



# חבורת מהות היהדות

## Weekly Newsletter

Vol. 1, Issue 1

פרשת חיי שרה

### What is this?

Chaburat Mahut Hayahadut is dedicated to the in-depth study of mitzvot at both the halachic and philosophical levels. This is the first edition of our weekly newsletter.

In general, the newsletter will contain the following sections. This week, the first two sections are introductions.

**From the Chaburah** - A point of analysis from a recent chaburah meeting.

**Mar'ei Mekomot** - Sources for the following week's chaburah.

**Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life** - An exploration of the philosophical underpinnings implicit in the disputes and formulations of the Tannaim.

**Eilu v'Eilu** - Divergent views from the Rishonim on the weekly parshah.

The chaburah meets on Thursday nights at Kehillas Shivtei Yeshurun (full details on the last page). We're currently learning Hilchot Keriat Shema. In two weeks, on November 23rd, we'll start learning about the *zemanim* for the Shema. We hope you enjoy this newsletter and consider joining us!

### From the Chaburah

By: Adam Friedmann

The Rambam writes that it's fitting for every Jew to contemplate the mitzvot and understand their reasons to the best of their abilities. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Meilah* 8:8, *Hilchot Temurah* 4:13) Only those mitzvot that one can't understand should be relegated to the status of *chukim*. Why?

Judaism is an ideology and historical vision objectified and concretized via halachah. As such, a version of Judaism that is faithful to halachah but lacks the underlying philosophical system is incomplete. It is, in the words of Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, an "uncomprehended Judaism", a "lifeless mummy" performed by rote. (*Nineteen Letters*, letters 10,18) The mitzvot are intended to refine our behavior, our characters, and our beliefs. (See *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:27) They are intended to create a spiritual lens through which to encounter the world, and to bring structure and meaning to our lives. These effects are severely curtailed when we place most of our emphasis studying *what* to do, and very little trying to understand *why* we do things. We end up with a life that is filled with rules, but without a visceral sense of the

lessons those rules are teaching us.

How can we remedy this? Rav Hirsch recommends a holistic study of Jewish sources with the explicit goal of extracting from them “Judaism’s views about G-d, the world, mankind and Yisrael”. The end result is the revelation of Judaism as “a science of wise living”.

This kind of no-holds-barred inquiry into the nature of Judaism is the goal of our *chaburah*. The learning has two major components:

### **In-Depth Analysis of Halachic Sources**

We begin by seeking out a solid grasp of the halachah and its sources. Following the order of the Mishneh Torah we move backwards to uncover the Rambam’s sources in Chazal and unpack other major positions in the Rishonim. Then we move forward to survey later halachic sources to get a sense of how the halachah is practiced today.

We try to follow the Vilna Gaon’s charge that learning should be:

- 1) Straightforward, without too many complex questions or *pilpul*.
- 2) Aimed as much as possible at the truth of what the texts actually say and their likely sources. (See the introduction to *Beur HaGra* on *Shulchan Aruch*)

To this end, we use resources such as Rav Nachum Rabinowitz’s *Yad Peshutah* and the Beur Halachah Institute’s gemaras to construct a straight path from the sources to halachic practice.

### **Constructing a Philosophy of Judaism**

Once we’ve built an understanding of *what* the halachah is, we take a step back to consider *why* it is. What lessons is the mitzvah teaching us? How is it realigning our lives? To this end, we engage in discussion using any sources available from the history of Jewish thought and coupled with an acute awareness of the world around us. We subscribe to Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook’s claim that the reasons for the mitzvot expand and evolve over the course of history. (*Talelei Orot*, section 7) This means that every generation must make this journey for itself. In the Rambam’s view, this applies to every individual as well.

Does this sound like the kind of learning you’ve been waiting for? Come join us!

**Watch this space next week for mar’ei mekomot!**

## Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

*Chazal, in the six orders of the Mishnah, divided up all of reality. And even if it seems to a person that these are very trivial subjects, it is not so.*

– Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael 10

It is a strange fact that the Mishnah, the foundational text of the Oral Torah, does not teach us how to live a Jewish life. With the Mishnah alone, we would not know how to make *tefillin* or recite our daily *tefillah*. The Mishnah seems to be generally uninterested in the minute details that fill thousands of pages of later rabbinic works. It records radical debates in both *halachah* and *aggadah* but only rarely explains what lies at the heart of these debates. As a legal text, the Mishnah is a nightmare.

But as a guided tour of reality, the Mishnah is revolutionary. No major domain of human experience is left unexplored. The Maharal explains that the first two orders of the Mishnah focus on the physical world in both the terrestrial realm of agriculture and the celestial realm of the seasons. The next two orders focus on where physicality meets spirituality in the human domains of family and civil life. The last two orders focus on the purely spiritual through the laws of the Temple and ritual impurity. The Mishnah takes us through the entire spectrum of physicality/spirituality.

Based on this, we might also conceptualize the six orders as a sort of narrative. All of us begin with a basic concern for our survival and livelihood, and the order of *Zeraim* teaches us to let go of our desire to hoard and manipulate the products of nature. But after we have come to recognize that there is "a time to plant and a time to uproot," we naturally recall "a time to give birth and a time to die" (*Kohélet* 3:2). The order of *Moed* therefore situates our short lives within the great cycle of Jewish history, imbuing our seasons with spiritual significance. As we seek to make our own contributions to this shared history, we navigate the more complex domains of family and communal responsibility, thoroughly presented in the orders of *Nashim* and *Nezikin*. But mankind naturally strives for something loftier, and the order of *Kodshim* therefore teaches us how a chosen nation – with all of its flaws and frailties – might yet approach the Holy. All that remains is to bring the lessons of the Temple into the realm of daily experience, and in the order of *Tehorot* we encounter our familiar world suddenly aglow with spiritual insights and ideals. This is the story of a Jewish life.

In the spirit of the chaburah this section will regularly feature a mishnah and its unique lens on reality. Whether exploring the nature of our perception, the limits of our uncertainty, or the depths of our responsibility, we'll return here each week to experience the text through which Chazal divided up all of reality.

**Eilu v'Eilu**  
**By: Dovid Campbell**

**"Avraham proceeded and took a wife whose name was Keturah."** (Bereishit 25:1)  
Rashi, following a midrash, tells us that this was Hagar, who maintained proper conduct even after separating from Avraham. Now, after marrying off his son, Avraham welcomed her back.

But why? Hagar was an Egyptian, and therefore not someone who was fitting for Avraham to marry. Their original relationship had only been in the hope that Sarah would be "built up through her." This question prompted the Baal HaTurim (in his long commentary) to propose that since their marriage had already been sanctioned prophetically (see Rashi to Bereishit 16:2), she was still permitted to him. Alternatively, based on a midrash, Avraham received a new prophecy to remarry her.

But many Rishonim explain otherwise. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Radak all write explicitly that Keturah was not Hagar, and this makes Avraham's new marriage even more difficult. Aware that only Yitzchak would carry on his lineage and divine mission, why have more children now?

The harshest explanation comes from the Tzror HaMor, who writes that even the original marriage to Hagar had been a mistake. Avraham should not have listened to Sarah, and he certainly should not have prayed for Yishmael's welfare (Bereishit 17:18). According to Tzror HaMor, Avraham "was not satisfied with Hagar, and he added to his sin. And he took a wife in place of Sarah – Keturah. And he fathered many children through her who would be a snare and a trap for Israel." Tzror HaMor cites a midrash regarding the disastrous consequences of these children.

But according to the Radak, Avraham's marriage to Keturah was neither prophetic nor problematic, but rather practical. Keturah would assist Avraham in his old age and increase his offspring in the world. Since his lineage was already secured through the newly-married Yitzchak, Avraham was not particular about which nation or family she came from. On the other hand, she was certainly of upstanding character and was not a Canaanite. Avraham recognized that a healthy family life was appropriate even in his old age, and he chose a woman who would be a fitting partner.

**Did you enjoy this newsletter? Join our weekly chaburah!**

When: Thursday nights at 8:45 (following Maariv)

Where: Kehillas Shivtei Yeshurun, Nachal Dolev 12, Bet Shemesh

Questions, comments, and concerns: [contact@essenceofjudaism.com](mailto:contact@essenceofjudaism.com)

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