

הלכות יסודי התורה • פרק שני

Learned like the daf, the literal words in bold, flowing with the elucidation

CHAPTER PREVIEW

In this chapter, the Rambam takes us on a beautiful journey to fulfill the fundamental mitzvos of loving and fearing Hashem. The Rambam teaches us that the path to true yiras Shamayim and ahavas Hashem is through deep contemplation of the wondrous, vast creations that Hashem brought into being. By looking at the greatness of the cosmos, a person's neshama is filled with a powerful yearning to know Hashem, while simultaneously feeling humbled by our own smallness before His infinite wisdom.

To help us begin this contemplation, the Rambam introduces us to the spiritual hierarchy of the universe. He explains the three categories of creation, focusing deeply on the spiritual forms that have no physical bodies—the holy angels. We will learn about their ten distinct spiritual levels, how they receive their existence one from another, and how they all stand in awe, recognizing their Creator according to their spiritual capacity.

All introductions, summaries, and contextual notes are the editor's commentary and are not part of the original text.

הלכה א

Halacha 1: The Mitzvah to Love and Fear the Glorious and Awesome God

האל הנכבד והנורא הזה

Regarding **this glorious and awesome God**,

מצוה לאהבו וליראה אותו

it is a positive **mitzvah to love Him and to fear Him**,

שנאמר דברים ו ה' ואהבת את ה' אלהיך.

as **it is said** in Devarim 6:5, "**And you shall love Hashem your God.**"

ונאמר דברים ו יג "את ה' אלהיך תירא":

And it is said in Devarim 6:13, "**Hashem your God you shall fear.**"

הלכה ב

Halacha 2: The Path to Attaining Love and Fear of God Through Contemplating His Creation

והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו ויראתו.

And how is the path to His love and His fear? How does a person reach these lofty levels of loving and fearing Hashem?

בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים

At the time that the person contemplates His deeds and His creations, the wondrous and the great,

וַיִּרְאֶה מֵהֶן חֲכָמָתוֹ שֶׁאֵין לָהּ עֶרֶךְ וְלֹא קֵץ

and he sees from them His wisdom, which has no measure and no end,

מִיד הוא אוֹהֵב וּמְשַׁבַּח וּמְפָאֵר וּמְתַאֲוֶה תַאֲוָה גְדוֹלָה לַיָּדַע הַשֵּׁם הַגְּדוֹל.

immediately he loves and praises and glorifies, and yearns with a great yearning to know the great Name of Hashem,

כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר דָּוִד "צָמָאָה נַפְשִׁי לֵאלֹהִים לֵאלֹל חַי".

like that which Dovid said, in Tehillim, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."

וּכְשֶׁמִּחְשַׁב בַּדְּבָרִים הָאֵלּוּ עֲצָמָן

And when he reflects on these very matters themselves,

מִיד הוא נִרְתַּע לְאַחֲרָיו וַיִּפְחַד וַיִּדַּע שֶׁהוּא בְּרִיָּה קְטַנָּה שְׂפֵלָה אֲפֵלָה

immediately he recoils backward and fears, and knows that he is a small, lowly, dark creature,

עוֹמֶדֶת בְּדַעַת קְלָה מְעוּטָה לִפְנֵי תַמִּים יְדוּת.

standing with a flimsy, limited understanding before the Perfect of knowledge, the Almighty.

כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר דָּוִד "כִּי אֶרְאֶה שָׁמַיָּה מַעֲשֵׂי אֶצְבְּעֹתֶיךָ" "מָה אֲנוֹשׁ כִּי תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ".

Like that which Dovid said, "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers," and then says, "What is man that You should remember him?"

וּלְפִי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלּוּ אֲנִי מְבַאֵר כָּל־לִים גְּדוֹלִים מִמַּעֲשֵׂה רַבּוֹן הָעוֹלָמִים

And according to these matters, I explain great principles of the work of the Master of the worlds,

כְּדִי שִׁיְהִיו פֶּתַח לְמִבִּין לְאוֹהֵב אֶת הַשֵּׁם.

in order that they will be an opening for the understanding one to love the Name of Hashem.

כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים בְּעֶנְיֵן אֶהְבָּה שְׂמִתּוֹךְ כִּךְ אֶתָּה מְכִיר אֶת מִי שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם:

Like that which the Sages said regarding the matter of love, "For from within this, you recognize Him who spoke and the world came into being."

הַלְכָּה ג

Halacha 3 · The Division of All Creations into Three Distinct Categories of Matter and Form

כָּל מַה שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוֹלָמוֹ

All that which the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world

נִחְלַק לְשִׁלְשָׁה חִלְקִים.

is divided into three parts.

מֵהֶן בְּרוּאִים שֶׁהֵן מִחִבְּרִים מִגֶּלֶם וְצוּרָה

Of them are creations that are joined from matter and form,

וְהֵם הֵימָּה וְנִפְסָדִים תָּמִיד

and they are coming into being and perishing constantly,

כְּמוֹ גּוּפוֹת הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה וְהַצִּמְחִים וְהַמִּתְכּוֹת.

like the bodies of man, and the beast, and the plants, and the metals.

וּמֵהֶן בְּרוּאִים שֶׁהֵן מִחִבְּרִים מִגֶּלֶם וְצוּרָה

And of them are creations that are joined from matter and form,

אָבֵל אֵינָן מִשְׁתַּנִּין מִגּוּף לְגּוּף וּמִצּוּרָה לְצוּרָה כְּמוֹ הָרִאשׁוֹנִים

but they do not change from body to body and from form to form like the first ones;

אֶלָּא צוּרְתָן קְבוּעָה לְעוֹלָם בְּגִלְמָם

rather, their form is fixed forever in their matter,

וְאֵינָן מִשְׁתַּנִּין כְּמוֹ אֵלֶּה.

and they do not change like those first ones.

וְהֵם הַגִּלְגָּלִים וְהַכּוֹכָבִים שֶׁבֵּהֶן.

And they are the spheres and the stars that are in them.

וְאֵין גִּלְמָם כְּשֶׁאֵר גִּלְמִים וְלֹא צוּרְתָם כְּשֶׁאֵר צוּרוֹת.

And their matter is not like other matters, and their form is not like other forms.

וּמֵהֶן בְּרוּאִים צוּרָה בְּלֹא גֶלֶם כָּלֵל

And of them are creations of form without matter at all,

וְהֵם הַמַּלְאָכִים.

and they are the angels.

שֶׁהֵם לְאֻכִּים אֵינָם גּוּף וְגוּיָה

For the angels are not body and physical form,

אֶלָּא צוּרוֹת נִפְרָדוֹת זוֹ מִזֹּ:

rather, they are forms separated one from another.

ומהו זה שהנביאים אומרים שראו המלאך אש ובעל כנפים.

And what is this that the prophets say, that they saw the angel as fire and as a possessor of wings?

הכל במראה הנבואה ודרך חידה.

All of this was only in a vision of the prophecy and by way of a riddle,

לומר שאינו גוף ואינו כבד כגופות הכבדים.

to say and to teach us that he is not a body, and he is not heavy like the heavy bodies of this physical world.

כמו שנאמר דברים ד כד "כי ה' אלהיך אש אכלה הוא" ואינו אש אלא משל.

This is just as it is said in the Torah, "For Hashem your God, fire consuming is He," and He is not fire, rather it is a parable to describe His power.

וכמו שנאמר תהילים קד ד "עשה מלאכיו רוחות":

And it is just as it is said in Tehillim, "He makes His angels winds," showing they are spiritual and swift.

ובמה יפרדו הצורות זו מזו

And by what means are these spiritual forms separated, and distinguished, this one from this other one,

והרי אינן גופין.

and behold, they are not bodies that could be separated by physical space?

לפי שאינן שוין במציאותן

It is because they are not equal in their level of existence,

אלא כל אחד מהן למטה ממעלתו של חברו.

rather, each one of them is below the level of his fellow angel.

והוא מצוי מכוח זה למעלה מזה

And each lower angel exists from the power of the one above him, this one above from this one,

והכל נמצאים מכוח של הקדוש ברוך הוא וטובו.

and everything exists from the power of the Holy One, blessed is He, and His goodness.

וזהו שרמז שלמה בכתבתו ואמר

And this is what Shlomo alluded to in his wisdom, and said in the Sefer of Koheles:

"כִּי גִבָּה מֵעַל גִּבָּה שְׁמִרָה":

"For high above high watches," meaning that each spiritual level is watched over and sustained by the one above it.

הִלְכָּה ו

Halacha 6 · The Spiritual Hierarchy of Angels and Causes

זֶה שֶׁאָמְרָנוּ לְמִטָּה מִמַּעַלְתּוֹ שֶׁל חֲבֵירוֹ

This which we said regarding the angels, that one is below the level of his fellow,

אֵינָהּ מַעַלְתַּת מְקוֹם.

is not a level of physical place,

כְּמוֹ אָדָם שֶׁיּוֹשֵׁב לְמַעַלָּה מִחֲבֵירוֹ.

like a man who sits above his fellow in a physical space.

אֲלָא כְּמוֹ שֶׁאוֹמְרִין בְּשְׁנֵי חֻכָּמִים

But rather, it is like that which they say regarding two sages,

שֶׁאֶחָד גָּדוֹל מִחֲבֵירוֹ בְּחֻכְמָה

that one is greater than his fellow in wisdom,

שֶׁהוּא לְמַעַלָּה מִמַּעַלְתּוֹ שֶׁל זֶה.

that he is above the level of this other one in spiritual stature.

וְכְמוֹ שֶׁאוֹמְרִין בְּעֵלָּה

And it is also like that which they say regarding a cause,

שֶׁהִיא לְמַעַלָּה מִן הָעֵלּוּל:

that it is above the effect which stems from it.

הִלְכָּה ז

Halacha 7 · The Ten Spiritual Levels of Angels and Their Respective Names

שְׁנוֵי שְׁמוֹת הַמַּלְאָכִים עַל שֵׁם מַעַלְתָּם הוּא.

The difference of the names of the angels is according to the measure of their level of spiritual attainment.

וּלְפִיכָּה נִקְרְאוּ חַיִּיּוֹת הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְהֵם לְמַעַלָּה מִן הַכָּל

And therefore, the highest level are called Chayyot HaKodesh, and they are above all the others;

ואופנים ואֶרְאֵלִים וְחַשְׁמָלִים וְשֶׁרָפִים וּמַלְאָכִים וְאֱלֹהִים וּבְנֵי אֱלֹהִים וְכִרּוּבִים וְאִישִׁים.

and below them are the Ofanim, and Er'elim, and Chashmalim, and Serafim, and Mal'achim, and Elohim, and sons of Elohim, and Keruvim, and Ishim.

כָּל אֵלֹהֵי עֲשָׂרָה הַשְּׁמוֹת שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ בָּהֶן הַמַּלְאָכִים עַל שֵׁם עֲשָׂרַת מַעְלֹת שֶׁלָּהֶן הֵן.

All of these ten names by which the angels are called are according to the measure of their ten levels of spiritual standing.

וּמַעַלָּה שֶׁאֵין לָמַעַלָּה מִמֶּנָּה אֵלָּא מַעַלְתֵּי הָאֵל בָּרוּךְ הוּא הִיא מַעַלְתֵּי הַצּוּרָה שֶׁנִּקְרְאת חַיּוֹת.

And the level that there is not any level above it except the level of the God, blessed is He, is the level of the form that is called Chayyot.

לְפִיכָךְ נֶאֱמַר בְּנִבְיָאָה שֶׁהֵן תַּחַת כִּסֵּא הַכְּבוֹד.

Therefore, it is said in prophecy that they are under the Throne of the Glory, indicating their supreme closeness to Hashem.

וּמַעַלָּה עֲשִׁירִית הִיא מַעַלְתֵּי הַצּוּרָה שֶׁנִּקְרְאת אִישִׁים.

And the tenth level is the level of the form that is called Ishim,

וְהֵם הַמַּלְאָכִים הַמְדַּבְּרִים עִם הַנְּבִיאִים וְנִרְאִים לָהֶם בְּמַרְאֵה הַנְּבוּאָה.

and they are the angels who speak with the prophets and appear to them in a vision of prophecy.

לְפִיכָךְ נִקְרְאוּ אִישִׁים שֶׁמַּעַלְתָּם קְרוּבָה לְמַעַלְתֵּי דַעַת בְּנֵי אָדָם:

Therefore, they are called Ishim, because their level is close to the level of the knowledge of sons of man, allowing humans to perceive and comprehend their message.

הַלָּכָה ח

Halacha 8 · The Spiritual Forms' Comprehension and Knowledge of the Creator

וְכָל הַצּוּרוֹת הָאֵלֹהִים חַיִּים וּמַכִּירִין אֶת הַבּוֹרֵא.

And all of these forms, the holy angels, are alive and recognize the Creator,

וְיוֹדְעִים אוֹתוֹ דַּעַה גְּדוֹלָה עַד לְמָאד.

and they know Him with a knowledge that is exceedingly great.

כָּל צוּרָה וְצוּרָה לְפִי מַעַלְתָּהּ לֹא לְפִי גְדֻלָּתָהּ.

This is true of each and every form according to its spiritual level, but not according to His infinite greatness.

אֲפִלּוּ מַעַלָּה הָרִאשׁוֹנָה אֵינָה יְכוּלָה לְהַשִּׁיג אֶמְתַּת הַבּוֹרֵא כְּמוֹ שֶׁהוּא

Even the first and highest level is unable to grasp the true essence of the Creator as He truly is,

אֵלָא דַּעְתָּהּ קִצְרָה לְהַשִּׁיג וְלִידַע

rather, its mind is too limited to grasp and to know Him fully,

אָבֵל מַשְׁגָּת וְיִדְעַת יוֹתֵר מִמָּה שֶׁמַּשְׁגָּת וְיִדְעַת צוּרָה שֶׁלֹּמֶטָה מִמֶּנָּה.

but it grasps and knows more than what is grasped and known by the form that is below it.

וְכֵן כָּל מַעֲלָה וּמַעֲלָה עַד מַעֲלָה עֲשִׂירִית

And so it is with every single level down to the tenth level,

גַּם הִיא יוֹדַעַת הַבּוֹרָא דַּעַה

it too knows the Creator with a knowledge

שֶׁאֵין כַּח בְּנֵי הָאָדָם הַמְּחַפְּרִים מִגֶּלֶם וְצוּרָה יָכוֹל לְהַשִּׁיג וְלִידַע כְּמוֹתָהּ.

that the power of human beings, who are composed of physical matter and form, is unable to grasp and to know like it.

וְהַכֹּל אֵינָן יוֹדְעִין הַבּוֹרָא כְּמוֹ שֶׁהוּא יוֹדֵעַ עַצְמוֹ:

Yet, all of them do not know the Creator as He knows Himself.

הִלְכָּה ט

Halacha 9 · All Existence Derives from the Creator and He Knows All Things

כָּל הַנִּמְצָאִים חוּץ מִן הַבּוֹרָא

All the existing things outside of the Creator,

מִצּוּרָה הָרְאשׁוֹנָה עַד יְתוֹשׁ קָטָן שֶׁיְהִיָּה בְּטַבּוֹר הָאָרֶץ

from the first spiritual form until the most small mosquito that is in the center of the earth,

הַכֹּל מִכַּח אֱמֶתתוֹ נִמְצָאוּ.

everything only exist from the power of His truth.

וְלִפִּי שֶׁהוּא יוֹדֵעַ עַצְמוֹ

And because that He knows Himself,

וּמִכִּיר גְּדֻלָּתוֹ וְתִפְאָרְתוֹ וְאֱמֶתתוֹ

and recognizes His greatness and His beauty and His truth,

הוּא יוֹדֵעַ הַכֹּל

He knows everything,

ואין דבר נעלם ממנו:

and there is no thing hidden from Him.

הלכה י

Halacha 10 · The Absolute Unity of the Creator, His Knowledge, and His Life

הקדוש ברוך הוא מכיר אמתו ויודע אותה כמו שהיא.

The Holy One, blessed be He, recognizes His own truth and knows it as it is.

ואינו יודע בדעה שהיא חוץ ממנו כמו שאנו יודעין.

And He does not know with a knowledge that is outside of Him, as we know things,

שאין אנו ודעתנו אחד

for we and our knowledge are not one, as our minds are separate from our essence,

אבל הבורא יתברך הוא ודעתו וחייו אחד מכל צד ומכל פנה ובכל דרך יחוד.

but the Creator, may He be blessed, He and His knowledge and His life are one from every side and from every corner, and in every way of unity.

שאלמלי היתה חי בחיים ויודע בדעה חוץ ממנו

For if He were living with a life, and knowing with a knowledge, that were outside of Him,

היו שם אלהות הרבה הוא וחייו ודעתו,

there would be many gods there: He, His life, and His knowledge;

ואין הדבר כן אלא אחד מכל צד ומכל פנה ובכל דרך יחוד.

and the matter is not so, but rather He is one from every side and from every corner, and in every way of unity.

נמצאת אתה אומר הוא היודע והוא הידוע והוא הדעה עצמה הכל אחד.

Consequently, you must say: He is the Knower, and He is the Known, and He is the Knowledge itself—the whole is one.

ודבר זה אין כח בפה לאמרו ולא באזן לשמעו ולא בלב האדם להכירו על בריו.

And this matter, there is no power in the mouth to say it, nor in the ear to hear it, nor in the heart of man to recognize it upon its truth and fully grasp it.

ולפיכך אומר חי פרעה וחי נפשו

And therefore, when swearing by a creation, the Torah says, "By the life of Pharaoh," and, "By the life of your soul," using the construct form 'chei' which implies a life possessed by the person,

ואין אומר חי ה' אלא חי ה'.

and it does not say, "By the life of Hashem" in the construct form, but rather, "As Hashem lives," using the absolute form 'chai'.

שאינן הבורא וחיייו שנים כמו חיי הגופים החיים או כחיי המלאכים.

For the Creator and His life are not two, like the life of living bodies, or like the life of the angels, whose life is distinct from their essence.

לפיכך אינו מכיר הבוראים ויודעם מחמת הברואים כמו שאנו יודעין אותם

Therefore, He does not recognize the creations and know them because of the creations, as we know them, by looking outside of ourselves,

אלא מחמת עצמו ידעם.

but rather, because of Himself He knows them.

לפיכך מפני שהוא יודע עצמו יודע הכל שהכל נסמך לו בהיותו.

Therefore, because He knows Himself, He knows everything, for everything is dependent on Him for its existence.

הלכה יא

Halacha 11 · The Depth of Ma'aseh Merkavah and the Limits of Explanation

דברים אלו שאמרנו בענין זה

These matters that we have said regarding this subject

בשני פרקים אלו

in these two chapters

כמו טפה מן הים הם

are like a drop from the sea

ממה שצריך לבאר בענין זה.

compared to what is needed to explain regarding this subject.

ובאור כל העקרין שבשני פרקים אלו

And the explanation of all the principles that are in these two chapters

הוא הנקרא מעשה מרכבה:

is that which is called the Work of the Chariot.

הלכה יב

Halacha 12 · The Restriction and Concealment of the Secrets of the Torah

ציון חכמים הראשונים

The early Sages commanded

שְׁלֹא לְדַרְשׁ בְּדִבְרֵי אֵלֹהִים

not to expound on these matters of Ma'aseh Merkavah

אֶלָּא לְאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלִבְדּוֹ

except to one man alone,

וְהוּא שֶׁיִּהְיֶה חָכָם וּמֵבִין מִדַּעְתּוֹ

and he must be such that he is wise and understanding from his own knowledge.

וְאַחֵר כִּי מוֹסְרִין לוֹ רְאִשֵׁי הַפְּרָקִים

And after that, they transmit to him the outlines of the chapters,

וּמוֹדִיעִין אוֹתוֹ שְׁמֵץ מִן הַדָּבָר

and they make known to him only a trace of the matter,

וְהוּא מֵבִין מִדַּעְתּוֹ

and he understands from his own knowledge

וַיֵּדַע סוֹף הַדָּבָר וְעִמְקוֹ.

and knows the end of the matter and its depth.

וְדִבְרֵי אֵלֹהִים דְּבָרִים עֲמֻקִּים הֵם עַד לְמָאד

And these matters are exceedingly deep matters,

וְאִין כָּל דַּעַת וְדַעַת רְאוּיָה לְסַבֵּלָן.

and not every mind is fitting to bear them.

וְעַלֵּיהֶם אָמַר שְׁלֹמֹה בְּחֻמָּתוֹ דְּרָהּ מִשָּׁל

And concerning them, Shlomo said in his wisdom by way of metaphor:

כִּבְשִׁים לְלְבוּשָׁה

"Lambs for your clothing."

כִּי אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים בְּפִירוּשׁ מִשָּׁל זֶה

So said the Sages in the explanation of this metaphor:

דְּבָרִים שֶׁהֵן כִּבְשׁוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם יִהְיוּ לְלְבוּשָׁה

Matters that are the secrets of the world shall be for your clothing,

כְּלוּמַר לָהּ לְבַדָּהּ וְאֵל תִּדְרֹשׁ אוֹתָם בְּרַבִּים.

meaning to say, for you alone, and do not expound them in public.

וְעַלֵּיהֶם אָמַר

And concerning them, the verse says:

יְהִיו לָהּ לְבַדָּהּ וְאֵין לְזָרִים אִתָּהּ.

"They shall be for you alone, and not for strangers with you."

וְעַלֵּיהֶם אָמַר

And concerning them, the verse says:

דְּבַשׁ וְחֶלֶב תַּחַת לְשׁוֹנְךָ

"Honey and milk under your tongue."

כֹּה פִּרְשׁוּ חֲכָמִים הָרֵאשׁוֹנִים

So explained the early Sages:

דְּבָרִים שֶׁהֵן כְּדֶבֶשׁ וְחֶלֶב יְהִיו תַּחַת לְשׁוֹנְךָ:

Matters that are like honey and milk shall be under your tongue and kept hidden.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The chapter begins by establishing the mitzvos of loving and fearing Hashem, explaining that these middos are awakened when we contemplate the greatness of His creations. The Rambam then categorizes all creation into three groups: physical things that change, permanent physical bodies like the stars and spheres, and purely spiritual forms without any physical matter, which are the angels. He explains that the physical descriptions of angels in the Torah are merely prophetic metaphors, as they have no physical form or weight. Instead, they are structured in ten spiritual levels, from the holy chayyot down to the ishim, who communicate with the prophets. The Rambam concludes by explaining that while these lofty spiritual beings have immense knowledge of Hashem, even the highest angel cannot fully comprehend the Creator, whose knowledge, life, and Essence are completely one.

The Rambam is teaching us a fundamental secret about how a Yid builds a real, living relationship with Hashem. We often think that love and fear of Hashem are emotions that just have to strike us like lightning, or that they are reserved only for the greatest tzaddikim. But the Torah commands every single one of us, "And you shall love... and you shall fear." How is this possible? The Rambam reveals the path: it comes through active contemplation. When you stop to look at the world, from the vastness of the stars to the intricate design of a tiny leaf, you are looking at the wisdom of the Creator.

This contemplation is a two-step movement of the soul. First, when you see the infinite wisdom and beauty in creation, your heart is pulled close; you are filled with a deep yearning and love to know Hashem. But in the very next moment, as you realize how small and limited you are standing before the Master of the universe, you naturally recoil in healthy awe and yiras Shamayim. True avodah requires both. We cannot serve Hashem properly with love alone, which can lead to familiarity, nor with fear alone, which can lead to coldness. We need the heartbeat of both running and returning.

Today, take just two minutes to step away from your busy schedule, look at something in Hashem's creation, even just the breath in your lungs or the sky outside your window, and think: "The Creator of the entire universe made this with infinite wisdom, and He wants a relationship with me."