseh Merkavah* (Ezek. 1) and the *Maaseh Bereshit*? The subject matter of *Maaseh Merkavah* is not expounded even to an individual unless he is wise and able to draw conclusions independently; and then, only the chapter headings are communicated to him. But the topics of the *Maaseh Bereshit* are taught to an individual; and even if he is unable to form independent conclusions we nevertheless teach him as much as he is capable of learning on these matters. Why is the subject not taught in public? Because not every one possesses the breadth of intellect requisite for obtaining an accurate grasp of the meaning and interpretation of all its contents.

12 When a man reflects on these things, studies all these created beings, from the angels and spheres down to human beings and so on, and realizes the Divine Wisdom manifested in them all, his love for God will increase, his soul will thirst, his very flesh will yearn to love God. He will be filled with fear and trembling, as he becomes conscious of his own lowly condition, poverty, and insignificance, and compares himself with any one of the pure forms that are incorporeal and have never had association with corporeal substance. He will then realize that he is a vessel full of shame, dishonor, and reproach, empty and deficient.

13 The topics connected with these five precepts, treated in the above four chapters, are what our wise men called *Pardes* (Paradise), as in the passage, "Four went into Pardes" (Hagigah 14). And although those four were great men of Israel and great sages, they did not all possess the capacity to know and grasp these subjects clearly. Therefore, I say that it is not proper to dally in Pardes till one has first filled oneself with bread and meat; by which I mean knowledge of what is permitted and what forbidden, and similar distinctions in other classes of precepts. Although these last subjects were called by the sages "a small thing" (when they say "A great thing, *Maaseh Merkavah*; a small thing, the discussion of *Abbaye* and *Rava*"), still they should have the precedence. For the knowledge of these things gives primarily composure to the mind. They are the precious boon bestowed by God, to promote social well-being on earth, and enable men to obtain bliss, in the life hereafter. Moreover, the knowledge of them is within the reach of all, young and old, men and women; those gifted with great intellectual capacity as well as those whose intelligence is limited.

Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah Chapter 5:1-4 and 11

1 All the members of the house of Israel are commanded to sanctify the great name of God, as it is said, “But I will be hallowed among the children of Israel” (Lev. 22:32). They are furthermore cautioned not to profane it, as it is said, “Neither shall you profane My holy name” (Lev. 22:32). How are these precepts to be applied? Should an idolater arise and coerce an Israelite to violate any one of the commandments mentioned in the Torah under the threat that otherwise he would put him to death, the Israelite is to commit the transgression rather than suffer death; for concerning the commandments it is said, “which, if a man do them, he shall live by them” (Lev. 18:5): “Live by them, and not die by them.” And if he suffered death rather than commit a transgression, he himself is to blame for his death.

2 This rule applies to all the commandments, except the prohibitions of idolatry, in chastity and murder. With regard to these: if an Israelite should be told: “Transgress one of them or else you will be put to death,” he should suffer death rather than transgress.. The above distinction only holds good if the idolater’s motive is personal advantage; for example, if he forces an Israelite to build him a house or cook for him on the Sabbath, or forces a Jewess to cohabit with him, and so on; but if his purpose is to compel the Israelite to violate the ordinances of his religion, then if this took place privately and ten fellow-Israelites were not present, he should commit the transgression rather than suffer death. But if the attempt to coerce the Israelite to transgress was made in the presence of ten Israelites, he should suffer death and not transgress, even if it was only one of the remaining commandments that the idolater wished him to violate.

3 All the foregoing applies to a time free from religious persecution. But at a period when there is such persecution, such as when a wicked king arises, like Nebuchadnezzar and his confederates, and issues decrees against Israel, with the purpose of abolishing their religion or one of the precepts, then it is the Israelite’s duty to suffer death and not violate any one, even of the remaining commandments, whether the coercion takes place in the presence of ten Israelites or in the presence of idolaters.

4 When one is enjoined to transgress rather than be slain, and suffers death rather than transgress he is to blame for his death. Where one is enjoined to die rather than transgress, and suffers death so as not to transgress, he sanctifies the name of God. If he does so in the presence of ten Israelites, he sanctifies the name of God publicly, like Daniel, Hananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah, Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues. These are the martyrs, whom none ranks higher. Concerning them it is said, “But for Your sake are we killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter”(Ps. 44:23). And to them also, the text refers, “Gather my saints together to Me, those that have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice” (Ps. 50:5).Where one is enjoined to suffer death rather than transgress, and commits a transgression and so escapes death, he has profaned the name of God. If the transgression and so escapes death, he has profaned the name of God. If the transgression was committed in the presence of ten Israelites, he has profaned the name of God in public, failed to observe an affirmative precept-to sanctify the name of God—and violated a negative precept—not to profane His Name. Still, as the

transgression was committed under duress, he is not punished with flogging, and, needless to add, he is not sentenced by a court to be put to death, even if, under duress, he committed murder. For the penalty of death or flogging is only inflicted on one who transgresses of his own free will, in the presence of witnesses and after due warning.

11 There are other things that are a profanation of the Name of God. When a man, great in the knowledge of the Torah and reputed for his piety does things which cause people to talk about him, even if the acts are not express violations, he profanes the Name of God. As, for example, if such a person makes a purchase and does not pay promptly, provided that he has means and the creditors ask for payment and he puts them off; or if he indulges immoderately in jesting, eating, or drinking, when he is staying with ignorant people or living among them; or if his mode of addressing people is not gentle, or he does not receive people affably, but is quarrelsome and irascible. The greater a man is the more scrupulous should he be in all such things, and do more than the strict letter of the law requires. And if a man has been scrupulous in his conduct, gentle in his conversation, pleasant toward his fellow-creatures affable in manner when receiving them, not retorting, even when affronted, but showing courtesy to all, even to those who treat him with disdain, conducting his commercial affairs with integrity, not readily accepting the hospitality of the ignorant nor frequenting their company, not seen at all times, but devoting himself to the study of the Torah, wrapped in *tallit*, and crowned with phylacteries, and doing more than his duty in all things, avoiding, however, extremes and exaggerations—such a man has sanctified God, and concerning him, Scripture says, “And He said to me, ‘You are My servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified’” (Is. 49:3).