

Special Issue on Metaphors

Just as "snake in the grass" means a sly person, the Rabbis also spoke in metaphor.

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Free Interpretation

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

What is the Torah's view on whether we have free rights to interpret the Torah and it's laws as we see fit?

Today, many people say, "I follow what laws I can, and interpret (follow) the Torah in my own way". Or, "I have to be comfortable with my Judaism. Maybe its good for some people when all the laws are followed, but that's not for me". And,

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THE SEVEN HEADED SERPENT

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



The Talmud on Kiddushin 29b, records a fantastic story of a "mazik", (destructive force), which plagued the study hall of Abayeh. As the account goes, Rav Yaakov bar Acha, upon witnessing his son's poor Talmudic skills, ventured to this place of study, as he decided that he was more fit to learn than his son. When Abayeh learned of Rav Yaakov bar Acha's upcoming arrival, he urged all townspeople not to offer Rav Yaakov hospitality. Rav Yaakov will thereby be forced to lodge at the study hall, and perhaps a miracle will be performed for him in his study hall, and he will be spared from this mazik. It was stated that even two students who entered this study hall, even during the day, were at risk due to this mazik. Rav Yaakov stayed in the study hall overnight. During his stay, this mazik appeared to him as a seven-headed serpent, a "tanina" in Aramaic. Rav Yaakov began to pray, and with each bow of his head in prayer (to G-d

one of the serpent's heads fell off. The next morning, Rav Yaakov stated that had it not been for a miracle, he would have been in danger.

We have no shortage of questions! But before reading mine, think about the account for yourself.

My questions:

1) Why couldn't Abayeh himself rid the study hall of this mazik? 2) What do 7 heads represent? 3) Why was this mazik found in the study hall, as opposed to somewhere else? 4) Why couldn't R. Yaakov rid it all at once, instead of only one head at each a bow? 5) How did prayer remove this mazik? 6) Is a mazik a real creature, or is it a metaphor for something else? 7) The serpent did not attack Rav Yaakov, or anyone for that matter. What then was the danger? 8) Why did Rav Yaakov attribute his success to a miracle? Did he not witness his actions himself? 9) What is the meaning of, "even two who enter" and even "by day"

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THE SEVEN HEADED SERPENT

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are at danger"? 10) Why was the mazik also referred to as a "tanina", a serpent?

I am always interested in teaching a method of Torah study, in addition to offering explanations. This case presents a prime opportunity for unraveling step-by-step, the Rabbis' bizarre stories and their hidden meanings, encountered in Scriptural and Talmudic portions. I have listed the questions above so you may think into them. I will demonstrate what I feel is an effective approach to questioning, offering my own explanations for this metaphor in the process.

The fact that the mazik was only found in the study hall should draw our attention. How should we formulate a question leading to an answer? Simply asking "Why was it there?" will not lead to a critical analysis. However, reformulating the question as follows will better lead to some insight: "What is the distinction of a study hall, that a specific damage can occur there, as opposed to other places?" This type of formulation drives our thoughts towards a study hall's distinction. We can now answer, "it is a place designated for learning". So we question further, "what danger is there when one learns in the study hall"? (The story clearly states this location is where this mazik was found.) Studying is the greatest of all G-d's commands! What type of danger can exist when occupying our time with G-d's greatest command? Let's think. Whether we learn quickly or slowly, we still learn, so we are not in danger as regards acquiring content. If we don't learn at all, this is not characterized as a "danger". If we learn false ideas, this is inevitable, we all make errors. Nothing can be done about man's disposition to err. So wherein lies the danger?

But there is one facet of study which is in fact harmful. We learn from Pirkei Avos (Ethic of the Fathers) that one can learn for the sole purpose of being called a scholar, and this has destructive results. Man's desire for self aggrandizement - even through Torah study - is ridiculed by the Rabbis. I believe with this small piece of information we can open up the entire mystery of this story.

The mazik being found only in the study hall shows us that there is a "damaging" force alive in this place. But it is not a being. I believe this "mazik" is a metaphor for a psychological attitude. We are well familiar with it; "competition". Learning in Abayeh's study hall had an ill effect on those students: they felt they had to be as smart as Abayeh. This is unfortunately a common practice today, where people learn for the sake of self honor. It is even promoted. However, this is not the derech ha'Torah - the way of G-d. One's learning should be for one purpose; the love of uncovering Torah insights. The appreciation of the Torah system and all true ideas must be our goal in our studies - not the honor gained by our mastery.

In Abayeh's study hall, somehow, there was a competitive drive which caused those who could not see themselves on Abayeh's level, to view themselves as failures. Compared to Abayeh, they failed at learning, and threw up their hands in surrender. This occurred due to an egotistical motive for learning, not the true motive to learn for the love of truth.

Abayeh knew this, and wished to remedy the situation. Upon hearing of Rav Yaakov's planned visit, he wanted a demonstration shown that one could learn successfully, if he was on a proper level, and with proper

motives. Abayeh therefore told all townspeople not to let Rav Yaakov stay overnight, so it be demonstrated that Rav Yaakov, and anyone for that matter, could learn well despite Abayeh's great reputation. He would learn for the proper reasons. But we see that the story states that this mazik even appeared to Rav Yaakov. This means that even he was under some degree of influence of this competitive emotion. But how did he combat it? He directed his energies towards G-d, and reconfirmed his purpose for learning through prayer. By praying, he realigned his attitude for learning with the zeal for discovering G-d's wisdom. It was a slow process, therefore the story states that with each bow he removed a head from the "mazik", from the danger. This competitive emotion could not be removed all at once, but only in a slow and steady fashion. So we read that the heads were severed one at a time, not simultaneously. In general, any change in our emotions takes time. (It is for this reason that Jacob limped on his leg after wrestling with his own personality [the "man"], and why Bilaam hurt his leg when slowly realizing his attempt to curse the Jews was a fruitless activity. A 'hurt leg' in both instances means that one's "path in life" is being redirected. "Leg" represents the vehicle for 'traveling' in a path of life, and a 'hurt leg' means this path is being inhibited.)

But why did the author of this metaphor design the creature as a seven-headed serpent? (The number seven is not important, as it merely indicates "many".) The answer: to show that the problem, the mazik, refers to that which involves the "head", i.e., wisdom. Abayeh was a great scholar - analogous to one with 'many heads'. Thus, the creature's form. I believe it is possible that the author of this medrash, (story), referred to the creature as a serpent ("tanina") for a good reason. As the tanina here represents the competitive drive which Abayeh's greatness awakened, tanina is used, because it also shares the same Aramaic root relating to learning, or one who learns. ("Tana" or "tanina" refer to an author of a Mishna.) So tanina is used in this story as a hint, that the creature represents the one who learned well, namely Abayeh.

The reason "even two students were in danger", is to teach us that normally, when two students study together, the self aggrandizement born out of one's own, new ideas, is belittled by the partner's inevitable critique of his ideas. Two people who learn together always experience their ideas being tested and opposed by their learning partner. In normal circumstances, one's ego would be in check. This story hints at the specific danger through telling us that "even two students" were subject to this danger. This points to an "ego" issue.

"Even by day" teaches us that at night, emotions have the upper hand. Daytime normally dulls the impact of our emotions, so this emotion should have been less harmful at day. But here, this competitive emotion was so strong, that daytime did not dull this competitive drive.

Rav Yaakov, learning for proper reasons and humble enough to pray to G-d to assist him, demonstrated his removal of self importance. He succeeded at not falling prey to this damaging emotion of competition, which was generated out of Abayeh's tremendous reputation. My friend Benji suggested this very same humility caused Rav Yaakov to attribute his success to G-d's miracle, and not to himself.

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THE SEVEN HEADED SERPENT

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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My friend Jesse asked, "Why didn't Abayeh come out straight and tell Rav Yaakov what he was up to, instead of keeping silent?" Two answers occur to me: 1) Had Abayeh done so, Rav Yaakov would be on guard for this phenomena, and it would not have had the emotional impact necessary for demonstrating that one could conquer such an emotion. When one is on guard of his emotions, he is less effected by them, and the demonstration which Abayeh sought to have Rav Yaakov display (to rid the mazik) would never have occurred. 2) Warning would do no good, as Abayeh's level of learning was the cause of the mazik, and could not be removed. This also explains why Abayeh could not rid the study hall of this mazik himself.

Perhaps Rav Yaakov was well aware of this competitive drive, as all wise men know psychology well. Rav Yaakov therefore made his journey to remove this problem.

After a careful analysis of this account, being mindful of the Rabbis' lesson that bizarre stories are not to be taken literally, we arrive at a new insight into human psychology. We learn of a flaw that rears its ugly "seven heads" to Torah scholars. We also learn from Rav Yaakov's response what the corrective measure is for such a damaging, competitive emotion.

The Torah does not hide from discussing any idea, even if it exposes our teachers flaws in the process. As a Rabbi once said, there is no hero worship in Judaism. We do not seek to view humans as infallible - not even Rabbis. For this reason, the Torah also teaches Moses' flaws.

Training children and students that we expect their attainment of a level like a Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, may result in the student's abandoning Torah study when he or she fails at such an impossible goal. What we should teach our children is to do their best, and nothing other than that is expected. They should be taught to learn for the purpose of discovering beautiful Torah ideas, that afford us all the greatest happiness available. A child's natural curiosity is G-d given - we see this all the time. This priceless curiosity is often destroyed by our current school system's "memorization and regurgitation" code. We must be on guard to counter this devastating emotion of competition, if our children are to enjoy Torah study, and remain steadfast to its study throughout their lives.

Today's children are tomorrow's leaders. We must have deep concern for future generations. Let us insure that others will benefit from our hard work at raising our children and students correctly, in line with the insights from this metaphorical, Talmudic account.

The "seven-headed" serpent is in fact nothing more than a metaphor for Abayeh's strong, Torah abilities. Each element in this story serves to draw our attention, pointing to clues for our investigation, as well as the causes and effects of the competitive emotion. □



THE Snake's Head

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

What do we learn from the fact that man conquers the snake by crushing its head, and the snake conquering man by bruising his heel? (Gen. 3:15)

Sforno derives a lesson from this statement: "Man conquers the snake by crushing its head, and the snake conquers man by bruising his heel". Sforno interprets "head" and "heel" to mean "beginning" and "end" respectively. Using these interpretations, Sforno teaches that man conquers the instincts at their very outset - their initial onslaught against man's reason. When an instinctual urge arises in man, it is at this point that man has the highest probability of conquering such urges, as man is still in control of all his faculties. But if man allows the urge to take hold of him, and he does not fight it, the urge becomes greater, and man loses all chance of subduing the urge. This is how the psyche operates. Stating that man "crushes the head of the snake" means, according to Sforno, that man conquers the instincts at their "head", at their initial onslaught. The snake "biting man's heel" means that the instincts subdue man at the end, at the "heel" of the battle. Man is overcome at the end of the battle.

It makes sense that the Torah informs man of our psychological workings at the very commencement of this great work, the Five Books of Moses. The Torah instructs us in perfection. By definition, it must include an explanation of our definitive components; the mind and the instincts. Here, the Sforno understands the "snake's interaction with Eve" to parallel our very psychological design.

Additionally, Sforno teaches that man's perfection cannot be devoid of understanding. The gift of the Tzelem Elokim - the intellect - teaches us that God wills all our actions to be guided by reason. Therefore, God's Torah must enable man to understand how all our commandments aim towards our perfection. Such an understanding cannot exist if we are ignorant of how the commandments perfect us as psychological beings. Therefore, knowledge of our psychological workings is taught immediately in the opening sections of Genesis. King Solomon does the same in the opening of Ecclesiastes, Koheles. (It is quite interesting that in the opening verses of both works, we find the discussion of "rivers".)

Sforno's lead may also explain why we have two accounts of the creation of man: The first account is the creation of man as he is a Tzelem Elokim - an intelligent being. The second account omits any reference of the Tzelem Elokim, but refers to man as a "nefesh chaya", a living beast - the same description given to animals. Perhaps this subtle change intimates what each account addresses. This latter account, including the snake's deception, borrows the animal kingdoms' appellation of "living beast" and not "Tzelem Elokim" as it addresses the instinctual workings of man. □

Free Interpretation of the Torah

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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"G-d knows that I'm doing my best."

In response to this last statement, I say, G-d knows man perfectly. He designed us, and possesses the foreknowledge that man would make this claim. In response, G-d stated in the Torah (Deut. 29:18) that if one says, "Ki b'shirus libi alaich", "because I go in the councils of my heart", he will not be safeguarded from the curses of G-d written therein. Meaning, if one 'feels' that something is correct, while it opposes Torah, this "following of one's heart" (one's own understandings) will cause his inevitable destruction.

If one posits that there is a G-d who gave the Torah, these opinions will be problematical for a few reasons:

Accurate Transmission of the Law

The Talmud contains the only valid interpretations of Jewish Law. As the Torah points out, "Al pi haTorah asher yorucha", "you shall follow the Torah as they (the Rabbis) teach you". Meaning, no one but the accepted Rabbis have the right to interpret Torah law. Additionally, we are not experiencing a "telephone" scenario of second, third, and fourth generation of discussions. We are reading the actual and only discussions of the law. Hence, no distortion.

Complete Body of the Law

The Talmud contains the only recorded discussions of the Rabbis, informing us what the only possibilities of the theories of the law are. There are no other possible views. No one can come along after the Talmud and offer another interpretation. If 3 opinions are listed in a given section in the Talmud, there are only 3 because a fourth is impossible, given the structure of the law. If one wants to add more, what he performs or understands will not be considered Judaism according to all Rabbis from Moses, throughout the Talmud. The Torah clearly states (Deut. 13:1) "Every thing which I command you to do, that is what you should be careful to do. Do not add upon, it and do not detract from it".

Precise Structure of the Law

To this, one might feel restricted in his thinking, "I can't come up with another interpretation?" This response is generated out of a need to feel unrestricted. The fact is, we are restricted!

The Torah, like any other science created by G-d, possesses a limited a structure. It is not a free system of interpretation. All interpretations of the Rabbis were based on principles handed down directly by Moses, from G-d. As G-d created this Torah, He is the only One Who can tell us how it was

written so we understand His intent. We cannot project our understanding onto Him. If we are to follow the Torah, it must be by his rules. Similarly, if one desires to learn the effects of boiling on certain chemicals, he must reach 212° F. If he only reaches 211° F, he is not working within chemistry. One degree of deviation from what boiling is, is not recognized by scientists, or by nature as "boiling". Here too we are restricted, if we desire to accurately understand science.

The same applies to the Torah. It is a science, just as chemistry, biology, physics, as it is created by the same Creator. Torah contains the same level of ingenuity in design. This point must be appreciated.

Additionally, the Torah has built in safeguards against someone suggesting new interpretations:

Reading of the Chumash each week to make the passages fluent on our lips; The meticulous laws governing the writing the Torah; Laws where to start or end a paragraph in the Torah scroll; Laws regarding spaces in the Torah scroll; How to write each letter in the Torah; G-d commanding us to follow the Rabbis, to the exclusion of any other source for interpretation; G-d has promised us that the Torah will not leave our mouths ever. G-d guarantees that what He gave will not be lost. If G-d gave it, He is sure to make certain that it reaches its goal of surviving all generations.

If one is honest, and can objectively separate their desire to be "free of commandments", and takes care to learn diligently, one will appreciate the wisdom and beauty of the precise structure which the Torah was created with. It takes time to uncover, but with a good teacher, one can gain in this life, from what his Creator intended for him.

When misinterpreting the Torah, one does not see his mistake immediately, as is seen in the lab when two chemicals violently interact. Due to this 'delayed effect' of Torah misinterpretation, one is wrongly assured of

his own interpretations. We must abandon the attitude that we can casually offer our own interpretations. I would like to see this same person casually offer his own interpretations of quantum physics to a board of scientists. Without following precise rules and theories, which take time to learn and understand, he will most certainly be laughed out of the lab. Even more so here, one must be careful not to underestimate the Creator's precision and numerous rules embedded in the Torah. Addressing this attitude, King Solomon referred, (Koheles, 5:1) "Don't be excited (with) your mouth, and do not hasten to bring forth words before G-d, for God is heaven and you are on Earth, therefore let your words be few". ▣



What are Midrashim?

ANONYMOUS

Virtually every tractate of Talmud contains sections known as Aggadoth or Midrashim. Some include various statements of our Sages and stories regarding different people and events. Others contain moral principles, and biblical exegesis. Not all Midrashim were recorded in the Talmud. Some were compiled in separate books by various Sages, such as Midrash Rabba and Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer. Upon close examination of the various Midrashim a common problem often arises: they do not make sense. Some Midrashim contain passages that make sense at first glance, yet careful analysis will expose many problems. Many, on the other hand, do not make sense even at first glance. They appear to be outright absurd and irrational. Others actually contradict verses in the Torah. How are we to understand these statements? Did our Sages want us to understand Midrashim literally and thereby accept nonsensical statements as true? No intelligent person will accept nonsense as truth. Perhaps, then, they had a different purpose in mind when compiling these statements. We must understand what these great minds were trying to accomplish with Midrashim and what our method should be when approaching them.

The Rambam writes in the Introduction to the Guide for the Perplexed that there are pasSages in the Midrash "which, if taken literally, appear to be inconsistent with truth and common sense, and must therefore be taken figuratively." Many people are drawn after the literal meaning of Midrashim. They feel that since our Sages wrote them in this form, we must accept them in that form. They do not understand that there is great wisdom behind their words. The cause of this mistake is ignorance as the Rambam states, "We have further noticed that when an ill-informed Theologian reads these Midrashim, he will find no difficulty; for possessing no knowledge of the property of things, he will not reject statements which involve impossibilities." A person that accepts impossibilities as possible cannot have true knowledge and a sound intellect. The Rambam continues to discuss the method which an intelligent person should use when confronted with a difficult Midrash, "When, however, a person who is both religious and well educated reads them, he cannot escape the following dilemma: either he takes them literally, and questions the abilities of the author and soundness of mind, or he will acquiesce in assuming that the pasSages in question have some secret meaning, and he will continue to hold the author in high estimation whether he understood the allegory or not." A person has the right to accept either

possibility. However, it would be irrational to accept the passages literally and at the same time hold the author in high estimation. For a person cannot be respected for making statements which are inconsistent with truth. If a noted scientist would publicly proclaim the earth to be flat, he would be ridiculed and called a fool. He would lose all honor he might have had.

The Rambam's approach to Midrashim is not unique. It is the approach of our Mesora. Rishonim such as the Meiri, Ritva Ramban and Rashba offered non-literal interpretations to numerous Midrashim. In fact, Rashba wrote a special commentary on certain Midrashim called Perushai HaAggadoth. In it, he shows that Midrashim were not meant to be taken literally. They contain deep concepts, which were written by way of allegory, and only great Torah scholars will understand their true meaning. Rabbeinu Yitzchak Abohab writes in his Menoras HaMeor (Fourth 'Ner', Part 3, Chapter 2), "But a person that does not have the ability to comprehend them (Midrashim) by way of their deeper meaning and he thinks that they are literal - there isn't anything that is more separated from intelligence and further from knowledge."

Acharonim, as well, held that Midrashim have a deeper meaning and are not meant to be taken literally. The Vilna Gaon analyzed various Midrashim in a non-literal manner in a small book entitled 'A Commentary on Many Aggadoth'. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal) discusses the nature of Midrashim in his Essay on the Aggadoth. He writes, "they would commit them to writing so that they would not be lost to succeeding generations, but [they would do so] in an obscure form or in various riddles." The Maharsha discusses in the introduction to his Commentary on Aggadoth that statements of our Sages that contain wild stories and statements that do not make sense are to be explained as parables and metaphors.

Why, then, did our Sages write Midrashim in this manner? The Rambam writes in his Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishna, "The Sages purposely arranged them in such a disguised form due to extremely weighty considerations. First of all, the purpose in this was to sharpen their disciples' wits and to broaden their minds. Another purpose was to beguile the fools so that their minds would not be able to discern their actual substance; for if you would plainly show them these brilliant truths, they would turn their faces away in scorn, because of their destitute nature." Foolish people cannot appreciate a true

profound concept. Rather they prefer to understand Midrashim literally and project a mystical, supernatural quality on them. They are amazed at the literal appearance, yet if shown the underlying concept they run away from it and despise it. Even brilliant scholars may fall into the category of fools. The Ramchal writes in his essay, "As for their (Midrashim) value, it would be disrespectful towards the Creator, blessed be He, to give over His secrets to men of bad character, even if they be brilliant scholars." He continues, "only persons of clear mind, who have been well trained in correct logical analysis, will succeed in [understanding] them. Dense individuals and those untrained in correct logic, if they should come across them, would interpret these true and precious concepts as to make them erroneous and harmful." A person may be an expert in Talmud and Halacha, be in charge of a synagogue or a Yeshiva, yet be dense in areas of philosophic thinking. He will think he understands the Midrashic passage properly and proceed to teach them to others. By this he will do great harm to himself and to others. The author of the Siddur Avodas Halev states, "the aggadoth according to their outward appearance without understanding their deep intentions are prone to cause the blind to go astray on the way and lead them to darkness and not light (Otzar HaTeffilos, pg. 20)." A person must be trained to think properly to begin to comprehend the hidden ideas contained in the Midrashim, otherwise he "will become snared in error and confusion" (Ramchal), and will never see the light of truth.

Amazingly, many people today will only accept Midrashim in their literal sense. They are brought up to believe that our great and wise Sages were magic men capable of performing supernatural feats. They feel that these brilliant and sharp minded men accepted ridiculous stories as actual occurrences and passed them on to future generations. These people have either disregarded the above opinions or are ignorant of them. They are arrogant in assuming they understand the words of our Sages without even using the method of our Mesora. We must not jump to conclusions when faced with a difficult statement. We must use intelligence in all attempts to comprehend a Midrash. If we cannot understand it, we must have the courage to admit we lack the knowledge needed. Conversely, we should only tackle problems which are within our capabilities. The more true knowledge we acquire, the more we will comprehend the profound ideas of our great Sages. □

An Enlightening Metaphor

"Nare mitzvah, v'Torah Or" - "A (single) flame is a command, and Torah is light." (Proverbs, 6:22)

To my amazement and enjoyment, I have learned many lessons from this brief statement. One idea is that mitzvah is a quantity of Torah: Mitzvah is but a single flame, it has the property of illumination but not in the necessary quantity to benefit man's entire existence. Whereas Torah is a complete system, it provides the full spectrum of the element (light) necessary for man's existence.

We learn that man cannot survive on mitzvah alone, just as man cannot survive with a single candle. Heat and light are essential for man's health, cooking and occupations. Interestingly, it does not say "and Torah is heat", but "light". This teaches that the more essential component of light is its illuminating property - that which benefits man's mind - and not heat which is a benefit to man's body. We derive the lesson that man's true perfection exists in his mind - his thoughts and values - not bodily perfection.

Man's life depends on abundant light. So too, a single mitzvah perfects but a small part of man. Man is a multifaceted creature with many components in dire need of guidance. Only the Creator knows man best, and can prescribe the proper actions and ideas essential for man's goal of happiness and perfection. The full range of commands and ideas encapsulated in the entire Torah is the correct prescription for man's well being. No more - no less.

Light is used as a metaphor for Torah and mitzvah equally. This teaches that Torah as a whole system and in parts is what removes darkness, i.e., ignorance. Torah is essential for man's understanding of reality. Without Torah man remains ignorant.

We also learn that mitzvah - actions - are but a small part, they are but a flame. Torah on the other hand - a system of knowledge behind the commands - is more essential. Our appreciation of God's knowledge which formulated the commands is the goal. According to Maimonides, commandments are a means to occupy our actions when we are not learning. The Talmud too describes Rav Shimon ben Yochai's students comparing all commands to Torah study and deriving that nothing compares to Torah study, not even other commands: (Proverbs 8:11) "For better is wisdom than pearls, and all desirous things do not compare to it." This means anything desirous - even other commandments - do not compare to Torah study.

Wisdom is how God's world operates. True appreciation for God, and our best existence here on Earth can only happen if we conform to how things truly operate, and conform our minds' ideas to God's system. Strict adherence to truth and all that is real will guide us to the most pleasant lives. More essentially however, by being honest and studying the world and the Torah with the goal of apprehending what is based on reason, we come to a true appreciation of God. Without reason, we see even religious Jews attracted to nonsensical practices as red bendels, checking mezuzot when ill, carrying books and chamsas as amulets, thereby removing themselves from God. Their concept of God is complete wrong through these gravely corrupt, idolatrous distortions. They have no share in the world to come. If they would only study what the Torah and our Rishonim teach, they would see the light. "And I have seen that wisdom surpasses folly, as is the benefit of light over darkness." (Ecclesiastes 2:13) □

Abraham's Jewel

Understanding allegories literally is a grave mistake. The Rabbis of blessed memory composed metaphors and allegories to teach us many ideas in a concise format.

One such metaphor is the Rabbi's statement, (Baba Basra 16b) "Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said, 'A precious stone was suspended on Abraham's neck, and any sickly person who saw it was instantly healed. And when Abraham died, G-d suspended it on the sphere of the Sun.'" Literally understood, we cannot fathom how a stone can effect someone's health. However, taken as the Rabbis intended, as a metaphor, I offer an interpretation of "Avraham's jewel" which I feel makes more sense than taking it literally: Avraham was known for teaching the ideas of monotheism to thousands of people. His speech was the tool used to direct masses in following the Creator. Perhaps the Rabbis meant that Avraham's speech, (allegorized as a jewel around his neck), cured incorrect notions among the masses. The Rabbis simply exchanged "speech" for the term "precious stone" as both are prized objects, and the "neck" is the source of speech. When Abraham died, his teachings continued through G-d's will, influencing many others to the reality of the Creator of the universe. This is described as G-d suspending the stone (Abraham's teachings) on the sun. This indicates that Abraham's teachings directed others towards the reality of the Creator of the universe, allegorized as the most dominant element in the universe, the sun. □

(This metaphor is also used by King Solomon in Proverbs, 1:9)

Something "Higher"?

Reader: Is Kabbalah really based on rational principles? Isn't there a level of reality, which supercedes logic? Isn't our mind capable of ascertaining truth from a level higher than logic?

Mesora: You make one error; imagining the existence of system "higher" than logic, and then a second error; seeking that imagination using "reason", which you admit cannot detect it. True Kabbalah, (matters "received" directly from Moses) are based on rational principles, as is the case with all areas of authentic Torah. There is nothing more elevated and capable in man's makeup than his intelligence, which can perceive only rational concepts, and derive new principles through rational thought alone. Imagining something "higher" than logic exists, as many of today's Kabbalists falsely assume, is a fantasy like any other, and is a complete fallacy. We don't live in fantasy, but in reality. And reality is that which we can identify only through reason.

G-d gave us one, supreme tool called "intelligence", as this is what He wishes we utilize in our approach to Him, which is His one goal for all mankind, as witnessed through His Torah system. Does something exist outside of our apprehension? This very question can have no answer, as you are using your intelligence to seek an answer, which you assume is out of the range of intelligence. A similar futility would be to 'look' for something in a pitch-dark room. Using a faculty in a 100% crippled state, i.e., vision in darkness, or intelligence in baseless imagination - is the height of foolishness. The Mishna in Talmud Chagiga 11b describes a person who questions matters out of man's range as better off as never having been born. The Mishna thereby warns us from attempting to exceed our limits. The Rabbis too stated, "In matters greater than you, don't investigate."

Use your intelligence to answer your own question: First step; realize with your honesty and intelligence that you see no evidence of anything but the external reality you perceive, you see no evidence of anything but the internally apprehended knowledge you contemplate, and you see no evidence of anything but your rational faculty which uncovers these two areas of knowledge. Nothing else has ever been perceived except for the external, physical world, the internal world of ideas, and our faculty of intelligence. This is an ironclad "proof" (see, we are using reason!) that there are no other methods of operation available to man.

Realize that your very inquiry is a "search", i.e., your question, "Isn't there a level of reality, which supercedes logic?" is a search, which by definition, must desire an "answer". What would be a satisfying "answer"? Any answer can only be based on "reason". So you see, you sought a reasonable response, admitting yourself, that reason is THE tool for identifying something as real! □