

## *B'rei'shit*

### The Need to Go beyond the Literal Sense of the Torah<sup>1</sup>

The first verse of the Torah, introducing an account of creation, consists of seven Hebrew words, and the combined numerical value (*g'matria*) of the first letter of each of those words adds up to twenty-two, the number of letters of the Hebrew alphabet, an allusion suggesting that all the worlds were created through those twenty-two letters of the Torah.

[According to *g'matria*, each letter of the alphabet has a numerical value. Hence it is possible to add up the numerical values of all the letters of a word and deduce meaning in terms of the equivalence of that word with another word having the same total numerical value. *G'matria* served as an interpretative strategy already in the rabbinic period and not infrequently served the same function in the Hasidic homily-literature. The mathematical observation mentioned above reinforced the concept that the Torah preceded the world and that God created the world(s) on the basis of the Torah and its letters, which served as a blueprint of creation.<sup>2</sup>]

Onkelos [who translated the Torah from Hebrew to Aramaic in the second century, C.E.] translated the first three words as “In the beginning / created / God,” but one must understand, as Rashi [acronym for *Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitshak*, the foremost medieval commentator of both the Torah and the Babylonian Talmud] explained, that grammatically it is not possible to interpret the first word, *B'rei'shit*, simply as indicating “In the beginning.” It would appear, rather, that the words and their order intimate that God’s own Self is beyond the reach of comprehension, as no idea or thought is at all capable of grasping God. The words convey

1. *Ma'or va-shemesh* (Warsaw, 1877), I, 2b.

2. *b. Ber.* 55a and *Menah.* 29b, *Midr.Gen* 1.9 and *y. Hag.* 77c; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:56, n. 10.

that all thoughts necessarily fail to grasp God's own essence and selfhood, which remains hidden beyond the reach of any idea. In the holy books this conception is referred to as "the Light that is unknowable."

Even those heavenly creatures who bear the divine Throne (referring to the vision in Ezek 1) and who hallow Him each day as they declare, "The Lord of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth!" (Isa 6:3), still find it necessary to ask, "Where is the place of His Presence?" (Ezek 3:12). His Oneness, which fills all the worlds, is not subject to any limit or qualification, and His very Self cannot be likened to any image. When the thought to create the world arose within Him, God contracted His infinite Divinity and prepared an empty space (vacuum, *halal panui*) for the worlds, and that contraction (*Tzimtzum*) then allowed for the appearance of the worlds.

This is what the *tanna* [generic name for the rabbinic sages of the period culminating with the editing of the Mishna, around 220 C.E.] Shmu'el bar Nahman said, "The blessed Holy One clad Himself with light and created the world."<sup>3</sup> Of course, due to the vast brightness of the Divine, within the very course of this contraction the vessels containing the Light lacked the sufficient strength to bear that Light, and so the vessels themselves could not endure but were shattered due to the infinitely greater brightness of the Primordial Light. [In this homily, the preacher refers not to the Primordial Light which, according to a midrashic interpretation, was later removed from the world as a result of the sin the First Man, but rather to the intrinsic Light of God's infinite state itself.]<sup>4</sup>

Consequently the world was left formless, leaving it without any possibility to endure, and so the Emanator (the Divine in its infinite state) had further to contract its Divinity so that the vessels might then be able to bear that Light. And through the second Contraction, they were able, in some small measure, to contain the Primordial Light, and the World of Repair ( *'olam ha-tikkun*) came into being in which the vessels, holding that Light, might endure.

And from this conception, we are able to grasp those first three words of the Torah, which Onkelos had translated as "In the beginning / created / God," in terms of the contraction that occurred so that there might be an empty space for the worlds. The very name *'Elohim* ("God"),

3. *Midr. Gen* 3.4; *Pirque R. El*, ch. 3.

4. Note Zohar I, 1b-2a, and Scholem, *Major Trends*, 220-21.

as is known, connotes limitation and infers such contraction of the Light. [Hence, the name became associated with judgment.]<sup>5</sup>

But unable to bear that Light due to its intense and powerful brightness, the initial existence of the vessels was annulled by the Light's very presence, and the world turned to chaos ("The earth being unformed and void," Gen 1: 2). And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3), signifying that following that chaos, the World of Repair emerged. The words, "Let there be light, and there was light," refer to that second contraction.

As a consequence, the much more limited Light was such that the vessels were able to contain it [and it came at least within the periphery of what the mind and language can attempt to express], though in a higher respect that Light itself remains on a level of "darkness," as that which is utterly beyond the reach of mind and language is referred to as "darkness," as is written, "He made darkness His screen . . ." (Ps 18:12). This is conveyed in the words, "And God separated the light from the darkness" (Gen 1:4)—the blessed Holy One made a division between the Light which came into being through the second contraction, that Light which is attainable to some degree, and between the Primordial Light, which is called "darkness" in that it remained utterly beyond reach. . . .

**Comment:** This opening discussion in *Ma'or va-shemesh* makes the case that the account of creation found at the very beginning of the Torah is both not to be understood literally and unable to be understood literally and, furthermore, that the biblical text itself clearly indicates that such is not its purpose.

Drawing from the legacy of kabbalistic teaching upon which his worldview was rooted, the biblical text was read in quite a metaphorical sense, and virtually every word or element of that text came to be interpreted symbolically. Kalonymus Kalman clearly understood various verses and elements in the account of creation, which opens the Torah, as allusions to the worldview of Lurianic Kabbalah, the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–1572), which revolutionized the earlier body of kabbalistic thought, and in large measure he viewed the biblical creation-text as a kind of code for the much more complex Lurianic explanation of how the world or worlds came into existence. That pattern, based upon Lurianic teaching, centers largely around the basic principles of Contraction (*Tzimtzum*), the

5. *Midr. Exod. 3:6 (Sh'mot)*, perhaps on basis of Ps 82:8.

Shattering of the Vessels (*Sh'virah*) and Repair (*Tikkun*). Reference to the building-blocks of Lurianic cosmology recurs at various places within the homilies of *Ma'or va-shemesh* and of kindred Hasidic homily-texts. In this homily on the very opening verse of the Torah (Pentateuch), the preacher fused his very brief synopsis of the Lurianic cosmology with the much earlier motif of the Primordial Light, subject of the following passage, perhaps causing some confusion in the process.

In his discourse on various passages from the Torah, the preacher's ruling out a literal reading creates an enlarged space for his homiletical interpretation which, by its very nature, goes beyond the simpler, surface meaning of the biblical text.

### The Hidden Light<sup>6</sup>

The Sages said that with that Light (of the six days of creation) man could see from one end of the world to the other, but, seeing that the world is not worthy of utilizing that Light, God removed it and hid it for the righteous (*tzaddikim*) of a future time. The righteous of our time have taught that the Light is hidden within the Torah, and the righteous who purify themselves and study Torah for its own sake (not for any personal benefit) succeed in finding that Light.

**Comment:** The theme of the Primordial Light that was later hidden has its source in that the creation-account that opens the Torah speaks of light as created on the First Day of creation (Gen 1:3), while further on in that same account, the sun and the moon and stars are all said to have been created on the Fourth Day (Gen 1:16). This apparent discrepancy gave birth to the aggadic motif that the much greater original Light created on the First Day was later hidden by God when He realized that man (created on the Sixth Day) would gravely disappoint Him. The Primordial Light was looked upon as being spiritual rather than physical or solely physical in nature. Rabbinic statements of that theme express the idea that the Primordial Light was removed and hidden for the righteous in the World-to-Come (*'olam ha-ba*), where, following their death, the righteous would bask in its light.<sup>7</sup>

6. *Ma'or va-shemesh*, I, 2b-3a.

7. *b. Hag. 12a, Midr. Gen 3.6, Midr. Exod. 35.1, and Midr. Num. 13.5.*

The above excerpt from *Ma'or va-shemesh* represents a transmutation in that it speaks of that Light as being hidden for the righteous (*tzaddikim*), not necessarily in the World-to-Come, but rather throughout the generations, in the sense that they would be able to draw upon that greater spiritual Light and understanding in their own respective times. That general re-interpretation of the older agada is heard already in *Degel mahaneh 'Efrayim (B'rei'shit)* and also in *No'am 'Elimelekh (B'rei'shit)*, which consists of homiletical notes of Kalonymus Kalman's own teacher, Elimelekh of Lyzhansk.

The theme that God hid the Light within the Torah is attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, the central figure of early Hasidism.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the Light came to be associated not with its being hidden, but rather with its presence and availability, as it is accessible to those who make the effort to seek it by going beyond the surface-level of the Torah's text to its richer, experiential nature. The more pessimistic nuance of the hidden Light was transposed in the process to the much more positive possibility of being able to pierce its hiddenness and to discover it within the Torah as well as within all of existence. The Light, in that sense, has become virtually synonymous with the Divine, which, though hidden, is yet paradoxically present within all that is.

The more positive understanding of the theme of the Hidden Light is evident already in the Zohar, which voices the claim that were that Light to be completely hidden, nothing would be able to exist, as existence itself is dependent upon that hidden but-not-totally-hidden Light.<sup>9</sup> The view presented in the Zohar represents a shift from emphasis upon the Light's absence, its having been withdrawn, to that of its continued presence. The position of the Zohar can be explained in light of the fact that while the motif of the *Hidden* Light is a distinctively midrashic motif, that of the *Primordial* Light, found in many traditions in ancient and medieval times including Neo-Platonism, viewed that light as underlying all existence and as present within all that exists. In addition, the view attributed to the *Besht* that the Light is hidden in the Torah might interestingly parallel an Islamic identification of the Primordial Light with Muhammad<sup>10</sup> and the much earlier Christian identification of that Light with Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

8. See *Ba'al shem tov 'al ha-torah*, 1:48–49 (#32–35). Also *Shivhei ha-Besht, In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, 49 (#33), and 89 (#69).

9. Zohar II, 148b–149a.

10. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 214–15 and *Muhammad is His Messenger*, 130.

11. John 1:1, 9; also The Apostolic Fathers, 1:51 (Second Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, #14).

## The Surface Meaning of the Torah and the Torah's Innerness<sup>12</sup>

“God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.’ God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. . . . God said, ‘Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear.’” (Gen 1:6–9)

It is important to note that the waters are not included in the list of created objects; there is no verb indicating their being created. . . .

And God created the world with the Torah (as its blueprint). The Torah, however, assumes different manifestations appropriate to the various levels of existence. At the very highest level (*'Atzilut*), it is completely beyond our grasp, and concerning the Torah at that level it is said, “I was with Him as an infant, a source of delight every day, rejoicing before Him at all times” (Prov 8:30), two thousand years prior to creation.<sup>13</sup> On another level (*B'ri'ah*), it exists as the innerness of the Torah, while at our level, appropriate to our world (*'Asiyah*), it assumes the form of the simple surface meaning of the Torah. Accordingly, the plain, simple meaning was given to us while the Torah's innerness is concealed from us, for if not, we would inflict damage upon the Torah's innerness, God forbid, just as did the early generations who knew the Torah's innerness and severely damaged it.

For this reason, only the simple level of the Torah was given to us; however, through our study of that plain surface level of the Torah and our engaging with it in discourse and observing it (being faithful to its commandments), we will come to grasp its innerness.

The very core-principle of *'avodah*, the service/worship of God, is to attain a sense of presence of God and to attach oneself to the blessed *'Ein-sof* (the Infinite state of the Divine), sublime beyond all the heights, something that not every person is able to experience. And in what way can one arrive at that understanding? Our Sages determined that one is to recite the *Sh'ma*, “Hear, Israel, . . . God is One,” (Deut 6:4) morning and evening with the intention of recognizing the majesty of the blessed Holy One both above and below and extending in all directions. And in

12. *Ma'or va-shemesh*, I, 3a.

13. *Midr. Gen* 8:2.

reciting this verse morning and evening with this inner intent and with great longing and yearning for God, it will be possible to attach oneself to God every day and every night.

But the person who has not yet adequately repaired his qualities and who has not shattered the force of his physical desires will be unable to recite this verse and to proclaim the word “One” (*'ehad*) with clear and flawless intention. This is because alien, disturbing thoughts still prevail within him to confuse him, and in reciting the *Sh'ma*, one ascribes kingship to God according to the extent that the person has attained a degree of oneness and unity within the self.

In order to recite the word “One” properly as is required, in a way that such foreign thoughts will not confuse him, he is advised, before praying, to devote considerable time to the study of Mishna and Gemara and the Zohar with this intention in mind. [The Mishna and Gemara are the two layers comprising the Talmud, the Gemara consisting of discussions on the Mishna, and the Zohar became the central text in medieval Kabbalah.] In that case, one will certainly be able to affirm and reify God's reign over all the higher and lower worlds, providing the person proves his diligence and devotes considerable time to study and does not trespass the time of prayer, God forbid. [The leaders and followers of Hasidism were accused by those who opposed the new stream of reciting traditional daily prayers when they were so moved, even long after their proper time, and in this comment the preacher voices his own opposition to taking such liberties. The various prayer-services connect with different times of the day: *Shaharit* after the first sign of dawn, *Minḥah* prior to sundown, and *Ma'ariv* (*'Aravit*) after sundown.]

It is known that the Torah is called water [*mayyim*,<sup>14</sup> based on Isa 55:1, “Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water . . .” As the prophet speaks of water metaphorically, that metaphor provided Kalonymus Kalman with a key to reading a verse from the toraitic creation-account in a way that transcends its much simpler surface meaning]. And from these points we can clarify what is written, “And God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water’” (Gen 1:6). With the understanding that Torah is called “water,” we can grasp that water is not included in the list of created things for the reason that the Torah preceded the world by two-thousand years. But the verse points to something very necessary: “Let there be an expanse in the midst

14. *b. Bava Qam.* 17a.

of the water,” meaning that a curtain is spread between the innerness of the Torah and its plain meaning. For the Torah’s innerness must be concealed; not everyone should have access to that innerness of the Torah lest that person inflict damage upon it, God forbid, as did those early generations (prior to Abraham’s time). [This theme might have its source in the Zohar, I, 176a in reference to the “secrets of wisdom” given to those early generations who utilized them for evil purposes.]

The pronouncement of the King, “God made the expanse,” serves as counsel to humankind who would be moved to see that innerness of the Torah. With the words, “And God said, ‘Let the water beneath the sky be gathered into one area’” (Gen 1:9), one is advised to study the simple level of the Torah, which is beneath the heavens, in our own level of existence, with great intent. Doing so, a person thereby accepts upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of God and crowns the blessed Holy One in the heavens and everywhere on earth, including all the corners of the earth, as he recites the *Sh'ma*, which includes the word *'ehad* (“One”). And in that way it will be possible to attain the Innerness of the Torah.

And the verse continues, “that the dry land appear,” signaling that in reciting the word, *'ehad* (“One”), one will be able to grasp whether that person’s uttering that word is something dry and lifeless or whether it contains the vitality of holiness. For according to the level of one’s own self-purification, a person will be able to accept upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of God while reciting the *Sh'ma*. And understand.

**Comment:** In his discussion of verses from the Torah’s creation-account, the concern of the Kraków preacher is remote from the actual phenomenon of waters, above and below. Rather, building upon the metaphorical significance of water itself, as evident in that verse from the book of Isaiah (55:1, and delineated at length in *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim rabbah* 1.19 on the opening verse of the Song of Songs), Kalonymus Kalman overheard in those verses from the creation-account a key-issue concerning conflicting senses of Torah itself, an issue with which the Kraków master engaged and wrestled in several of his discourses. This homily is built upon the premise that the more sublime essence of the Torah, its depth and innerness, transcends its surface-meaning, the manifestation and character that the Torah assumes in our finite, physical world. And accordingly, the homily raises the question: how do we then relate to that simpler meaning

of the Torah which includes also a body of law that might be felt to occupy even a vast distance from the Torah's innerness?

That Innerness is hidden from us, and our path to find it, the preacher insists, must bring us through the Torah's surface meaning with all that is contained in it. There is no shortcut to a grasp of the Torah's innerness. Building upon the biblical and rabbinic use of water as a metaphor for Torah, the master went on to read the verses concerning the division of waters as an allusion to those two dimensions of Torah.

In one respect, he subscribed to a consciousness anchored to the recognition of a higher and inner meaning of all that is written in the basic Jewish sacred text, while in another respect he remained fully loyal and insistent upon the importance of the tradition as a whole which developed around the written Torah-text. He viewed that necessary relationship with the Torah's simple meaning, however, not as an end in itself, but rather as a means and as the keys with which to attain a sense of the Torah's Innerness.

In this sense, he was, at one and the same time, both radical and conservative. He advised his fellows to study and direct their lives according to that surface-dimension of the Torah and its traditional rabbinic understanding, while also maintaining that through doing so, they might be able to reach that deeper, more sublime, and even mystic grasp of the Torah identified with its guarded innerness.

The dual-emphasis in this passage is sounded in any number of homilies in which the preacher continued to wrestle with a potential paradox in his understanding of the central Jewish sacred text.

## A Longing Permeating All Existence<sup>15</sup>

When the thought of creating the worlds arose in God's highest and most essential will, God contracted His Divinity from its heights and the worlds evolved and the blessed Light of Infinity glistened through all the worlds from the most sublime to this very lowest, physical world. The Light of Divinity could then be experienced in the higher realms of existence, while in the lower realms it appears hidden, even though there is no created object in the world in which the Light of the Infinite ('Or 'ein-sof) does not glisten. This is noted in 'Or ha-Hayyim, which explained the verse, "The heavens and the earth were finished and all their

15. *Ma'or va-shemesh*, I, 3b.

array” (Gen 2:1), reading the word, *vaykhulu* (literally, “were finished”) as conveying longing, as in the expression, *kalta nafshi* (“I long, I yearn . . . my soul longs,” Ps 84:3). This same interpretation is found also in the teachings of the *Ar'i* (Rabbi Isaac Luria) who understood plants’ growing upward from the ground as indicative of the ascent of the worlds (to their sublime Source).

The Midrash mentions that each blade of grass here below has an angel from above who strikes it and commands it to grow.<sup>16</sup> [The midrashic source actually refers to a *mazal*, a star or constellation, striking the blade of grass, while the preacher refers instead to an angel, avoiding the astrological overtones of crediting a *mazal*.] This comment can be understood only with the realization that the blessed Holy One created all the worlds with the twenty-two letters of the Torah together with the Torah’s vowel-points and cantillation signs, through the combinations of names in a way that the Ineffable Name joins with every single letter. And if that is so, there is nothing in the world that does not have a part in some letter or vowel-point of the Torah (which in itself, on a more sublime level, is a manifestation of the Divine). And as every letter or vowel-point is a part of the Ineffable Name, all the plants and trees naturally seek to ascend to their Root.

The writings of the *Ar'i* refer to such combinations of letters as “an act of striking,” specifically striking one letter with another and joining one letter together with another. And it is in this light that we can grasp that each blade of grass has an angel from above who strikes it and tells it to grow, meaning that the angel illuminates the combination belonging to that specific blade of grass. Every single blade of grass has its own combination of letters by means of which it has a portion in the blessed Ineffable Name.

And how do they awaken to ascend to their Root? They awaken by means of the *tzaddik* (holy man) who studies Torah purely for its own sake to unite the blessed Holy One with the *Sh'khinah* (acting to unify the world of the *s'firot* which underlies and permeates all existence) and who attaches himself to the letters of the Torah and to the combinations of names and connects with the *'Ein sof* (the infinite state of the Divine). In this way, such a person provides divine energy (*hiyyut*) and awakening to all created things, whether they be inert or plants or (zoological) living beings or humans (literally, having the gift of speech and language) to the

16. *Midr. Gen* 10:6.

end that they all long to ascend to their divine Root. For in the combinations and permutations of their names, all these have some part of the letters of the Torah.

And by means of the *tzaddik's* awakening the lower world, he attaches himself to the holy patriarchs and draws down lovingkindness upon the community of Israel (*Kneset Yisra'el*). [The image of “feminine waters” conveys an awakening initiated by action of the lower world which effects what is above.] In this light, Rashi explained the verse, “When no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted . . . and there was no man to till the soil” (Gen 2:5), in that these grew when a human emerged and prayed for the vegetation of the field. Everything depends upon the prayer of the *tzaddik*, and in particular upon his acts of unification (*yihuddim*) . . .

From this we come to the explanation of the verse, “And God said, ‘Let the earth sprout vegetation . . .’” (Gen 1:11), meaning that the *tzaddik* will unite the lower worlds with the higher worlds. And via the *tzaddik's* awakening, he is able to awaken the feminine waters (the lower worlds) and unify the worlds through bringing all created things to long to ascend to their Root . . .

**Comment:** Like the earlier Hayyim ben-Attar, author of *'Or ha-hayyim*, also Kalonymus Kalman Epstein sensed in all of nature, including even inert nature, a longing for the divine Root of all existence. Everything created has within it a longing to ascend to its higher, divine Root and, furthermore, that longing which is, in turn, awakened by the longing of the *tzaddik* (holy man), serves to unite all the realms of being. This homily expresses a remarkable poetic intuition and opens for the reader an essential aspect of how the master and preacher, a city-dweller who nevertheless lived with a sense of cosmic longing, experienced the natural world.

He explained the source of such cosmic longing in the sense that everything that exists, even every blade of grass, shares in the Torah—which he grasped as much more than a conglomeration of words. And he went on to connect his sublime sense of the nature of being to what was for him the highest human ideal. A *tzaddik*, means literally, a “righteous person,” though the word came to suggest more essentially a *holy man*, and the same term, *tzaddik*, came to signify, more particularly, the holy man who served as the leader and center of a Hasidic community and who embodied its spiritual ethos. Here, the role of the *tzaddik* is defined as one of awakening

such longing not only in one's human associates but in all the cosmos. One might overhear in this conception an echo and reflection of sensitivities associated with European romanticism.

A glimpse into the homilist's own consciousness is revealed in his interpreting the glistening which he experienced in the plant-world as a sign of connection with Divinity, a connection explained in that the letters of the Torah are stamped on each particular plant or blade of grass. Not only is each such specimen in the world of vegetation a living sign of the Divine, but he viewed each such specimen as a *unique* living sign of the Divine. The master's sense of the uniqueness of each person, emphasized in various ways in this collection of homilies, is grounded in this broader vision of being which recognizes the uniqueness even of every single botanical specimen.

While the Kraków sage more often presented his interpretations within the framework of basic concepts of Lurianic Kabbalah, this homily might signify that his particular spiritual temperament is closer to that of Moses Cordovoro (the *Rama"l*) in granting greater importance to immanence and the experiential, a legacy of still earlier "ecstatic kabbalah."<sup>17</sup>

## Two Modes of Torah-study<sup>18</sup>

"God created the great sea monsters and all the living creatures of every kind that creep . . ." (Gen 1:21).

The word *t'ninim* (sea monsters, a plural word) is derived from *t'nina*, which means "study" and thus indicates that God created different types of study. For there are two ways of study: one is the way of life and of the good, namely study of Torah for its own sake (*torah lishmah*), while the second is study not for its own purpose (*torah shelo lishmah*), but for an evil purpose, God forbid. Both types of students can become great in Torah in their own way, though the one engages in Torah for its true, legitimate purpose, to experience the divine sweetness, while the other chooses an evil path, as his motivation derives from his quest for position and material benefit and uses Torah "as a spade with which to dig."<sup>19</sup> "The one no less than the other was God's doing . . ." (Eccl 7:14).

17. Idel, *Hasidism—Between Ecstasy and Magic*, 53–65.

18. *Ma'or va-shemesh*, I, 3b–4a.

19. *m. 'Abot* 4:7.

And this is alluded in what our Sages relayed in their saying that the Creator chilled the male, meaning the one who studies Torah for its own purpose; this is associated with the male and is necessitated to an extent lest one would cease to exist in the face of the enormous delight in his engaging in Torah-study for its own sake, leaving him no possibility of existence. [The sexist overtones typify the attitudes largely prevalent in the preacher's environment and in much of prior tradition. The male is described here as driven by such an all-powerful love of Torah-study that he could easily die in the course of pursuing that love.] And God killed the female, connoting the person who studies not for the sake of the Torah itself, killing and weakening that person's strength lest the world be destroyed as a consequence of his mode of study.<sup>20</sup> [In the talmudic agada, which refers to the danger of the sea monsters' mating, as with their boundless appetite their offspring could consume the entire world, the male is castrated and chilled and preserved to serve as a feast for the righteous in the World-to-Come.]

And the text concludes, "and all the living creatures of every kind that creep . . . and all the winged birds of every kind" (Gen 1:21), referring to the young ones—and there are many of them—who only limitedly study Torah for its own sake, each one according to the person's own aspect and level. For "Torah-learning for its own sake" assumes many faces, just as there are also many varieties of "Torah-learning not for its own sake." And fortunate is the person who chooses the good, thereby coming to experience the pleasantness of God.

**Comment:** In a society with few intellectual outlets other than the study of sacred text and the discourse relating to it, the issue at the center of this homily becomes very real. Does one's mental endeavor, in such a situation, respect the nature of the subject of his study?

While the concepts of *torah lishmah* and *torah shelo lishmah* (studying out of sincere motivations or out of self-centered pragmatic motivations such as position, prestige, or reputation) are found already in talmudic literature (conveying that whereas *torah shelo lishmah* is a death-potion, *torah lishmah* is a potion for life),<sup>21</sup> the contrast between those two modes bore a special and more particular relevance in the polemics between the Hasidim and their opponents (*Mitnagdim*). Hasidic homilists accused their opposition,

20. *b. B. Bat.* 74b.

21. *b. Ta'an.* 7a.

specifically those devoted to the intense talmudic study of the academies (*y'shivot*), of often being driven by very impious, self-centered motivations, while the opponents of Hasidism, in turn, accused the Hasidim both of ignorance in terms of the level of their talmudic knowledge and of disrespectfully denigrating the scholar-class and talmudic learning itself.

Kalonymus Kalman claimed to find an allusion in the rabbinic agada of the two sea monsters to those two modes of study which differed in terms of their motivations. The one monster represents all-too-this-worldly considerations, while the other might be drawn to a life beyond the grave as he prefers death for the sake of a more complete sense of God's presence.

The reader, however, can hear in his discussion a more conciliatory position according to which both modes, carried to an extreme, represent dangers to the world. The totally unblemished ideal of *torah lishmah* can remove its practitioners from this world through their total cleaving to the Divine in a way that could evoke a negative attitude toward life. And the blatant examples of *torah shelo lishmah* endanger the very existence of the world by the falsity masked in their study itself.

Realizing the pitfalls of both modes, the Creator placed both those modes themselves beyond the pale of reality, something the preacher felt to be symbolized in that much earlier agada of the two sea monsters.

The rabbinic agada itself, which would appear to echo ancient myths of a primeval sea monster (such as Tiamat),<sup>22</sup> would not interest Kalonymus Kalman in its own terms, but he utilized that agada to engage an issue that acquired special importance in his own time and experience. His more complex reading of this cultural or spiritual conflict into that agada of a mythological character is an expression both of his creativity and of his ongoing struggling with the polarities involved.

## The Function of Shabbat<sup>23</sup>

“And God saw all that He had made and found it very good. . . . On the seventh day God finished the work which He had been doing, and He ceased on the seventh day (from all the work which He had done.” (Gen 1:31—2:2)

22. Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, 112–23.

23. *Ma'or va-shemesh*, I, 4b–5a.

Rashi explained that a person of flesh and blood, not knowing his hours and minutes in all their preciseness, must add from the profane (week-day) to the holy [as a precaution, one must begin a holy day, such as the *Shabbat*, at least somewhat earlier than required lest he might be violating the holy day], whereas the blessed Holy One, knowing His times and minutes, enters into a holy day at the precise split second, with the accuracy of a hair-breadth.<sup>24</sup>

That, however, still doesn't suffice to explain, for God nevertheless completed His work on the Sixth Day and not on the Seventh Day. And a rabbinic reading maintains that the demons were created at dusk just before the *Shabbat*, and though there was need yet to create bodies for them, nevertheless the Creator hallowed the Day and refrained from creating bodies for them.<sup>25</sup>

. . . For the sake of choice and will, in order that the Israelites who accepted upon themselves the yoke/commitment of His Kingship might receive a reward for their good deeds, God contracted His Divinity in stages, from world to world, and made partitions and a screen separating one world from another. They limit the Light of God's Divinity and holiness through a series of contractions culminating with the physical world, doing so, however, in a way that nothing exists even in this lower, material world in which the Light of God's holiness does not glisten, for otherwise this lower world could not even exist. . . . And the person who accepts upon himself the yoke of God's kingdom and comes to attach himself to one's Root must remove all the partitions until one can experience the pleasantness of God, the sublime Light, the blessed Infinite One.

And concerning the quality of *Malkhut* [royalty, reign; the lowest of the *s'firot*], it is said "Her feet go down to death" (Prov 5:5, in reference to the strange, forbidden woman), meaning that it is the level closest to the realm of the *hitzonim* [demonic agents, the very word signifying "external"] and if, God forbid, the world would become materialized to any greater degree, then due to the thickness of the physicality of things, it would no longer be possible for man to turn to attach himself to the sublime Light. But certainly the merciful God who, desiring mercy, does not wish that anyone be banished (*leval yidah mimenu nidah*, a composite of words from Mic 7:18 and 2 Sam 14:14).

24. *Midr. Gen* 10:9.

25. *Midr. Gen* 7:5.

And accordingly, God said to the world “Enough” (*dai*),<sup>26</sup> lest it undergo further materialization, so that even considering the contractions and evolving of the worlds, it might still be possible for God’s created ones both to attain a sense of Divinity and to raise up the holy Sparks from this material world to the higher levels of being. And for this very reason bodies were not created for the demons, lest the world become materialized to any greater extent.

And even now, it is necessary for each person to be careful to seek quickly to repair what he has damaged, because no person is able to grasp to what extent he has distanced himself from what is holy. It is concerning this that our wise ones intimated that God hallowed the Day and the bodies of the demons were not created, in order that the world would ascend and not become further materialized.

And this is the interpretation of the verse, “on the Seventh Day God finished . . .”: that with the Seventh Day, the holiness of *Shabbat*, God completed His work in the sense that it would not continue further. And as Rashi alluded, the blessed Holy One, knowing precisely His times and moments, entered into the Seventh Day as a hairbreadth, setting a very precise limit to the contraction, even to the extent of a hairbreath, and bringing down the holiness of *Shabbat* in order to halt the world’s process toward materialization. The divine Wisdom decreed that the world might assume physical character up to that precise point, but not beyond it. . . .

**Comment:** The master and preacher latched on to a rabbinic agada which explains the divine Name, *’El Shaddai*, in terms of its last syllable, *dai* (“enough”), signifying God’s halting the expansion of the world immediately following the days of creation. The preacher, however, did not simply repeat a much older bit of cosmological lore.

He understood that motif in terms of a context gleaned from Lurianic Kabbalah which delineated the physical world’s evolving from the infinite state of the Divine. The vessels brought into being were unable to contain the Light, the manifestations of divine energy, and hence they collapsed. This cosmic scheme speaks in terms of a complex and uncertain relationship between forms and what they contain, presented almost on a mechanical level. The Kraków master, however, read both that example of rabbinic lore and its Lurianic interpretation in terms of the effect of such

26. *b. Hag.* 12a.

contractions on human consciousness and even on a broader consciousness pervading all of existence.

In Kalonymus Kalman's reading of that agada in the context of Lurianic teaching, all that is spiritual in nature could have acquired a very precarious state-of-being. Hence, a critical need to halt the further expansion of the created world was crucial, lest it continue to acquire a more and more material, physical character to the point that it could fail to allow for any awareness of its more ultimate spiritual moorings.

A delicate balance between the material and the spiritual was in danger of being violated, and only a definite halt to the expansion of materialization could preserve that balance. The timing contributes a meaning to the Seventh Day as a way of preventing man's drowning in his materialistic orientation and understanding of himself, something that could forever close the door to humankind's reaching upward to its Root in the divine. *Shabbat* (the Seventh Day) preserves a sense of connection with a deeper spiritual reality, a connection that, however, continues to stand in danger of being conclusively lost. And the world hangs in the balance.

That sense of balance is heard and overheard in various passages in the collection of Kalonymus Kalman's homilies. Furthermore, it will become evident that the balance is one that works in more than one direction as it guarantees that neither physicality nor spirituality would completely demolish the other, as only a proper balance between the two can truly allow for the world's continued existence.

This homily refers also to another rabbinic agada, this time having to do with the *hitzonim*, demonic agents, for which bodies were never created due to the entrance of the Seventh Day following the days of creation. The very name *hitzonim* indicates their externality and their opposition to all that is holy. Reflecting Hasidic teaching's emphasis upon interior meaning and the inner life, the name *hitzonim* defined those demonic forces as the antithesis of Hasidism's own value-system. It would follow that understanding the world and life and humans and the Torah itself solely in terms of their external character brings in its wake something that is in itself potentially demonic in nature.

## Humility and the World's Sustainability<sup>27</sup>

“Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created . . .” (Gen 2:4)

As it appears in the Torah-text, the word *b'hibar'am* (“when they were created”) contains one letter, *hei*, written very small, an occurrence which has been explained in various ways including reading that word as *b'Avraham* (through the merit of Abraham, simply situating the same letters in a different order).<sup>28</sup>

. . . When the worlds evolved one from the other, down to this physical world, its inhabitants forgot God's Divinity and came to think that they have no Lord or ruler over them. Each person said, “I shall rule,” and consequently they were destroyed.

The important point is the need to know that God is the master and ruler and the Root of all the worlds<sup>29</sup> and to be humble before Him, like Abraham who said, “I who am but dust and ashes” (Gen 18:27). And through the merit of such a person, the world is sustained. And this is *b'hibar'am*: *b'Avraham* (through Abraham), continuing in the way of the quality of Abraham which is one of humility before God, unlike that of the early generations, each one of whom said, “I shall rule” and, accordingly, were destroyed. And the small letter *hei* alludes to his humility; conveying that each person should consider himself small and lowly before God, and in this way the world can continue to exist.

**Comment:** In the Torah's opening chapters Abraham emerges as a figure who stands in rather sharp contrast to the generations that preceded him. While all else conveys a picture of consistent and repeated human failure, only Abraham stands out in a positive way against that background. In that one word, *b'hibar'am*, that rabbinic midrash claimed to locate a somewhat concealed reference to Abraham already in the Torah's account of creation; the letters of that word, given a different order, could read as *b'Avraham*, conveying that the world was created for the sake of Abraham and those like him.

27. *Ma'or va-shemesh*, I, 5a.

28. *Midr. Gen* 12:9.

29. *Zohar*, I, 11b (Int.).

That thought in itself might be interpreted in terms of various qualities or actions of Abraham, but Kalonymus Kalman, in the above passage, focuses on one particular quality, namely Abraham's humility. The homilist here viewed Abraham's humility as his distinguishing trait. And in the context of Hasidic teaching, humility represents the antithesis of egotism which is itself understood as taking seriously something that lacks any true place in existence itself. Humility, in this sense, is a recognition of truth and a rejection of distorted self-centered perceptions of oneself in comparison with others.

### When One Person Judges Another<sup>30</sup>

“(Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat;) but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it . . .”  
(Gen 2:16–17)

The person who comes to serve God must be careful not even to look at the fault of his fellow, and not to consider himself wise and capable of understanding his fellow and his way. “Man sees only what is visible, but the Lord sees into the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). The person who looks upon the faults of his fellow does so out of one's own arrogance, whereas if that person were humble, recognizing his own shortcomings, he would have a more favorable picture of his fellow and would not come to any awareness of the latter's shortcomings. It is only due to a person's sense of self-importance that his fellow's words and ways fail to meet his approval. In contrast, our father Jacob, may he rest in peace, who was a mild man (Gen 25:27) did not look upon himself as a person of wisdom capable of judging the ways of others.

This thought connects with the verse, “but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it . . .” For if you do, pride and the Evil Inclination will enter into you, and because you perceive yourself to be a person of wisdom, your heart will be drawn to discern the ways of your fellows and to consider whether they are good or evil. And this was the claim of the serpent, “And you will be like divine beings who know good and bad” (Gen 3:5), for by eating of the tree you make yourself wise (in your own eyes), believing that you know how to evaluate the ways

30. *Ma'or va-shemesh*, I, 5b.

of your fellow and to know whether they are good or evil. And you will reach a conclusion that you would not have arrived at otherwise.

And this is heard in the words, “And they perceived that they were naked” (‘*arumim*, Gen 3:7), which connects with the words, “Now the serpent was the shrewdest, *eirom* (of all the wild beasts that the Lord God had made,” Gen 3:1). For as a consequence of their eating from the tree, they opened themselves to the Evil Inclination and to arrogance, and in their guile they attributed to themselves wisdom. And this connects also with the man’s saying, “And I was afraid because I was naked (‘*arum*) . . .” (Gen 3:10)—I fear because I see that my heart arrogantly puffs up within me saying, I am shrewd and wise. And we should be very fearful of that.

**Comment:** In this homily, the Kraków master offered his interpretation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in a way that amazingly brings that theme very much down-to-earth. While statements concerning the effects and consequences of eating from that tree have included very far-reaching and complex implications, for Kalonymus Kalman in this brief homily, the meaning of the sin of the First Man has to do with something extraordinarily commonplace: the tendency of people to be judgmental concerning others and the self-importance involved in a person’s viewing others critically. A rare beauty is displayed in the very simplicity of the master’s interpretation.