YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Commentaries on the Mishna**

**By Rav Yosef Marcus**

**Shiur#19: The Commentary of the *Tiferet Yisrael*,Part 3**

Translated by Rav Eli Ozarowski

In the previous *shiur,* we discussed a number of the unique qualities of the commentary of the *Tiferet Yisrael.* In this *shiur,* the final one about the *Tiferet Yisrael,* we will discuss one more characteristic of the commentary itself, and then examine his philosophical worldview as it is reflected in the commentary.

1. **Elaborations in the Commentary that are not Directly Related to the Mishna**

In a number of places, the *Tiferet Yisrael* sees fit to add comments or suggestions that are totally unrelated to the Mishna. Here are a few examples related to medical recommendations:

1. **Cures for Illness**

The Mishna (*Yoma* 8:6) cites a number of examples of the principle that saving a life overrides the entire Torah. Within this discussion, the Mishna states: “Rabbi Matya ben Cheresh also said that on Shabbat, we give one whose throat ails him a remedy in his mouth because it is a possible case of danger to life, and any possible danger to life overrides Shabbat.” The *Tiferet Yisrael* explains the illness referred to by Rabbi Matya and parenthetically recommends a cure for it:

[This refers to] the illness called *sharbek*, where the flesh of the teeth begins to rot, and the rotting extends to the intestines. [Said he who rejoices and is happy to help my people and anyone in a place where there is no doctor, for I found a tested cure for this illness from expert and famous doctors: one who is afflicted with this illness in our climate should eat a lot of the herb called *lapel croit*, and also eat a lot of sour and spicy foods, like lemons… and drink a lot of vinegar, and he should also sway a lot while walking, and all this is tried, tested, and experienced…] (*Tiferet Yisrael,* commentary on the Mishna, *Yoma* 8:6)

The *Tiferet Yisrael* speaks in flowery language here, and he is evidently very happy that he has the capability to assist individuals who are sick.

1. **Acquiring Torah**

The Mishna (*Pirkei Avot* 6:5) lists forty-eight ways in which Torah can be acquired, one of which is reducing one’s amount of sleep. The *Tiferet Yisrael* here elaborates on health issues related to the lack of sleep:

Because with too much sleep, not only does one lose time, but one’s intellect also is put to sleep, and one loses one’s diligence. However, [one who sleeps] less than the appropriate [amount] can also greatly harm the body and soul. And they said in the name of the Rambam that he slept eight hours every night, and the mnemonic is “I would sleep then [*az*][[1]](#footnote-1), it would be restful for me.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, this was before he was fifty years old, but after that, when the grinding of the foundations of the body are not as great as in his younger years, and one doesn’t need as much rest, the scientists write that it is sufficient for one to sleep five or six hours every night. (*Tiferet Yisrael,* commentary on the Mishna, *Pirkei Avot* 6:5)

1. **The Philosophical and Theological Worldview of the *Tiferet Yisrael***

Due to the nature of the commentary, which often elaborates on and explains specific issues beyond the simple interpretation of the Mishna, many fundamental underpinnings of the philosophical and theological worldview of the *Tiferet Yisrael* are evident from it.

1. **Attitude Toward Secular Wisdom**

In the previous *shiur,* we noted that one of the unique features of the commentary is utilizing secular wisdom in interpreting the Mishna. This usage certainly attests to a fundamentally positive orientation toward secular wisdom. Indeed, this attitude is expressed clearly in a number of places in the commentary.

The Mishna in tractate *Sota* (9:15) lists a number of Sages whose deaths caused a specific characteristic to be removed from the world. For example, the Mishna states that following Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai’s death, the splendor of wisdom ceased to exist. The *Tiferet Yisrael* there makes the following comment: “Aside from the fact that he was great in Torah, he also knew other types of wisdom, which impart a beautiful countenance and adornment of the Torah in the eyes of every person.” The *Tiferet Yisrael* thus stresses the importance of knowing other types of wisdom and sees them as adding distinction to the Torah in the eyes of the world.

An additional comment addressing this issue appears in his commentary to the Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (6:5), which lists forty-eight ways to acquire the Torah, one of them being “*yishuv*.” The *Tiferet Yisrael* explains the meaning of the word *yishuv* as follows:

That he should be calm in his mind, and not hasty in his words. And some say that [this means] he should be expert in the settling of the world, both in proper conduct [*derekh eretz*], as well as the natural sciences and studies. Because these can serve him as perfumers and cooks for the holy Torah, meaning that these will be its servants [that help] understand it properly, as all of them are included in it. In this way, one will be nice and pleasant in the eyes of the people. (*Tiferet Yisrael,* commentary on the Mishna, *Pirkei Avot* 6:5)

The *Tiferet Yisrael* here emphasizes the necessity of studying secular wisdom as a method of better understanding the Torah, as well as its value in influencing the reputation of a Torah scholar in the eyes of the greater population, as in the previous source.

An additional instance where the *Tiferet Yisrael* addresses this question is in his commentary to *Pirkei Avot* on the Mishna (3:18) that states: “Astronomy and *gematriot* are the condiments for wisdom.”

This means to say, they are like an appetizer for the wisdom of the Torah, as the Torah is compared to bread for the soul, which is sustained by it. As it is stated, “Go partake of my bread (*Mishlei* 9:5),” and just as bread tastes better to a person when he adds condiments, spreads butter on the bread, and the like, so too the Torah will be sweeter for him if he adds other wisdoms, like perfumers and cooks (see Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 4:13). However, just like one who eats butter or condiments without bread is disgusted with it, and he will not be satiated, so too one who makes these other wisdoms his primary occupation, his soul will not be satiated from them, and they will not enable it to be maintained… (*Tiferet Yisrael,* commentary on the Mishna, *Pirkei Avot* 3:18)

The *Tiferet Yisrael* explains here that on one hand, engaging in the study of secular wisdom can increase the sweetness of Torah, but on the other hand, one must be careful not to confuse one’s priorities and make secular wisdom primary and the study of Torah secondary.

1. **Attitude Toward Non-Jews**

One of the famous sources regarding the status of non-Jews is the commentary of the *Tiferet Yisrael* on *Pirkei Avot* (3:14) where the Mishna states: “A person [*adam*] is beloved, because he is created in the image [of God].” The *Tiferet Yisrael* elaborates there on this issue, and first proves that the “person” referred to here is a non-Jew:

It seems to me that the correct version is “the person [*ha-adam*],” which means even a non-Jew [in accordance with *Tosafot, Yevamot* 61a], as since the latter clause concludes, “Israel is beloved,” the first clause refers to any type of person, meaning even a non-Jew. Likewise, the proof that the *tanna* brings from the verse, “He made the man” (*Bereishit* 9:6)” is also referring to a non-Jew, as it is stated to the sons of Noach [as the *Tosefot Yom Tov* notes], and also [regarding] the king of Ai, and the five kings that Yehoshua hung, he lowered them before evening.[[3]](#footnote-3) Learn from here that even a non-Jew was created in the image of God. (*Tiferet Yisrael,* commentary on the Mishna, *Pirkei Avot* 3:14)

He then comments that this is a good opportunity to elaborate about the topic of non-Jews. He first adduces proof from additional sources that all humans are created in the same image of God.[[4]](#footnote-4) He then writes:

Even if not for the holy mouths of Chazal that said this to us, we would already know this based on logic, as “God is righteous in all His ways, and is pious in all His actions” (*Tehillim* 145:17). And we see a number of their pious ones who aside from [the fact that that] they acknowledge the Creator of the world and believe that the holy Torah is divine, and perform kindness to Jews as well, some of them have done especially good things for everyone in the world. Like the pious Jenner,[[5]](#footnote-5) who invented the vaccine, which saves tens of thousands of people from illness, death, and the plague. And Drake,[[6]](#footnote-6) who brought the potato to Europe, preventing famine a number of times. And Gutenberg,[[7]](#footnote-7) who invented the printing press.

And a number of them who were not recompensed at all in this world, like the pious Reuchlin,[[8]](#footnote-8) who risked his life to prevent the burning of the Talmud that was commanded by the Emperor Maximilian in the year 5662 due to the incitement of the heretic Pfefferkorn, the grinder of bones, [who made] a knot of evil with the priests. And Reuchlin threw himself against this, and with his arguments he changed the heart of the Caesar to retract his order, and because of this, they chased him and his enemies the priests heaped bitterness on him, and made him poor to the point that he died in his poverty and with a broken heart… (*Tiferet Yisrael,* commentary on the Mishna, *Pirkei Avot* 3:14)

The *Tiferet Yisrael* in this paragraph lists a number of figures who provided humanity with tremendous benefits, and were not Jewish. Later on in his commentary, he explains that the nations of the world actually have a certain spiritual advantage over the Jewish people:

We find that Israel and the other nations each have an exclusive advantage over the other. The advantage of the nations over Israel is that they have made themselves through their own free choice and with their own strength, and this is certainly a higher level than Israel, who were dragged by the headlocks of their head with the force of God to make them complete. And they should not credit themselves, as that which God amazingly made them complete, and that the hand of God was with them for all these, [it is] only in the merit of their forefathers.

However, there is also an exclusive advantage to Israel, as the nations achieved all that they achieved only with their intellect; therefore, there are many *mitzvot* in the Torah that are greatly exalted above human comprehension, like all of the *chukim* in the Torah, they [the non-Jews] still will not do them, because they do not understand them [until the end of days, when God will pour His spirit on all flesh[[9]](#footnote-9)]. And moreover, because all that they have achieved they only achieved with human intellect, any of them that neglected to open his eyes over the course of time, is still immersed in the filth of the abominations of the early ones, like most of the residents of Africa, and also in Asia and America, there are many nations that still walk in darkness, and worship idols and sacrifice their sons to demons like their forefathers of old, because they did not know God, and did not recognize His Torah. Not so is Israel; they keep all of the statutes of the Torah, even those that are above human comprehension. And the entire people, from small to large, live on its faith… nursing from the Torah of God, and it will compel him to open his eyes to see the path of life. (*Tiferet Yisrael,* commentary on the Mishna, *Pirkei Avot* 3:14)

According to the *Tiferet Yisrael,* the greatness of the other nations stems from the fact that their spiritual achievements result from their own merit alone, which is achieved by exercising their free will positively. The greatness of the Jewish people, in contrast, is that they fulfill the Torah, which is above human intellect. This level is one that is unreachable with the power of intellect alone.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. The *gematria,* numerical value, of the word *az*, is eight: *Aleph* equals one, and *zayin* equals seven. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This refers to the verse in *Iyov* (3:12): “For now, I would be lying tranquilly; I would sleep then, it would be restful for me.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Yehoshua* 8:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One of his proofs is from the verse, “and you shall be a distinction for Me from among all the peoples” (*Shemot* 19:5), which proves that the other nations also have an element of prominence. He also cites the words of Chazal that the pious ones of the nations of the world receive a portion in the world to come (Tosefta, *Sanhedrin* 13; Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This refers to Dr. Edward Jenner, who died in 1823, and discovered the cure for smallpox. He essentially invented the entire concept of vaccination. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The reference is to Francis Drake (sixteenth century), who headed many expeditions to the New World who discovered new lands, and was the second person to circumnavigate the world. The *Tiferet Yisrael* here credits him with bringing the potato to Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This refers to Johannes Gutenberg (fifteenth century), the inventor of the printing press. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The *Tiferet Yisrael* here refers to Johann Reuchlin (fifteenth and sixteenth century), who was a learned Christian that struggled against the attempts of the heretic Johannes Pfefferkorn to burn the Talmud. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Based on *Yo’el,* 3:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It appears from here that the *Tiferet Yisrael* believes that there is a common divine image shared by Israel and the nations, and the difference between them is not fundamental. However, his approach is more complex than this, as Moshe Weinstock has illustrated in his doctorate, *Emuna Ve-halakha Ba-olam Ha-moderni: Mifaleihem Ve-hagutam shel R. Yisrael U-beno R. Barukh Lifshitz*, Hebrew University, 5768, p.163-168.

In his commentary elsewhere on *Pirkei Avot* (6:10), the *Tiferet Yisrael* explicitly notes that Jews have an additional soul, “drawn from a quarry that is high and exalted.” It is based on this idea that he states in the *Derush Ohr Ha-chaim* that all Jews, including the wicked, have a portion in the world to come. In the same paragraph quoted in the text, he also states explicitly that in messianic times, non-Jews will be similar to Jews, and will perform all of the *mitzvot.* This is consistent with his comments on *Pirkei Avot* 5:2 that initially, God’s intention was that all humans would receive the Torah and “all precious things,” but sin caused them all to be rejected. This statement indicates that although God’s choice of Israel as the chosen people was fundamental in nature, it was also based on the historical factor that the other peoples did not live up to His aspirations, a notion that has implications for the future as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)