

Dvar Torah Outline — Rabbi Shulman on *Derech Hashem*: Three Modes of Talmud Torah and the Source of Human “Darkness” and “Illumination”

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explains that the Ramchal describes three distinct modes of engaging Torah—reading Written Torah, understanding the revealed Torah (Gemara and halachah), and understanding *סתרי תורה*—and that each produces spiritual growth in a different way. He highlights the Ramchal’s precise word choices—*ויתעצם*, *יקנה*, and *יקבע ויתעצם בנשמתו*—to show when Torah functions as a *סגולה* “internalized” into a person versus when it becomes a true *קניין* acquired through exertion. Rabbi Shulman then begins the next section (*אות*), framing all human states of “darkness” and “illumination” as dependent on the degree of Hashem’s “illumination” toward the person—limited only by the recipient, not by the Divine Giver.

I. Returning to *אות*: the Ramchal’s three categories of Torah learning

A. The three categories Rabbi Shulman reviewed

- **Reading the Written Torah**
 - Even without understanding, reading the words has spiritual impact.
- **Understanding the revealed Torah**
 - The “revealed” realm: *פוסקים*, *ראשונים*, *גמרא*, *משנה*; Rabbi Shulman labels this as *שמעתתא*.
- **Understanding *סתרי תורה***
 - Often called *קבלה*; the Ramchal calls it *סתרי תורה*.
 - Emphasized as an **extension of “understanding Torah”**, not merely “reading.”

B. The Ramchal’s baseline claim: increasing “payoff” across the three

- Reading Written Torah elevates a person through the holiness embedded in the letters.
- Understanding revealed Torah elevates more, because it requires intellectual grasp and effort.

- Understanding *סתרי תורה* is “by far the biggest payoff,” though hardest to achieve properly.
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II. Noticing the Ramchal’s language shifts: *ויתעצם*, *יקנה*, and *יקבע ויתעצם בנשמתו* (2:31)

A. First mode (reading Written Torah): “internalization” language

- Rabbi Shulman points to the phrase: “*ויתעצם בו ... מעלה עליונה*”
 - The elevation is described as becoming “internalized” in the person.

B. Second mode (understanding revealed Torah): “acquisition” language

- Rabbi Shulman highlights: “*יקנה כפי השתדלותו ... שלמות*”
 - The perfection is described as a *קניין*, dependent on *השתדלות* (effort).

C. Third mode (understanding *סתרי תורה*): back to internalization, with a new focus

- Rabbi Shulman notes the wording: “*יקבע ויתעצם בנשמתו*”
 - Returns to *ויתעצם* (internalized), plus:
 - *בנשמתו* — specifically “in his soul.”
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III. Why the first level is *ויתעצם* and not *יקנה*: Torah-reading as *סגולה* rather than earned attainment (4:30)

A. Reading Written Torah doesn’t scale with effort in the same way

- Rabbi Shulman explains:
 - You “sit and read”; it’s not primarily about pushing intellectual exertion.
 - Therefore, its effect is not described as something you “acquired.”

B. Mechanism: *סגולה*

- Hashem imbued the letters/words with a special spiritual property.
- The result is an elevation that is “internalized” into the person (hence *ויתעצם*), but not owned as a *קניין*.

C. Why “acquisition” would be inaccurate here

- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes:
 - **קניין** implies: without my toil, I would not possess it; through toil, it becomes mine.
 - Torah-reading is more like a “gifted” spiritual elevation than a personally earned possession.
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IV. Why the second level is **יקנה**: understanding Torah as earned **קניין** through exertion (6:00)

A. Understanding depends on the learner’s effort

- The Ramchal’s phrase “**יקנה כפי השתדלותו**” signals:
 - the result is proportionate to effort and struggle for comprehension.

B. “From **תורת ה'** to **תורת משה**”: toil makes Torah “yours”

- Rabbi Shulman cites the Chazal-idea:
 - Torah begins as **תורת ה'** and becomes **תורת משה** (or “תורת” the learner) through toil.
- Practical implication:
 - When one strives to understand (Oral Torah learning), the attained **שלמות** is properly called an acquisition.

C. Conceptual frame: earning one’s perfection

- Rabbi Shulman connects it to the Ramchal’s broader thesis:
 - A person must acquire perfection through their own exertion (avoiding “bread of shame”).
 - That exertion makes the growth truly “one’s own.”
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V. Why **סתרי תורה** returns to **ויתעצם**—and why it specifies “(9:30) **בנשמתו**”

A. A key distinction: the payoff isn’t commensurate with equal effort

- Rabbi Shulman proposes a comparison:
 - Two people may work equally hard:
 - one on a very difficult sugya in **בבא מציעא**,
 - one on **סתרי תורה**.

- The one learning *סתרי תורה* gains a **greater perfection**, not because they worked harder, but because of the subject's nature.

B. Subject-matter effect: learning about Hashem and His conduct

- Rabbi Shulman explains:
 - *סתרי תורה* is intensely centered on Hashem and His hanhagah (conduct).
 - Therefore, its effect resembles the first mode (reading), where the elevation comes from the “specialness” of the Torah-content itself more than from human effort.

C. “בנשמתו”: different Torah modes affect different parts of the person

- Rabbi Shulman reads *בנשמתו* as a major clue:
 - Ordinary reading or revealed Torah learning perfects the “self” (the person as experienced in ordinary consciousness).
 - *סתרי תורה* impacts the **נשמה**, the “higher” dimension of the person.

D. Prerequisites and danger of premature study

- Rabbi Shulman notes the traditional warning:
 - until a person is “filled” with *ש"ס ופוסקים*, they won't grasp *סתרי תורה* properly.
- He underscores:
 - true understanding is extraordinarily difficult, but yields higher *שלמות*.

VI. Clarifying what counts as *קבלה*: *Derech Hashem* vs. *מעשה בראשית* and *מעשה מרכבה* (13:00)

A. A question raised: isn't “learning about the ways of God” itself *קבלה*?

- Rabbi Shulman responds:
 - *דרך ה'* is not “kabbalistic” in the strict sense because it does not describe the “mechanics.”

B. The Mishnah's definition: the mechanical/process realms

- Rabbi Shulman defines:
 - **מעשה בראשית** — processes of creation of the worlds.
 - **מעשה מרכבה** — processes of how Hashem runs/operates the world.

C. Where *Derech Hashem* fits

- It explains:
 - the “what for” (purpose), outcomes, and framework,
 - but not ספירות and not holy names.
 - Rabbi Shulman argues it is an essential and safer introduction:
 - learning hidden Torah without mastery of דרך ה' would be spiritually dangerous.
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VII. Moving to ' *אֹת*: the root of all human states —“darkness” and “illumination” (15:00)

A. Text theme introduced

- Rabbi Shulman begins ' *אֹת* with the idea:
 - human “חשכתו והארתו” (darkness/illumination) depend on one principle.

B. Central cause: Hashem’s “illumination of His Face”

- Rabbi Shulman paraphrases:
 - all states depend on “הארת פניו יתברך אליו”
 - or, “הסתתרו ממנו”, חס ושלום, (concealment).

C. Interpreting “face” and “radiance”

- Rabbi Shulman clarifies:
 - “face” is not literal; it means interface/revelation.
 - “radiance” means revelation “from the inside out,” extending beyond oneself to another.
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VIII. How illumination translates into personal perfection: soul receives, body becomes purified (16:30)

A. Proportionality principle

- Rabbi Shulman explains the Ramchal's rule:
 - “וכפי שיעור ההארה כך הוא שיעור השלמות”
 - The degree of Divine illumination corresponds to the degree of human שלמות.

B. Two effects: *שלמות* (in the soul) and *זוך* (in the body)

- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes:
 - *שלמות* primarily describes what happens to the *נשמה*.
 - *זוך* (purity/refinement) primarily describes what happens to the *גוף*.

C. Review of last week's framework: *יראה* and *אהבה*

- Rabbi Shulman recalls:
 - the body is prone to lust/arrogance/coarseness.
 - *יראה* works to purify and “knock down” bodily coarseness.
 - *אהבה* “lights up” the *נשמה* and drives greater *שלמות*.

D. Question and response: can one “reorient” the body's passions?

- Rabbi Shulman answers yes within this framework:
 - thoughts influence feelings,
 - feelings influence the body and behavior,
 - so the body can be redirected through inner work.

IX. Hashem's illumination is constant; the limitation is the recipient (21:01)

A. Hashem illuminates anyone who draws close

- Rabbi Shulman reads the Ramchal's claim:
 - “האדון ברוך הוא מאיר תמיד למי שיתקרב אליו”
 - There is **no withholding from Hashem's side**: “ואין מניעה מצדו כלל”.

B. If illumination is lacking, it is due to the receiver

- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes:
 - “המניעה מצד המקבל ... ולא מצד המשפיע”
 - The blockage is in the recipient, not the Giver.

C. Analogy: the sun

- Hashem's giving is likened to the sun always shining.
- Clouds, walls, and being indoors represent the receiver's barriers.

D. Reframing “Divine anger” or changing Divine modes

- Rabbi Shulman explains:
 - descriptions like a “moment of anger” are experienced-relative.
 - Hashem’s “output” is constant; what changes is the person’s capacity to receive.

E. Nuance: not always under conscious control, but still “from our side”

- Rabbi Shulman adds:
 - limitations may involve מזל, life circumstances, זכות אבות or חובת אבות.
 - Nonetheless, they are factors on the human/recipient side rather than a change in Hashem’s giving.
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X. In Summary

- Rabbi Shulman explains that the Ramchal’s threefold model of Torah learning distinguishes between: (1) Torah-reading as a סגולה that becomes internalized (ויתעצם), (2) revealed Torah understanding as an earned קניין proportionate to exertion (יקנה כפי השתדלותו), and (3) סתרי תורה as a higher internalization that primarily perfects the נשמה (יקבע ויתעצם בנשמתו).
- He clarifies that *Derech Hashem* provides a vital framework about purpose and outcomes, while classic קבלה concerns the processes of מעשה בראשית and מעשה מרכבה.
- Beginning 'אות, Rabbi Shulman frames all human “darkness” and “illumination” as dependent on the degree of Hashem’s revelation to a person—where any blockage is on the receiving end, not because Hashem withholds.