

Toldot Shimshon

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Published Livorno 1776*

Chapter VI – Mishnah 1¹

שְׁנוּ חֲכָמִים בְּלִשׁוֹן הַמִּשְׁנָה, בְּרוּךְ שֶׁבָחָר בָּהֶם וּבְמִשְׁנָתָם.

The sages taught in the language of the Mishnah. Blessed be He who chose them and their teaching.²

יְסוּד הַיְסוּדוֹת וְקִנְיֵן הַתּוֹרָה, גְּרָסִינָן בְּיְרוּשָׁלַיִם פֶּרֶק קָמָא דְמַגְלָה, ר' חִיָּיא בְּרַבָּא וְר' סִימּוֹן, תְּרַנְיָהוּן אֲמַרִין, דּוֹרוֹת הַקְּרָאוּנִים לֹא הָיָה לֹא הָיָה אֵלָּא שְׁלֵקֶהֶם וְלֹא מ"ם שְׁלֵקֶהֶם, סְתוּם. הָא סְמ"ךְ, סְתוּם. וּפִירֵשׁ הִיפָּה תּוֹאֵר, אָף עַל גַּב דְּה"א שְׁלַנּוּ גַם כֵּן אֵינּוּ סְתוּם, אֵין זֶה לְעִיכּוּבָא, אֵלָּא לְשׁוּפְרָא דְמִלְתָּא, כְּדִאֲמַרִין בְּהַקּוֹמָז, אָמַר רַב אֲשִׁי, תּוֹנָא לֵהוּ לְסַפְרֵי דִינְקֵי דְבֵי רַב, דְּחֻטְרֵי לִיָּה לְגַגִּיָּה דְחֵי"ת, וְתִלוּ לִיָּה לְכַרְעִיָּה דְה"א. אֵלְמָא דְכָל הַסּוֹפְרִים דְלָאוּ דִינְקֵי, לֹא תִלִּי לִיָּה לְכַרְעִיָּה דְה"א, וְלֹא אֵיפְסֵל בְּהַכֵּי, כְּדִאֲמַרִין בְּמַהֲרֵי"ק שׁוֹרֵשׁ ע"א. וְאָף עַל פִּי כּוֹן, לֹא הִיָּתָה סְתוּמָה כְּמוֹ חֵי"ת, וְכֵן הִמ"ם סְתוּמָה, לֹא הִיָּתָה סְתוּמָה לְגַמְרֵי כְּמוֹ סְמ"ךְ.

The foundation of foundations and the acquisition of the Torah,³ the reading in the Jerusalem Talmud, the first chapter of tractate Megillah is: “Rabbi Yirmiah in the name of Rabbi Chiya bar Abba and Rabbi Simon both were saying, for the earlier generations, their letter *he* and their final letter *mem* were not closed.⁴ The letter *samech* that they had was closed.”⁵

The *Yefeh To'ar*⁶ explains: Even though our *he* is also not closed, this is not an invalidating condition, rather it's for the beauty of the word. As we said in the third chapter of tractate Menachot entitled “one who grabs,” [*ha'kometz*]:⁷

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¹ While the teachings of the first five chapters of Pirkei Avot are indeed Mishnayot, it's important to remember that the sixth chapter of Pirkei Avot was added later, from a collection of Baraitot, miscellaneous sayings of the Tannaim.

² This teaching that the *Toldot Shimshon* lists as Mishnah 1 is not included in the Baraitot, but rather is only an introduction to this final chapter of Pirkei Avot.

³ In the Hebrew original, the initial letters of the first four words are printed in bold, and spell the Tetragrammaton, the four-lettered name of G-d. The first two words, “the foundation of foundations,” appear at the beginning of the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* (which similarly begins with four words whose initial letters spell the Tetragrammaton). The last two words, “the acquisition of the Torah,” is a name given to this sixth chapter of Pirkei Avot..

⁴ At the time of the Jerusalem Talmud, the Aramaic *he* appeared more like a *chet*, with the left leg being more centered rather than at the left side: ח. They noted that in contrast, the *he* of the earlier generations was not closed, in that it had a gap between the left leg and the top.

⁵ Our copies of the Jerusalem Talmud do not state “earlier generations,” but “earlier [copies of] the Torah.”

⁶ Samuel ben Isaac Jaffe, (d. late 16th century), rabbi in Constantinople. Author of commentaries on Midrash Rabbah, *Yefeh To'ar*, and on the Jerusalem Talmud, *Yefeh Mareh* (Constantinople, 1587; Venice 1590).

⁷ Beginning on Menachot 17a.

Rav Ashi says: I have seen that the exacting scribes of the study hall of Rav would put a hump-like stroke on the roof of [the letter] *chet* and they would suspend the [left] leg of [the letter] *he* [i.e., they would ensure that it is not joined to the roof of the letter].

Rava explains: “They would put a hump-like stroke on the roof of the letter *chet* as if to thereby say: The Holy One, Blessed be He, lives [*chai*] in the heights of the universe. And they would suspend the left leg of the letter *heh* . . .”

[The Gemara then explains that the significance of the letter *heh* is that this world was created with the letter *heh*.]

And for what [reason] was this world created with [the letter] *heh*? Because [the letter *heh*], which [is open on its bottom, has] a similar [appearance] to a colonnade.⁸ [It alludes to this world], where anyone who wishes to leave may leave [i.e., every person has the ability to choose to do evil]. And what is the reason [that the left] leg of [the letter *heh*] is suspended [i.e., is not joined to the roof of the letter]? Because if one repents, he is brought [back] in [through the opening at the top.]

- Menachot 29b

Apparently, not all of the scribes are exacting, for they didn't suspend the left leg of the letter *he*, and it didn't become invalid this way, as is written by the Maharik, shoresht 71.⁹

Despite this, [the *he*] was not as closed as the *chet*, and similarly the *mem* was closed, but it was not completely closed as was the *samech*.

ופירוש העיר בנימין, שהטעם שגשגנו עכשו מדורות הראשונים, לפי שהעולם הזה נברא בה"א, להורות דרכי התשובה, כדאמרין התם, דאי הדר ביה, ליעול וליזיל באידך. והנה דורות הראשונים שהיו מתעוררים מעצמם לשוב בתשובה, לא היו צריכים להורות להם דרכי התשובה, לתלות רגל הה"א להיות שם פתח גדול פתוח ליכנס בזה השער לה' וכיו'. והנה די להם בפתח קטן, לא הנה הה"א שלקם פתוח רק קצת, כדי להכדיל מהסי"ת. אבל בדורות האחרונים עשו שם הרחק גדול ופתח גדול, כולי האי ואולי יכנסו בו.

The *Ir Binyamin*¹⁰ explained, that the reason that we changed the shape of the letter *he* now from the shape used by the earlier generations, was because this world was created with the letter *he*, to teach the ways of repentance, as it is said there, if he repents, he can enter

⁸ A colonnade refers to columns joined on top by an entablature.

⁹ Joseph Colon ben Solomon Trabotto (“Maharik”) (c. 1420–80), Italy’s foremost Talmudist of his era. The reference is to his responsa, *Teshuvot Maharik*.

¹⁰ Binyamin Ze'ev Wolf ben Samuel Romaner (died c. 1718). His sefer, *Ir Binyamin*, discussing Aggadot, was published in two parts (Fürth 1698 and 1722). Part one was on the Babylonian Talmud, and part two on the Jerusalem Talmud.

through the gap between the top of the left leg and the roof, **but** if he wants to become a sinner, **he can go out another way**, through the bottom of the letter *he*.¹¹ **The earlier generations awakened themselves to return in repentance, and there was no need to teach them the ways of repentance, to suspend the left leg of the letter *he* such that there would be a large open entrance through which to enter the gate to G-d. It was enough for them with a small opening, their *he* was only a little open, in order to distinguish from the *chet*. But the later generations made a big distinction and a big opening, all of this and maybe they will repent and enter through the opening.**

וכן ה"ם סתומה, לא היתה סתומה לגמרי, דבפרק הבונה אמרינו, מ"ם פתוחה, מ"ם סתומה, מאמר פתוח, מאמר סתום. שיש דברים שאינם נותנים לגלות ולדרש, פגון סתרי תורה, שצריך שיהיה "שרתמשים ונשוא פנים וכו' ונבון לחש", קודם שיקמדם. ובדורות הראשונים היו רובם ככולם קדושים ובתוכם ה'. אכל עמה בעונותינו, שרבו אשר "שתו בשמים פיהם ולשונם תהלך בארץ", נעשית ה"ם סתומה, להיות המאמר סתום. עכ"ל.

Similarly, the *mem* is closed. It was not closed completely, as in the 12th chapter of tractate Shabbat entitled “one who builds” [*ha’boneh*],¹² it says, “[There is] an open *mem*, [and there is] a closed *mem*. [These indicate that the Torah contains] an open statement [understood by all], and an esoteric statement.”¹³ For there are things that are not given to disclose and to expound, such as secrets of the Torah, that require that he who wants to learn should be, “The captain of fifty, and the man of rank, and the counsellor, and the cunning charmer, and the skillful enchanter,”¹⁴ before he will learn [these things].¹⁵ In the earlier generations, most of them were entirely holy and had G-d inside of them, i.e., constantly in their hearts and minds.¹⁶ But now, with our sins, that most are such that “They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth,”¹⁷ the *mem* was made closed, to be an esoteric statement.

¹¹ The author discusses this at greater length in *Zera Shimshon*, Chapter LVII: Kinnot (Lamentations), essay 13.

¹² Beginning on Shabbat 102b.

¹³ Shabbat 104a.

¹⁴ Isaiah 3:3.

¹⁵ Chagigah 13a: “Rabbi Ami said: The secrets of the Torah may be transmitted only to one who possesses the following five characteristics: ‘The captain of fifty, and the man of favor, and the counselor, and the cunning charmer, and the skillful enchanter’ (Isaiah 3:3).”

¹⁶ Even more so, as was expressed by Rabbi Yoel Kahn, *Hamohadim Bechassidut*, “[B]y means of a Jew learning Torah, his physical brain becomes connected and attached to the Essence of G-d that resides in the Torah, to the point where they become one [united] entity—G-dliness actually dwells within the grey-matter of his brain.”

¹⁷ Ps. 73:9.

ונודע מדברי האר"י זלה"ה, כי מתחלה לא הינה לקליפות כל כף אחיזה בעולם, ולא היו צריכים לטרוח ולפלפל. ולכן מתחלה לא הינה להם פי אם המשנה, דהיינו בתי גונאי. ואחר כך תיקנו הבריות, דהיינו בתי בראי, ושתייהן בלשון הקדש. ואחר כך נמשך תלמוד ירושלמי בלשון תרגום, אבל לא הינה צריך כל כך פלפול וטורח לברר ההלכה על בוריה. וכשגברה הקליפה בעוונות הרבים, אז נמשך תלמוד בבלי, כי "תלמוד" גימטריא לילית, דהיינו ת"פ, "במתשפים הושיבני", זה תלמוד בבלי.

It's known from the writings of the Ari, may he be remembered for life in the World-to-Come,¹⁸ that initially the *klipot* [the husks of impurity], did not have much of a grip on the world, and it was not necessary to burden oneself and debate about them. Therefore, initially they only had the Mishnah, that is to say the inner rooms, where there were more esoteric statements. Afterward the Baraitot were established, that is to say the outer rooms, where open statements were made that could be more readily understood by all.¹⁹ Both of them, the Mishnah and the Baraitot, were in the holy language, Hebrew, as opposed to the Gemarah, which is written in Aramaic. Afterward, the Jerusalem Talmud was established in the language of the Targum, i.e., in the Aramaic vernacular, but debate and burdening oneself were not so necessary to clarify the halacha. When the *klipa* was strengthened by the many sins, the Babylonian Talmud was established, for "Talmud" has the same Gematria, 480, as Lilith,²⁰ "He has made me dwell in darkness,"²¹ this refers to the Babylonian Talmud, according to Rabbi Yirmiah, for he felt that the Babylonian Talmud was not as clear as the Jerusalem Talmud.²²

והוה דברי התנא, שגו חכמים וכו'. אף על גב דבאותו זמן שישנו הבריות, דהיינו בתי בראי, כדאיתא בספר הזהר, אז הקליפה הייתה מתפשטת בעולם, הרבה יותר ממה שהיה בימי חכמי המשנה. עם כל זה, גדל פתחם של אותם חכמים, שאפילו הכי, לא הוצרכו לתקן הבריות בלשון תרגום, כי מחמת חכמתם לא נתנו לקליפה מקום להתפשט כל כך, והיו מכניעים אותה בחכמתם, וגברה ידם לשנות המשנה בלשון הקדש, להגביר פח הקדשה והברכה בכל העולמות.

These then, are the words of the Tanna, "The sages taught in the language of the Mishnah." Despite the fact that at the same time they taught the Baraitot, which is to say the outer rooms, as is brought in the Zohar II:257b, the *klipa* spread out in the world, much more than it had in the days of the sages of the Mishnah. With all this, the strength of these sages was great, that even so, they didn't need to establish the Baraitot in the language of the

¹⁸ Mentioned in the introduction of Rabbi Chaim Vital's *Otzrot Chaim*. See also R. Naftali Hertz Bachrach, *Emek haMelech* (1648), Gate 7, perek 10.

¹⁹ Kiddushin 33a discusses that in the inner rooms, where everyone is naked, it is not necessary to stand to give respect to someone, whereas in the outer rooms, where people are clothed, it is appropriate to stand to give respect. See also Zohar II:257b, analogizing the inner and outer rooms to the Mishnayot and Baraitot.

²⁰ Lilith was a harmful spirit. See Isaiah 34:14. The Arizal identified Lilith as a partner of Satan who seeks to bring immorality to man.

²¹ Lam. 3:6.

²² Sanhedrin 24a.

Targum, for because of their wisdom, they didn't give the *klipa* room to spread out so much, and they were subduing it by their wisdom, and their hands were strengthened to study the Mishnah in the Holy language, i.e., Hebrew, to increase the power of holiness and blessing in all the worlds.

וְלָכוּ, בְּרוּךְ הָאֵל שֶׁבָחָר בָּהֶם, שֶׁהִקְדוּשׁ, בְּרוּךְ הוּא, בּוֹחֵר בְּצַדִּיקִים וּבְמִשְׁנֵתָם בְּלִשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ, שֶׁהוּא הַלְשׁוֹן רִאשׁוֹן שֶׁבּוֹ
נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם, דְּכַתִּיב "נִיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָת" וְכוּ'.

Thus, “Blessed be the G-d who chose them,” that the Holy One, Blessed be He, chose the righteous “and their teaching” in the Holy language, which is the first language, with which the world was created, as it is written, “Everyone on earth had the same language.”²³

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²³ Gen. 11:1.