

TORAH FOR ITS OWN SAKE

by

Prof. Norman Lamm*

In this book Norman Lamm sets himself the task of explaining the meaning given by R. Chayyim of Wolozhin (1749-1822) to the phrase "Torah for its own sake". R. Chayyim was a disciple of the Gaon of Vilna and founder of the famous Wolozhin Yeshivah, prototype of the Lithuanian Torah Colleges which made Lithuania the intellectual centre of world Jewry. His influence is still very much alive in numerous Yeshivot today, and therefore it is important to pay attention to this study for an understanding of contemporary Jewish religious thought. The author analyses *Nefesh ha-Chayyim* (1st ed., 1824), which R. Chayyim on his death-bed charged his heirs to publish.

The first chapter deals with the historical background of the era; the relation of R. Chayyim both to his teacher, the Gaon of Vilna, and to Chassidim; the founding of Wolozhin Yeshivah; and R. Chayyim's views on education.

Chapter 2 contains a description of *Nefesh ha-Chayyim*; its relation to similar works published in that era; its purpose; and an account of R. Chayyim's other works. Lamm attempts to show that *Nefesh ha-Chayyim* was not intended primarily as an attack upon Chassidism, nor as an ethical work designed for the common man. It is rather a record of the fundamental religious beliefs through which R. Chayyim viewed the important and serious problems facing world Jewry. The ethics, and the implied attack upon Chassidism, followed from those views but they were not the prime intention of the author. A cogent case is presented and the conflicting opinions cited at length.

Chapter 3 discusses the centrality of Torah study in Judaism and the outstanding primacy given to it by R. Chayyim. In effect *Nefesh ha-Chayyim* is a paean of glorification of Torah study. The Torah is not simply the cause of Israel's continued existence, as well as that of the universe, but also the means to human knowledge of God, and mystically part of his essence. Study of halakhah is the exclusive comprehensive link between man and his Maker, and is *the* means of influencing man to repentance and his

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real purpose in living. The Torah is not so much a gift from God to man but part of His Very Being. The philosophical and metaphysical bases of this belief are discussed.

In chapter 4 the relation between Torah study and the practice of the precepts is dealt with. After discussing the Talmudic, medieval Jewish philosophic, and Chassidic views, Lamm states that for R. Chayyim Torah study is not simply the means to the practice of the precepts, but is itself the most important of the precepts. Whereas each precept receives its importance as being a specific way of serving God, the study of Torah is the comprehensive mode of such service. Basing himself upon *Avot* 6:1, "R. Meir said: He who occupies himself with the study of Torah for its own sake achieves many things . . . and it magnifies and exalts him above all things", R. Chayyim explains that in this connection "things" is to be identified with precepts. Hence Torah study is superior to all the precepts.

Chapter 5 discusses the potential meanings of the phrase, "Torah for its own sake", and the motivations to its study. These are: (a) functional, i. e. the need to study Torah in order to know the precepts and their method of execution; (b) religious, i. e. the study of Torah as a means of expressing the love of God, a meaning given to it by kabbalists and Chassidim; and (c) cognitive, i. e. the study of Torah for the sake of Torah itself. It is this last meaning which is adopted by R. Chayyim. Accordingly the fundamental purpose of Torah study is that study itself. When the phrase "for its own sake" is used in connection with other precepts it can mean either investing an object with sanctity, as in writing a scroll of the Torah, or preparing the object for a specific purpose, as in preparing unleavened bread for Passover. With Torah study, however, the purpose is not external but turns back upon itself – Torah study is intended for the sake of Torah. Knowledge of the precepts derived through study is secondary to the actual study, though to study without intending to act is a violation of Torah study.

In chapter 6 the author discusses the various meanings given to "Torah for its own sake" in rabbinic literature. The view of Maimonides that Torah study should be an expression of man's love for God and not utilitarian, as well as those of various Chassidic authors who emphasise the religious aspect of such study are elaborated.

Chapter 7 shows why, according to R. Chayyim, Torah study cannot possibly be regarded as an act of religious worship. The mental exertion essential to understand Torah leaves no place for religious experience. Hala-khah study demands concentration of the intellect on the prosaic matters under discussion, whether these be such topics as menstruation and sacrificial rite, or the various aspects of civil law in which legal discussion could not be pursued with acumen were the student to attempt to achieve devotion to God while striving to clarify the argument. Torah studied for its own sake confers benefit upon the creation as a whole. Were it to cease even for a

moment, the universe would revert to chaos. The study of Torah for its own sake elevates man to a status transcending natural causes. The intellectual approach is profoundly religio-mystic. Thus Torah for the sake of Torah is not to be confused with art for art's sake. The ultimate consequence of Torah study is objective, leading to true knowledge and love of God and is no mere subjective exercise. Although the intent of the student be not devotion to God, yet the study of Torah is itself a declaration of adhesion to the Unity, and by his toil to understand the student causes the Divine Presence to become manifest.

There are rabbinic statements which are in flagrant contradiction to one another. On the one hand, it is stated that one who studies Torah not for its own sake were better never to have been born; and on the other, numerous sayings value the study of Torah even if not undertaken for its own sake, because it can eventually lead man to study for its own sake. Chapter 8 deals specifically with this dilemma. There are three categories of study not for the sake of Torah: (i) those who study with no specific intent, being neutral and lacking any awareness of the true motive for Torah study, their study stemming from habit; (ii) those whose study is egotistical, arising from the desire for material benefit, honour, social standing, and the like; (iii) study with aggressive purposes, with the intent to use such knowledge to display intellectual superiority, as a weapon in personal quarrels, or for vindictive reasons. The stricture that a man were better never to have been born should he study Torah not for its own sake applies to this last category. The first two categories are laudable, because they are a means to the study of Torah for its own sake. Initially it is impossible for man to attain to the study of Torah for the sake of Torah. For this reason, such study is beloved of God. They are rungs to the heights of study for its own sake. Moreover though most of a man's study be for ulterior motives, yet if he is constant in study it is impossible on occasion not to transcend these motives and to attain to Torah study for the sake of Torah. On those occasions man's entire Torah study is elevated to study for the sake of Torah. Hence it is essential to respect those who spend their whole time in Torah study even if it be for an ulterior motive. To demand that all men study only for the sake of Torah is self-defeating and would lead eventually to abandonment of study.

If the purpose of studying Torah is for Torah, then its relation to the fear of God requires examination. This is discussed in chapter 9. Implicit in learning must be the intention to fulfil all the precepts. Moreover, man's penetration to the inner core of Torah is dependent on his fear of God. A man who does not prepare himself to fear God will not only be unable to attain to full knowledge of the Torah, but will eventually lose the knowledge he possessed and his Torah will be rejected. However, a firm division must be made between fear of God and Torah study in order that

the Torah study be not disordered by the religious emotion. In fact true Torah study strengthens the fear of God. A section of this chapter deals with the study of moralistic literature to which but little time should be devoted, and in which Lamm argues that R. Chayyim is not to be regarded as the prime instigator of the *musar* movement.

The work has three appendices. The first discusses a publication intended as a reply to *Nefesh ha-Chayyim*. The second deals with the moralistic literature referred to by R. Chayyim. The third is a criticism of Finkelstein's views on Torah study in the Tannaitic era.

Although the work utilises the terminology of mysticism and the Kabbalah, this does not disturb the reading and clarity of presentation.

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