

Likkutei Sichos

On the weekly Torah readings and holidays

From the Talks of
The Lubavitcher Rebbe
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson

Volume 26 | Yisro | Sichah 1

Endless Like the Sea

General Editor: Rabbi Eliezer Robbins | **Senior Editor:** Rabbi Lazer Danzinger

Content Editor: Rabbi Zalmy Avtzon

Translated by Rabbi Zusya Kreitenberg



© Copyright by Sichos In English 2025 ◦ 5785

A note on the translation: Rounded and square brackets reflect their use in the original *sichah*; curly brackets represent the interpolations of the translator or editor. The footnotes in curly brackets are from the translator or editors and do not correspond to the original footnotes. Words in bold type are italicized in the original text.

Significant effort has been invested to ensure the accuracy of the translation while preserving its clarity. However, as with all translations, inadvertent errors may occur.

Your feedback is appreciated — please share your thoughts at info@projectlikkuteisichos.org

THE FIRST MITZVAH

In his “Count of the Mitzvos,” found at the beginning of *Mishneh Torah*,¹ *Rambam* states:²

The first positive mitzvah is to know that there is a G-d, as the verse says,³ “I am Hashem, your Lord.”

Rambam also begins the halachos in his *Sefer Mishneh Torah* with this mitzvah:⁴

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being....

Yet, in the first halachah, *Rambam* does not say that knowing (“that there is a Primary Being”) is a **positive mitzvah**. Instead, he first discusses at length (throughout five halachos) **many** details regarding the “Primary Being,” and only then does he conclude (in halachah 6):⁵ “And knowing this matter is a positive mitzvah, as the verse says, ‘I am Hashem, your L-rd.’”

This shows that according to the *Rambam*’s view, the positive mitzvah, “I am Hashem, your L-rd,” not only consists of the general knowledge “that there is a G-d” — “that there is a Primary Being” — but also includes knowledge of specific elements of Hashem’s existence (which he lists in those halachos).

As *Abarbenel* clarifies (in his book *Rosh Amanah*)⁶ — cited in the Tzemach Tzedek’s *Sefer HaMitzvos*⁷ — according to *Rambam*’s position, the positive mitzvah to believe in Hashem is not merely that “only Hashem exists,” “that Hashem exists.” —

[If that were the case, a question would arise:⁸ How can faith in Hashem be considered a **mitzvah**? The whole principle of a mitzvah only applies if there is a Commander who commands. Thus, to say that there is a mitzvah to believe in the existence of a Commander of the mitzvos is illogical!]

Instead, {*Rambam*’s position is that the mitzvah is to know that} “Hashem whom we **already** know exists — He is the most primal and the most perfect Being that exists...” (as *Abarbenel* explains at length).

¹ Also see *Rambam*’s commentary on the *Mishnah* on *Sanhedrin* in his introduction to ch. “*chelek*” — the first foundation.

² {*Mishneh Torah*, “Count of the Mitzvos.”}

³ In our *parshah*, *Shemos* 20:2;

⁴ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 1, par. 1.

⁵ {*Ibid.*, par. 6.}

⁶ *Rosh Amanah*, ch. 7; ch. 17.

⁷ Tzemach Tzedek’s *Sefer HaMitzvos* {*Derech Mitzvosecha*}, “*Mitzvas Ha’amanas Elokus*,” ch. 1.

⁸ See *Rosh Amanah*, chs. 4 and 17; Tzemach Tzedek’s *Sefer HaMitzvos* {*Derech Mitzvosecha*}, “*Mitzvas Ha’amanas Elokus*,” ch. 1; see also the sources cited there before ch. 1.

Therefore, *Rambam* prefaces with these five halachos regarding Hashem's existence — since the mitzvah to believe (know) Hashem requires (at the very least) knowledge of **these** specific elements of Hashem's existence, which clarifies how Hashem is “the most perfect Being of all that exists....”⁹

2.

TO KNOW

Moreover, as known,¹⁰ *Rambam's* wording is precise — “**To know** that there is a G-d,” “**To know** that there is a Primary Being” [similarly *Rambam* concludes — both when discussing the mitzvah of knowing Hashem¹¹ and the mitzvah of Hashem's unity¹² — “**knowing** (not “believing”) this matter is a positive mitzvah”] — the mitzvah is “**to know**,” intellectually, etc.

This aligns with how *Abarbanel*¹³ addresses the following issue: How can we be **commanded** about matters of **faith**, “which are not attained by will or choice”? *Abarbanel* answers that *Rambam* “does not enumerate possession of faith and its truth as a positive mitzvah. What *Rambam* enumerates is **knowledge** and contemplation of those matters that nurture those beliefs...,” for “these ideas, analyses, examinations, and studies... that lead to faith... are products of will and free choice....”

This clarifies why *Rambam* does not suffice by stating the concepts regarding Hashem's existence (in halachos 1-7) that a Jew must know to fulfill the mitzvos of knowing Hashem and His unity. Instead, *Rambam* continues (in the subsequent halachos until the end of the chapter) to review many details pertaining to knowing Hashem.

[For example, he adduces from verses that “the Holy One has no body,” explaining that physical descriptions “written in the Torah” about Hashem are {anthropomorphisms} used “to relate to mortal understanding..., and all of these are parables”; and *Rambam* explains Moshe's request,¹⁴ “Please, show me Your Glory” and the nature of his comprehension of “the truth of His existence,” **etc.**].

At first glance, this is difficult. What is the practical relevance of this **analytical discussion** in *Sefer HaYad* {*Mishneh Torah*}, a book of “**Jewish laws**”?¹⁵

⁹ See *Rosh Amanah*, ch. 20.

¹⁰ See *Rosh Amanah*, ch. 17; Tzemach Tzedek's *Sefer HaMitzvos* {*Derech Mitzvosecha*}, “*Mitzvas Ha'amanas Elokus*,” end of ch. 2; *Kuntres Toras HaChassidus*, p. 14 (and the fn. there); the sources listed in *Rambam's Sefer HaMitzvos*, publ. by HaRav Chaim Heller, positive mitzvah 1; *Encyclopedia Talmudis*, end of “*Emunas Hashem*”; et al.

¹¹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 1, par. 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, par. 7.

¹³ *Rosh Amanah*, ch. 17; see also ch. 4; see also Tzemach Tzedek's *Sefer HaMitzvos* {*Derech Mitzvosecha*}, “*Mitzvas Ha'amanas Elokus*,” ch. 2 (end of 46a ff.).

¹⁴ *Shemos* 33:18.

¹⁵ Wording of *Rambam* at the end of his Introduction to *Sefer HaYad*; see at length *Rosh Amanah*, ch. 19.

Based on the above, however, we can say that the analysis is integral to the obligation “to know.” Only when a person is familiar with the analysis presented in these halachos can his knowledge of Hashem meet the halachic criteria of *knowing*. It is not an ordinary faith but a rational understanding, etc.

In other words, to fulfill the mitzvah of **knowing** Hashem, a person must at least know the **fundamental** “ideas, analyses, and elements” of Hashem’s existence that *Rambam* clarifies in that chapter.

3.

RAMBAM’S SOURCE

Rambam explains that the mitzvah of faith in Hashem means (a) not only to acquire the general knowledge that “Hashem exists” but also the specifics regarding the absolute perfection of Hashem’s existence and (b) to cultivate a belief that satisfies the requirement “**to know**” — although the verse only says, “I am Hashem, your L-rd.”

We can suggest that *Rambam*’s source is the following passage in the *Zohar*:¹⁶

*You shall know that I am Hashem, your L-rd....*¹⁷ This mitzvah precedes all other mitzvos..., to know the Holy One...; that there is a Supernal Ruler Who is the Master of the universe, and Who created all worlds, heaven, earth, and all their hosts.

The language of *Rambam* in his first halachah corresponds substantively to the *Zohar*’s language: “The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom” (“This mitzvah precedes all other mitzvos”) “is **to know** that there is a Primary Being” (“**to know** the Holy One”) “Who brought into being **all** existence. All the beings of **the heavens, the earth, and what is between them...**” (“and Who created **all** worlds, **heaven, earth, and all their hosts**”). Similarly, *Rambam*’s wording (in halachah 5) — “This entity is the G-d of the world and Master of the entire earth” — resembles the language of *Zohar*: “There is a Supernal Ruler Who is the Master of the universe.”

Rambam derives from this *Zohar* that “this mitzvah” is connected with **knowledge** — “**You shall know..., to know.**” General knowledge “that Hashem exists” is insufficient. Instead, we must understand the specific elements of Hashem’s existence (which provide the knowledge that “He is the most primal and perfect Being, etc.”)

Although *Zohar* cites the verse, “You shall know that I am Hashem, your L-rd,” as the source for this mitzvah (and not the verse, “I am Hashem, your L-rd” {that *Rambam* cites), the reason for this is straightforward. The *Zohar* discusses how Moshe taught the Jewish people about Hashem’s unity before they left Egypt based on the command given **at that time**: “You

¹⁶ *Zohar*, vol. 2 (*Raayah Meihemnah*), 25a.

¹⁷ *Shemos* 6:7.

shall know that I am Hashem, your L-rd.” (That way¹⁸ the Jewish people would believe “all those miracles and mighty acts that He performed for them in Egypt.”)

In contrast, **we** must fulfill this mitzvah (in line with *Rambam’s* famous words)¹⁹ because of “the Holy One’s mitzvah given through the agency of Moshe [at Sinai].” Therefore, the **command** regarding belief in Hashem is the verse, “I am Hashem, your L-rd.” Similarly, *Zohar* itself (elsewhere) says:²⁰ “**The first command, ‘I am.’**”

[The fact that the specific elements mentioned above regarding the **manner** of the mitzvah’s fulfillment is derived from the verse, “You shall know that I am Hashem, your L-rd” (which was proclaimed **before** the Giving of the Torah) raises no difficulty. After all, we find in many places²¹ that the elaboration and specifics of a mitzvah are derived from verses that appear **before** the Giving of the Torah.]²²

4.

QUESTIONING RAMBAM

On this basis, we can clarify a perplexing matter in *Mishneh Torah*:

In the second chapter of *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*, *Rambam* discusses the mitzvah of love and fear of Hashem. *Rambam* says:²³

What is the path to attain love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love..., to know Hashem’s great name..., and feel fear. Based on these concepts, I will explain essential principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the Worlds to provide a foothold for a person of understanding to develop love for Hashem.

¹⁸ See *Nitzutzei Oros* on the *Zohar*, loc. cit.

¹⁹ *Rambam’s “Commentary on Mishnah,” Chullin 7:6.*

²⁰ *Zohar*, vol. 3 (*Raayah Meihemnah*), 256b.

²¹ See *Sedei Chemmed Klalim*, “*Maareches Alef*,” sec. 321; *Encyclopedia Talmudis*, “*ein lemaidin mekodem Matan Torah*”; see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 25, p. 142.

²² See, for example, **Rambam** {*Mishneh Torah*}, end of “*Hilchos Milah*,” where he writes that circumcision is greater than all the other mitzvos of the Torah because thirteen covenants were made regarding circumcision (all of which were said **before** the Giving of the Torah), whereas only three were made regarding the other mitzvos (all of which were said **after** the Giving of the Torah).

²³ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 2, par. 2.

Subsequently, *Rambam* explains at length — over **three chapters** — “His wondrous deeds and creations”: One chapter focuses on angels²⁴ (which is part²⁵ of *Maaseh Merkavah*,²⁶ and the following two chapters discuss²⁷ *Maaseh Besreishis*.²⁸ *Rambam* then concludes:²⁹

When a person meditates on these matters and recognizes all the creations..., he will bolster his love for Hashem and stand in awe and fear....

This requires clarification: Indeed, the “path to attain love and fear of Him” is taken “when a person contemplates....”³⁰ However, *Rambam* is a book of “Jewish law.” How do all the details describing “His wondrous deeds and creations” at length fit with the content of *Mishneh Torah*?

True, *Rambam*’s diction in *Sefer HaMitzvos*³¹ implies that “a person contemplating His deeds” is (not only a preparation for the mitzvah but is) the **act** of the mitzvah of love.³² {In other words} the command on the person, the *gavra*,³³ is the *cheftza*³⁴ “to think and contemplate on His mitzvos, directives, and his accomplishments...,” and then, “the love will **inevitably** follow.”³⁵ —

Nonetheless, this doesn’t seem to adequately explain why *Rambam* included in *Mishneh Torah* (Jewish law) **ideas** to be contemplated to awaken in oneself the *cheftza* of “love and fear of Hashem.” These ideas belong in philosophical works,³⁶ etc.³⁷ The **halachah** is that a person must contemplate “His wondrous deeds and creations,” and the like. However, the **explanations** of “His wondrous deeds and creations” fall outside the scope of the halachah, delineating the mitzvah of love. Therefore, these explanations do not seem to belong in *Mishneh Torah*.

²⁴ Ibid., par. 3-8.

²⁵ Ibid., par. 11.

²⁶ {Lit., “Workings of the Chariot”; refers to the mystical vision of the Divine Chariot described in the first chapter of *Yechezkel*. It is one of the most profound and esoteric subjects in Jewish mysticism, focusing on the nature of G-d’s presence and the structure of the spiritual realms. Traditionally, study of the *Maaseh Merkavah* was restricted to only the most learned and spiritually prepared individuals, as it delves into complex and abstract concepts about G-d’s manifestations and the celestial order. It is a key foundation of Kabbalah and is often paired with the *Maaseh Bereishis*) as the two primary mysteries of the Torah.}

²⁷ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 4, par. 10.

²⁸ {Lit. “Workings of Creation”; refers to the teachings about the process of Creation as described in the opening chapters of *Bereishis*. It explores the Divine wisdom underlying the formation of the universe, the spiritual forces governing nature, and the interaction between the physical and metaphysical realms.}

²⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, op cit., ch. 4, par. 12.

³⁰ *Shemos* 33:18.

³¹ *Rambam*’s *Sefer HaMitzvos*, “positive mitzvah 3.”

³² See *Kinas Sofrim* on *Sefer HaMitzvos*, ad loc.

³³ {Lit., “person.” This term pertains to obligations that fall upon the individual person.}

³⁴ {Lit., “object” or “item.” This term relates to laws that are focused on the object or item itself.}

³⁵ *Rambam*’s wording in his *Sefer HaMitzvos*, loc cit.

³⁶ {In the original Hebrew, “*sifrei chakirah*.”}

³⁷ **This resembles** how a sick person is required to follow a doctor’s instructions, but the instructions themselves do not constitute halachah, even though some of them are mentioned in *Mishneh Torah* (see *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Deos*,” ch. 4, par. 21; see also *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 23, p. 35 ff. regarding medical remedies in *Mishneh Torah*).

THE CLARIFICATION

The explanation is as follows: The ideas *Rambam* discusses in these three chapters — (the conclusion of) *Maaseh Merkavah* and *Maaseh Bereishis* — are not merely concepts to be contemplated to **attain afterward** love and fear of Hashem. Instead, they pertain to the mitzvah of **knowing Hashem**, or even more — they comprise part of it.

As clarified in the “Commentary”³⁸ on *Rambam*:³⁹ Included in the knowledge mandated by these two mitzvos [to know that there is a G-d and that there is no other G-d besides Him] are the ideas of *Maaseh Bereishis* and *Maaseh Merkavah*. This is because by knowing them, a person knows the proofs of the Creator’s existence and that He alone is the Primary Being and the Foundation of All.

This idea is also underscored by *Rambam*’s own wording [showing how the subject matter of these three chapters continues the principle of **knowing Hashem** presented in the first chapter]: (a) In the second chapter, following the lengthy discussion of angels, *Rambam* returns to elaborate on how the **Holy One** “knows Himself..., knows everything..., recognizes His truth and knows it as it is.... He is the Knower.”⁴⁰ (b) At the end of the chapter, *Rambam* states:⁴¹ “These matters that we discussed **regarding this topic in these two chapters**..., all of these fundamental principles **in these two chapters** are called *Maaseh Merkavah*” — jointly, both chapters present a **single** concept — *Maaseh Merkavah*. (c) At the end of chapter four, *Rambam* says,⁴² “The matters discussed in these **four chapters**..., are what the original Sages called ***Pardes***.”⁴³ All four chapters present **one** idea — the ***Pardes***.

[*Rambam* connects these “important principles” with [concepts to be contemplated that lead to] love and fear of Hashem,⁴⁴ rather than with the mitzvah of knowing Hashem (discussed in an **earlier** chapter) because *Rambam* presents these ideas of knowing Hashem in conjunction with the mitzvos to which they are associated. Since these “important principles” are (also) relevant to the mitzvos of love and fear of Hashem, *Rambam* presents them (not only as a continuation of the earlier chapter, as mentioned above but also) as a component of the mitzvos of love and fear of Hashem.]

On this basis, we can suggest why *Rambam* mentions in his book the “important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the Worlds.” To fulfill the mitzvah of knowing Hashem — which means (as mentioned above in Section 3) having a (rational) **understanding** of the **nature** of Hashem’s existence (“That His existence is more... perfect”) — it is

³⁸ {By an anonymous author.}

³⁹ Beginning of *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*.

⁴⁰ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 2, par. 9-10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, par. 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, ch. 4, par. 13.

⁴³ {Lit., “orchard”; in this context, refers to the esoteric realm of Torah study, specifically the exploration of its mystical teachings.}

⁴⁴ *Mishneh Torah*, op cit., ch. 2, par. 1-2.

imperative to know (at least) **these** “important principles.” This is because (as mentioned above) “By knowing them, a person knows the proofs of the Creator’s existence and that He alone is the primary being and the foundation of all.”

6.

A CHALLENGING RAMBAM

On the basis that knowledge of *Maaseh Merkavah* and *Maaseh Bereishshis* (which *Rambam* discusses in his book) is imperative for fulfilling the mitzvah of knowing Hashem and that, moreover, they constitute a part of this mitzvah, we can also clarify the final law, the conclusion of *Mishneh Torah*. In the words of *Rambam*:⁴⁵

In that era..., the world will be occupied solely by knowing Hashem. Therefore, the Jews will be great sages and comprehend esoteric matters, grasping the knowledge of their Creator according to the full extent of human potential. As Scripture says,⁴⁶ “The world will be filled with the knowledge of Hashem as the waters cover the sea bed.”

This requires clarification:

- a) What are these two ideas — the Jews will “grasp esoteric matters, grasping the knowledge of their Creator”? Since *Rambam* prefaces that “the occupation..., will be **solely** to know Hashem,” clearly also “esoteric matters” are connected with “**to know** Hashem.” What, then, is the difference between “esoteric matters” and “the knowledge of their Creator”?
- b) The continuation of *Rambam*’s wording suggests that the limitation “of human potential” is specifically relevant to “grasping the knowledge of their Creator” but not to knowing “esoteric matters.” This requires an explanation.
- c) Why is the end of the verse, “as the waters cover the sea bed,” relevant (to add) in this context? The words, “**The world will be filled** with the knowledge of Hashem,” already demonstrate that “the occupation of the entire world will be solely to know Hashem.”

Moreover, in *Hilchos Teshuvah*,⁴⁷ *Rambam* also describes the messianic era and states, “In those days, knowledge, wisdom, and truth will increase, as Scripture says, ‘The world will be filled with the knowledge of Hashem,’ **without** the conclusion of the verse,’ as the waters cover the sea bed.’

⁴⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” ch. 12, par. 5.

⁴⁶ *Yeshayahu* 11:9.

⁴⁷ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Teshuvah*,” ch. 9, par. 2 (which *Rambam* points to in *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” ch. 12, par. 4).

CLARIFYING FURTHER

Based on the above explanation — that to fulfill the mitzvah of knowing Hashem, we must know *Maaseh Merkavah* and *Maaseh Bereishis* — we can say that the two terms mentioned above align with the areas of knowledge *Maaseh Merkavah* and *Maaseh Bereishis*:

“Esoteric matters” (without additionally clarifying that this refers to the Creator) — refer to the concepts of *Maaseh Bereishis*. Although they are things “that are composed of matter and form,”⁴⁸ they are still “**deep** matters.”⁴⁹ They are the aspects of creation whose essence and significance cannot be seen with physical eyes. Instead, they are hidden elements, “deep matters,” which require “broad knowledge to grasp the interpretation and the explanation of these subjects comprehensively.”⁵⁰ Thus, *Rambam* calls these subjects “esoteric matters.”

On the other hand, since these are *Maaseh Bereishis*, they can be understood.

Subsequently, there will be a higher matter — “They will grasp the knowledge of their Creator” — this refers to the ideas of *Maaseh Merkavah*. Even angels, being “form without matter at all,”⁵¹ cannot be truly grasped by a mortal⁵² who is “composed of matter and form.”⁵³ How much more so regarding “the knowledge of **their Creator**” — it is **undoubtedly** impossible (as *Rambam* clarifies)⁵⁴ for “a living person composed of body and soul” to grasp “the truth of His being as it is.”

Therefore, *Rambam* must add, “**Grasping** the knowledge of their Creator **according to the full extent of human potential.**”

⁴⁸ *Rambam’s* words in *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 2, par. 3 — regarding the heavenly spheres etc., which are a component of *Maaseh Bereishis* (in contrast, angels are associated with *Maaseh Merkavah*).

⁴⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 4, par. 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, par. 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 2, end of par. 3.

⁵² See *ibid.*, ch. 2, par. 4: What is meant by {the prophets’ statements that they saw an angle of fire or with wings}? All these are **prophetic** visions and **parables**.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, ch. 2, par. 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 1, par. 10; see also par. 9; *ibid.*, ch. 2, par. 8, 10; “*Hilchos Teshuvah*,” ch. 8, par. 2; at length — *Rambam’s* “*Commentary on Mishnah*,” in his Introduction to ch. “*Chelek*,” s.v., “*Ve’atah Acheil*.”

8.

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE KNOWLEDGE OF HASHEM

On this basis, we can also understand why *Rambam* includes the end of the verse, “As the waters cover the sea bed.” To preface:

The difference between *Maaseh Merkavah* and *Maaseh Bereishis* (as *Rambam* says)⁵⁵ is that *Maaseh Bereishis* “does not have the depth” of *Maaseh Merkavah*. [This affects practical **law** regarding expounding subject matter covered in *Maaseh Merkavah* or *Maaseh Bereishis*, as clarified by *Rambam*.]⁵⁶

This difference is not only in the “quantity” of understanding — with *Maaseh Merkavah* being more recondite than *Maaseh Bereishis* — but also in their “qualitative nature” and manner of understanding:

Maaseh Bereishis, which concerns creation itself, can be understood **positively** {definitively} (constructive understanding). In contrast, *Maaseh Merkavah* involves matters connected with the **Creator**⁵⁷ (“grasping the knowledge of their Creator”). Thus, they cannot be grasped definitively, but only through negation (“understanding what is not true {of Hashem}”).

As *Rambam* elaborates in *Guide for the Perplexed*, we cannot attribute any compulsory attributions to Hashem; instead, we can only apply descriptions of negation.⁵⁸

[Accordingly, when we say that Hashem is “wise,” we merely mean to negate the attribution of any quality **antithetical** to wisdom from Him. Likewise with other descriptions.]

Therefore, Hashem cannot be understood with “positive” comprehension. {E.g., we cannot honestly assert that He is wise.} Instead, He can only be grasped in a manner of negation. {We can only realize that Hashem is *not* unwise.}

Although understanding through negation is also **knowledge**, to the extent that, as *Rambam* clarifies, through many negations, “you will advance toward comprehension and you will be closer to Him.”⁵⁹ “Descriptions of negation bring you closer to knowing Hashem and comprehending Him.”

⁵⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 4, par. 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, par. 11.

⁵⁷ See *Rambam*’s “*Commentary on Mishnah*,” “*Chagigah* (2:1)” and his Introduction to *Guide for the Perplexed*, where he explains that *Maaseh Bereishis* constitutes natural science, while *Maaseh Merkavah* constitute knowledge of **Divinity** (the inclusion of study of angels within this latter category can be understood based on his statements in *Guide for the Perplexed*, vol. 3, ch. 45).

⁵⁸ *Guide for the Perplexed*, vol. 1, ch. 58 ff.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, ch. 59–60, cited in *Likkutei Torah*, “*Pikudei*,” 6c.

Nevertheless,⁶⁰ even the most sophisticated understanding through negation does not **reveal** the Creator's essence. The “truth of His being” remains opaque beyond understanding.

9.

SEA OR BUCKET?

On this basis, we can understand the difference in *Rambam's* phraseology regarding *Maaseh Merkavah* and *Maaseh Bereishis*:

Regarding *Maaseh Merkavah*, *Rambam* says,⁶¹ “The concepts that we discussed in these two chapters are like **a drop from the sea** when compared with what is necessary to explicate this subject.” In contrast, when discussing *Maaseh Bereishis*, *Rambam* says,⁶² “All these concepts that we discussed about this topic are **like a drop in a bucket**.”

This difference is understood simply based on the above: *Maaseh Bereishis's* ideas are limited since they pertain to creation matters. Therefore, although *Rambam* speaks in generalities, point form, etc., and thus presents what is merely “like a drop,” what he explains is still comparable to a drop *relative to a bucket*. The quantity of water in a bucket is **very** limited.

In contrast, regarding *Maaseh Merkavah*, *Rambam* uses the simile “like a drop from **the sea**” since “the sea” is a metaphor for infinity. Indeed, in **Jewish law**, “the sea” is (referred to as) “waters that have no end.”⁶³

Even though the water of the sea is also finite (supported by the Gemara's statement,⁶⁴ “They⁶⁵ know how to estimate how many drops there are in the sea”) – the fact that we refer to the sea as “waters that have no end” proves that the volume of water in the ocean is so vast that we can describe it as “infinite” **according to Torah** (at least figuratively).

⁶⁰ See *Guide for the Perplexed*, vol. 1, ch. 59-60.

⁶¹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 2, par. 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, ch. 4, par. 10.

⁶³ *Yevamos* 121a; *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Geirushin*,” ch. 13, par. 16.

⁶⁴ *Horiyos* 10a.

⁶⁵ {Referring to Rabbi Elazar Chasma and Rabbi Yochanan ben Gudgeda, disciples of Rabban Gamliel.}

10.

UNLIMITED WATERS

We can further say the following: Scripture explicitly says,⁶⁶ “All rivers lead to the sea, yet the sea is not full.” The sea never fills. On this basis, we can posit that the waters of the sea are described as “waters that do not have an end” because (since the sea **does not fill**, it can contain and) it has the **potential** for containing unlimited quantities of water. Practically, the volume of the sea’s waters is finite, and some sages **knew** how to estimate the amount of drops in the sea. However, **in potential**, all these drops can never fill the sea. It is a place of endless waters.

Since the ideas of the *Maaseh Merkaveh* transcend the limitations and parameters of creation, they are comparable to the “sea”— (waters) that have no end.

On this basis, we can understand why *Rambam* concludes his work by adding the end of the verse: “As the waters cover the sea bed.” With this wording, *Rambam* alludes to the idea that although in those days, humanity will be “grasping the knowledge of their Creator according to the full extent of human potential” — since this knowledge is “the knowledge of **their Creator**,” it will (also) always **transcend** created beings — “as the waters **cover** the sea bed” (a person can only grasp this through negation, as explained above).

11.

THE LESSON

All the foregoing provides us with a lesson regarding studying *Maaseh Merkavah* and the *Maaseh Bereishis*:

Rambam writes in the Introduction to *Mishneh Torah* (in “the count of the mitzvos corresponding to the sequence of laws in *Rambam*”) that he included in *Sefer Hamada* “all the mitzvos that are primary to the religion of Moshe **and a person must know them before all else**.” This indicates that within *Sefer Hamada* itself, the concepts *Rambam* places **at the beginning** of *Sefer Hamada* and calls “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*” must be learned before learning the other ideas in *Sefer Hamada* (and certainly before those presented in the later thirteen books of *Mishneh Torah*).

Within *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*, one must first know “the **foundation** of all foundations **and the pillar** of wisdom.” Since all “the matters discussed in these four chapters regarding these five mitzvos..., which the original Sages called *Pardes*”⁶⁷ are imperative for fulfilling “the foundation of all foundations... to know that there is a primary being, etc.” (as

⁶⁶ *Koheles* 1:7.

⁶⁷ *Rambam’s* words in *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 4, par. 13.

explained above at length), it follows that, in addition to the **obligation** to study these concepts in general, **their** study must also **precede** the study of other subjects in Torah.⁶⁸

12.

RAMBAM'S CONTRADICTION

On this basis, the following words of *Rambam* concerning these subjects are problematic: “I maintain that it is unfitting to stroll in the *Pardes* except for **someone who has filled** his stomach with bread and meat... to know what is forbidden and what is permissible....”⁶⁹ In other words, the sublime concepts of *Pardes* (discussed in these four chapters) should only be pursued *after* one has already mastered many of the Torah’s laws (bread and meat).

Furthermore, *Rambam* writes in the Introduction to his work:⁷⁰ “A person should first review the Written Torah and then **this** book, and from it, he will know the entire Oral Torah. He will need to review no other book **between them.**” In other words, after studying the Written Torah, one does not need to learn from other books of the Oral Torah (and certainly not from the {intricate} “disputes of Abayei and Rava”⁷¹ or to fill his stomach with bread and meat). Instead, the **first subjects** *Rambam* teaches him are *Maaseh Merkaveh* and the *Maaseh Bereishis*!

Moreover, *Rambam* includes these four chapters in his magnum opus, which he states in his Introduction is “**for the small and the great.**” Obviously, “the small” refers to someone who has not yet **filled his stomach with bread and meat.**

13.

STROLLING IN THE PARDES

The explanation: With his nuanced wording, *Rambam* anticipates this paradox: “It is unfitting to **stroll** in the *Pardes*” (*Rambam deviates* from the diction of our Sages, which he references “They **entered** into the *Pardes*”):⁷² The verb “stroll” does not mean simply “to enter.” Instead, it refers to remaining in the *Pardes* for an **extended period**, as if **strolling, pleasurably**⁷³ — engaging in profound and expansive contemplation to the extent that he **derives enjoyment.**⁷⁴ Pursuing the study of the *Pardes* **in this** way first requires ‘filling his

⁶⁸ See also *Rambam’s Iggeres Techiyas HaMeisim*, ch. 1, 2; see as well *Rosh Amanah*, ch. 19; *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 26, p. 34.

⁶⁹ *Rambam’s* words in *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 4, par. 13.

⁷⁰ At the end of *Rambam’s* Introduction to *Mishneh Torah*.

⁷¹ The language of our Sages in *Sukkah* 28a, quoted in *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 4, par. 13.

⁷² *Chagigah* 14b.

⁷³ See *Kesubos* 62a.

⁷⁴ See *Hagahos Maimoniyos* on *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 4, par. 13.

stomach with bread and meat.” Additionally, as *Rambam* rules, “The early sages dictated that we do not teach these matters publicly.”⁷⁵

In contrast, the ideas discussed in these four chapters of *Mishneh Torah* are presented without lengthy explanations, **and so forth**. As *Rambam* himself **emphasizes**, they are only “like a drop from the sea when compared with what is necessary to explain this matter” (similarly, in *Maaseh Bereishis*, these concepts are described as “a drop in the bucket”), as explained above. They do not even fall into the category of “point form” (since even the point form of *Maaseh Merkaveh* is not to be taught **publicly** — let alone to “the small and the great”). Instead, these ideas are presented only in general terms (although **fundamental**). Therefore, such learning does not fall into the category of “strolling in the *Pardes*.”

14.

IN CONCLUSION

Conversely, regarding the study of these concepts in **this** format (as general ideas) as *Rambam* presents them in his work — the approach is the **opposite**: These concepts must be learned “**before anything else**” since “the foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom” is to **know** Hashem. All other laws of the Torah stand upon this **pillar** and are built upon this **foundation**.

By busying oneself with learning these concepts of the knowledge of Hashem now, we will merit, very soon, “the days of Mashiach,” when (in the words of *Rambam* mentioned above) “the occupation of the entire world will be solely to know Hashem...,” as “the world will be filled with the knowledge of Hashem as the waters cover the sea bed.”

— From talks delivered on Yud-Aleph Nissan, *Acharon Shel Pesach*, and Shabbos *parshas Emor* 5744 (1984), and Shabbos *parshas Vaera* 5745 (1985)

⁷⁵ Ibid., par. 10-11; ch. 2, par. 12.