

Source and Secret

Torah's all encompassing power

by Rabbi Dan Roth

“Rabbanim, don’t interfere with politics,” David Ben-Gurion admonished the *Gedolim* in 1951 when they stated their opinion on the topic of women’s national service.¹ His remark, which has often been echoed by others,² is founded on the mistaken belief that the Torah only deals with so-called “ritualistic” matters, like the kashrus of a pot or the height of a sukka, but has nothing to do with worldly affairs, such as the running of a country.³

Delve into Torah, says the last Mishnah in Avos⁴, *dekula ba* — for *everything* is in it: every facet of creation and every wisdom of the world.⁵ The Torah offers direction on the most diverse topics, from how to become a leader and speak in public, to how to view world events and care for the environment. As Reb Yitzchak of Volozhin put it, “There is no question in the world whose answer cannot be found in Torah... One only needs to open his eyes to find where it is written.”⁶

Everything Is in the Torah

The greatest men in our history sought and derived all of their knowledge from the Torah. Shlomo Hamelech, the wisest man who ever lived, gleaned all of his knowledge in astrology, botany, medicine, the language of animals, birds, reptiles, demons and spirits from the Torah.⁷

Dovid Hamelech referred to the Torah’s testimonies as his “men of counsel.”⁸ Whereas most rulers have a cabinet of ministers to whom they turn for advice, Dovid Hamelech sought guidance from the Torah. Moreover, the Torah provided better advice than the finest of ministers. Ministers can only offer advice in their particular fields of expertise, whereas the Torah was equivalent to *all* Dovid’s “men of counsel,” providing him with direction in all areas and circumstances.⁹

Even in our generation there are those whose study and understanding of the Torah is so in-depth that they are able to gain clarity on scientific subjects and other areas of worldly knowledge. The Chazon Ish had a profound understanding of human anatomy and was able to guide doctors on how to best perform surgeries, even drawing detailed diagrams for them.¹⁰ Yet, he never attended medical school, nor any lectures on the subject.¹¹ He learned everything from the Torah.

A distraught Jew came to him one night for advice. His son was deathly ill and the doctors were in a dilemma. On the one hand they felt that without an operation he would not have long to live. On the other hand the operation itself was fraught with danger and had a low success rate, with many patients not surviving the surgery.

The Chazon Ish listened to the man’s predicament while he was lying down with his eyes closed. He lay still for almost fifteen minutes, buried in thought. When he finally opened his eyes, he asked the boy’s father which doctor would be performing the surgery. Upon hearing the name, the Chazon Ish said that they should proceed with the operation, and he instructed the father to tell the doctor in his name that the operation should be carried out.

When the doctor heard what the Chazon Ish had said, he commented, “It is true that the Chazon Ish is always accurate with his prognoses, but in this case he is mistaken. There is no hope.” Nevertheless, he acceded to the father’s plea and performed the surgery. When he emerged from the

operating room six hours later, he told the father that if his son regained consciousness in the next twenty-four hours it was a good sign, but if not, the end was surely near.

Twenty-four hours passed and the son was still unconscious. The doctor threw his hands in the air in despair. The broken father hurried to the Chazon Ish, who told him, “Our allotted time is seventy-two hours.” To the father’s great joy, the boy opened his eyes after seventy-two hours and within a few weeks had made a complete recovery.

Afterward, those close to the Chazon Ish asked him what he had been thinking about for so long when the father had first come. They also wanted to know from which source he had derived the seventy-two-hour wait.

The Chazon Ish replied that when he heard the doctor’s report about the child not having long to live without the operation, he mentally reviewed the Gemara’s discussion about whether we are allowed to put momentary life at risk for a chance of effecting a long-term extension of life, until he arrived at the conclusion that this is indeed permitted.¹² As for the number seventy-two, that was an explicit Mishnah, he said.¹³

We see that the Torah is not just a dry set of laws, but a living entity, encompassing all areas of life.

Dig and Discover

What is unique about the Torah is the way its knowledge needs to be retrieved. All the information is there, but in order to access it you have to “turn it over and over,” digging for answers — just as one turns over layers of earth when searching for a lost object.¹⁴

Why is the Torah organized in this manner? Why couldn’t G-d have presented the Torah’s attitude on all kinds of topics in an organized and easy-to-find manner, like an encyclopedia? Why the need to excavate answers with toil, sweat, and a lifetime of effort?

To answer this question we first need to understand why the Torah is described as being deep.¹⁵

For any medium to have depth, it must simultaneously exist on higher and lower levels. For example, were the sea only to have an upper layer without any water below, it would be shallow like a pond. Yet, if it only had a lower layer without any water on top, it would simply be low, but it would not be deep. Depth requires that an upper and lower layer coexist together.¹⁶

The Torah is described as deep because it contains infinite layers of meaning, all of which are true and exist in complete harmony. When a child learns *Bereishis* he understands the verses on one level. As he grows older and learns the same verses again, he reads more into the text and attains new levels of understanding. In fact, a person can read the same verse in the Torah again and again throughout his life, uncovering new layers of meaning each time. Indeed, the Vilna Gaon perceived that the details of every creation that ever existed and that will ever exist — human, animal, plant, and inanimate object — are all contained in *Bereishis*.¹⁷

The new levels of perception a person discovers in the text do not negate his original interpretation of the text; they add to it. The Torah is able to accommodate multiple layers of understanding simultaneously. The *cheder* boy’s understanding of the verse is as true as the Vilna Gaon’s interpretation. Most other books are not like that. They are either easy to understand, such as a child’s spelling book, or difficult to understand, such as quantum physics, but they cannot be both at the same time. The Torah, however, contains an infinite number of layers, each existing side by side.¹⁸

Hard-Earned Wisdom

The reason that the Torah could not be laid out flat, like an encyclopedia, is because the Torah is G-d's way of revealing Himself to the world, and, as such, its words must infuse us in a very deep, intrinsic way.¹⁹

When you read an encyclopedia, you connect to the information it contains on a purely intellectual level. But Torah is not meant to enter just our minds, like a cold textbook of information. It is meant to permeate our entire being, entering and forming the very core of our existence and becoming the center of our lives. The only way to form a strong, inner bond of this sort is by chiseling away at its words, using all one's heart and soul to uncover hidden layers of meaning.

This explains the meaning of the coming phrase in the Mishnah, which says that one should “grow old and gray” with Torah.²⁰

With an encyclopedia, once you have read a particular entry there is no reason to read it again, unless you want to refresh your memory or you did not fully understand the material the first time. But either way, you will not discover any new insights or uncover depth that was not there before. With Torah, however, you can reread it until you're gray, for the more you dig away at the surface, the more you uncover.²¹ You never outgrow or tire of learning Torah, for as you delve deeper into its words, you uncover new layers of meaning. It's like digging in a mine where the soil is abundant with precious stones. You till the earth and discover a rare gem, a new insight. After unearthing your treasure and rejoicing over it, you continue to dig more, finding yet more jewels and new levels of comprehension.²²

The Mishnah concludes by saying that there is no better measuring rod than Torah. In other words, the levels of knowledge and understanding that man attains through his own intellect will never reach the level of truth contained in the Torah.²³ It is clear that besides offering a unique G-d oriented perspective on every conceivable topic and moral issue, the Torah's dictates and insights always contain more discernment and profundity than any other system of thought.²⁴

One author, who noted that “rabbis frequently hear the complaint that Orthodox Judaism is not ‘with it,’” decided to write a book showing how “traditional Judaism does have something to say on contemporary matters.” Without meaning to, he actually belittles the value of Torah. Torah does not just have “something to say” about the world and modern issues — it has everything to say, for it contains priceless wisdom and insights that far outweigh what any contemporary philosophy posits about the world.

The Torah's wisdom stems from G-d and will always surpass human wisdom. In fact, if after learning what the Torah has to say on a certain topic, it seems to be something we could have derived on our own from outside sources, we can be certain that we have not fully understood what the Torah is saying, and that we still need to uncover more layers.²⁵

We do not learn Torah just because we are commanded to. We learn it because it teaches us how to live and how to behave, how to think and relate to everything that happens in our lives with unmatched wisdom and clarity.²⁶ It is *Toras chaim* — a living Torah.

When we enter a new phase of life, or are faced with a dilemma of any sort, the first place we should turn to for direction is the Torah. If we can find areas where the Torah deals with the general subject of our issues, we then need to immerse ourselves in its words, prodding and poking and churning until the Torah's guidelines emerge from beneath the surface. If we are unsuccessful or are unable to uncover the Torah's guidelines for our particular problem, that is the time to turn to the *Gedolei Yisrael* and to ask them to share with us the Torah point of view. Once we open our lives up and invite the Torah inside so that it can speak to us, we will discover to our great joy that not only does the Torah contain a viewpoint on every facet of life, but that its teachings surpass all others and are the most relevant aspect of our lives.

*The above article is an excerpt from Rabbi Roth's exciting book, "[Relevance: Pirkei Avos for the Twenty-First Century](#)". Taking selections from *Ethics of the Fathers*, the book shows how the classic text of *Pirkei Avos* pertains to the modern world, and is as vibrant and contemporary as if it was written today. For more information, or to order a copy, visit www.relevance.co.il.*

¹ *Pe'er Hador* 5:27.

² See R' Avi Shafran, "What *Da'at Torah* Really Means," *The Jewish Week*, March 21, 2003, and R' Moshe Grylak, "Point of View," *Mishpacha*, June 23, 2004.

³ In a letter, the Chazon Ish writes that one who subscribes to the Torah's authority in regards to halachic rulings but not in other areas of life distorts the Torah and has no place in the World to Come (*Pe'er Hador* 5:52–53). Part of the letter has been reprinted in *Igros Chazon Ish* 3:§92.

פרק ה' משנה כ"ו: בן בג בג אומר, הפך בה והפך בה, דכלא בה. ובה תחזי, וסיב ובלה בה, ומנה לא תזוע, שאין לך מדה טובה הימנה.

Perek 5, Mishnah 26: Ben Bag Bag says: Turn it [Torah] over and over for everything is in it. See with it, grow old and gray with it, and do not budge from it, as there is no better measuring rod than it.

⁵ Rabbeinu Yona (Shas Vilna ed.), Rabbeinu Ephraim (quoted in the last line of *Midrash Shmuel*), *Peirushei Rabbeinu Yitzchak ben Harav Shlomo MiToledo*, *Pirkei Moshe*, *Sefer Mussar*, *Mirkeves Hamishneh*, *Roshei Avos*, *Milei D'Avos*. See also Ramban (Introduction to *Bereishis*), Rabeinu Bachya (Introduction to *Bereishis*), *Me'oz Hadas* (chap. 6), and Vilna Gaon (Commentary to *Sifra Ditzniusa*, chap. 5). Cf. *Meiri* and *Midrash Dovid* who offer a different explanation of the Mishnah.

⁶ Chofetz Chaim in the name of R' Itzelle, quoted in *Kovetz Ma'amarim VeIgros* 1:229.

⁷ Ramban (Introduction to *Bereishis*).

⁸ *Tehillim* 119:24 with *Seforno*.

⁹ R' Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Tehillim*, 1427.

¹⁰ *Pe'er Hador* 4:106–146. When Professor Yerachmiel Ashkenazi, head of Beilinson Hospital's Department of Neurology, was provided with a diagram of the brain showing how to carry out a surgical procedure, he quizzed the family as to which expert had given them the drawing, solving the patient's complicated problem (*ibid.*, 138).

¹¹ *Ibid.* 127–128.

¹² The reference is to the passage in *Avoda Zara* 27b: אי חיישין לחיי שעה.

¹³ *Pe'er Hador* 4:144–146.

¹⁴ See *Lechem Shamayim*.

¹⁵ *Sanhedrin* 44b with Rashi, ד"ה עתה באתי.

¹⁶ R' Reuven Leuchter.

¹⁷ Commentary to *Sifra Ditzniusa*, chap. 5.

¹⁸ See *Midrash Shmuel*.

Chazal compare Torah scholars to fish in water (*Berachos* 61b) to bring out this point. Land creatures move in two dimensions: left-right and forward-backward, thus remaining on one plain. Fish are unique in that they move in three dimensions, gliding smoothly between upper and lower layers of water. The reason Torah scholars are compared to fish is because they are able to move between different layers of understanding in Torah, much like fish move in water.

¹⁹ R' Reuven Leuchter.

²⁰ *Menoras HaMa'or* (Al-Nakawa), chap. 5, "Talmud Torah," 317. See also *Meiri*.

²¹ *Roshei Avos* mentions the idea of reading other books once, and the Torah many times.

²² As Dovid Hamelech writes: "I rejoice over Your word like one who finds abundant spoil" (*Tehillim* 119:162).

²³ *Nachalas Avos*. See *HaChassid Yaavetz*.

²⁴ The Midrashic saying (*Eicha Rabba* 2:13) “*chochma bagoyim ta’amin...Torah bagoyim al ta’amin*” portrays this point: While non-Jews do possess wisdom (*chochma*), they cannot reach the highest form of wisdom referred to as *Torah*. See *Da’as Chochma U’Mussar* 2:163.

²⁵ On the verse, “For it [the Torah] is not an empty thing *from you*,” (*Devarim* 32:47), Chazal expound that if the Torah does seem empty it is only *from you*, in other words due to a lack of exertion in understanding its words (*Midrash Tanna’im, Devarim*, loc. cit. See also *Sifri, Eikev* 12).

²⁶ See *Michtavim U’Ma’amarim* 4:125.