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A Contextual Analysis of
Gate To The Heart - An Evolving Process
by Rabbi Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi

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A Contextual Analysis
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שער אל הלב - מסע התפחות פנימית
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The Legacy

Gate To The Heart, An Evolving Process is a practical manual for the Jewish spiritual seeker. It addresses the needs of those in our community who are compelled to pursue inner development and deliberate spiritual growth in a Jewish framework of theology, mythology, and methodology. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi elucidates an approach to spiritual growth that originates in "classical Jewish mysticism, as refined by *Hassidism* and, particularly by the *HaBaD* school"¹. It is hardly possible to convey the subtleties and depth of Rabbi Schachter's work in a brief summary. In order to gain full appreciation of this specific approach, it is well worth engaging directly with the text. However, an understanding of the broader historical and literary context of **Gate To The Heart** is bound to deepen the reader's encounter with it. Thus, we will view the work as a late link in a continual chain of a distinct subtype of literary creations within the genre of *Jewish ethical literature*.

Gate To The Heart is indeed but a recent contribution to a legacy of cutting-edge texts on Jewish spiritual development. The main purpose of such a textual genre is to revitalize and/or bring up-to-date the practice and study of Torah-centered spirituality. These works have set out, at each generation, to reopen a gate of deep wisdom, the gate of authentic spiritual experience,

¹ Rabbi Zalman M. Schachter Shalomi, **Gate To The Heart, An Evolving Process**, ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, Philadelphia 1993, page 5

for the practicing individual Jew. Their exegesis of textual sources and conceptual reorganization of materials are meant to open a gate in the heart of the student, as well as open a gate to the Divine. Such works served, over the course of generations, to ever fine-tune and perfect a religious and spiritual life-style that is committed to the values of Torah, and committed to attaining a deeply felt connection to God. The idea of a multi-generational chain of Jewish spiritual works is succinctly expressed in the words of Rabbi Me'ir Ben Gabbai, the author of the sixteenth century **Avodat HaKodesh, The Sacred Service**:

היה מן ההשגחה אשר לא סרה ולא תסור לעורר לב אנשיה ומקבליה, לחבר בה ספרים, וזו הסיבה עצמית כי בכל דור ודור נפלאותה ההשגחה כשלא יעדר איש מקבל מאיש שרשי החכמה, וכבר שלא אבדה חכמת חכמינו מכל וכל...

"... in each and every generation Divine-Providence (*HaHashgaha*) wondrously sees to it that in the chain of transmission, from person to person, of the roots of wisdom there would not be any absent link. It is such that Divine-Providence does not cease to awaken the hearts of Her people and those who receive (the wisdom) to compose books about her (wisdom), and thus our sages' wisdom has not been lost..."²

Each generation is bound to produce innovative religious scholars and writers of such texts in response to each generation's particular sociological, technological and spiritual characteristics. Rabbi Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi is just such a scholar, teacher and writer; one who reinterprets the textual as well as behavioral vessels of eternal Jewish wisdom so that they may inform and inspire the life paths of contemporary seekers.

² רבי מאיר בן גבאי, **עבודת הקודש**, הוצאת "ארחות החיים" ירושלים, (Author's English translation)
תשנ"ב, מבוא הספר

The Literary Genre

A glance at the span of Jewish literature, especially since the Middle Ages, shows that "...there was a considerable corpus of writings whose purpose was distinctly ethical. Most of them are essentially pietistic... [while] some of them... presented formal ethical systems."³ These writings differed from philosophical or mystical works, because in addition to offering a Torah-centered spiritual philosophy, they also served as instructional manuals on how to attain desired spiritual goals. These manuals included detailed advice for daily living, ranging in topics from worship and ethics to material affairs. A prototype for such works is "Solomon ibn Gabirol's **Tikkun Middot ha-Neffesh, Improvement of the Moral Qualities**.... Predicated on psychological and physiological bases rather than religious premises, Gabirol's thesis conceives the soul as consisting of two parts: the higher, which strives for union with God, and the lower, the seat of the moral qualities of the daily life. He proposed to teach the art of training and cultivating the soul."⁴

Focus on cultivating the soul, or on individual spiritual development, is an essential element in most ethical literature. These text assume at the outset that walking God's path, or working towards personal spiritual perfection is the primary purpose of human life in general, and of Jewish life in particular. This genre aims at assisting the reader in his or her quest for God. It instructs them in attitude and method in order to maximize the results of their spiritual endeavor.

Gate To The Heart belongs to a subtype of ethical literature that, for our purposes, we will coin *Texts of Jewish Spiritual Development and Renewal*. Such works are distinct in their daring nature. They offer ideas and perspectives that depart from the conventions of their time.

³ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Jerusalem Vol. 11 page 343

⁴ *ibid.*

They venture into radical, and at times, controversial creativity and innovation. These are writings by spiritual leaders and scholars who thought out-of-the-box. In these writings, a new conceptual framework for spiritual attainment through Torah and Mitzvot was offered. In addition, the author often suggested new methodology, insight, and language that utilized, integrated, or even embraced the general cultural and intellectual idiom of the time; all with the stated purpose of opening access paths to Torah and authentic connection to the Holy One.

Axes of Dynamic Tension

There are at least one of two types of dynamic tension axes present throughout these works. These axes are either part of the stated motivation for the book, or run as a sub-text throughout the narrative. Thus, they can be found either in the introduction to the book or in the narrative itself. It is through the attempt to negotiate one or both of these tension axes that the authors weave their creative presentations of ideas, sources and sparks of wisdom.

The New - Old Axis

The first axis of dynamic tension is between new and old, between a contemporary world-view, with its particular linguistic expressions, and those of the past. Here the tension runs along the axis of history, throughout which, ever new trends of thought, philosophical jargon, and culture evolve. This constant evolution changes the environment in which the Jewish seeker pursues his or her conversation with eternity.

While endeavoring to polemically defend the observance of Mitzvot (Jewish religious actions and prohibitions), the early twentieth century sage, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, discusses the challenge of resolving the confrontation between new and old. In his own words:

“When Judaism had to defend itself as the champion of the basic idea of the divine,
and then encountered the Greek conception of the eternity of the universe,

Maimonides was very successful, not only in demonstrating a way of maintaining the divine idea on the basis of the belief in creation, but also by utilizing the ideology of the adversary. He spoke confidently about the conception of God, even on the basis of the theory of the eternalists.... The relationship of the doctrine of evolution - in all its ramifications - to Judaism, and its fundamental concepts in our time, is similar to the ancient confrontation of the teaching about the eternity of the universe with Judaism in the time of the spiritual polemic with the Greeks. Here we need to follow resolutely the scientific method of Maimonides, although the methods of reasoning have changed with the changing time....”⁵

Rav Kook reminds us that the ideological and theological tensions between the ancient account of creation and contemporary theory about the universe are not unique to his (or our) time. We see that they reoccur throughout history. At each period the debate has its unique features, thus the “method of reasoning... [changes] with the changing time”⁶. However, while the substance and language of the debate, in the Rav’s example, has changed from “the eternity of the universe verses creation” to the “doctrine of evolution verses creation” the nature of the tension remains the same, that being between new and old. In Rav Kook’s analysis above we find two strains of confrontation between old and new. One is the tension between an ancient concept with inherent spiritual value and a new materialistic one, as in the debate between creationism and either eternalism or evolution. The second is the tension between an old reasoning paradigm of diminished communication value verses a new paradigm of reasoning with enhanced communication value, as in the case of the Rambam’s method of reasoning verses contemporary reasoning methodology.

⁵ Ben Zion Bokser, **Abraham Isaac Kook**, Paulist Press New York - Ramsey - Toronto, 1978 page 305, 306

⁶ *ibid.*

Rav Kook's words imply an additional profound point about the true but subtle essence of the debate, and in which lies the significance of the new - old tension axis. According to Rav Kook, in neither polemic did Judaism have to prove the correctness of the Biblical account of creation, nor disprove its "adversary". Rather "Judaism had to defend... the basic idea of the divine...", not the basic idea of creation theory. The debate is between a spiritual world-view in which there is a gate to the Divine and a materialistic world-view in which the gate is lost from sight. This competition of spiritual verses materialistic is the sub-text of the new - old debate. *Texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal* work this tension by highlighting the intrinsic spiritual value in both old and new, as did the Rambam, when communicating the idea of God through both creation theory and eternalist theory.

Rabbi Nissan Mindel translated the **Tanya**, the philosophical, ethical, and spiritual manifesto of the HaBaD Hassidic community, into English. In his introductory remarks, Rabbi Mindel explains some of the considerations of the author, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, when writing the **Tanya**. One of the considerations placed before the Rebbe was the fact that Hebrew literature on the topics of Jewish philosophy, ethics and spirituality had existed in abundance. Why then write another one? In the translator's own words:

"He (Rabbi Schneur Zalman) is aware, of course, of the existence of Hebrew literature dealing with the same subject. If he is impelled to write a new book, it is not, as he is careful to note, because of the shortcomings of the available works *per se*, but because the human mind is not equally receptive, nor equally responsive to, the same stimuli. The implication is that many works on Jewish philosophy and ethics were useful for their time and age, or for the specific group for whom they were written. Now there was a need for a new approach (in the light of the Hassidic

doctrine), and for a “guide” that would command a universal appeal.”⁷

Here the **Tanya**’s translator demonstrates how the Rebbe considers the tension of old and new as a motivation, as well as challenge, in his writing process. We read about the Rebbe’s care and respect for older works, which were “useful for their time and age or for the specific group for whom they were written”⁸. However, the Rebbe acknowledges their diminished relevance, and consequently the necessity to embrace a new approach in order to meet the spiritual needs of his generation.

Let us note that often *texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal*, when they first appeared, have often elicited controversy among fellow religionists for having emphasized the spiritual value of the new. Such was the case with the works of both the Rambam and Rabbi Schneur Zalman, before they became widely appreciated.

The Keva - Kavanah Axis

The second axis common to this genre addresses the dynamic tension between *Keva and Kavanah*. *Keva*, depending on context, can be translated as either routine, action, or external orientation. *Kavanah*, depending on context, can be translated as either spontaneity, intention, or internal orientation. While the tension between new and old happens in the realm of history, this dynamic tension exists in the realm of methodology and approach. It is the tension between the systematic fulfillment of prescribed religious observance and the often conflicting spontaneity involved in the process of cultivating spiritual experience and expression through those same observances.

רבי שמעון אומר הוי זהיר בקריאת שמע ובתפלה. וכשאתה מתפלל אל תעש תפלתך

⁷ Rabbi Nissan Mindel, **Lessons In Tanya**, “KEHOT” Publication Society Brooklyn NY 1987 page xx

⁸ *ibid*

קבע אלא רחמים ותחנונים לפני המקום ברוך הוא...

“Rabbi Shimeon said: Be prudent in saying the *Shema* and with *Tefilah*. When you pray do not make your prayer *Keva*, a set task, Rather [appeal for] mercy and entreat the All Present...”⁹

On its face, this statement from the Mishnah may seem to advocate for *Kavanah*, spontaneity, intention, or internal orientation, in prayer. But, a broader look will reveal that the Mishnah rather epitomizes the never resolved tension between *Keva* and *Kavanah*.

Rashi, a dominant Bible and Talmud commentator, offers the following interpretation on this Mishnah.¹⁰ He questions what the Mishnah means by “be prudent”? “Recite them (*Shema* and *Tefilah*) at their prescribed times”, he answers. Or in other words, make sure to maintain, *Keva*, a set task, with regard to your prayer. Since this interpretation contradicts the statement that follows it, “... do not make your prayer *Keva*, a set task”, it altogether cancels the possibility that the Mishnah simply intends to advocate for *Kavanah* alone, as we may have first thought. If, according to Rashi, “be prudent” means *Keva* in prayer, then how should we understand the sentence immediately after it? “Do not pray as one who tries to merely fulfill a burdensome obligation” answers Rashi. Rashi’s interpretation collapses the initial and simple reading of the paragraph and introduces the tension dynamic between *Keva* and *Kavanah*; the tension dynamic between set external practice and internal attitude.

When commenting on Rabbi Shimeon’s words, Rashi must have been aware of the following Gemara (The Talmud’s commentary on a Mishnah) relating to our Mishnah:

⁹ Mishnah Avot 2: 13

¹⁰ מאיר דוד הכהן, מאור האבות ותולדותיהם במסגרת פרקי אבות, ירושלים תשל"ח,

“What is meant by [one whose prayer is a] routine? Rabbi Jacob bar Idi said in the name of Rabbi Hoshia: Anyone whose prayer is to him nothing but a heavy burden. The sages said: He who does not say it as one supplicating. Rabbah and Rabbi Joseph both said: He who is unable to bring something fresh into it.”¹¹

The clash of opinion in the above Gemara, in of itself, reflects the *Keva - Kavanah* tension. However, we especially encounter the tension in the contradicting implications that two of those opinions have with regard to how we may understand the Mishnah. When we apply Rabbah and Rabbi Joseph’s opinion, “the inability to bring something fresh to it”, to the Mishnah, it reinforces the simple meaning, emphasizing freshness in prayer while rejecting routine. On the other hand, when we apply the opinion of Rabbi Jacob bar Idi, that *Keva* means “prayer is to him nothing but a heavy burden”, this allows the creative reworking of the Mishnah’s simple meaning, which Rashi chose to do.

Rashi’s deliberate choice of one Tanaitic opinion over the other is telling. It suggests that Rashi’s engagement with the *Keva - Kavanah* tension dynamic runs deeper than a clever conceptual presentation. One can imagine that his very choice to exegetically transform a simple statement that prefers *Kavanah* over *Keva* is likely to reflect the anxiety that such a statement must have provoked in him. The presumed catalyst for this anxiety seems likely to have been the potential supremacy of one, *Kavanah* over the other, *Keva*. In Rashi’s response, we are witnessing the deeply intuitive as well as rather practical way in which the *Keva - Kavanah* tension dynamic would concern any committed spiritual seeker. Ultimately, the seeker and the community need their religious practice to be informed and shaped by the pull and tug of both polarities. Alerted to the spiritual as well as practical damage that a unipolar endorsement of *Kavanah* could cause, Rashi uses his interpretive wit to restore the sustaining energy of a

¹¹ Talmud Bavli Berakhot 29b

dynamic tension on a bipolar axis.

This axis further appears in another Rabbinic debate concerning the recitation of *Berakhot*, blessings:

“Rabbi Meir said: Even if one merely sees a loaf of bread and says, “Blessed be He who created this bread; how beautiful is this bread!” - that is the same as a blessing over it. Even if he sees figs and says, “Blessed be He who created these figs; how beautiful they are!” - that is the same as a blessing over them.

But Rabbi Yose said: He who changes the formulae the sages have fixed for blessings has not discharged his duty.”¹²

Both opinions, one advocating *Kavanah* and the other *Keva*, arise from, as well as actively define, the parameters of a time-honored debate that continually reshapes Jewish sacred practices to this day.

Texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal typically seek to educate as well as instruct their readers on how to meet the challenge inherent in the *Keva* - *Kavanah* axis; the challenge of maintaining an authentic opening to the Divine.

Bahya ibn Paquda, an eleventh century author, offers an approach to the *Keva* - *Kavanah* tension in his book **Duties of The Heart**. In his own words:

וצריך שתדע, כי הכונה והתועלת במצות הלבבות שיהיו גלויים וצפויים שוים ושקולים

¹² Tosefta Berakhot 4: 4 - 5

בעבודת השם, עד שתהיה עדות הלב והלשון והאברים שחה, ויצדיק כל אחד מהם
את חברו, ויעיד לו, ולא יחלוק עליו, ולא יסתור דבריו, והוא אשר יקראהו הכתוב
"תמים" באמרו: תמים תהיה עם יי אלהיך " (דברים יח, יג)

"What you must know is that the aim and objective of the duties of the heart are for
both our outer and inner selves to share equally in serving God; that the heart,
tongue and limbs be consistent in their testimony, that they authenticate each other
and bear out one another, rather than oppose and contradict each other. This is what
Scripture calls being wholehearted: You must be wholehearted with HaShem your
God" (Devarim 18: 13)¹³

Rabbi Bahya discusses interaction and balance between *Keva* and *Kavanah*. In a similar
manner, each *text of Jewish spiritual development and renewal* suggests its own unique and
interactive blend of prescribed obligation versus self-expression, discipline versus meaning-
making, inner versus outer orientation. Each author offers conceptual framework and
methodology that consist of a particular *Keva - Kavanah* balance in accordance with the
perceived need of their time, place and constituency. Thus, Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi, in
Gate To The Heart, negotiates the tension of *Keva* and *Kavanah*, in a way unique to his
understanding of post-modern spirituality.

Texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal are a sub-genre of ethical literature
that creatively negotiate the tension axes of new versus old and *Kavanah* versus *Keva*. In the
process of doing so they offer fresh insight and instruction in the areas of both philosophy and
methodology. The readers of such texts glean deeply relevant understandings of God, Torah, and

¹³ Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, **Duties of the Heart**, English translation by Daniel Haberman, Feldheim
Publishers Jerusalem - New York, 1996 Volume one page 36, 37

Mitzvot. In addition they find instructions in refined spiritual practices that integrate the old, the new, and the occasionally borrowed. Above all, the primary stated concern of these works is to support and enhance that which Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto coined, *Sh'lemut Ha'Avodah*¹⁴, individual spiritual development.

¹⁴ Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, **Mesillat Yesharim, The Path Of The Just**, English translation by Shraga Silverstein, Feldheim Publishers Jerusalem / New York, 5747 -1987 page 4

The Essential Function of *Kavanah*

Above, we discerned the equal and essential role of both *Keva* and *Kavanah* in the process of spiritual development. We described how negotiating the appropriate dynamic balance between *Keva* and *Kavanah* at any given time, and within any given framework of religious life, is crucial to opening a desired gate to the Divine. However, the tension dynamic between *Keva* and *Kavanah* assumes an entirely different quality when it plays out in the internal rather than the external realm.

Let us examine the difference between these two realms. The external realm includes choices that are pragmatic in nature since they exist within the limits of real time and space. These are choices of emphasis of certain Mitzvot over others, or choices among topics for learning, or choices among other selected activities. All of these choices have the power to affect the quality of a spiritual Torah life. This level of negotiation occurs on a horizontal tension axis. In this realm, both ends of the tension axis, *Keva* and *Kavanah*, hold equal force, merit, and value. The nature of the tension in the internal realm, however, manifests along a vertical axis. This axis is hierarchical and developmental, rather than leveled or horizontal.

The particular nature of the internal-realm-dynamic is best illumined by a set of common observations that are presented by several authors of *texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal*. These authors describe in the introductions to their prospective works that a majority of their contemporaries incline to focus on *Keva* at the expense of *Kavanah*, and consequently deprive themselves of a fully developed relationship with God. These observations necessitate a new perspective, an internal one, to help make sense of the discrepancy of popular appeal between the *Keva* and *Kavanah* approaches in religious life.

According to the internal perspective, a majority of the individuals who perform religious

acts with primary emphasis on *Keva* do so because they are yet at an entry level of their spiritual development. At the same time, those individuals who increase their emphasis on *Kavanah* are bound to cultivate over time an ever-growing saintly and highly developed spiritual life.

From this point of view, *Keva* and *Kavanah* are not simply factors in a set of pragmatic choices, but rather distinct intra-personal forces that wrestle for the soul and mind of the evolving person. They are sets of internal choices between the comfort of rote and the effort involved in maximizing one's presence of mind and heart, a choice that need be made moment by moment. This negotiation centers around the continual effort to instill an attitude of *Kavanah* into a the fundamentally rigid mind-set of *Keva*.

The effort required to consistently reevaluate *Keva* and to infuse it with *Kavanah* explains the reduced numbers of those attaining a more refined and authentic level of religious conduct. This common prominence of *Keva* at the expense of *Kavanah* has been cause for concern for the spiritually sensitive observer. Authors of *texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal* often state this concern as the primary catalyst for composing their works. These works reflect an effort to rebalance the demographics of spiritual evolution in their corresponding generations.

Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, the author of **Mesillat Yesharim, The Path of the Just**, tells us that:

"A consideration of the general state of affairs will reveal that the majority of men of quick intelligence and keen mentality devote most of their thought and speculation to the subtleties of wisdom and the profundities of analysis, each according to the inclination of his intelligence and his natural bent. There are some who expend a

great deal of effort in studying... (secular subjects).... There are those who go more deeply into sacred studies, into the study of the holy Torah, some occupying themselves with Halakhic discussions, others with Midrash and others with legal decisions. There are few, however, who devote thought and study to perfection of divine service - to love, fear, communion and all of the other aspects of saintliness.... the reading of works of this kind have been left to those of a not too sensitive, almost dull intelligence. These you will see immersed in the study of saintliness, not stirring from it.... This state of affairs results in evil consequences both for those who possess wisdom and for those who do not, causing both classes to lack true saintliness, and rendering it extremely rare.... Is it fitting that our intelligence exert itself and labor in speculations which are not binding upon us, in fruitless argumentation, in laws which have no application to us, while we leave to habit and abandon, to mechanical observance, our great debt to our Creator? If we do not look into and analyze the question of what constitutes true fear of God and what its ramifications are, how will we escape worldly vanity which renders our hearts forgetful of it?.... Love of God, too - if we do not make an effort to implant it in our hearts, utilizing all of the means which direct us towards it, how will it exist within us? Whence will enter into our souls intimacy with and ardor towards the Blessed One and towards His Torah if we do not give heart to His greatness and majesty which engender this intimacy in our hearts? How will our thoughts be purified if we do not strive to rescue them from the imperfections infused in them by physical nature? And all of the character traits, which are in such great need of correction and cultivation - who will cultivate and

correct them if we do not give heart to them and subject them to exacting
scrutiny?"¹⁵

Rabbi Luzzatto is observing the lack of attention to the study and cultivation of the psycho-spiritual process among his contemporaries. According to Rabbi Luzzatto, this phenomenon stands in the way of engendering true intimacy with God. The author, most succinctly expresses his concern with the people's skewed sense of priorities in his question: "...Is it fitting that our intelligence exert itself... in fruitless argumentation, in laws which have no application to us, while we leave to habit and abandon, to mechanical observance, our great debt to our Creator?"¹⁶ Rabbi Luzzatto is imploring his readers to turn their attention from overindulgence in *Keva* for-its-own-sake, to a focus on their great debt to their Creator. Which debt? The charge to nurture an in-depth relationship, a relationship infused with *Kavanah*.

Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, in **Duties of the Heart**, reports the results of his research and observations about Jewish conduct. Rabbi Bahya, not only observed his own generation, but researched literature about previous generations as well. In his own words:

"...when I made an inquiry into the conduct of previous generations as documented in written records, I found that the people were far removed from them (the duties of the heart). Only the most fervent and outstanding personalities among the people lived up to these duties, as we know from accounts of their conduct; the rest of the people, however, sorely needed guidance and instruction in this area.

How much the more so in our generation! Most of the people do not take seriously the duties of the limbs, certainly not the duties of the heart.

¹⁵ ibid page 3, 7, 9

¹⁶ ibid.

Those among the people who are drawn to Torah-study aim only to be considered scholars by the common people and to be thought of as great men. They veer off the path of the Torah to [study] that which brings no excellence of character, does not correct personal faults, and ignorance of the fundamentals of the religion and the foundations of the Torah (i.e. the duties of the heart), which should not be ignored or forsaken. Without knowledge of these [duties of the heart] and without practicing them, one simply cannot fulfill the commandments.

Belief in the unity of God is an example: Is this something which we are obligated to investigate intellectually (i.e. *Kavanah*), or is it enough to know of it by way of tradition and declare - as the simple do - without argument or proof, that our God is one (i.e. *Keva*)?... It is forbidden for a believer to remain in ignorance of these matters, for the Torah has cautioned us in this regard, saying: *Understand it today and reflect on it in your heart: HaShem is the God in the heavens above and on the earth below (Devarim 4: 39).*

The same is true of the other duties of the heart which have been mentioned and which will be mentioned: the believer's faith is not complete unless he knows of them and practices them. This is the inner wisdom, which is the light of the heart and the radiance of the soul. It is this that the verse refers to, saying: *Surely You desire truth in the inward parts; teach me wisdom in my innermost being (Tehillim 51: 8).*¹⁷

Rabbi Bahya notices the poor observance-level of Mitzvot in his time. He specifically refers to those Mitzvot that call for *Kavanah*, focused mental and emotional attention, which he

¹⁷ Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, **Duties of the Heart**, English translation by Daniel Haberman, Feldheim Publishers New York 1996, Vol. 1 page 21, 23

coins “duties of the heart”. His concern about this deficiency is great enough to cause him to declare that without knowledge and practice of *Kavanah* “one simply cannot fulfill the commandments”¹⁸. Rabbi Bahya states that religious observance at the mechanical level of *Keva* alone is but rudimentary and renders one’s faith incomplete. Thus, the knowledge and practice of *Kavanah* is the key to developing spiritual fullness, the state of “inner wisdom, which is the light of the heart and the radiance of the soul”¹⁹.

The nineteenth century, Rabbi Pinhas Eliyahu Horowitz of Vilna, the author of **Sefer HaBrit, The Book of the Covenant**, makes a rather poetic case for the study of the Torah’s hidden meanings, while he simultaneously rebukes those scholars who preach the exclusive study of the revealed Torah: In his own words:

”ראה ראיתי כתרה של תורה היא פנימיות, הנקראת חכמת הקבלה מונחת בקרן
זויות אין יורש ואין מבקש ואין שואל בשלומה, ואיכה ישבה בדד כלה נאה וחסודה זו,
טובת מראה מאד, ואיש לא ידעה וכו’.... ואתה אהובי ראה גם ראה מכל דברי חז”ל
המזכרים מה רוב טוב הצפון לבעלי הקבלה וכמה גדול העונש מי שלא עסק בחכמה
זו, ואל תפן לקחת ראייה מגדולי התורה בעלי נגלות שלא רוצים לעסוק בחכמה הזאת
כי דברי חז”ל במדרש ובזוהר שזכרנו נאמנים ובטוחים יותר מגדולי הדור הללו, ולא
יפחד לבבך לאנשי לצון החכמים בעיניהם המלעיגים על זה כו’.”

“I have seen time and again, the crown of Torah, which is its inner meaning, and
which is coined the wisdom of Kabbalah, remaining neglected. None are pursuing
her, none are questing for her, and no one is inquiring as to her well being. Thus she
dwells in solitude, this beautiful and righteous bride; how fair she is and none have

¹⁸ ibid. page 21

¹⁹ ibid. page 23

known her, etc.... And you, my beloved friend, see truly, in all of the well-known teachings of our sages, may their memory be blessed, the multitude of goodness that is in store for the initiates of the Kabbalah and how great is the punishment awarded to those who do not occupy themselves in this wisdom. Do not turn for proof to the giants of the revealed Torah who do not wish to occupy themselves with this wisdom, since the teachings of our sages in the Midrash and in the Zohar, as we know, are secure, and more trustworthy, than these giants of the generation. Your heart should not be fearful of these jesters, who are wise in their own eyes, and who mock this (study of Kabbalah) etc.”²⁰

Rabbi Horowitz, like Rabbi Luzzatto and Rabbi Paquda, seems to bemoan the fact that an influential majority of Torah scholars are neglecting, or even mocking, the pursuit of Torah's inner wisdom. He passionately cries out against this erroneous neglect and encourages the seeker to draw confidence from the many sources in Midrash and Zohar that suggest an essential and inwardly oriented path in Torah.

Each one of the above authors describes widespread neglect of the inward and spiritual orientation to Torah study and living, and sees a consistent demographic pattern. They observe that a majority of Jews are blind to, or even opposed to, inner-oriented practices and focus primarily on the technicalities of Torah observance. They also observe that only a rare few embrace Torah as a path of personal spiritual development.

Enlightening even more, is the fact that one may recognize the same attitudes, demographics and perhaps concerns found in our own post-modern communities. These observations across time and space clearly reveal the universality of the hierarchical dynamic

²⁰ ציטוט מתוך: שאול בוימן, **מפתחי חכמת אמת**, חלק ראשון ווארשא תרצ"ז עמוד יא-יב (Author's English translation)

between *Keva* and *Kavanah*.

Familiar routines, prescribed activities, and external orientation are taught and followed at the foundation level of this hierarchy. These modes of Torah observance are in consonance with the fundamental human proclivity for routine, *Keva*. However, the above cited texts remind us that this mode of operation is but the ground level from which one begins to climb the internal ladder of an unfolding spiritual life. Spontaneity, intention, and internal orientation make up the rungs of the ladder as well as the process of the climber. These latter modes are often in dissonance with the comfort and familiarity of routine.

Our authors express their distress at the fact that most of their contemporaries mistake *Keva* for the developmental ladder it is designed to support. They observe how so many committed individuals succumb to basic human nature as they choose a Torah path of least resistance, a path unchallenged by the deliberate learning and practice of *Kavanah*. In their views, the gravity force of extreme *Keva* seems to repeatedly collapse the subjectivity, creativity, and spirituality nurtured by the practice of *Kavanah*.

Therefore, on this vertical as well as internal axis of *Keva* and *Kavanah* dynamics, our authors urge that the constricting domination of *Keva* be countered by a continual infusion of *Kavanah*. Thus, *texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal* share a common mission, that of offering ever new and relevant teachings and methods that enhance *Kavanah* and reopen authentic gates to God and Torah.

The Proof-Texts

The notion that *Keva* takes priority over *Kavanah* is not based on human spiritual frailty alone. This point of view is clearly expressed in numerous places throughout classical sources. These sources lend support and seemingly justify religious conduct that focuses exclusively on *Keva*. The following list samples some of those readings.

In Bible:

”ועתה ישראל שמע אל החקים ואל המשפטים אשר אנכי מלמד אתכם לעשות למען
תחיו ובאתם וירשתם את הארץ אשר יהוה אלהי אבותיכם נותן לכם: לא תספו על
הדבר אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם ולא תגרעו ממנו לשמר את מצות יהוה אלהיכם אשר
אנכי מצוה אתכם.”

“Now, O Israel, listen to the decrees and to the ordinances that I teach you to
perform, so that you may live, and you will come and possess the land that HaShem,
the God of your forefathers, gives you. You shall not add to the word that I command
you, nor shall you subtract from it, to observe the commandments of HaShem, your
God, that I command you.”²¹

”ויקח ספר הברית ויקרא באזני העם ויאמרו כל אשר דבר יהוה נעשה ונשמע”

“And he (Moses) took the Book-of-the-Covenant and read it such that the people
could hear, and they said: all that God has spoken we will do and understand”²²

²¹ Deuteronomy 4: 1-2 (English translation from the Stone edition, the Humash)

²² Exodus 24: 7 (Author's English translation)

In Mishnah:

”רבי אומר ... והוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה. שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצות.”

“Rabi says... be cautious with (the performance of) simple Mitzvot as with weighty ones, since you do not know by which criteria Mitzvot are rewarded”²³

”שמאי אומר עשה תורתך קבע אמור מעט ועשה הרבה.”

“Shamai says: Make your Torah (study) a fixed task, say little and do much”²⁴

In Talmud:

”דאמר רב יהודה אמר רב: לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה ובמצות אף על פי שלא לשמה, שמתוך שלא לשמה - בא לשמה.”

“Said Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav: A person should always busy themselves in Torah (study) and Mitzvot, even not for their own sake (i.e. *Keva*), since (busy-ing oneself in them) not for their own sake will eventually result in (busy-ing oneself in them) for their own sake (i.e. *Kavanah*)”²⁵

In Ethical literature:

”וכאשר נתם התלמוד הקדוש, אנו לנו אלא לשמור ולעשות ככל הכתוב בתורה הקדושה שבכתב ובעל פה, ככל משפטם וחקותם ובזמנם ופרטיהם ודקדוקיהם, בלי

²³ Mishnah Avot 2: 1 (Author's English translation)

²⁴ Mishnah Avot 1: 15 (Author's English translation)

²⁵ Talmud Bavli Pesachim 50a (Author's English translation)

נטות מהם נטיה כל דהו. וכשיקיימם איש ישראל כראוי, אף אם לא יכוין, וגם לא ידע
כלל טעמי המצות וסודות כוונתם, עם כל זה נתקיימו המצות, ויתוקנו על ידיהם
העולמות, ויתרבה בהם קדושה ואור....”

“Since the completion of the holy Talmud, it remains incumbent upon us to observe
all that is written in the holy Torah, the written Torah as well as the oral Torah, all the
laws and statutes, each in their proper time, all their details and specifications,
without straying even lightly. When a man of Israel observes (the Torah) properly,
even without *Kavanah*, and without knowledge of the rationale of the Mitzvot, and
their secret meanings, nevertheless they are considered fulfilled, and through them
the (spiritual) worlds are rectified, such that light increases in them...”²⁶

Texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal, however, highlight the extensive
references in Torah and in rabbinic literature that educate and instruct us in the cultivation of
Kavanah. These texts offer the reader a more sophisticated and complex reading of classical
sources that cannot but soften the hard structure of an exclusive focus on *Keva*. The following is
a digest of some of those sources.

In Bible:

”ואהבת את " אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאדך, והיו הדברים האלה אשר
“ אנכי מצוך היום על לבבך...”

“Love HaShem your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

²⁶ Rabbi Hayim of Velozhin, *Nefesh HaHayim*, OHEL DESKTOP PUBLISHING, Wickliffe, Ohio, 5757, 1997
page 94 (Author's English translation)

might. These words which I command you this day must be on your heart “²⁷

”לאהבה את יי אלהיך לשמע בקולו ולדבקה בו כי הוא חייך וארך ימך...”

“To love HaShem your God, to obey His voice, and to attach yourself to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days...”²⁸

”והיה אם שמע תשמעו אל מצותי אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום לאהבה את יי אלהיכם ולעבדו בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם,”

“It will be that if you hearken to My commandments that I command you today, to love HaShem your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul”²⁹

”וידעת היום והשבת אל לבבך כי יי הוא האלהים בשמים ממעל ועל הארץ מתחת אין עד,”

“Understand it today and reflect on it in your heart: HaShem is the God in the heavens above and on the earth below”³⁰

”ועתה ישראל מה יהוה אלהיך שאל מעמך כי אם ליראה את יהוה אלהיך ללכת בכל דרכיו ולאהבה אתו ולעבד את יהוה אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך,”

²⁷ Deuteronomy 6: 5-6

²⁸ ibid. 30: 20

²⁹ ibid. 11: 13

³⁰ ibid. 4: 39

“And now, Israel what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul”³¹

“ועשו לכם לב חדש ורוח חדשה”

“Make for yourselves a new heart and new spirit”³²

“ונתתי לכם לב חדש ורוח חדשה אתן בקרבכם והסרתי את לב האבן מבשרכם ונתתי לכם לב בשר: ואת רוחי אתן בקרבכם ועשיתי את אשר בחקי תלכו ומשפטי תשמרו ועשיתם:”

“A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put inside you; and I will take away the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit inside you , and cause you to follow my statutes, and you shall keep my judgments, and do them.”³³

“יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון להי לפניך יהוה צורי וגאלי”

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in Your sight, O YHVH my rock and my redeemer”³⁴

³¹ ibid. 10: 12

³² Ezekiel 18: 31

³³ Ezekiel 39: 26 - 27

³⁴ Psalms 19: 15

In Talmud:

”רחמנא לבא בעי.”

“The Merciful One wants the heart”³⁵

”מרגלא בפומייהו דרבנן דיבנה: אני בריה וחברי בריה, אני מלאכתי בעיר והוא מלאכתי בשדה, אני משכים למלאכתי והוא משכים למלאכתי, כשם שהוא אינו מתגדר במלאכתי כך אני איני מתגדר במלאכתי, ושמא תאמר: אני מרבה והוא ממעיט - שנינו: אחד המרבה ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.”

“A favorite saying of the Rabbis of Jabneh was: I am God’s creature and my fellow is God’s creature. My work is in the town and his work is in the country. I rise early for my work and he rises early for his work. Just as he does not presume to do my work, so I do not presume to do his work. Will you say, I do much and he does little? We have learned: One may do much or one may do little; it is all one, provided he directs his heart to heaven.”³⁶

”מאי איכא בין עושה מאהבה לעושה מיראה? איכא הא דתניא, רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר: גדול העושה מאהבה יותר מן העושה מיראה, שזה תלוי לאלף דור, וזה תלוי לאלפים דור, הכא כתיב: (שמות כ) לאלפים לאהבי ולשומרי מצותי, והתם כתיב: (דברים ז) ולשומרי מצותיו לאלף דור. התם נמי כתיב: לאוהביו ולשומרי מצותיו לאלף דור האי לדסמך ליה, והאי לדסמך ליה.”

³⁵ Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 106b

³⁶ Talmud Bavli Berakhot 17a

“What difference is there between one who acts out of love and one who acts out of fear? The difference is indicated in this teaching: Rabbi Simeon b. Eleazar says: Greater is he who acts from love than he who acts from fear, because with the latter [the merit] remains effective for a thousand generations but with the former it remains effective for two thousand generations. Here it is written: (Exod. 20) ‘Unto thousands of them that love Me and keep My commandments and elsewhere it is written: (Deut. 7) And keep His commandments to a thousand generations...”³⁷

”תנו רבנן: המתפלל צריך שיכוין את לבו לשמים. אבא שאול אומר, סימן לדבר: (תהלים י') תכין לבם תקשיב אזנך. תניא, אמר רבי יהודה: כך היה מנהגו של רבי עקיבא, כשהיה מתפלל עם הצבור - היה מקצר ועולה, מפני טורח צבור, וכשהיה מתפלל בינו לבין עצמו - אדם מניחו בזוית זו ומוצאו בזוית אחרת, וכל כך למה - מפני כריעות והשתחויות.”

“Our Rabbis taught: When a man prays, he should direct his heart to heaven. Aba Saul says: A reminder of this is the text: You will direct their heart, You will cause their ear to attend (Psalm 10: 17). It has been taught: Such was the custom of Rabbi Akiba; when he prayed with the congregation, he used to cut it short and finish in order not to inconvenience the congregation, but when he prayed by himself, a man would leave him in one corner and find him in another, on account of his many genuflections and prostrations.”³⁸

”אמר רבי אמי: אין תפלתו של אדם נשמעת אלא אם כן משים נפשו בכפו, שנאמר

³⁷ Talmud Bavli Sotah 31a

³⁸ Talmud Bavli Berakhot 31a

(איכה ג') נשא לבבנו אל כפים,

"Rabbi Ammi said: A man's prayer is only answered if he takes his heart into his hand, as it is said, Let us lift up our heart with our hands (Lam. 3: 41)."³⁹

"אין עומדין להתפלל אלא מתוך כבוד ראש. חסידים הראשונים היו שוהין שעה אחת ומתפללין, כדי שיכונו לבם לאביהם שבשמים... אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי, מהכא: (תהלים כ"ט) השתחוּו לה' בהדרת קדש, אל תקרי בהדרת אלא בחדרת... אלא אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק מהכא: (תהלים ב') עבדו את ה' ביראה וגילו ברעדה. מאי וגילו ברעדה? אמר רב אדא בר מתנא אמר רבה במקום גילה שם תהא רעדה.

"One should not stand up to say the *tefillah* except in a reverent frame of mind. The pious men of yore used to spend an hour [in meditation] and pray only after that, in order to make sure that their hearts would be directed to their Father in heaven. And the proof from Scripture? From the verse "Worship the Lord in the beauty (*hadrat*) of holiness" (Ps. 29: 2), concerning which Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, read not *hadrat* but *herdat*, "awe". But Rabbi Nahman Bar Isaac said, from another verse: "Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2: 11), which, according to Rav, means: Where there is rejoicing, there is also to be trembling."⁴⁰

In Ethical Literature:

"הרקנטי ז"ל בהקדמת ספרו 'מאה שערים' (כותב): בהיות כוונת בריאת האדם היתה

³⁹ Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 8a

⁴⁰ Talmud Bavli Berakhot 30b

כדי שיגיע אל השלימות האמיתי שתהא נפשו צרורה בצרור החיים כו', וכדי שתגיע נפשו של אדם אל המקום ההוא צריך אדם לעסוק בתורה עד ששיג לידע הידיעה האמיתית הנקראת חכמת הקבלה, כי בידיעה הזאת נפשו של אדם מתאחזת ועולה אל המקום אשר ממנו חוצבה כו', ומצד הידיעה הזאת יבוא אדם לעבוד את בוראו, כמו שכתוב "דע את אלקי אביך ועבדהו", וכל מי שלא נתעסק בחכמת אלקות בין רב למעט עתיד ליתן את הדין עליו כו', ונדבק באלקים יותר ממאמרי מקרא וממאמרי משנה ותלמוד לבד, וזה, מרוב הדביקות ששיג האדם עם הבורא בחכמה הזאת.

"The Rekanati, may his memory be blessed, writes the following in his introduction to his book, **Me'ah She'arim**", **One Hundred Gates**: Since God's original intention in creating mankind was to afford him an opportunity to attain perfection and connection to eternal life, *Tzror HaHayim*, etc., and since in order for a person's soul to reach that state, he or she need busy him or herself with Torah, a person should study until they comprehend the true knowledge i.e. the wisdom of Kabbalah, and indeed, it is through this knowledge that one's soul rises to the place from where it originated etc. This type of knowledge motivates a person to serve his or her Maker, as it is written: "Know the God of your ancestor and serve Him". And those who do not busy themselves with the study of divine wisdom, neither abundantly nor modestly, are destined to suffer judgment etc. And (as a result of this study) one will (achieve a) cleaving to God, much more so than from (the study) of the texts of the Bible, or the texts of the Mishna, or the texts of the Talmud alone, since one can cultivate a great attachment to the Creator (through the study of) this wisdom."⁴¹

⁴¹ (Author's English translation) ציטוט מתוך: שאול בוימן, **מפתחי חכמת אמת**, חלק ראשון ווארשא תרצ"ז עמוד יא

”... והיינו משום שהנשמה אינה צריכה תיקון לעצמה במצות רק להמשיך אור לתקן
נפש החיונית והגוף על ידי אותיות הדבור שהנפש מדברת בה מוצאות הפה וכן
במצות מעשיות שהנפש עושה בשאר אברי הגוף: אך אף על פי כן אמרו תפלה או
שאר ברכה בלא כוונה הן כגוף בלא נשמה... אלא מפני שזהו גם כן רצונו יתברך
לדבקה בשכל ומחשבה וכוונת המצות מעשיות ובכוונת קריאת שמע ותפלה ושאר
ברכות.”

“... the *Neshamah* (higher soul) needs no *Tikun* (mending) for herself by means of
the commandments, but has only to draw forth light to perfect the vivifying soul and
body by means of the letters of speech which the *Nefesh* (lower soul) pronounces
with the aid of the five organs of the verbal articulation. Similarly with the active
commandments which the *Nefesh* performs with the [aid of the] other bodily organs.
Nevertheless, it has been said that ‘Prayer or other benediction [recited] without
Kavanah is like a body without a *Neshamah*.’... Rather it is His blessed will that one
should cleave to Him with one’s intelligence, thought and intention in the active
commandments, and with intention during the recital of Shema, prayer and other
benedictions.”⁴²

Texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal offer exegesis of textual sources that
sustain the creative tension of the *Keva* - *Kavanah* dynamic and counter the popular and intuitive
Keva-centered perception of Torah. These works mine Torah text with lenses that uncover her
wisdom and fill her instructions with life, heart, soul, and deeply felt spiritual relevance.

⁴² Rabbi Schneur Zalman, *Likutei Amarim*, TANYA, Bi-Lingual Edition, “KEHOT” Publication Society, 1993
pages 181-183

Daring Voices

Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, the Rambam, Rabeynu Hayyim Vital, and Rabbi Eliyahu D'Vidas are just a few among those daring voices who offered their contemporaries, as well as future generations, religious treatises committed to uncompromising spiritual honesty and creativity. Their concerns, motivations, and world-views are most poignantly expressed in their prospective book introductions.

Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, of eleventh century Spain, in his introduction to **Duties of the Heart** lays out a schema of the anatomy of the mind and its thinking processes in order to distinguish between "... wisdom that is manifested externally and knowledge of the 'duties of the heart', duties which belong to the hidden, private realm of the heart; it is wisdom of the inward life."⁴³ Rabbi Bahya makes this distinction in order to eventually offer a new and challenging perspective to his generation; the perspective that fulfilling the duties related to inward conditioning and intentionality are a prerequisite for meaningful observance of the external, more technical aspect of Torah.

"It became clear to me that an act which is performed for God's sake is, in essence, made up of [two things]: purity of heart and of mind. Any corruption of the inner intent renders the ["good"] act unacceptable, even if performed many times and on a regular basis...."⁴⁴.

Rabbi Bahya realized the importance of the inner intent in religious life while also noticing the negligence of intentional observances among the Jews of his generation and

⁴³ Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, **Duties of the Heart**, English translation by Daniel Haberman, Feldheim Publishers Jerusalem - New York, 1996 Volume one. page 7

⁴⁴ Ibid. page 35

community. He recognized that a rare few were meticulous about the Mitzvot relating to inner intention, while the majority lacked even an understanding of such concepts. This motivated Rabbi Bahya to respond by creating a book that would open the inner gates of Torah for his contemporary community. He eloquently describes the purpose of his book.

"... I would write a book on the subject which would be arranged according to the foundations of the duties of the heart and the inner life.... it would wake up those who slumber in foolishness, delve deeply into the nuances of this science, and remind one of the knowledge of God and His teachings; it would help one recover one's spirit; it would spur on the observant and stir up the indifferent; it would set straight the reckless, train the tardy, bolster the beginner, and show the way to those who are perplexed."⁴⁵

Rabbi Bahya uses a deeply penetrating metaphor to describe the spiritual renewal that he wishes for his readers. In his own words:

"This is like the case of the astrologer who entered the yard of one of his friends and sensed that a hidden treasure lay buried there. He searched for it, and found a hoard of blackened silver that had lost its luster, because of the tarnish that had formed on it. He took some of it, cleaned it with salt and vinegar, and washed and polished it, until the silver was restored to its original beauty, splendor, and brilliance. The owner then gave the order to treat the rest of the hoard in the same fashion. My intent was to do the same with the hidden treasures of the heart: to uncover them and show the radiance of their virtue, so that whoever wants to draw near to God and attach

⁴⁵ Ibid. page 41

himself to Him may do likewise.”⁴⁶

Rabbi Bahya lived at a time when mainstream Torah instruction focused on technical observance and did not commonly instruct students about the deeper essence of Torah ethics and practice. He, therefore, conceptualized the need for an understanding of the duties of the heart. Rabbi Bahya tells us that no one ever before him had written a book to address this area of religious life. He, therefore, wrote the book introducing the concept of duties of the heart in contemporary language as well as in a style accessible to the lay and learned person alike. His book became popular in his own time and has made a unique and lasting contribution to the development of Jewish thought and practice as well. Rabbi Bachya's work created a framework for popularizing an old concept in a new and revolutionary way. He illuminated a then neglected aspect of tradition, the duties of the heart, and entered it onto the popular arena.

The Rambam lived and wrote just a few generations after Rabbi Bahya. Both were Spanish Jews. The Rambam however, while initially from Spain, lived the majority of his life in Egypt, where he wrote his important works, mostly in response to the communal and intellectual needs of his own time and environment.

In the preface to his work, **Sh'monah Prakim, Eight Chapters**⁴⁷, the Rambam reflects on his motivations for writing this elaborate introduction to **Pirkei Avot, Ethics of The Fathers**. The Rambam tells us that

“Although this tractate (**Pirkei Avot**) is short and its meaning appears straightforward and easy to comprehend, the application of its teachings is not easy

⁴⁶ Ibid page 55

⁴⁷ Maimonides, **Pirkei Avot**, with the Rambam's commentary, including **Shemoneh Perakim** by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, Moznaim Publishing Corporation New York / Jerusalem, 1994.

to comprehend.... In addition, its insights bring a person to high levels of fulfillment and true happiness. Therefore, I have chosen to elaborate on it.... There is no attribute greater than (ethical) piety except prophecy, and indeed, piety leads to prophecy, as our sages say, 'Piety leads to the spirit of divine inspiration'. Accordingly, I will explain the truth of these matters.... Before I begin to explain each law in the Mishnah (**Pirkei Avot**) individually, I thought it beneficial to include as a preface several chapters to help a person grasp axiomatic principles that will serve as a key to the comprehension of the concepts to be explained... the concepts stated in these chapters and the forthcoming explanations are not new concepts that I have invented. They are, rather an anthology of the words of our sages... the works of philosophers of the early and later generations, and many other texts. Accept the truth regardless of which person said it. ⁴⁸

The Rambam explains that by properly comprehending **Pirkei Avot**, one can attain fulfillment and happiness. Furthermore, one can attain a level of true piety which is a prerequisite for attaining the high spiritual level of prophecy. The Rambam attempts to help his reader better access the text of the Mishnah.

In order to elucidate the hidden truths in the text, such that the reader may attain Jewish spiritual evolution, the Rambam utilizes concepts and wisdom-teachings of non-Jewish thinkers. He thus asks us to accept truth "regardless of its source". He boldly steps outside the boundaries of conventional Jewish thought and literature of his day in order to assist his readers in attaining an authentic and relevant relationship to their Torah.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Pages 13 - 14

Rabeynu Hayyim Vital, of the late sixteenth century, was a student and scribe of Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as the AR"l. He wrote his work, **Sha'arei Kedusha , Gates of Holiness**⁴⁹, inspired by the teachings of his master. The book is a brief manual for Jewish spiritual development. Its stated goal is to help the Jewish spiritual seeker attain the advanced state of prophecy based on strict observance of the written and oral Torah as well as on the cutting-edge insights and kabbalistic methods of the holy AR"l.

Rabbi Hayyim Vital tells us in his introduction that he found it necessary to write this book because there were no remaining instructional texts from the days of the prophets or the days of later spiritual adepts, *P'rushim*, that could appropriately guide contemporary seekers towards attaining high spiritual states. According to Vital, the later adepts proceeded to imitate the prophets through renunciation of mundane pursuits and through retreat to caves, to deserts, or to their homes. They dedicated all their time to worship and Torah until they attained the level of the experience of *Ruah HaKodesh*, the holy spirit. But their methods, too, have not been preserved. This motivated Rabbi Vital to offer guidance to his contemporaries. As he expresses most succinctly:

"... the spirit in my guts troubled me to release the (contemporary) seekers (from anguish), to support their right hand, to instruct them about the path they should walk on. For this reason I have written this composition, small in quantity but great in quality; it will alert the wise; and I called it: *Gates of Holiness*; and in it I will clarify mysteries which have not been considered by our predecessors, because I have received them from the mouth of a holy man, an angel of the God of hosts, my teacher the AR"l Luria may his memory be blessed...."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ ספר שערי קדושה, ר. פישר ביי"מ לספרים רחוב ירושלים 13, בני ברק תשכ"ז (Author's English translation)

⁵⁰ שם עמוד ט'

According to Rabbi Vital, a new form and method is necessary to help the seeker connect with a Jewish spiritual essence that had been previously available to the prophets and to the generations of spiritual adepts that followed. He additionally suggests that the old methods of retreating to caves and deserts may no longer be appropriate, while the methods taught by his master are more relevant to the time.

The following record of an interaction between Rabbi Vital and his teacher, the AR"Y, illustrates the AR"Y's view on intergenerational differences with regard to religious practice and leadership:

"Once I asked my teacher, may his memory be blessed, how come he had been telling me that my soul is so elevated... since the lowliest person of the first generations (generations of the Tanaim) was a righteous and saintly man, to whose heels I can barely rise. And he said to me: 'Know that a soul's level is not dependent on a person's doing, but rather in accordance to his time and generation; because a lower action in this generation equals several great Mitzvot of those other generations; because in these generations the husk (negative force) is growing greater to no end, which was not the case in the first generations; and if I was (living) in those first generations, my deeds and wisdom would have been greater than some of those first righteous ones....'" ⁵¹

The AR"Y rejects his student's self-perceived low spiritual level. On the contrary, he acknowledges his student's greatness of soul on the basis of his very contemporary, though seemingly limited body of religious deeds and learning. The AR"Y's answer implies that he

⁵¹ שם לקוטים מספר החזיונות עמוד ז' ח'

recognized that each generation calls for a different approach to divine service, based on the spiritual as well as the material conditions of that time. Rabbi Hayyim Vital's above account reveals the context of spiritual renewal in which he wrote his work.

Rabbi Eliyahu D'Vidas was a contemporary of Rabeynu Hayyim Vital. He completed writing his work, **Reshit Hokhmah, Initial Wisdom**⁵², in 1575 in Zefat, Israel. His mentor and master was Rabbi Moshe Kordevero, author of **Pardes Rimonim**. **Initial Wisdom** is structured as a survey of Rabbinic and kabbalistic sources on the inner cultivation of the five soul arenas: awe, love, repentance, holiness and humility. According to D'Vidas, these five inner realms are necessary for developing initial wisdom.

In the introduction to the book he recounts the following rationale for his writing:

"permission had been given to print the book (titled) **Pardes (Rimonim)** of my teacher may his memory be blessed, and the truth is that any one who attempts to enter the inner wisdom without repentance and good deeds will never enter the wisdom... therefore, I set out to produce this book in order to clarify the ways required by the one entering the wisdom".⁵³

D'Vidas considered his teacher's book, **Pardes Rimonim**, the key to the secrets of Kabbalah. He was concerned, however, that readers would use the book's ideas outside of their original context of Torah observance, particularly with regard to the ethical commandments. Therefore, he wrote his book as a forerunner, to prepare the newcomer to properly handle the kabbalistic theories presented in his teacher's writings. But in addition to his protective concern

⁵² ראשית חכמה השלם, מכון לחקר ולהפצת מוסר ותורת החסידות "אור המוסר"
(Author's English translation) ירושלים, שנת תדש"ם

⁵³ שם הקדמת המחבר עמוד כא

for the observance of the Torah's prohibitions, D'Vidas was interested in assuring his contemporaries' access to the unique and up-to-date wisdom system that had been made available by his master. Wisdom according to Rabbi Kordovero and his disciple D'Vidas, was the knowledge of the mystical reasons for Mitzvot, such as found in the Zohar, rather than mere technical knowledge as laid out in the Talmud and codes. In his own words:

"...and for this reason I titled it **Initial Wisdom**, a beginning and entry to inner wisdom; because inner wisdom is the true definition of wisdom, as wrote the pious-one, Rabbi Yosef Ya'abetz, may his memory be blessed (144): ... that the wisdom... is not the wisdom of performing the commandments, but rather the supreme wisdom, the wisdom of Kabbalah...." ⁵⁴

D'Vidas created a platform of ethical mystical renewal in order to enliven both Torah observance and wisdom-seeking. He did so by creating a new and uniquely integrated mesh of kabbalistic and Rabbinic teachings with regard to key ethical mitzvot.

A common thread and a number of shared themes are woven throughout these introductions. Each of these authors addresses the potential for personal spiritual development as a core value of Torah and Jewish living. Rabbi Paquda and Rabbi Vital explicitly address the need for greater and/or more refined *Kavanah* in Jewish practice while the Rambam and Rabbi D'Vidas allude to it by implication. All are deeply committed to the path of Torah and Jewish tradition. All of these authors dare to offer teachings that are new and creative in response to the perceived needs of their times. These common themes are typical characteristics of the genre: *Texts of Jewish Spiritual Development and Renewal*.

⁵⁴ שם עמוד כב

Gate To The Heart, An Evolving Process

A scan of the Jewish socio-spiritual demographics of the latter half of the twentieth century will reveal the following conundrum. Jewish communities in which religious piety is visible and demonstrative (Orthodox and some Conservative) direct the majority of their institutional and doctrinal attention towards the observance of technicalities in law and custom, while often only negligible attention is directed towards the living relationship with the Lawgiver. The majority of Jews, who are anything but publicly pious, reject being bound by Jewish law and the notion of a Lawgiver, altogether. Thus, the doctrines of the major segments of mainstream Jewry either avoid or outright reject Judaism's core calling to "love the Lord your God", the call to spirituality. At the same time, Jewish individuals across denominational backgrounds have been highly visible in the gamut of post-modern spiritually oriented programs and organizations. The experiences and choices of a significantly large number of seeking Jews may suggest that perhaps a fulfilling path to God can be better actualized through venues which exist outside Torah and tradition. In these past few decades, a schism appears to have grown between the Jew's intuitive reverence for his or her core spiritual ideal, namely Torah and tradition, and the undeniable and persuasive power of the generation's eclectic socio-spiritual reality.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi responded to this conundrum when in 1966, as an Orthodox Jew, and a dedicated HaBaD *Shaliah* (emissary), he daringly attempted an empathic response. He described his choice to embrace the schism and allow its message and meaning to arise from its very midst. In his own words:

"I don't want to mitigate the *is-ought* (real-ideal) tension. I also want my fellow Jew to experience this tension, for out of it new guidance arises..., and through the multiplication of this process, the consensus of the pious (who are by and large not

immune from the same tensions) is modified. This is how the *halakhah* progresses, and in this lies its viability. I must insist on the bindingness of the 613 commandments (and their rabbinic extensions) as an *ought* and yet with the compassion of one whose *is* is far from the *ought*, I must feel with others and I must not lessen the tension.”⁵⁵

Rabbi Schachter continues to express his concern and sharp criticism of the “death of God” among the pious and secular alike. He recognizes the tension between the objectivity of the “consensus of the pious” (*halakhah*) and the subjectivity of the inner human striving towards God. He voices compassion for those who, like himself, seek to reclaim their birthright for spiritual depth. In his own words:

“...God’s will having been so clearly defined as to be capable of being printed in a *Shulhan Arukh*, (results in the subtle notion that) He is no longer necessary. It is all cut and dried. And a cut and dried God is dead. To be overly concerned with Him who commands rather than with the product of His commandment is generally not *de rigueur* in the circles of the shapers of the consensus of the pious. Only by deviating from this consensus do I admit God to live in my tension, to shape the mute, still voice that issues from my subjectivity and moves me up and down the sliding scale (of Torah observance as well as inner growth). Where the halakhic behaviorist kills God, so that He need no longer live among His subjects [except to keep score], the “crooked heart” revives Him in the battle to please and love Him.. In a circle of others who struggle in the same way, He becomes palpably present.... Speak to those

⁵⁵ Rabbi Zalman M. Schachter - Shalomi, **Paradigm Shift**, Jason Aronson Inc. New Jersey, 1993 page 121

who either by their fulfillment of the Law or by their complete disregard of it ignore Him, mention His blessed Name to them and there is no movement, no vital reaction..."⁵⁶

Gate To The Heart, An Evolving Process is Rabbi Schachter's spirituality manual, written in direct response to the predicaments of post-modern western Jewish seekers. Its narrative weaves together an outline of a spiritual philosophy with basic methodology for inner work that is rooted in Torah and tradition.

The book's pages are laid out in simplified Talmudic style. The central text is paralleled by a side-bar narrative. The side-bar narrative compliments the thematic progression of the central text with a patterned rotation of related reflections, explanations, meditations and guidance that add depth and richness to the reading. This creative layout reflects the multi-layered sophistication of its spiritual discussion as well as its necessary pragmatism. In addition, it graphically expresses the book's task, which is to balance the old with the new.

Gate To The Heart reads like a spiritual travelogue. The journey begins with a reflection on the unique nature of the pathway as well as the traveler. The opening step is a psychologically insightful review of the developmental stages one experiences along the spiritual path. From the description of the path's stages, the narrative moves to Kabbalah's anatomy of the human soul, recounting its five distinct levels. Once the nature of the path and that of the traveler are considered, a profound discussion of meditation and traditional prayer as practices for inner development ensues. Meditation and traditional prayer are then explained and deeply analyzed in the context of related topics, such as the role of language, the meaning of "mystical", the significance of *Kavanah*, and the concept of *Devekut* (Union). These discussions provide the foundation for more specific explanation and instruction about daily prayer, Shabbat, liturgical

⁵⁶ *ibid.* page 122

music, "the prayer book and tracks of consciousness", *Mezuzah*, *Talit*, and *Tefilin*. The journey closes with discussion of the issues of motivation and guidance. The author addresses the questions of obedience, and of discerning the criteria for knowing God's will. Rabbi Schachter challenges the seeker when he says that:

"It makes little sense to wear yourself out in a selfish desire for inner growth for its own sake. With this motivation alone, no one survives the rigors of development.... In order to really progress you need a different motivation, and that is loyal obedience to God."⁵⁷

The book concludes by stressing obedience to God as well as appropriate fellowship and mentorship as the foundations for a true and vital Jewish spiritual path.

Gate To The Heart, An Evolving Process, like its predecessors in the genre *texts of Jewish spiritual development and renewal*, addresses the soul concerns of its generation. Like its predecessors, it recognizes the subtle yet crucial work of infusing renewed *Kavanah* into a life path of Torah. It is daring in its openness and creativity, while fiercely loyal to the lineage upon whose shoulders it stands. It communicates an eternal and uncompromising spiritual truth. Thus, it speaks to the heart.

⁵⁷ Rabbi Zalman M. Schachter-Shalomi, **Gate To The Heart, An Evolving Process**, ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, Philadelphia 1993, page 52