

# A Heart to Know

Entrance to the Eternal Kingdom

After Moses lays out the terms of the covenant God has made with Israel, the blessings for keeping the covenant and the curses for unfaithfulness, he tells them something a bit odd.

In Deuteronomy 29 starting in verse 1, or verse 2 in a Christian Bible:

And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: "You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear."

The word translated "understand" is *lada'at*, typically translated "to know." From this verb we get the noun *da'at*, which means "knowledge."

This verse raises some questions. What does it mean that Hashem has not given them a heart to know or eyes to see or ears to hear? What about Mount Sinai, when heaven was opened to them?

You might notice that Moshe is not placing blame on the Israelites. It doesn't say that they failed to understand or see or hear. Hashem simply hadn't yet given them the proper body parts to do those things. And it makes you wonder, when was Hashem planning to do this? When will they finally have a heart to know?

## Review

Sporadically over the last several months, I have been teaching through a fascinating passage in 2 Peter 1. In this passage, Shimon Kefa provides a path, a sequence of steps in the journey of a person of faith.

Life has a destination. Our goal is to progress forward toward that destination, both on a community level and as individuals. But whether you are talking about business, or health, or spirituality, the same principle applies: to see improvements, you need to take measurements.

One word for "measurements" in Hebrew is *middot*. This is a common term to describe character traits, dimensions in a person's makeup. Middot help us divide our self into distinct categories which enables us to isolate trouble issues, kind of like the way a trainer will give you specific exercises to isolate certain parts of your body.

We are making spiritual progress, but what is our destination? Our text explains in verse 11, and this time I'll read from the David Stern translation, "Thus you will be generously supplied with everything you need to enter the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Deliverer, Yeshua the Messiah."

The Kingdom—that's our destination—and these are steps along the way that will take us there. These steps have a natural sequence, but we shouldn't attempt to perfect one before moving on to the next. When you are exercising, it would be a mistake to try to perfect one body part before moving on to the next. But we keep cycling through these seven steps day by day.

We determined that faith, emunah, is the starting point on our journey. Faith is defined as the awareness and recognition that God is not distant but is involved in life. He rewards, punishes, answers prayer, and redeems. Because it includes the awareness of reward and punishment, faith also implies the fear of God.

From the starting point of faith, our first step is a good heart. A good heart means not only purity of intentions, but also making proper use of your inherent, God-given skills of reasoning. Take a moment to think about life and what is important. Calculate the cost-benefit ratio of serving God. Attaining a good heart means calibrating your moral compass and aligning it with God's values. It means seeing the big picture, perceiving the result of your actions.

## Knowledge

Now it's time for the next step. Let's revisit the list, and this time I'll read from the Stern translation. 2 Peter 1:5-7.

For this very reason, try your hardest to furnish your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with perseverance, perseverance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

Our next step on this path, after starting with faith and moving on to goodness of heart is knowledge.

Knowledge of what? How do you get knowledge? Are we talking about advanced academics? As the saying goes, "Girls go to college to get more knowledge?" Or do we achieve this through late night rabbit trails on Wikipedia?

I think we know that it's something deeper than that. A great source from our mesorah on knowledge can be found in the beginning of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Now Paul is hard to read sometimes so I experimented collaborating with ChatGPT to produce an easily understood version of this passage, Colossians 1, verses 3-11:

We're thanking the God of our Master Yeshua, always praying for you, ever since we heard about your faithfulness in the Messiah Yeshua and the love you extend to all God's holy ones. {This love springs} from the hope stored up for you in heaven, a hope you first heard about in the true word of the Good News. {This Good News} has reached you, and it's also yielding fruit and growing across the world, just like it has among you from the day you recognized God's grace in truth. You learned this from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant, who is Messiah's faithful attendant on your behalf. He's also the one who told us about the love you have, {empowered} by the Spirit.

For this reason, ever since we heard, we haven't stopped praying for you, asking that you be filled with the deep knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. {We have been praying} that you may walk in a way that honors the Master, pleasing in every way, being productive in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God. {We have been praying} that you may be strengthened in all the powers of his glorious might for all endurance and patience, {and that it be} with joy. {And we have been} thanking the Father who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in the light.

This is not a perfect translation and there are still things to nitpick, but I think it got the idea across just fine.

Look at verse three, how it begins with Paul recognizing their faith, the starting point on the journey. In verses 9 and 10 we see that his prayer is that they would increase in knowledge. And at the end of this passage, their destination is the inheritance of "light." This refers to the Jewish tradition that the good light that God created in the beginning he stashed away for the righteous to give to them in the world to come. This light is called the "light of the world." If you're interested in knowing more about this, I wrote a book on it called "Children of Light," intended for teenagers but suitable for everyone.

Just as Peter states, the beginning is faith. The end is our inheritance: the Kingdom. And one of our steps along the way is knowledge. Let me read verse 10 again, and this time from the ESV:

so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; (Col. 1:10 ESV)

This clarifies what knowledge is. Our goal is to know God. This verse implies that knowing God is not a binary state, as if you either know him or you don't. You can increase in knowledge of God, something we should strive to do every moment of our lives.

Knowing God is not the same as believing things about him. Knowing God implies a relationship, just like you know a spouse or a friend. It's not memorization of facts. It's intimacy, communication, and experience. And the verse we just read indicates that knowing God will enable us to walk in a way that is worthy of him; in other words, to behave in a way that reflects well on him and that pleases him. It's the same as how knowing a friend or spouse better helps you make them happier.

So, we want to know God. But that's rather absurd when you think of it. Hashem is infinite, boundless. He transcends our world, all time, space, and matter. Every way to describe him is a frail analogy. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are Hashem's ways higher than our ways and his thoughts than our thoughts (cf. Isaiah 55:9). Who do we think we are, that we can know the one who was and is and will be? Can a character in a book know her own author? To know Hashem, you'd practically have to be him.

And yet, this is what we are called to do. It's step two of seven steps to the kingdom, so it must be possible. How can we accomplish this?

### Acknowledging God

There is one simple aspect of knowing God that is attainable and it's a good start. And that is to recognize God, to acknowledge him. Many of you have this passage committed to heart: Proverbs 3:5–6:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

It's important to note here that the word translated "acknowledge" comes from the Hebrew word for "knowledge" – da'at. We could even translate it as "in all your ways *know* him." Knowing him begins with acknowledging him. Noticing him. Seeing and observing his involvement in your life, both on a moment-by-moment micro scale, and in guiding the path of your life on a macro scale. Hashem is there. He's deeply involved with you all the time, whether you know this or not. He is hoping you will notice. Open

the eyes of your heart and acknowledge that God is with you right now, and is with you in every moment and every day, everywhere.

One thing that can help with this is to say brachot. When you wake up, before and after you eat, after you use the bathroom, when you go to sleep, and when you encounter various interesting things in your life: say the appropriate blessing. Notice that the formula for a blessing is not just "Blessed is Hashem," it is "Blessed are you, Hashem." Pause on that word *attah*, you, and think for a moment about the fact that you are addressing the infinite King and Creator and just calling him "you." It's powerful if you let it be.

Acknowledging God is the first step to knowing him.

### Knowing God's Will

Let's back up a little bit in our passage from Colossians. We read verse 10, now let's look more closely at Colossians 1:9:

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

Here "knowledge" comes in the form of knowing God's will. As I said, truly knowing the Divine is impossible. In his transcendent self, he is completely inaccessible to mortal humans. However, he has chosen to make himself accessible to us through his will. By knowing his will, we learn about him. We learn how to walk in a manner worthy of him. We learn to live in a way that is pleasing to him. We bear fruit in good work and ultimately grow in knowledge of God.

Growing up in an Assembly of God church I desperately wanted to know the will of God. I prayed "God, show me your will for my life." I was expecting some kind of spiritual Spidey-sense or prophetic power that would lead me around and tell me this and that in every moment. In a way, I was like the rich young ruler asking, "what must I do?" and expecting a weird trick that would unlock divine revelation. It turns out that divine revelation has been here all along, and God's will is spelled out in significant detail in the Torah.

Hashem revealed his will at Mount Sinai through the Torah and commandments, giving instructions that apply to different groups: to kings, to prophets, to priests, to farmers, to businessmen, to Jewish people, to gentiles, to men, and to women. The commandments are an essential source of God's will, so to know God, we should know the commandments.

The commandments are not all we have. The Bible also encapsulates a value system that transcends the individual laws. Moshe told Israel in Deuteronomy 10:12-13:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?

The commandments are one of five aspects of God's will. Let's number them according to these verses:

1. Fear Hashem
2. Walk in his ways
3. Love him

4. Serve him with your whole heart
5. Keep the commandments

Micah 6:8 has a similar ring to it. "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

So God's will is revealed both in his commandments and in the Biblical value system, which is founded on fear and awe of God, walking in his ways by improving your character, loving him by seeking to please him and make him happy, wholehearted service that is not tainted by any other motive, and the attributes of justice, kindness, and modesty or humility.

God's will is also revealed through Yeshua the Messiah. He wrapped up the commandments in two categories: Love of God and love of neighbor. He taught that these principles guide all areas of our observance.

Nonetheless, whether we are talking about the commandments, biblical values, or the teachings of our Messiah, all this instruction in God's will is encapsulated in one word: Torah. All this is Torah.

### Knowing the Torah

When I began this series, I cited the list of traits given by Rabbi Pinchas ben Ya'ir and recorded in the Mishnah, at the end of tractate Sotah. Let me read it for you again:

Rabbi Pinehas ben Ya'ir says: Torah study leads to care in the performance of mitzvot. Care in the performance of mitzvot leads to diligence in their observance. Diligence leads to cleanliness of the soul. Cleanliness of the soul leads to abstention from all evil. Abstention from evil leads to purity. Purity leads to piety. Piety leads to humility. Humility leads to fear of sin. Fear of sin leads to holiness. Holiness leads to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead.

This, as you may recall, is the outline that the Ramchal used when he wrote the incredible mussar book, *The Path of the Just*, or *Mesillat Yesharim*. The very first thing on Pinchas ben Ya'ir's list is Torah, that is to say, the knowledge of the Torah and its basic observance. In fact, Torah is not the first step in this list, but it is the starting point. Since *Mesillat Yesharim* is already dealing with observant Jews, he begins a little further down the road than Peter and Paul who were speaking with Gentile God-fearers and formerly Gentile converts.

The Ramchal explains how essential this step is. I will read a quote from *Mesillat Yesharim*:

The foundation of piety and the root of unblemished service [of God] is that a person should clarify and ascertain what his obligation is in the world and what a person needs to focus himself on with all his effort throughout his life.

He goes on to explain that the Torah is that path, like breadcrumbs that lead us to Olam Haba, the world to come. Knowing the Torah enables us to know God and it helps us arrive at the entrance to the eternal kingdom.

## What is Knowledge?

But let's zoom out for a moment. What does it mean to know something, in the biblical sense? What is knowledge? The English word "knowledge" tends to paint the picture in our mind of memorizing facts. In high school I was involved in a fun and nerdy club called knowledge bowl. Our team would compete with other schools in a kind of quiz game where they asked us about random facts, like "Who wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" or "What is the powerhouse of the cell?"

We associate the word "knowledge" with memorizing facts. That is not the meaning of *da'at*. That is not what it means to know the Torah, and it is not what it means to know God. In some ways, "knowledge" is not a very good translation of *da'at* at all.

The Hebrew word *da'at* (note that the stress is on the first syllable, DAH-aht) means consciousness, awareness, and experience. *Da'at* implies joining, merging, integrating, and becoming one with something. *Da'at* is the unity of a husband and wife that produces children.

When a Jewish man puts on tefillin, and we wrap the last strap around our finger, we recite a passage from Hosea 2, where God says to Israel:

I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. *Veyada'at et Hashem* – And you shall know the LORD. (Hosea 2:[21-22]19-20)

Clearly, knowing Hashem in this sense is not about memorizing a lot of Bible verses. It's engaging in covenant. Being conscious of his presence. Clinging to him with all your might. Signing over your identity and taking on his.

## Synthesis

Don't get me wrong. Memorizing Bible verses and facts is a good thing and is an ingredient in *da'at*. According to the Jewish mystics, *da'at* is the synthesis between wisdom, that is *chochmah*, and understanding, that is, *binah*. The combination of wisdom and understanding is what produces knowledge. *Chochmah*, *binah*, and *da'at*.

The Hasidic movement of Lubavitch used those three words to describe the core of their identity and mission. The acronym Chabad is an abbreviation for *Chochmah*, *Binah*, and *Da'at*.

But are the mystics correct that knowledge emerges from wisdom and understanding? How far back does this idea go? Let's read this verse from Colossians once more, Colossians 1:9:

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

The knowledge (*da'at*) of his will emerges from wisdom (*chochmah*) and understanding (*binah*). Paul is not just throwing around intellectual synonyms here. In Paul's mind, *chochmah* and *binah* are ingredients needed to synthesize or to form *da'at*.

What is this mumbo-jumbo I'm talking about? What are *chochmah* and *binah* exactly and how do they combine to form *da'at*?

We often translate chochmah as wisdom, and to be fair, perhaps there are contexts where that translation is good. But in the sense that these three terms relate to one another, chochmah is more like what I described before as “knowledge.” It’s singular points of light, isolated facts, truths with no context, no comparison, no differentiation. As a small child, you begin to learn facts. You are told, “this shape is a circle.” “This color is red.” “Here is the letter A.” You learn that  $1 + 1 = 2$ , perhaps without comprehending yet what adding or equaling really are. You are told, “this is a table” and you are not given any definition for a table or criteria to determine what is or isn’t a table. You are just told, “this is a table,” “go sit at the table,” “put your cup on the table,” and you accept the truth that it’s a table. Chochmah is simply this, the essence of a concept. An abstract, isolated discovery. At this level, you don’t know what it means; it has no meaning, it just is. It does not define a principle or an over-arching idea. It is truth in its simplest, raw form.

Once you begin to gather a collection of chochmah, you can use it as a seed from which to develop a concept. This is the idea of binah or understanding. You can categorize it. You can define it. You can compare and contrast it. You can extrapolate from it. You begin to understand what shapes are, what defines a circle, the point at which red ends and orange begins, how letters form into words, what it means to add and subtract numbers. You can look at an object and decide whether or not it is a table, even though tables can assume many shapes and forms and you’ve never read the definition of “table” in the dictionary. Binah describes recognizing. It turns an abstract concept into a practical, actionable reality. It is truth that is now developed, not simply discovered.

So chochmah is raw data. Binah is analysis. From chochmah and binah, we can finally arrive at the level of da’at, or knowledge.

Da’at is when this developed idea is applied to reality. It is no longer in your head as a concept, but it now interacts with your will and emotions. Da’at is the bridge between intellect and emotions.

How often do we know something to be true and right and yet don’t act on it? You might know that exercise is good for your health, but if it doesn’t cause you to start exercising, it’s not da’at, it’s only chochmah and binah. You may have learned a mitzvah, but da’at means you are acting according to your learning. A smart person often does stupid things. Why? Because you can have chochmah and binah, and yet that intellect is detached and disconnected from your will, resulting in a lack of da’at.

When it comes to knowing God, consider that you can understand that God exists without acting in a way that accords with that understanding. Are there times when you do something that you wouldn’t do if someone were looking? When someone else is in the room, you have da’at that they are in the room. Even though you understand that God is also in the room and also perceives what you are doing, this understanding does not impact your actions, and as such you lack knowledge of God. You lack da’at.

When you know someone, you become one with them. Can someone really know God and become one with God? Yes, in the sense that when you know God, you nullify your will before him. You have no desires but to carry out his will in this world. This is what Yeshua prayed for regarding us in John 17, starting in verse 21:

that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may

become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (Jn. 17:21-23 ESV)

This is describing da'at: integration, unity, oneness. To know God means to be one in purpose with him. To know Messiah means to know God, because he also knows God and is one with him.

So chochmah is discovery of information; binah is development of ideas; and da'at is internalizing and applying this information and these ideas.

## Gaining Knowledge

Now that we understand what knowledge is, how do we achieve it? What are the practical steps we can take? Fortunately, Proverbs 2 provides a nice roadmap for us:

My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to **wisdom** [chochmah] and inclining your heart to **understanding** [tevunah]; yes, if you call out for **insight** [binah] and raise your voice for **understanding** [tevunah], if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will **understand** [tavin] the fear of the LORD and find the **knowledge** [da'at] of God. (Prov. 2:1-5 ESV)

So a first step to knowledge is to gather up commandments. Memorize Bible verses. Learn facts. This is chochmah. Then incline your heart to binah. Binah takes more struggle. You have to call out and raise your voice, implying prayer. You have to search for it, implying study. Through prayer and thoughtful research and meditation those facts and details will crystallize and you will begin to see patterns and ideas. When these patterns lead you to the point of understanding fear of the LORD, you will discover da'at.

It doesn't come easy. You have to work for it, to labor for it. And even though you exert effort and toil and strive, it doesn't come as a result of your work. As a human being, you do not have the capacity to work and study hard enough to achieve da'at. But when you work and study and you put in effort, it comes as a gift from above, you discover it like a buried treasure.

Regardless, it will not come to you without work. Remember what Hillel said, "Do not say, 'When I have time I will study.' You might not have time." (Pirkei Avot 2:4) You might say, "I know, I know..." but do you know, or do you just understand?

Regardless, knowing the Torah, knowing the teachings of our Master, does not happen in a book. There are many academics who understand libraries of material but know nothing at all. You can't really know unless you do.

## A Heart to Know

Let's return to our initial question. Moses stood at the border of the land of Israel, and he told the Jewish people, "But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to [know] or eyes to see or ears to hear."

The Sefat Emet has an insightful interpretation of this verse. It does not say that Hashem didn't give them da'at. It merely says that they lacked the faculties: the heart, the eyes, and the ears. When they stood at Mount Sinai, they were like disembodied beings, as it says in Song of Songs 5:6, "My soul departed when he spoke." The holy Torah was given to them to enable them to transcend the physical



body and the material world. But da'at happens when the rubber hits the road. When they plant trees in the land of Israel and eat of its fruit. The holy Temple is the place where the physical world unites with the spiritual world, and this is where da'at happens, not in the realm of divine revelation and disembodied souls, but in drawing down godliness into this physical world, through our heart, our eyes, and our ears in day-to-day life.

We started with faith, we aligned our hearts with goodness. Now let's move forward and seek knowledge of God by committing ourselves to study, prayer, meditation, and putting it all into practice.