Judaism and Its Wisdom Literature

Rabbi Rami Shapiro

Jewish wisdom, *chochmah* in Hebrew, isn't as much a body of knowledge to be mastered, as it is a life-long project to be undertaken. The aim of this project is spelled out in the opening verses of *Sefer Mishlei*, the Book of Proverbs:

These are the proverbs and parables of Solomon, son of David, King of Israel, offered as a guide to insight, understanding, and spiritual discipline to help you become generous, honest, and balanced.

(Proverbs 1: 1–3, author’s translation)

Wisdom and the pursuit of wisdom are valuable to all people, from the simple and the young to the seeker and the sage. Much of what is contained in Jewish wisdom literature is clearly aimed at the former, offering practical insights into the workings of the world that will benefit them as they mature and take their place as productive citizens of their communities. This is not the wisdom with which we will be concerned. Our goal is to reveal the core teaching of *chochmah* and a method for actualizing it in one’s daily life.

Chochmah, despite all attempts to tame her, is seditious. This is why the wise speak in parable and puzzle; to speak clearly is to place themselves at risk. For what they teach is not simply an alternative worldview, but a series of observations that eat at the foundations of the official worldview until that worldview collapses under its own weight, and with it the power of those who preach it.

Following the schema of Lawrence Kohlberg, director of Harvard’s Center for Moral Education, there are three categories of worldview: Preconventional, Conventional, and Postconventional, each with its own sense of wisdom and morality. The Preconventional worldview is rooted in the notion that those with superior power determine what is true, wise, and good. You know an action is good because compliance is rewarded, and resistance is punished. Wisdom is the system that identifies what is good and what is not based on reward and punishment, and truth is simply that set of ideas insisted upon by those with the power to enforce them.
One of the clearest expressions of Preconventionalism in the Hebrew Bible is the rebellion of Korah and the Elders of Israel against Moses found in the Book of Numbers (1–40). Relying on the notion, revealed by God, that all Israelites are holy and equal in the sight of God, Korah and two hundred and fifty of the leaders of Israel demand that Moses replace his autocratic rule with a more democratic style of leadership. (Numbers 16:3) The rebellion spreads to the entire people, and they gather behind Korah to confront Moses at the Tent of Meeting. Moses address the people this way:

“This is how you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works; it has not been of my own accord...if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD.” As soon as he finished speaking all these words, the ground under them was split apart. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households—everyone who belonged to Korah and all their goods. (Numbers 16:28–33 NRSV)

A more sophisticated expression of Preconventional thinking, one that arises on the heals of the “might makes right” model mentioned above, is transactional: I do to you what you do to me. The classic example of this in the Hebrew Bible can be found in Leviticus:

Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered. One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death. You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 24:19–22, NRSV)

In Preconventional worldviews right and wrong are determined by power and personal satisfaction. In Conventional worldviews a more sophisticated level of thinking is
required that subsumes individual happiness to group cohesion. The community rather than the powerful individual determines what is good and true and wise. Adherence to the community’s rules and laws, rather than the often arbitrary whim of the powerful, now constitutes morality.

This is the worldview to which most people ascribe, and upon which much of Judaism in its contemporary form rests. The central teaching of the Conventional worldview is that wisdom and morality lie with group conformity. The official worldview of Judaism then and now, clearly falls within Kolberg’s category of Conventional. It is articulated in the Book of Deuteronomy and read twice daily in the liturgy:

If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul—then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. (Deuteronomy 11:13–15, NRSV)

Simply put, the official worldview of Judaism is this: do good, get good; where “doing good” is defined as keeping the mitzvot (divine commandments), and “getting good” is defined as material success. The problem with this theology is that it doesn’t hold up under the contingencies of everyday life. It doesn’t take much investigation to see that good people often suffer while wicked people often prosper. Nor does it take a detailed examination of Jewish history to see that even the most observant Jews fall victim to God’s blazing wrath. Unless we assume that God’s angry fire, manifest in our time as the flames of the Nazi crematoria, took the lives of nonobservant Jews only, it is terrifyingly obvious that the “do good, get good” theology is farcical. But you don’t have to be a Holocaust historian to question this theology, as the ancient wisdom sages, especially the author of the Book of Job, make clear.

The worldview of the wisdom sages falls into Kohlberg’s category of Postconventional. The Postconventional thinker seeks to identify universal moral principles,
and to use these to guide her actions. The Hebrew Wisdom sages did not find wisdom in
the covenant with God, the sacrificial service of priests, or even the revelations of prophets.
They were independent observers of life, and their teachings reflected what they saw to be
true rather than what the official arbiters of truth insisted is true. As we shall see, life is
more than a matter of trusting in God, adhering to the commandments, or even doing good
and receiving good. Life was, and is, a wild chaotic struggle for survival that can be neither
tamed nor avoided, only well travelled.

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The Wisdom literature consists of the Hebrew books Proverbs, Job, and
Ecclesiastes, and the Greek books Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sirach. I shall present
each book of wisdom in turn, highlighting its primary message, and pointing each toward a
shared insight that will occupy us in the final section of this essay.

Proverbs

Even a quick glance at the thirty one chapters of Sefer Mishlei, the Book of Proverbs,
makes it clear that this is an anthology of sayings. While traditionally ascribed to King
Solomon it is impossible to take this claim seriously as the entire collection spans some
eight hundred years.

Despite the plurality of voices contained in these collections, one can detect a
common thread captured in the phrase yirat HaShem, commonly, albeit misleadingly,
rendered into English as “fear of the Lord.” For example: “Yirat HaShem is the beginning of
knowledge, wisdom, and character that the foolish scorn” (1:7); “Yirat HaShem is hatred of
evil” (8:13); and “Yirat HaShem is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy
One is insight” (9:10).

Translating yirat HaShem as “fear of the Lord,” while quite common, is more than a
little problematic. First yirat can mean both “fear” and “awe,” and either would be a
legitimate translation of the Hebrew. Choosing “fear” over “awe” gives the phrase yirat
**HaShem** an emotional quality of alarm that “awe” clearly lacks, and which the authors of these sayings may not intend.

Second, translating **HaShem** as “Lord” assigns gender to God and places “him” at the head of a hierarchical system reflective of the patriarchal hierarchy operative in ancient times. Such a rendering, however, is completely independent of the actual Hebrew of the text.

The actual Hebrew, rendered here as **HaShem**, literally “the Name,” is the four letter ineffable name of God: **Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh**. Because of the prohibition against pronouncing the name of God, sometime in the third century B.C.E. the euphemism **Adonai**, “Lord,” became the accepted stand-in for the unpronounceable four letter Name of God. So, **yirat HaShem** is not “fear of the Lord,” but “fear of **Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh**.”

**Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh** is the singular, future imperfect form of the Hebrew verb “to be,” reflecting the self-revelation of God to Moses at the Burning Bush, **ehyeh asher ehyeh**, “I will be what I will be” (Exodus 3:14). Hebrew lacks a present tense for the verb “to be,” and thus the more common translation of Exodus as “I am that I am,” locks the biblical notion of God into a static mode that the Hebrew does not allow. The Hebrew God is not a noun but a verb; not a being or even the Supreme Being, but be-ing itself.

This grammatical insight is the basis for the panentheism of much of Jewish mystical teaching. The sixteenth-century kabbalist, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, for example, defines God this way:

> [God] is found in all things and all things are found in God, and there is nothing devoid of divinity, heaven forfend. Everything is in God, and God is in everything and beyond everything, and there is nothing beside God. 1

Similarly Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), the founder of Chabad Hasidism taught, “Everything is God, blessed be He, who makes everything be, and in truth the world of seemingly separate entities is entirely annulled.” 2

If we were to conjure a modern euphemism for **Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh** and **ehyeh asher ehyeh** we might be better served with “that which is happening,” or “Be-ing” where be-ing
implies the on-going creative process of life, death, and new life rather than a static source outside the process.

The absolute reality of God, while extending beyond the conceptual borders of “existence,” also fills the entire expanse of existence as we know it. There is no space possible for any other existences or realities we may identify—the objects in our physical universe, the metaphysical truths we contemplate our very selves...do not exist in their own reality; they exist only as an extension of divine energy.... 3

With this understanding of Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh we might more accurately read our proverb to say, “Awe of reality (yirat HaShem) is the beginning of knowledge, wisdom, and character disdained by fools.” Standing in awe of reality is quite different than standing in fear of the Lord.

The question now becomes, what is the correlation between Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh and Chochmah, Wisdom? Let me suggest that Chochmah is the personification of HaShem. While God is clearly anthropomorphized in Torah, the first five books of the Bible, there is no corresponding understanding of God in the Book of Proverbs. God as Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh is the abstract reality of which we are comprised and in which we function. Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh is far closer to St. Paul’s notion of God as that “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28, NRSV), than to the all too human God of Torah. Yet it is difficult for people to relate to such an abstraction. We need a sense of divinity with whom we can interact. Jesus, God’s son, plays that role in the Christian Gospels; Chochmah, God’s daughter plays it in Proverbs:

I fill the hearts of those who love me,
they will never lack for insight.
I am the deep grain of creation, the subtle current of life.
God fashioned me before all things;
I am the blueprint of creation.
I was there from the beginning, from before there was a beginning.
I am independent of time and space, earth and sky...

My nature is joy, and I gave God constant delight.

Now that the world is inhabited, I rejoice in it.

I will be your true delight if you will heed my teachings.

(Proverbs 8:21–31, author's translation)

The choice of personifying wisdom as a woman may reflect the cultural influence of the Egyptian Goddess *Ma'at* who, like Chochmah, represents order, balance, and justice.

In the 25th century B.C.E. text, *The Proverbs of Ptah–hotep* we learn that Ma’at, justice, is the foundation of creation (1. 6, 5), and she alone endures (1. 6, 7). Aligning oneself with Ma’at assures long life for both oneself and one’s children (1. 18, 1). We can see parallels with Chochmah: She too was the foundation of creation (Proverbs 8:23); walking Chochmah’s path is the key to a righteous and long life (Proverbs 2: 20:22). In the Egyptian hymn to Amon–Re, the Egyptian Creator and Sustainer of life, Ma’at is revealed as Truth who comes forth from Amon–Re and burns up the wicked. Proverbs 2: 20-22 tells that Chochmah comes from God and cuts off and uproots the wicked.

Chochmah was not simply the first of God’s creations; she is the means of creation itself, the “master builder” (Proverbs 8:30, the Hebrew can be read as “child” or “craftsman”). To know wisdom is to become wise. To become wise is to find happiness and peace: “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a Tree of Life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her close are happy.” (Proverbs 3: 17-18)

This last claim is testable. You don’t believe in Wisdom, you engage with her. If your engagement with Wisdom leads to pleasantness and peace, then you have proof that her teachings are true.

As I understand the matter, the key to the awakening that is Wisdom is having a clear perception of reality. Wisdom not only leads you to this clarity; she is this clarity. Imagine you wake up in the middle of the night to find a snake coiled at the end of your bed. You freeze in fear, and spend the rest of the night awake, afraid, and frozen in place. As dawn bathes your bedroom in soft light you suddenly realize that the “snake” is simply the belt you forgot to put away as you undressed the night before. The fear ends as quickly as it arose. Nothing has changed but the quality of your perception.
Changing the quality of perception is the key to Job’s awakening in the Book of Job. While it is true that what Job sees is beyond the descriptive capacity of language, that he saw it is central to his spiritual realization.

**Job**

The Book of Job, dating in its current form to the 4th century B.C.E., consists of two distinct elements: the narrative that opens and closes the book, and the epic poem that is its primary focus. The narrative is the older of the two. In it Satan, God’s prosecuting attorney, reports to God on the doings of humanity. Asked about Job, God’s favorite, Satan suggests that the pious Job would curse God to His Face if God were not so gracious to him. To test Satan’s hypothesis, God empowers Satan to do whatever he will with Job’s businesses and family, but must leave the man himself untouched (Job 1:12). Satan destroys Job’s businesses, kills his flocks and herds, sends marauding bands to attack and destroy his caravans, and kills his children via a tornado that flattens the home in which they were eating. Job is devastated, but does not curse God, saying instead, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; HaShem gave, and HaShem has taken away; blessed be the name HaShem.” (Job 1:21)

Reporting Job’s continued loyalty to God at their next meeting, Satan suggests that Job has held his tongue because Job himself was not physically harmed. God tests Satan’s claim by placing Job’s health, but not his life, in Satan’s hands. Job is suddenly covered with boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Job’s wife finds her husband scratching his sores with the sharp ends of broken pottery. The horror of his plight stuns her, and she says, “You still keep your integrity? Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9)

Job refuses to do so, however, saying, “Should we accept only good from God and not evil?” (Job 2:10) For his loyalty, God rewards Job with renewed health, financial success, and a new brood of healthy and righteous children. While the overt message here is that loyalty to God results in material reward, the theological insight that God is the source of all things good as well as evil is the more important teaching. Job is confirming the teaching found in Isaiah 45:7 where God says, “I form light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I am HaShem, Maker of all things.” Isaiah and Job offer us a theology that sees God as beyond good and evil even as God is the source of good and evil.
The message of the narrative section of Job maintains the “do good, get good theology” even as it hints of something more. The bulk of the book, the poetic heart of Job, explores that something more.

The poetic section of Job is a series of conversations primarily between Job and four friends who come to “comfort” him. Their comfort however is simply an attempt to get Job to admit that he is concealing some evil, and it is this evil that is the cause of his plight. God only punishes the wicked, they argue; Job is clearly being punished; so Job's supposed righteousness is a mask, and he must be wicked. If Job would confess his wickedness, God would surely forgive him, and his torment would cease. Job clings to his innocence, however, and demands that God show himself and explain what is happening.

Despite the phrase “the patience of Job,” Job himself is anything but patient, “As for me, I will not hold back my tongue; I will give voice to my torment; I will protest the bitterness of my life.” (Job 7:11)

The climax of the Book of Job is the appearance of God. It is crucial to the message of the story that God appears to Job from out of a whirlwind. (Job 38:1) Job is looking to make sense of things, and God further blinds and disorients him. Imagine Job engulfed in the skin-tearing sands of this whirlwind and hearing the voice of God demanding that Job answer God’s questions.

The poet has reversed the setting. It was Job who was questioning God all this time, and receiving no answers. But now that God arrives it is not to answer Job’s questions but to pose his own. God’s questions are, on the surface, irrelevant to Job’s situation. God doesn’t address Job’s concerns at all, but peppers him with questions about the enormity of the universe, “Where were you when I set the foundation of the earth? Speak if you know!” (Job 38:4–7) Job wants justice; God offers only awe.

But as we read in the Book of Proverbs, the beginning of wisdom is awe. God is going to bring Job to wisdom, and to do so God has to strip Job of his anthropocentric view of reality. God cannot be reduced to human ideas of right and wrong, just and unjust. Creation does not run in harmony with human notions of law and order. Creation is irreducibly wild—*tohu v’vohu* as Genesis 1:1 tells us, chaotic and unformed. There is no conquering the chaos of life. There is no avoiding the terror of merely being alive. There is only learning how to make meaning in the madness.
Job’s clinging to his integrity (Job 2:9), and his understanding that both the good and
the horrible come from God (Job 2:10) prepare him for the climactic encounter with God in
the whirlwind. Job is not willing to surrender to injustice, but neither is he willing to plead
guilty to crimes he didn’t commit in order to bolster the conventional worldview of his
friends who insist that if you do good you will get good, and if you do evil you will be
punished.

The author of Job is telling us that there is no *quid pro quo* in the universe. God is not
human. Nature is not human. For all humanity’s ideas to the contrary, humans are a tiny
part of a vast and cosmic frenzy. Whatever justice and order there may be in the universe it
is beyond the limited anthropomorphic fantasies of the conventional worldview.

Yet do not imagine the Book of Job to be promoting a kind of nihilism. As I read the
Book of Job, especially when read alongside the rest of the Hebrew Wisdom Books, I don’t
see these books propounding a pointless universe and a meaningless life, but rather a vast
and wild universe that transcends human categories of justice. It isn’t that life has no
meaning, but that only when you see life for what it is are you able to make meaning in the
midst of it. Yet seeing the truth can be frightening, and our initial response, like that of Job,
may be to hide from it.

Having gotten what he wished for, an audience with God, Job now wants it all to
cease. He cannot answer any of God’s questions, and wishes only that God stop asking
them. Job says, “Enough! I see I am puny and worthless. How can I possibly respond to you?
I slap my hand across my mouth to silence my speech. I spoke once, but no more; twice but
not again.” (Job 40: 4–5)

You might expect God to leave Job alone at this point, but the opposite is true. God
redoubles his efforts and begins the questioning all over again. But why? What has Job left
to learn from the wildness of God and his creation? The key is in Job’s proclamation of
humanity’s worthlessness. This is not awe, but fear. God wants Job to move through the
fear toward awe. And he does. After a second round of terrifying questions Job says, “I had
heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:5–6, NRSV)

We have to go carefully into these, the final words of Job, if we are to discover the
wisdom they contain. Job “heard of God” that is he had ideas about God. He knew the
standard theologies of his friends, and tried unsuccessfully to reconcile them with his own experience. Stripped of what he had heard, he is now fully engaged with God, seeing God with his eyes. But what could Job see? God was speaking from a whirlwind. Job was blinded by the burning sands tearing through his already ravaged flesh. Job isn’t talking about physical sight. God didn’t show him anything, but only asked questions. Job is speaking of an inner seeing, and what he saw was that he, and all creation, was nothing but dust and ash.

Now there are two possible realizations that this seeing can call forth. Either Job passes through fear into awe, the beginning of wisdom, or he passes into self-hatred. Most English translations, like the New Revised Standard Version quoted above, lead us to believe he falls into the latter, but they are wrong.

The Hebrew verb ‘em’as does not mean “to despise,” but “to reject,” and what Job is rejecting is not himself, but the ideas about God he had heard with his ears. Job now knows that God cannot be reduced to theology. The second verb, nichamti, means “to comfort or console” rather than “repent.” Somehow, being stripped of theological notions is comforting to Job, why? Because it reveals that he is dust and ash, ‘afar va–‘efer. The NRSV makes it appear that Job is repenting of his arrogance in the surrounding dust and ash; Job is groveling in the dirt. But the phrase ‘afar va–‘efer appears earlier in Job (30:19) as a reference to Job’s body not the place in which he sits. What Job realizes is that he and the universe are both dust and ash, and that dust and ash are the very stuff of awe and wonder. Job is lead by God to the transcendent realization that God and creation are greater than humanity but nonetheless include humanity. Job is part of the wildness of the divine manifestation; and so are we.

A parallel teaching may be found in the Heart Sutra, a central text of the Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) literature of Buddhism. Composed in China sometime in the first century CE, the Heart Sutra speaks to the core philosophical principle of emptiness (sunya). The most famous line of this sutra is “Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form.” The seeming paradox of the teaching fades when you realize that emptiness is not a state but an action. Like Yod–Heh–Vav–Heh, emptiness is best understood as a verb rather than a noun. Rather than the standard “form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” a more
philosophically accurate rendering of the text would be “form is emptying; emptying is forming.”

Nothing in the world of Wisdom, Jewish or Buddhist, is fixed; everything is in flux. Problems arise only when we seek to make permanent that which is intrinsically impermanent. The suffering of Job and the self-righteousness of his friends arose because both clung to an abstract and fixed notion of justice laid waste by the wildness of God manifest as creation. Job’s insight that the rising and fading of things both comes from God (Job 1:21), and that one cannot take precedence over the other, is what allows him to move deeper into truth until he realizes that all reality is a whirlwind of rising and fading, coming and going, birthing and dying. Job’s ultimate realization that he is nothing other than this cosmic dance brings him a sense of peace by shifting his identity from the micro-cosmic dimension of humanity to the macro-cosmic dimension of God. While admittedly a stretch, I can imagine Job spontaneously shouting a Hebrew equivalent to the central mantra of the Heart Sutra: gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, Bodhi swaha! “Gone, gone, gone beyond all notions and categories, gone beyond even the idea of beyond—Enlightenment! Hail!” (author’s rendering).

Going beyond, realizing that form is emptying, doesn’t yet tell us how to live with the forming. While the Book of Job does a fine job decimating the conventional worldview of Job’s friends, and pointing us to the possibility of enlightenment and a true understanding of “dust and ash,” it does not offer a way to live in the midst of the chaos it reveals. For this we turn to the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes

The author of Ecclesiastes claims to be King Solomon, but the language of the text—specifically the use of Aramaic and Persian words, and Hebrew grammatical forms unknown in Solomon’s time—makes this impossible. While scholars disagree as to the exact date, it is safe to say the book was written sometime around 250 B.C.E.

Koheleth, the Hebrew name of the book, and Ecclesiastes, its Greek counterpart, are titles rather than proper nouns. Both terms mean “Assembler” or “Compiler,” suggesting that the author wove together wisdom from multiple sources. Whoever the author was his book takes the teaching of wisdom to another level.
Nowhere does Koheleth use the Israelite name of God, *Yod–Heh–Vav–Heh*, preferring instead the term *HaElohim*, literally “The God.” This is both striking and provocative: striking in that a Jewish text does not refer to the Jewish god, and provocative in that the formulation *HaElohim* rather than the more common *Elohim* found throughout the Bible implies a more abstract and impersonal understanding of God.

Elohim is the creator God of Genesis: “In the beginning *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1) Elohim belongs to no tribe or nation, and is associated with no religion or cult. It is Elohim in whose image women and men are created. (Genesis 1:26) It is Elohim who blesses the new creation and proclaims it “very good.” (Genesis 1:31) And it is Elohim who creates the Sabbath by resting on the seventh day, but did not impose it upon the Hebrew people as their personal Sabbath. Elohim is a global deity, not a tribal one. Over time Elohim, the God worshipped by the northern tribes and *HaShem* (*Yod–Heh–Vav–Heh*), the name of God preferred by the southern tribes are linked, appearing in much of the Bible as *HaShem Elohim*, or as most English Bibles translate it Lord God.

Koheleth, however, opts for neither *Elohim* nor *HaShem*, choosing instead the rare form *HaElohim*. Koheleth is not abandoning *HaShem*, but is pointing to something more impersonal. Take note of Deuteronomy 4:35 where we read, “You have been shown [all this] in order to know that *HaShem* is *HaElohim*! There is nothing else (*ayn od*).” *HaShem*, the ineffable and unconditionable one who chose the Jews as the vehicle for carrying the divine wisdom into the world, is none other than *HaElohim*, the global, transtribal Reality that cannot be bound by word or tribe. And this divine reality is all there is (*ayn od*): all life is an expression of the singular reality of God.

Koheleth is pointing beyond the gods of any nation to speak of the singular reality that embraces all creation. It is the nature of this reality that concerns Koheleth most. He calls it *hevel havalim*. (Ecclesiastes 1:2) While most English Bibles render this phrase as “vanity of vanities” or “futility upon futility,” Koheleth’s Hebrew is far subtler. *Hevel* means “breath” or “vapor” and suggests neither vanity nor futility, but impermanence: life is as fleeting as breath, as temporary as dew.

*Hevel* occurs some seventy times in the Hebrew Bible to indicate the brevity of human life. Job says, “my life is a breath,” and “my days are a breath” (Job 7:7, 16, NRSV); the Psalmist tells that human beings “are like a breath; their days are like a passing
shadow” (Psalm 144:4, NRSV); “Men are mere breath; mortals, illusion; placed on a scale all together, they weigh even less than a breath” (Psalm 62:10, JPS). As Gerhard von Rad puts it, “[Koheleth] lumps all of life’s experiences together and then labels the sum nothingness (hevel).” 5

*HaElohim* and the universe *HaElohim* creates is one of continual emptying. This is why HaShem is *HaElohim*.

As we have seen, HaShem (*Yod–Heh–Vav–Heh*) is defined in Torah as *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, “I will be whatever I will be” (Exodus 3:14), that is to say, HaShem cannot be restricted to this or that label or concept or form. Koheleth is saying this and more: not only is HaShem in perpetual flux, so is life itself. By using the term *HaElohim*, Koheleth is asking us to recall the reality that spoke to Job from the whirlwind, that reality that cannot be managed or made part of a religious system. Indeed, Koheleth never asks us to pray, to observe *mitzvot* (divine commandments), to attend the festivals or make sacrifice in the Temple.

So what can we do? First here is what we can’t do: we can’t win. If you expect life to conform to the “do good, get good” ideology you will be disappointed. Koheleth makes it clear that everyone suffers, everyone grows old, and everyone dies. The rich can lose all they have in a bad investment, or accumulated wealth will fall to children who will spend wildly and foolishly. There is no escaping the absurdity of life. So don’t try. Don’t expect things to work out the way you wish. Don’t expect the courts to be just (3:16), the government to be caring (5:7), or nature to cooperate with your hopes and dreams. (3:19–20) Wishing things to be other then they are leads to *re’ut ruach* or *ra’yon ruach*. These idioms, often translated as “chasing after wind,” actually mean “disturbing the breath.” When you work against *hevel*, the impermanent nature of reality, you end up vexing your own breath; gasping for air as you engage in an endless and futile grasping for permanence in an impermanent world. Working against the way of things is *ahmahl*, needless effort or toil, and there is no benefit to it at all (4:6). It is the opposite of following the path of Chochmah.

Where the Book of Proverbs tells us there is wisdom to be found in the midst of life’s turmoil, and where the Book of Job tells us that we will find comfort and contentment in our own impermanence (dust and ash), Koheleth tells us how to achieve *simcha*, joy (5:19).
When we stop fighting reality by insisting it conform to some generally agreed upon notions of right and wrong, we can then learn instead to navigate it, we find joy. And how do we manage this? By accepting the reality of impermanence, by ceasing to grasp and gasp, and by doing the four things that Koheleth says will bring us joy: eating and drinking moderately (3:13), engaging in meaningful work (3:13), and bonding with two or three good friends. (4:9-12)

Is that it? Can that be all there is to living? Does all of Koheleth’s rhetoric lead simply to the mundane? In a sense, yes, but there is nothing mundane about this; it is in fact marvelous. When you realize you are part of the cosmic that embraces and transcends the micro-cosmic everything you do is imbued with meaning. Hence the Zen saying: “How wonderful! How marvelous! I chop wood! I carry water!”

This is what the Sufis call the Supreme Identity. You have realized your fundamental identity with the Condition of all conditions and the Nature of all natures and the Being of all beings. Since spirit is the suchness or condition of all things, it is perfectly compatible with all things. It is even nothing special. It is chop wood, carry water. For this reason, individuals who reach this state are often depicted as very ordinary people, nothing special about them. This is the path of sages, of the wise men and women who are so wise you can’t even spot it.

Job taught us that life is impermanent and chaotic: it and we are but dust and ash. He found comfort in this realization because it freed him from having to conform his life and his worldview to the conventional worldview of his community: do good, get good. But Job does not tell us how to live with the wisdom he attained. What do we do, now that we know we are but dust and ash? We eat, we drink, we work, and we befriend. In a sense, Job tells us what life is, Koheleth tells us how best to live it. Nothing special.

**Ben Sirach**

Sometime around 175 B.C.E. Ben Sira, a Jewish sage living in Alexandria, Egypt wrote a book of instruction for his students. Ben Sira’s grandson translated the original
Hebrew text into Greek, thus expanding its audience. While held in high regard by Jews of his time and for generations thereafter, *Sefer Ben Sira* (the Book of Ben Sira) was never considered canonical by the Jews. The Greek translation of his grandson Jesus, however, did become part of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, and entered into the Catholic and Orthodox Christian canons as part of the Apocrypha under the Greek name *Sirach* or the Latin *Ecclesiasticus*.

The Book of Ben Sira is a collection of ethical teachings along the model of the Book of Proverbs. While useful as a guide to life and ideas extant in Ben Sira’s time, the most important aspect of the book for our purposes is its attempt to “Judaize” wisdom. Where Proverbs, Job, and Koheleth offer a universalist notion of wisdom unchained to Jewish life, the Book of Sira seeks to link *chochmah* with Torah. Speaking of herself in a manner similar to Proverbs, Chochmah says,

> I came forth from the mount of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss... Among all these I sought a resting place; in whose territory should I abide? (Sirach 24: 3–7, NRSV)

The notion that wisdom needs to abide in a territory and hence to be associated with a people is new. Not surprisingly, given that Sira is a Jewish sage, it is among the Jews that wisdom dwells:

> Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, “Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.” Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be. In the holy tent I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion. Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my domain. I took root in an honored people, in the portion of the Lord, his heritage. (Sirach 24: 8–12, NRSV)
If any doubt should linger regarding the identity of Wisdom with Judaism, Sira puts it to rest saying, “All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.” (Sirach 24: 23)

As we shall see shortly, linking wisdom with Torah will prove central to the cultivation of wisdom’s central revelation: the nonduality of reality in, with, and as HaElohim.

**Wisdom of Solomon**

Written by an unnamed Alexandrian Jewish sage perhaps a century after the Book of Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon carries on Sira’s attempt to uphold the viability of Torah by linking Torah with wisdom, but does so without reducing wisdom’s universality. Written during a period when Greek philosophies competed with Judaism for the loyalties of many Jews, especially those living outside the Promised Land, the Wisdom of Solomon defends Judaism by essentially equating God with Wisdom:

For it is he [God] who gave me unerring knowledge of what exists, to know the structure of the world and the activity of the elements; the beginning and end and middle of times, the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons, the cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars, the natures of animals and the tempers of wild animals, the powers of spirits and the thoughts of human beings, the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots; I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. (Wisdom 7: 17–22, NRSV)

The Wisdom of Solomon defines wisdom as one might define God:

intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing
all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle... for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. (Wisdom 7: 22–28, NRSV)

THE NATURE OF WISDOM

Having briefly outlined the texts comprising Jewish Wisdom literature, we now turn to the Lady herself. Just who is Chochmah and what does she teach?

Chochmah is both the way and the way-pointer:

I fill the hearts of those who love me,
they will never lack for insight.
I am the deep grain of creation, the subtle current of life.
God fashioned me before all things;
I am the blueprint of creation.
I was there from the beginning, from before there was a beginning.
I am independent of time and space, earth and sky...
My nature is joy, and I gave God constant delight.
Now that the world is inhabited, I rejoice in it.
I will be your true delight if you will heed my teachings.
(Proverbs 8: 21–31, author’s translation)

Chochmah exists before time and with it. She is the archetype of creation and the way creation functions. To know Her is to know

the structure of the world and the activity of the elements; the beginning and end and middle of times, the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons, the cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars... I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. (Wisdom of Solomon 7:17–22, NRSV)
Chochmah is the “breath of God,” a “spotless mirror” reflecting divine creativity. “Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. (Wisdom of Solomon 7: 27–28, NRSV)

Our question now becomes, how do we live with wisdom? We opened our discussion of the Hebrew Wisdom tradition with the claim that it was a post–conventional worldview depending on neither personal gratification nor compliance with communal norms, but on universal principles available to all: Chochmah translated into a way of living.

Like the grain in wood, Chochmah “pervades and penetrates” all things (Wisdom of Solomon 7:24, NRSV). Just as the experienced woodworker learns to cut with the grain, so the wise learn to work with Chochmah. You do not pray to her or choose her, you simply see her and work in harmony with Her. Wisdom operates for you whether or not you appreciate her. What distinguishes the wise from the foolish is their ability to distinguish between a belt and a snake.

How do you become wise? “The beginning of Wisdom is this: Get Wisdom!” (Proverbs 4:7). While this teaching may seem solipsistic, it actually reveals an important aspect of Chochmah: the way to Wisdom is Wisdom herself. The way of Wisdom is study, observation, and clear perception. What you study, observe, and perceive is Wisdom as well, for she is both the Way to and the Way of. Wisdom “knows and understands all things,” (Wisdom of Solomon 9:10, NRSV) because she is the creative energy through which God fashions all things. To know her is to know the Way of all things. But you cannot study Chochmah in the abstract, for there is no abstract with her. You study Chochmah by studying life and the myriad living beings that comprise life.

Chochmah is not a reluctant guide or a hidden guru. She is not hard to find, nor does she require any austere test to prove you are worthy of her. Rather she “stands on the hilltops, on the sidewalks, at the crossroads, at the gateways” (Proverbs 8:1-11, author’s translation) and calls to you to follow her. Wisdom’s only desire is to teach you to become wise. Her only frustration is your refusal to listen to her.
The Bible is not reticent to sing Chochmah’s praises. She is “intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, active, incisive, pure, lucid, invulnerable, gracious, keen, irresistible, loyal, trustworthy, all-powerful, all-pervading, and all-penetrating,” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-23 NRSV). Clearly Chochmah rivals God in many ways, but this is not surprising, for she is the Way God is manifest in the world. To know her is to know God as well.

“Search for Her and seek Her out, and She will reveal Herself to you. When you lay hold of Her do not let Her go. Take your rest with Her at last, and She will become ecstasy for you,” (Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, 6:27-28 NRSV).

If Wisdom is both the teacher and the taught, then following her is becoming intimate with her. The Hebrew verb “to know” means both intellectual knowing and sexual intimacy. To know Wisdom is to be her lover, and by loving her you become God’s beloved as well for “the Lord loves those who love Her,” (Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach 4:14 NRSV).

How are you to love Chochmah? By knowing her. You know her by knowing how she manifests in the world as the world. You know her, the Way of Life, when you know the ways of the living.

PRACTICING THE WAY OF WISDOM

With the rise of rabbinic Judaism as the de facto Jewish standard bearer following the destruction of the Temple and its priestly class by Rome in 70 C.E., the wisdom tradition became part of rabbinic teaching, and Chochmah was equated with Torah. Indeed, it is not uncommon to see inscribed above the ark holding the Torah scrolls in synagogues around the world the words of Proverbs 3:18, “She is a Tree of Life to those who hold her close, and all who cling to Her find happiness.” As we have noted the text originally referred to Wisdom not Torah, but over time the two were conflated, and today the way of wisdom is the way of Torah.

To practice wisdom, then, is to practice Torah. But just what does this mean? Shall we equate Chochmah with the 613 mitzvot of rabbinic Judaism? To do so would be to ignore and indeed to undo the teachings of the Wisdom Literature we have just reviewed. So what is Torah? The answer can be found in the teaching of the first century Jewish wisdom sage Hillel:
It happened that a certain gentile came before Shammai [Hillel’s chief rabbinic rival] and said to him, “I will convert to Judaism on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Outraged by the insult [that the 613 commandments of Judaism could be reduced in this way], Shammai chased the man away, threatening to strike him with the builder’s level that was in his hand [rabbis didn’t earn a living from scholarship; Shammai earned his as a building contractor]. The gentile then went before Hillel and said, “I will convert to Judaism on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Hillel replied, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary; go and learn it.”

(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 31a)

Hillel’s recasting of Torah as compassion is what makes him a wisdom sage. Like the authors of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, Hillel makes no mention of mitzvot, prayer, or Temple sacrifice. For him, and I would say for them, wisdom is an understanding of reality that is lived out in acts of compassion. He is not denying the value of the mitzvot, he is only (!) saying that their essential purpose is to promote compassion. Compassion is how one lives Chochmah.

Compassion arises naturally when we realize two things: first, the post–conventional worldview rooted in Chochmah, i.e. the interdependence and impermanence of all beings in the active be-ing of God; and second the fact that most of us live in opposition to wisdom, craving independence and permanence in a world that allows for neither.

The Hebrew Bible has a name for this way of living: achad, alienation. Its opposite, the way of life arising from wisdom, is echad, unity or interdependence. When we live foolishly, i.e. without wisdom, we live under the illusion of separate and competing selves. The point of wisdom is to reveal the true nature of reality as interdependent aspects of the singular God. As the 19th century Hasidic sage Rabbi Aharon HaLevi wrote:
God’s only desire is to reveal unity through diversity. That is, to reveal that all reality is unique in all of its levels and in all of its details, and nevertheless united in a fundamental oneness. 7

One who realizes the nonduality of all things in, with, and as God, achieves a level of awareness that overcomes any sense of alienation. Speaking of such a person, the thirteenth century Spanish kabbalist Abraham Abulafia wrote:

For now he [the awakened individual] is no longer separated from God, and behold he is God and God is he; for he is so intimately adhering to God that he cannot by any means be separate from God, for he is God. See now that I, even I, am God. He is I and I am He. 8

The practical implications of this awakening come when we realize that the unity of “I and God” includes the unity of “I and everything else”, as the eighteenth century Hasidic sage Menachem Mendel of Kotzsk wrote:

If I am I, and you are you,
Then I am I and you are you.
But I am I because you are you,
Then I am not I and you are not you. 9

There is no alienated I in the world of the awakened wisdom sage. There is only the interdependence of all in All. As I read the Bible, albeit from my own transpersonal perspective, the root of this insight can be found in Book of Genesis. When God discovers that Adam has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, God says,

“Behold the man has become achad mimenu, knowing good and evil. Now he might reach out and take also from the Tree of Life, and eat it and gain immortality!” So HaShem God banished him from the Garden
of Eden, to work the soil from which he was taken. And having driven
out the man, He stationed at the east of the Garden of Eden the
cherubim and the flame of the ever-turning sword, to guard the way
to the Tree of Life. (Genesis 3:22–24)

To understand this myth we have to understand the Hebrew phrase *achad mimenu*,
usually translated as “like one among us.” The Hebrew, however, literally means “unique
from us,” or “one separate from us,” or as the great nineteenth century German scholar and
Bible commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch taught, *achad always means the*
separation of one being from another another being or from a group of beings. 10

Eating from the tree does not make Adam like God, as the serpent promised (Genesis
3:5); rather he becomes alienated from God, first psychologically and then physically.
Becoming *achad* means that humanity can no longer see itself as a part of the divine whole.
Instead, humanity imagines itself to be apart from rather than a part of both God and
nature.

God is going to expel Adam from the Garden not simply because God fears Adam could
eat from the Tree of Life and thereby gain immortality (God had actually never prohibited
the first couple from eating of the Tree of Life or any other tree in the Garden, except for the
Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil), but that by eating from it without first overcoming
this state of *achad*, alienation, Adam would be eternally cut off from God; he would be
forever locked in a world of seeming separation and duality. Thus the expulsion from the
Garden is not so much a punishment as it is a prophylactic.

*Chochmah* is the cure for the disease of *achad*. Seeing through the illusory duality that is
*achad* (imagined alienation from the whole that is God), we awake to *echad*, the unity of all
things in, with, and as God, and with this awakening live the way of wisdom by loving our
neighbor as our self (Leviticus 19:18) where “neighbor” is understood to be all things. Note the
Torah doesn’t say “love your neighbor as you love yourself” for that would imply a separation of
self and neighbor that wisdom rejects. Rather Torah says love your neighbor as yourself, as a
part of the singular self that is the whole of reality.

But the question is how: how do we overcome the alienation that is *achad* and restore
the truth of *echad* that is the hallmark of wisdom? The rabbis offer us a variety of ways, all
of which are designed, as Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson put it, “to go beyond our own mind.”

According to the Talmud, for example, the ancient rabbis used to “sit motionless one hour prior to each of the three prayer services, then pray for one hour, and afterwards be still again for one hour more” (Berachot 32b). While the Talmud says nothing more about this practice, the preeminent twelfth century Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, taught that they practiced sitting motionless “in order to settle their minds and quiet their thoughts.” (Mishneh Torah, Yesodai ha-Torah, 7:4)

Abraham Abulafia taught a number of techniques for going beyond one’s own mind, most of which, however, require a solid foundation in Hebrew. One method that doesn’t require this is based on his notion that reality is essentially vibrational and experienced through primal sounds: “And God said...” (Genesis 1:3 for example). Abulafia identified these sounds as OH, AH, AY, EE, and UU, the vowels of the Hebrew alphabet. The recitation of these sounds was accompanied by movements of the head: OH—raise the head up and then return to center; AH—turn the head toward the left shoulder and then back to center; AY—turn the head toward the right shoulder and then back to center; EE—turn the head downward and then return to center; and UU—rock the head forward and back, and then return to center.

In the nineteenth century, Reb Nachman of Breslav, the great grandson of Hasidism’s founder, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, taught a meditation technique he called hitbodedut, self isolation. Reb Nachman encouraged people to go out into the fields away from other humans and to (among other things) practice “the silent scream:"

You can shout loudly in a "small still voice"... Anyone can do this. Just imagine the sound of such a scream in your mind. Depict the shout in your imagination exactly as it would sound. Keep this up until you are literally screaming with this soundless "small still voice.

This is actually a scream and not mere imagination. Just as some vessels bring the sound from your lungs to your lips, others bring it to the brain. You can draw the sound through these nerves, literally
bringing it into your head. When you do this, you are actually shouting inside your brain (*Likutey Moharan* I, 52)

The inner scream eventually blots out any self-chatter and leaves one, paradoxically, absorbed in the Divine.

Perhaps the simplest and most widespread Jewish practice for going beyond the mind of achad is *hagah*, the contemplative practice of repeating single words or phrases over and over. “The mouth of the righteous utters (hagah) wisdom” (Psalm 37:30); “My tongue shall utter (hagah) Your righteousness” (Psalm 35:28).

The Book of Joshua also promotes hagah, “This book [perhaps the Torah] shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall meditate (hagah) on it day and night” (Joshua 1:9).

Rabbi Dov Ber taught hagah in the nineteenth century as a means of overcoming achad and achieving echad:

A person should be so absorbed in this practice that there is no longer awareness of self. There is nothing but the flow of life; all thoughts are with God. One who still knows how intensely goes the practice has not yet overcome the bonds of life. 13

What word shall we say? There is no agreed upon term, but I follow the teaching of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740-1810), author of the poem *Dudele*:

Where can I find You—and where can I not find You?
Above—only You;
Below—only You;
To the East—only You;
To the West—only You;
To the South—only You;
To the North—only You;
If it is good—it is You;
If it is not—also You;
It is You; It is only You.

Levi Yitzhak taught hagah as a means of realizing this poetic expression of the nonduality of God. The word he recommended was *HaRachaman*, the Compassionate One. The practice is simple. There is no formal sitting or walking practice; no melody to be learned, or specific time of day for practice. Simply repeat the word over and over throughout the day: “when sitting in your house when walking on your way, when lying down, and when rising up.” (Deuteronomy 6:7)

The practice of hagah is a gentler way of experiencing the comfort and consolation Job found when he realized the all–encompassing reality of God. Over time (the rabbis say forty days of serious practice), you awaken to the interconnectedness of all things in, with, and as the One Thing, HaElohim, God. Compassion is the way the wise live out this realization. Or, to state it as clearly as I can: to live wisely is to love fully.

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