

valid only when Hashem was performing miracles for them through the prophets and His holy spirit was resting among them in the Beis Hamikdash. Bnei Yisrael could argue that they accepted the Torah only because the mountain “hovered over them like a barrel.” Just as a barrel is used to hold an intoxicating beverage, as Rashi explains, “a [wine] cask,” Bnei Yisrael were prepared to keep the Torah only at a time when they felt intoxicated with the sweet feeling of closeness to Hashem, accompanied by absolute conviction in His omnipotence and His preferential treatment of the Jewish People. The Jewish Nation could not guarantee that it would overcome the trials of exile and keep the Torah properly even during times of darkness, when Hashem hides Himself and when they suffer so much that it appears as if He has abandoned them. Therefore, the nation could be exonerated for disobeying the Torah laws during times of suffering.

When Bnei Yisrael were exiled to Bavel and Hashem hid His face from them, they could have excused themselves for their failure to perform the mitzvos on the grounds that they had never agreed to keep the Torah under such conditions. However, during the time of Achashveirosh, in spite of Hashem’s concealment and the impending doom, Hashem performed tremendous miracles for them. Despite the fact that the miracles were disguised as coincidental events, the Jews realized that Hashem was behind the scenes and continued to love them, guard them, and save them even when they sojourned in the lands of their enemies. Consequently, they reaccepted the Torah wholeheartedly upon themselves and committed to uphold the Torah under all circumstances.



Between Torah and Science

שְׁמוֹת יִטְבּ: וַיֵּרַד ה' עַל הַר סִינַי...

Hashem descended on Mount Sinai... (Shemos 19:20)

The Midrash (*Eichah* 2:13) states, “If someone tells you, יֵשׁ חֵכְמָה בְּגוֹיִם—the nations of the world possess wisdom, believe him. The navi Ovadiah attests to this when he writes (*Ovadiah* 1:8), וְהָאַבְרָתִי חֲכָמִים מְאֹדִים וְתִבְנֶה מֵהָר עֵשָׂר—I will destroy the **sages of Edom and the knowledgeable ones from the Mountain of Eisav**. Indeed, there are wise gentiles. However, if someone contends that the nations have

Torah, do not believe him, as Yirmiyahu declares (*Eichah* 2:9), מַלְכֵי וְשָׂרֵיָהּ בְּגוֹיִם אֵין, תּוֹרָה—*Her kings and her princes are among the nations, where there is no Torah.*”

Why must *Chazal* tell us to believe something that is quite obvious, as great scientists and philosophers have existed among the gentiles since the earliest times? Further, do we really need proof that there is no Torah among the nations?

The answer is that Hashem created the world in such a way that the study of nature should lead a person to recognize His presence in the world. Any חֵכְמָה, wisdom, that does not bring a person to the recognition of Hashem is not true wisdom. *Chazal* are informing us that it is possible to recognize the hand of Hashem through the study of science and nature. Therefore, if someone claims יֵשׁ חֵכְמָה בְּגוֹיִם, that non-Jews have come to believe in the existence of a Creator by virtue of their observation of nature and their scientific research, you may believe him; this is entirely possible. However, if someone asserts that these sages have Torah, i.e., an absolute standard of morals and ethics and an awareness of life’s essence, do not accept this. An awareness of Hashem’s existence—yes, but knowledge of how to live—no. That one receives only from the study of Torah.

To further understand this distinction between Torah and science: Scientific knowledge has developed over time. Adam Harishon’s immediate descendants barely understood the laws of nature. As time passed, mankind researched the principles of nature and gradually built upon past discoveries, thereby developing the body of knowledge that we have today (see *Avodah Zarah* 8a and *Avos D’Rav Nassan*, ch. 1). We suggest that the phrase in *Shemoneh Esrei*, אֲתָהּ חוֹנֵן לְאָדָם דַּעַת—*You graciously endow man with wisdom*, refers to the wisdom of science, and acknowledges that Hashem grants each generation a greater measure of knowledge than He did the previous one. It is an ongoing process; new discoveries and pioneering inventions emerge continually. Today’s miraculous innovations, unimaginable to prior generations, will be considered trivial by future generations. Ultimately, science will reveal so much that Mankind will universally recognize that Hashem is the Creator and that עוֹד מַלְכֵהּ, there is none other than Him.

Whereas in the realm of science mankind continually advances, when it comes to the wisdom of the Torah the generations continuously decline. Thus we find that Moshe Rabbeinu achieved unparalleled Torah heights and was likened to the sun, while Yehoshua, his student, was compared to the moon (*Bava Basra* 75a). Similarly, the Gemara (*Shabbos* 112b) says, “If the earlier generations were sons of angels, we are like the sons of men, and if the earlier generations were children of humans, we can be likened to donkeys.” *Mattan Torah* was the greatest revelation of Hashem to the world. Ever since Hashem descended upon Har Sinai, Torah knowledge has

continually diminished. The challenge of every passing generation is to hold on to as much of the original Torah given to Bnei Yisrael at Sinai as possible. The *pasuk*, וַיֵּרַד ה' עַל הַר סִינַי—*Hashem descended on Mount Sinai*, alludes to the fact that after *Mattan Torah*, subsequent generations' understanding of the Torah is in a constant state of decline.

Yet despite ירידת הדורות, the decline of the generations, Hashem ensures that the Torah will not be forgotten. He provides each generation with Torah luminaries who protect us from freefall and serve as links to the past. Furthermore, as Torah knowledge diminishes, Hashem presents us with gifts of Torah scholarship to help us maintain our grasp of Torah. At the end of each era we were given great contributions that made it possible for us to hold onto the past. For example, at the end of the era of the *Tanna'im* we received the Mishnayos of Rabbeinu Hakadosh. When generations continued to deteriorate, Ravina and Rav Ashi gave us the Talmud, and this cycle continued through the production of the works of the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*, so that every generation would be able to learn Torah despite our diminishing status.

Therefore, whereas the first part of the prayer, אַתָּה חוֹנֵן לְאָדָם דַּעַת—*You graciously endow all mankind with wisdom*, refers to scientific knowledge, in the next phrase, חוֹנְנוּ מֵאַתָּךְ דַּעַת בִּינָה וְהַשְׂכָּל—*Graciously endow us [Bnei Yisrael] with Your wisdom, insight, and discernment*, we ask Hashem Himself to provide us with the capacity to delve into the wisdom of the Torah. Torah wisdom is not a byproduct of scientific research; rather, Torah insight is a gift directly מֵאַתָּךְ, from *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* Himself. We highlight this on Motza'ei Shabbos, when we add the *tefillah* of אַתָּה חוֹנְנֵתֵנוּ לְמַדְע לְמַדְע תּוֹרָתְךָ—*You have graciously endowed us with the knowledge of Your Torah*.

Despite the fact that in the development of civilization each generation rises to a higher level of scientific knowledge than the previous one, the opposite is true with regard to Torah knowledge. This is known as ירידת הדורות, decline of the generations. The greatest people of our generation would have been considered small two centuries ago.

A *posek hador* of today may not have merited to be the *shamash* of the Vilna Gaon. And the Vilna Gaon said of himself that even if he would become ten times as great as he was, he would not reach קַרְסוּלֵי הַרַמְבַּ"ן, “the ankles of the Ramban.” And the Ramban himself would not reach anywhere near the level of the greatness of the *Geonim*, and the *Geonim* to the *Savora'im*, and the *Savora'im* to even the last of the *Amora'im*, Mar bar Rav Ashi. And the *Amora'im* themselves would not reach the

level of the *Tanna'im*, and the *Tanna'im* to the *Sofrim*, and the *Sofrim* to the *Nevi'im Acharonim*, and the *Nevi'im Acharonim* to the *Rishonim*. And Yehoshua, who was the first of the *Nevi'im Rishonim*, was only like the moon in comparison to the sun of Moshe Rabbeinu.

Eventually, by the sheer process of *אתה חונן לאדם דעת ומלמד לאנוש בינה*—G-d teaching mankind wisdom, the scientists and the philosophers of the world will reach the conclusion that there is a Creator.

Rav Schwab on Prayer, pages 443-444



Understanding Torah Through Torah

שמות יט:כ: וַיֵּרָד ה' עַל הַר סִינַי...

Hashem descended on Mount Sinai... (Shemos 19:20)

As previously discussed, scientific knowledge advances over time; old scientific principles which contradict the new reality are discarded. Torah, however, is not based on human knowledge; rather, it is anchored in G-d's knowledge. Therefore, when in our pursuit of Torah understanding we have questions, this only demonstrates the limitation of our perception and underscores that humans cannot fully understand the Torah. As the *Zohar* (Introduction to *Tikkunei Zohar* 11b) says, questions in Torah learning are simply the peels that cover the truth of Torah.

To resolve our questions, we must delve into the Torah utilizing only Torah principles. For example, Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest prophet, who redeemed the Jews from Egypt, brought on the Ten Plagues, was involved in the Splitting of the Sea, ascended to the highest heavens to accept the Torah from Hashem Himself, and ultimately built the Mishkan. Yet, paradoxically, he was not permitted to enter that very same Mishkan until Hashem invited him in. Hashem had commanded (*Bamidbar* 18:7) that *וְהַזָּר הַקָּרֵב יוּמָת*—*Any alien who enters [the Mishkan] shall die*. Despite Moshe's greatness he was considered a *זָר*, a commoner, insofar as the service in the Mishkan was concerned. From a purely rational human perspective, this seems bizarre. A simple *kohen* was allowed to enter the Mishkan to fulfill