

THE ESSENCE

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שד"ר רבותינו נשיאנו
הרה"ח הרה"ת
ר' מנחם שמואל דוד הלוי ע"ה
רייטיק
גלב"ע ח' שבט ה'תשנ"ח
תנ"צ'ב'ה'
נדפס ע"י משפחתו שיחיו

KNOWLEDGE

THE TWO APPROACHES IN UNDERSTANDING HASHEM'S INFINITE GREATNESS¹

PART I

When we say that in recent generations there have been new revelations of Penimiyus haTorah—of the inner secrets of Kabbalah and Chassidus—one might assume that it is a matter of **explanation**: In previous generations these esoteric ideas were not explained to regular people and now Chassidus explained these ideas to all.

The truth, however, is that Kabbalah and Chassidus do not only explain what had already been revealed—rather, they revealed completely **new** depths in the way we view *Elokus*. In every generation, this revelation was taken to new levels.

Perhaps the most important discussion in Jewish philosophy is the fundamental question of “What is Hashem?” In this article, we will explore some ways Jewish philosophy answers the question—and the depth that Kabbalah and then Chassidus brings to it.

RAMBAM AND MAHARAL

There is a famous argument between the Rambam and the Maharal (quoted multiple times in Chassidus, and discussed at length in *Derech Mitzvosecha Mitzvas Ha'amanas Elokus*²):

In an oft-quoted passage in *Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah*³, the Rambam writes that Hashem's attributes and manner of knowledge are utterly beyond our human understanding:

“He is the knower, He is the subject of knowledge, and He is the knowledge itself. All is one. This matter is beyond the ability of our mouths to relate, [or our] ears to hear, nor is there [the capacity] within the heart of man to grasp it in its entirety.”

In his *sefer Gevuros Hashem*⁴, the Maharal argues strongly against this description:⁵ “Intellect is a specific thing: intellect means knowing something as it is. But one cannot place Hashem into a specific category, and if we say that Hashem is intellect, we are thereby categorizing Him.

“And if someone says: If Hashem is not intellect, nor is He physical, *chas veshalom*—then what is He? We will answer: does a person know his own *neshama*? How much more so the Creator of all! One cannot ask any questions, ‘for Man cannot see me and live.’

“...This is why Hashem is called ‘*Hakadosh Baruch Hu*’ and not ‘*Hasechel Baruch Hu*,’ for we cannot know His true

existence, only that He is removed from physicality and bodily things. This is why we say ‘*Hakadosh Boruch Hu*:’ *Kadosh* refers to something that is utterly removed, and Hashem is *pashut b'tachlis hapshitus*.⁶

DEFINING THE ARGUMENT

What, exactly, is their argument?⁶ The Rambam never suggested that Hashem is intellect! To the contrary, he writes that Hashem's knowledge is utterly beyond our understanding! No one was suggesting that He should be called *Hasechel Baruch Hu*!

Furthermore, the Maharal agrees that Hashem knows everything. As he writes, “Being that Hashem is *pashut bitachlis hapshitus*, and he has no specifics—nothing is removed from Him. Thus, He knows everything and can do anything, and all of this is because He has no specifics...”⁷

How is that different from the Rambam? As the Or Sameach⁸ phrases it: *These words [of the Maharal] are puzzling in our eyes... It is utter folly to say that Hashem is pure intellect—no religious person or philosopher ever said such a thing, Heaven forfend... Is there anyone who negated conventional attributes (to'arim chiyuvi'im) like the Rambam in the Moreh [Nevuchim]?*

Note: These fundamental concepts are quite profound. They are very accessible, but can take time to digest (and are often taught in live classes). The article has been divided into sections, each containing a single general theme that can be understood on its own.

SECTION 1: THE MEANING OF INFINITY

Let us delve into the perspective of the *chokrim* (otherwise termed the “*philosophim*”—a general term used to describe the Rishonim and Achronim who explained *Elokus* based primarily on an intellectual approach, including the Rambam, the Ikarim, Abarbanel, and others).

The *chokrim* look at our reality and see that the state of our existence raises fundamental questions: We take it for granted that everything we see must have a cause—everything comes from somewhere. A person has parents, and so do animals. Trees and plants were seeded from a prior plant. Even inanimate matter (like rocks and dirt) must have a cause—they could not have just been sitting here forever.⁹

There is clearly a Higher Being who causes everything else to be—Hashem.

But this leads to an obvious question—what does it *mean* that Hashem Himself doesn’t need something else to create Him?

The answer is that Hashem exists differently than anything else we know of.

MECHUYAV HAMETZIUS

All existence that we know of is *efshari hametzius*, which means “possible existence”—it can exist, or it can not exist. This table in front of me can exist—or it can not exist. It *happens* to exist. If you burn it, it will be gone. If it never was, it wouldn’t be missed.

Hashem’s existence is an entirely different realm; He is *mechuyav hametzius*—He *must* exist. As the Abarbanel writes, “His existence is the most fundamental and the most complete of all creations. His existence is not *possible*, like all the other beings, rather He fundamentally *must* exist, *mechuyav hametzius*.”¹⁰

Let us examine a (very limited) example for this from our world: a logical rule.¹¹

It is a logical rule that a father must be older than his son. It is impossible to imagine differently—a father must be older than the son.

It is a logical rule that a father must be older than his son. It is impossible to imagine differently—a father *must* be older than the son.

Unlike something physical, which just *happens* to exist—like the table, which *happens* to be here as long as it’s here—this logical rule *must* exist. It is not that two plus two *happens* to equal four—we cannot imagine it any differently.

The difference between these types of existences isn’t only in *how long* they will exist for; it is in their *current* existence now. In what way does a table exist? By actually existing. You can capture the entire depth of its existence by knowing that it actually exists. The word “exists” refers to the fact that it happens to exist here in front of you.

In what way does a logical rule exist? It exists *fundamentally*, we cannot imagine it any differently. The word “exists” takes on an entirely new meaning. Therefore, the depth of its existence *cannot be captured* in actual facts. The logical rule can be *expressed* in actual facts, but it cannot be *captured* in any fact.

To explain: Physical things exist by actually existing; If you have one table—you have one table. If you have ten tables—then the room is full of tables. If you have a million tables—you have a million times more tables, and that one table is suddenly small.

Now let us try applying this same logic to the idea that fathers must be older than sons: *if you have only one example, Yaakov and Reuven—then the idea is true one time. If you have ten examples, then the idea is ten*

times more true. And if you have a million examples, then it's a million times as true!

That's ludicrous. Why? Because fathers *must* be older than their sons, and it makes no difference if I have zero examples or a million examples! The idea doesn't exist by *actually* existing—because we have *actual* examples—it exists fundamentally, because it *must* be that way. It's *infinitely* true—every single father will always be older than his son.

The same is true with mathematics. Let's say you're counting coins, and you find that two and two equal four. Does the fact that—in *this case*—two coins plus two coins equals four coins *capture* the logical imperative that two plus two *must* equal four? Not even a tiny bit! The fact that it equals four *in this case* is one limited fact, that can be captured in physical reality—it *actually* equals four—whereas the logical imperative is infinite: it *must* be this way!

This can serve as somewhat of an example for *mechuyav hametzius*, the fact that Hashem *must exist*. Hashem doesn't exist like we do; he doesn't exist because He *happens* to exist. He fundamentally exists, He *must exist*—His existence is infinitely true.¹²

THE TRUE MEANING OF INFINITY

This is what we mean when we say that Hashem is infinite, *bli gvul*: When we think of infinity, we often think of it using our finite terms; we imagine something that just goes on and on forever. But when we say that Hashem is *infinite*, we're saying that Hashem's *very existence* is infinite—he exists *infinitely*, he's *mechuyav hametzius*.

So we borrow the term “existence” to describe Hashem, but only because we don't have a better term: when we say that something exists, we are referring to something that could exist—or it could not exist—and it happens to exist. But Hashem is *bli gvul*, and His existence is infinitely true.

HASHEM'S ATTRIBUTES

By the same token, Hashem's attributes are infinite as well.¹³

When we say that a person has certain qualities (intellect, emotions, etc.), we automatically imply limitation.

For example, when we say that a person knows something, we are implying two different components: the person, and the thing that he knows. And just as his very existence is a limited, *efshari* (possible) existence, his knowledge is an *efshari* knowledge: He may know—or he may not know—and it happens to be that he knows. His *knowing* stems from his *knowledge*.

Similarly, what does it mean that a person is capable of doing something? That he *has* the ability to do it—he *has* the strength to throw the rock, he *has* the intellect to figure it out, and so on. There are two components: Him and his capability. We could imagine a situation whereby he wouldn't have the capability—but now he happens to have it.

That's how it works with limited things, they are something *additional* that the person possesses.

But Hashem is infinite and utterly One. He doesn't *have* additional things; His attributes are essential and one with His infinity. And because He is infinite, nothing can be beyond Him. Just as His existence is *mechuyav*, He *must exist*—any other scenario is unimaginable (similar to a logical imperative)—so are His attributes *mechuyav*, He is fundamentally capable, it would be impossible otherwise.¹⁴

He doesn't know by *possessing* knowledge—rather, there is only one thing: Himself. And because He is infinite, it is impossible for Him to not know!

This is the simple *pshat* of what the Rambam¹⁵ writes that Hashem, “does not know with a knowledge which is external to Him in the way that we know—for ourselves and our knowledge are not one. Rather, the Creator may He be blessed—He, His knowledge, and His life are one from all sides and corners, in all manners of unity.”¹⁶

SECTION 2: THERE IS NO COMPARISON TO INFINITY

THE BORROWED TERM “NOTHING”

Since Hashem is fundamentally infinite, He is incomparably and immeasurably greater than anything limited. It is all valueless compared to Him.

Now, we use the term *nothing* quite a lot (e.g. that this amount of money is nothing, or that this thing that happened is nothing, and so on). What do we mean? We mean that it is very insignificant.

For example, if I have 10 dollars, compared to that, one dollar is definitely *something*, it has value. If I have 100 dollars, then the one dollar looks pretty small. If I have a million dollars, then I would say that the dollar is basically nothing. If I have a billion dollars—then that one dollar is really nothing.

But what we really mean is that *it is very very small*—but it is obviously still *something*; even something as huge as a billion dollars is made up of a *billion single dollars*.

The same is true with intellect. Sometimes, a person can feel like his knowledge and understanding is very small compared to someone else's. Once in a while, when confronted with a true genius, he feels like he understands *nothing*—his intellect is so insignificant that it feels like it has no value at all.

But, again, we really mean to say that it is *insignificant*: The youngest child who is just beginning to form ideas has only a tiny sliver of the mental capacity of a great innovator and genius—but it is not *nothing*. The genius might be a million times smarter than the child—but the child has a tiny percentage.¹⁷

The same concept applies to the rungs of life. A rock is much lower than a tree, which is much lower than an animal, which is much lower than a human. But, even compared to the person, the rock isn't *nothing*—they are vastly different levels of *something*.

Ultimately, as long as we are comparing limited things—one will never be immeasurably greater than the other. Even if you visualize the entire world, and the great vastness of the galaxies—you cannot say that a little grain of sand has no value compared to it. It is very, very, very small—but it is *something*.

We have no tangible example of something that is worth *absolutely nothing*.

THE TRUE MEANING OF NOTHING

But compared to *bli gvul*, infinity—limited things have no value at all. Compared to an infinite amount of money, a thousand dollars is absolutely *nothing*—it's *infinitely* smaller. What if you gain another billion dollars—have you gotten any closer? Have you crept a percentage point up? Not at all, it still has zero value. No matter how much money you add, you will never come even a tiny step closer to the infinite. When confronted with an infinitely smart idea, the greatest genius who ever lived and the simplest child are exactly the same.

A rock compared to the infinite Hashem has no value. What about a person? Not a drop closer. The greatest *malachim*? The same nothing.

The entire globe and all the dazzling vastness of the universe are just as far from the infinite as that little rock.

THE AVODA OF THE CHOKER

Thus, someone who contemplates the greatness of *Elokus* and endeavors to grasp Hashem's perfection, will inevitably see his goal slip away.

His contemplation begins with the world. He sees that with all the greatness evident in the world, it is clearly not *it*—there is an entirely different type of being, the perfect and ultimate and infinite Being, who brings it all into existence.

And so, he tries to fathom and appreciate this true perfection. Yet as soon as he appreciates a deeper level of perfection—he realizes that it is still not it: Our intellect is fundamentally limited; it grasps things by knowing its contours and description. So if he can fathom it, if he can grasp it—then he must be dealing with something limited!

Even if you visualize the entire world, and the great vastness of the galaxies—you cannot say that a little grain of sand has no value compared to it. It is very, very, very small—but it is something.

If you ask him what he is aiming for, he will say, “I’m yearning for the ultimate perfection, the true Being.” What is that? I don’t know.

I am a limited being who can only fathom limited things, and as soon as I explain it, as soon as I put it into words, I’m already limiting it—and that is not Hashem. Hashem is utterly beyond definition, without any *geder*.

The *neshamos* in Gan Eden have been spending thousands of years studying and contemplating Hashem’s greatness and rising to ever higher levels in appreciating Him, yet they remain just as infinitely far as when they began.

SECTION 3:

THE MEKUBAL, FUNDAMEN- TALLY BEYOND

The Maharal comes and says, “*He is Hakadosh Baruch Hu, not Hasechel Baruch Hu.*” The Maharal is saying that Hashem is not limited to our definitions:¹⁸

All of the above comes from the worldview of a *choker*, someone whose perspective of Hashem stems from the world. He knows that Hashem is infinitely perfect and contains *all* the ultimate qualities, אנת הוא שלימותא דכולא. He does not know exactly *how* Hashem is perfect—because he cannot grasp infinity—but he knows that He *is* perfect.

But if Hashem is infinite, why isn’t He a stick? Why do we assume that He certainly has the quality of knowledge, and not the quality of being a rock?

The answer is obvious—of course he is not a rock, because there is no value in being a rock! A rock has nothing to do with ultimate perfection!

Kabbalah comes and tells us that the entire value system that we know of—the very concept of *perfection*, and *higher and lower*—is something that Hashem created. The same way we understand that Hashem *created* that rock—while still being utterly above it—He also *made up* the very notion that being capable is better than being incapable, that being knowledgeable is better than being ignorant, that being nice is better than being cruel, that a thousand is more than zero—even that spirituality is higher than physicality!

Does Hashem actually know everything? Of course! But not because the true perfection must know everything *in order to be perfect*—rather, He knows the same way He creates the rock, because he is utterly limitless.

Kabbalah teaches us that when you say that Hashem is perfection—that *itself is a limitation!* You are saying that you have some type of information about what

Hashem is, how to define Him. But the truth is that there's nothing more to *knowledge*, or *perfection*, or *capability* than physical objects. The entire hierarchy of the world is actually flat.

This is utterly outside anything we can fathom. It is impossible for us to imagine such a reality where not-knowing *is not* a deficiency, where spirituality *is not* higher than physicality.

But that itself was made up by Hashem. What is Hashem Himself? לית מחשבה תפיסה ב'י. He has absolutely no definition.

Both the Rambam and the Maharal say that we cannot grasp Hashem—but they mean very different things: The Rambam means that we cannot understand *how* Hashem is infinitely capable, we cannot understand *how* He knows everything—but we do know that He *is* capable, and we do know that He *does* know. But the Maharal says that Hashem is utterly above all of this—and He himself is utterly description-less.

The *choker* will never be able to reach his goal and understand the ultimate truth, for anything he can fathom is inherently limited—but at least he knows which direction he is reaching for: the Ultimate Being.

But, if you ask the *mekubal*, 'What are you searching for?' He will tell you, 'My notion of the Ultimate Being is a creation like any other. What is Hashem himself? Utterly beyond definition.'

This is the difference between the Rambam and the Maharal.

TWO DIFFERENT TYPES OF EIN AROCH

The *mekubalim* introduce an entirely new understanding into the utter nothingness of the creations in relation to Hashem.

There are two possible ways for something to be *ein aroch*—infinitely nothing—in relation to something else:¹⁹

1) The first is the one we described above: When they are both the same *type*

of thing—but one is finite and the other is infinite. The reason that the finite is nothing is not because it is *fundamentally* nothing, but because it is *not enough*. It has value—the problem is that it is infinitely smaller than the infinite.

Like one dollar in comparison to an infinite amount of money. The single dollar is nothing because it is finite—not because it doesn't have any value on its own. (To the contrary, if one dollar had no value, then infinite dollars would have no value either!)

2) When they are two different *types* of things, and the second *type* of thing is nothing compared to the first.

In the example above—dirt in comparison to an infinite amount of money. Why is dirt nothing? Because you don't have enough of it? Because it is *not infinite*? No! It is nothing because it is dirt! The fact that it is nothing doesn't stem from its *limitation*—because it is *not* infinite—rather it stems from what it *is*—the fact that it is *fundamentally* nothing.

This is the difference between the *choker* and the *mekubal*:

In the *choker's* worldview, the finite world still holds some type of value (albeit in a very limited sense). True, any finite being is infinitely far from the infinite—one dollar is the same as a billion, and the greatest *malach* and the smallest rock are the same.

But why are one and a billion the same? Because we are comparing them to the infinite. What if I *can't* have an infinite amount of money? Is a billion better than one?—Of course it is!

Notwithstanding their distance from the infinite, is it better to be a *malach* than a rock?—Of course it is better to be a *malach*! The infinite *recognizes* that the finite has a value—the finite just is not *enough*. The finite is not nothing because of what it *is*, it is nothing because of what it *lacks*.

But this is all in the *choker's* perspective.

The *mekubal* tells you: You are trying to reach infinite coins—but you are holding dirt! It is nothing (not because it is too small, but) because it *fundamentally* has no value. You can bring in millions of pieces of dirt and it will be exactly the same nothing!

...When a Yid cleaves to Hashem bechol me'odecha, with all his might, beyond any type of logic—and that stems from sovev, transcending systems and limitations.

The dirt is nothing not because of what it lacks—but because of what it is.

If you try reaching infinite intellect with finite intellect, you will never come any closer to the infinite—but at least you have *some type* of intellect. But what if you are thinking stupidity? You can have more and more and more stupidity, but you've gained nothing at all! It is fundamentally and absolutely nothing!

Hashem created our entire hierarchy. In reality, it doesn't really exist. If so, is a person higher than a rock? Not at all. Is a *malach* higher than a rock? No. Even higher: Is *Kesser of Atzilus* higher than a rock? Is *Adam Kadmon* higher than a rock? They are all *exactly* the same thing!²⁰

Hashem Himself is utterly beyond them.

BOTH ARE TRUE

Kabbalah and Chassidus explain that these two worldviews are both true; because there are two levels within Hashem Himself.²¹

As the *Avodas Hakodesh* says: “אור אין סוף הוא שלימותא דכולא, כשם שיש לו כח בבלתי בעל גבול—The *Or Ein Sof* is the ultimate perfection; just as He the power of infinite, so does He have the power of finite.”

Sovev Kol Almin refers to the infinite light of Hashem that is utterly beyond any type of understanding. From *Sovev's* perspective—*A”K*, *Atzilus* and the lowest creature in this world are the same—absolutely nothing.

Memalei Kol Almin refers to how Hashem invested himself in the 10 *sefiros*—the 10 qualities that define our reality. This is how Hashem is the Ultimate and Perfect Being—infinity in *our* terms.²² This is

considered “limitation”—for the very fact that he invested himself into *our* definition of infinity is itself the greatest limitation. (Thus, what is considered “infinity” in the conventional sense is considered “limitation” in Chassidus and Kabbalah!)²³

These two different levels of *Elokus*—how He is infinite in our terms and how He is infinite beyond—are reflected in all areas of the creation of the world and *avodas Hashem*. The following are two basic examples:²⁴

The natural order of the world stems from *memalei*, because in *memalei* the value system of the world *exists*, and everything has a natural function. Miracles, where the system is transcended, come from *sovev*.

This is also reflected in the *avodas Hashem* of a Yid: One way to serve Hashem is in a systematic way—through contemplating the greatness of Hashem and thus reaching various emotions of love and awe for Him. This reaches *memalei*. But then there is an *avoda* that transcends limitations, transcending systems, where a Yid cleaves to Hashem *bechol me'odecha*, with all his might, beyond any type of logic—and that stems from *sovev*, the level in *Elokus* that transcends systems and limitations.

In the next article, we will explore a yet deeper level of infinity—Atzmus itself.

1. This article is largely based on: Reb Yoel Kahn's shiurim on *Hemshech Shavuos Samach Hei* (on the maamar *V'el Mi Tidamyuni*); *Sefer Ha'erkim* vol. 4 p. 530-531; 588-589. The opinions of the Rambam and Maharal are discussed at length in *Derech Mitzvosecha, Mitzvas Haamanas Elokus* (and explained at length in *Derech Mitzvosecha* published by *Hamaayanos* vol. 2).

2. *Perek 3* and on.

3. 2:10
4. The second *hakdama* to Gevuros Hashem.
5. He is not quoting the Rambam himself but the Ralbag, who wrote based on the Rambam.
6. For the following, see Sefer Haërkim vol. 4 p. 530-531.
7. Ibid.
8. Hilchos Teshuva end of Perek Hei.
9. It is obvious that nothing could have just been here forever—for that would be saying that time (which is inherently limited) stretched back forever—and it is obvious that finite matters can never become infinite.
10. Rosh Amanah ch. 7.
11. For the following, see Reb Yoel's shiur on V'el Mi Tidamyuni 5665.
12. Logical imperatives are an example for this concept, but they are obviously not *mechuyav hametzius* either. A logical imperative exists in its own realm and nowhere else (for example, it is not physical); and as soon as you take away the logical axioms, the logic ceases to exist.
13. See Rambam Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah ch. 1:11-12; Moreh Nevuchim vol. 1 ch. 54-58; quoted in *Haamanas Elokus* ch. 9. See also Or Hatorah Inyanim pg. 266.
14. See Sefer Haërkim vol. 4 p. 530-531.
15. Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah ch. 2:10
16. It should be noted that there are two ways to understand this Rambam: that he is referring to

to'arim shlili'im (as described in Moreh Nevuchim and explained in Sefer Haërkim *ibid.*), or that he is referring to *to'arim chiyuvi'im*, as explained in Chassidus (see footnotes at end of article).

17. See Sefer Haërkim vol. 4 bottom of p. 586 and top of p. 587.
18. See Sefer Haërkim vol. 4 p. 530-531.
19. For below, see Reb Yoel's *shiurim* on V'el Mi Tidamyuni; Sefer Haërkim vol. 4 p. 589-590 (within a different context).
20. See Sefer Haërkim vol. 3 p. 116.
21. See *Haamanas Elokus* ch. 4 and on. It should be noted that there are many nuances in the approach of Chassidus (which itself has several approaches). This is only in very general terms.
22. Whereas the Maharal understood that the values of the world were *created* by Hashem as new creations—so that His knowledge is an *external action and creation*—Chassidus explains that Hashem *invested Himself* into the *sefiros*, so that He is utterly unified with them, and *He* is the Knower. See *Haamanas Elokus* ch. 4 (Derech Mitzvosecha Maayanos vol. 2 p. 409-411).
23. It should be noted that although the Rambam in the Moreh Nevuchim explains that the descriptions of Hashem can only be understood as *shlili'im*—negating terms, that He *cannot not*—the approach of Chassidus is that when Hashem invested himself in the *sefiros*, these are *actual descriptions* (as far as the *keilim*). See Sefer Haërkim vol. 4 p. 183 footnote 550.
24. This is explained in many places, including e.g. Posach Eliyahu 5715.