

יסודות:

# Foundations

THE THIRTEEN PRINCIPLES

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Dedicated:

With heartfelt recognition of all my Rabbeim, teachers, mentors, friends, family and students who directed me any amount closer towards the דרך ישרה. To my dear wife and children for providing endless eternity within the small yet precious confines of our local life. I thank the Almighty for the power of Teshuva and for giving strength to the weary.

הנותן ליכל  
הוא ייתן  
כח ובינה, עצה ותשובה,  
מנוחה ונחלה, דעת ותשובה  
כיה"ר ונ"א  
ה"ח אלול ה'תש"פ

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# **Foreword:** **Where Are We**

## **Foreword:**

# **Where Are We**

Have you ever wondered: how did we get here? What are all these Mitzvot? And what is this vague collection of writings, laws and stories people refer to as “Torah” – like, literally, what does the word Torah even mean? Or, have you thought to yourself: why am I alive? What does it mean to be human; and more, to be part of the Jewish people? What is the point of life, if there is any?

In order to make sense of things, we need to start from the beginning. You see, most people grow up learning all sorts of ideas in school or from their local synagogue – but very rarely is anyone taught what it’s all about, and why.

Now, there’s a good reason for that, to an extent – it has to do with age and maturity. Parents want what’s best for their children, and sometimes the children aren’t developed enough to understand the significance and benefit of their parents’ demand. It’s not anyone’s fault! That’s just how the human brain develops. Most humans don’t reach peak neural functionality until their mid-twenties.

This implies that a lot of education begins as persuasion and habituation. In other words, parents (and the teachers they hire) encourage their children to study the information that will ultimately serve them best, and to act in the proper behavior which, one day, they will see more clearly as being a healthy and enjoyable way to live.

But as you know, as children grow older, we become less satisfied with following orders, and become more interested in knowing “Why?” before we agree to follow along. And that’s where things get challenging. Because now, the parent or teacher can’t just get away with teaching information and behavior, but rather they must couple those with content and insight. And, guess what? That’s a lot more challenging.

And so, we arrive where we are now, having this conversation. This is a place which is dedicated to exploring the fundamentals of life, Torah, Judaism, society, humanity, personal fulfilment and national identity. To do so, we will investigate some of the most basic and primary aspects of Yisrael’s identity and what we are capable of accomplishing. In particular, we will examine concepts which lie at the bedrock of Yisrael – who are we, what values are we committed to, and which concepts provide the unique vision of life which has defined our people from time immemorial.

This book is structured around the Thirteen Foundational Principles as codified by Rambam, which we will learn more about as we move on. First, though, we will examine a number of crucial points which are important to orient ourselves around in order to properly engage with this book. The need for context, the moorings of Yisrael’s unique civilization, and the ideal mindset for enlightened growth within the structure of Yisrael’s priceless knowledge and insight.



# **Introduction: Why Foundations**

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# **Why Foundations**

We live in a world filled with incredible diversity and individuality. Just a few short decades ago, only the very fortunate could even conceive of being the masters of their own destiny to the extent possible today. In today's world, the most underprivileged can rise to the highest rungs of society by the power of self-expression alone: unfettered liberties and opportunities are just one viral video away.

One of the numerous effects of this fundamental shift in human society is the way in which wide-spread and collective perspectives have fallen to the wayside. Whereas it used to be that one's parents were the primary source of knowledge and information in a child's life, that is no longer entirely the case. As a result, the relevance of tradition – the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation – have become increasingly irrelevant for today's youth. Whereas the fears of eternal damnation or bliss in exchange for obedience used to be overwhelmingly effective, our generation grabs life by the horns and believes it can find its' own way through life. By and large, they are correct.

Some things, however, cannot be exchanged. When we no longer look to the past, we lack the perspective to inspire an informed future. They say that "history repeats itself"; but that is only when her lessons are not used as stepping stones to the next challenge or opportunity. Beliefs which moored civilization caused much illusion and hardship, true – but also opened us to deep and devout experiences of spiritual exaltation. Today's

generation largely lacks the vocabulary to deal with commitments to transcendent values. We've traded in faith for fortune, trust for self-sufficiency, and spiritual ideals for physical pursuits. Sadly, none of these trades were necessary; it is the very short-sightedness of our generation which believes such concepts cannot share the same space in life concomitantly.

And yet, with all the changes humanity has endured, some things do stay the same. While living oblivious to the foundations laid by civilizations before us, we've created structures of our own – local as they may be. Within every realm of our lives, we've created micro-meaning: ways in which things are *supposed* to be done. This is how you run a successful business; these are the essential rules of a healthy relationship; here's how you can grow your social media following in three simple steps. Every company has their corporate values; each institution needs to explain “who we are” and what values they are built upon.

Why are we so insistent to provide structure to our pursuits? Why does every company or brand feel the need to express their corporate philosophy or ethical vision? In truth, we recognize that these things matter, more than we are often willing to be cognizant about. We crave structure and order; we will spend more money on a purchase if the company which makes our clothing tells us a story about the fabric and its' origin story. Context gives us a sense of placement and purpose; it introduces intentionality into what is otherwise chaotic and impersonal.

Within any system, it is context that allows for meaning to emerge from amongst the assorted constituent parts. Indeed, it is difficult to assert the particular value of any given snapshot of reality without framing it within the broader context within which the detail is imbedded. At the highest level of aperture, our lives as a whole require context if we are to feel properly situated within our slice of reality. When we know who we are, where we are, and what we are meant to be doing, we have the capacity to transform our experience from bewildering and chaotic to meaningful and relevant.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known by the acronym Ramchal, was one of the great scholars and Kabbalists of the early eighteenth century.

Although the story of his life would carry us far beyond the limitations of this book, suffice it to say that in a short thirty-nine years Ramchal chartered the course of Yisrael's mind, heart and action through his dozens of influential books and the impact his colorful life made on world Jewry.

Among the many works of his which became historical classics, Ramchal's *Derech Hashem*, or "Way of God", was written towards the end of his life. Always sensitive to structure and layout, *Derech Hashem* sets out the fundamentals of Torah belief and practice concerning humanity's role in this world, the methods for Godly connection, and what we know of God's system by which He conducts all of existence. Published in approximately 1740, *Derech Hashem* attempts to provide a consistent path and context for viewing reality and the interplay between man and God.

In the opening of the book's introduction, Ramchal explains the value of what he's written. He uses the following metaphor to illustrate how a clear understanding of the structure and layout of any system can completely change how we experience any number of details contained within the system. Writes Ramchal as follow:

### **Derech Hashem, Introduction**

The advantage of knowing matters within the structure of their parts, divisions and orders of interrelationship, in contrast with knowing matters without such distinction, [is similar to the] advantage of seeing a garden, beautiful in her flowerbeds, her paths elegant and symmetrically aligned, [in contrast to] seeing a wild thicket of reeds or an overgrown forest.

For the imagery of many parts, without knowing their connections and true relative positions in the structure of everything which they are a part of (which they comprise) – for an inquisitive mind – will merely yield a

### **דרך השם, הקדמה**

יתרון ידיעת הדברים על מתכנת חלקיהם כפי מחלקותם וסדרי יחסיהם, מידעתם שלא בהבחנה, כיתרון ראית הגן המהדר בערוגותיו ומיפה במסלותיו ובשורות מטעו, מראית חורש הקנים והיער הצומח בערבוב.

כי אמנם ציור חלקים רבים, אשר לא נודע קשרם ומדרגתם האמתית בבנין הכל המרכב מהם, אצל השכל המשתוקק לדעת, אינו אלא משא כבד בלא

heavy burden without any passion, in which he will toil and work and just become exhausted without satisfaction. For a large component of any thing is its' interrelationship with its related aspects and its' relative position within existence. So, if these connections are hidden from him, he will find himself involved without satiation and his desire will be filled with pain, without providing him security. Not so for one who knows a matter in its' structure! As he carries it, it reveals itself to him as it truly is, continually enlightening towards wherever he shall turn, and in the beauty of his work he takes pleasure and delight.

חֲמֻדָּה, שִׁיגַע בּוֹ וַיַּעֲמַל  
וְנִלְאָה וְעִיף וְאֵין נֶחֱת...  
שְׁהִי חֶלֶק גָּדוֹל מֵהַדָּבָר,  
הוּא יִחְסִיו עִם הַמַּתִּיחִים לוֹ  
וּמִדְרָגָתוֹ בְּמַצִּיאוֹת, וְזֶה  
נֶעֱלַם מִמֶּנּוּ, וְנִמְצְאָת  
תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ טוֹרְדָתוֹ מִבְּלִי  
שְׂבַעְתָּהּ וְחֲמֻדָּתוֹ מִכְּאִיבָתוֹ  
וְאֵין מְנוּחָה. לֹא כֵן הִיִּדַע  
דָּבָר עַל אַפְנֵיו, שְׂבָהִיּוֹת  
נוֹשָׂאוֹ מִתְגַּלָּה לְעֵינָיו בְּעֵלִיל  
כְּמוֹת שְׁהוּא, הַלּוֹךְ יִלֵּךְ  
וְהַשֶּׁכֶּל אֶל אֲשֶׁר יִפְנֶה שָׁם,  
וּבִיפִי מְלֶאכֶתוֹ יִתְעַנֵּג  
וַיִּשְׂתַּעֲשַׂע.

Ramchal opens by comparing experiences. On the one hand, we reflect on the experience of finding one's self in a well-tended botanical garden. Here, every species is carefully cultivated and arranged according to its' natural climate and within a careful color scheme across the entire garden. Unique flora from across the globe have been collected and made accessible in a particular way, ultimately to please the visitor. Everything has its' place.

What experience do we undergo in this place? We are at peace; life is beautiful, bright, and clearly arranged. As we traverse its' numerous paths, we are pleased by the flowing rows of flower and the seamless arrangement. We enjoy the sense of calm and security that the careful structure of the garden provides the visitor, and leave the visit relaxed, energized and with a positive impression of the garden.

Let's contrast the above with finding one's self in the midst of a densely overgrown thicket. The dry twigs are tangled in impossibly complex ways across the floor. A variety of intrusive weeds grow freely amidst the undefined clusters of struggling plant life. The few meager flowers which have fought hard enough to survive their savage neighbors are nonetheless overcrowded by the forcefully multiplying shrubbery.

With no easy way to turn, a visitor must struggle to make his way through the difficult terrain, causing both emotional and physical strain. If he makes it through the overgrown mess, he will leave exhausted, distressed and with a negative impression of the thicket.

Explains Ramchal: the same is true with systems of life in general, and the experience of Torah to Yisrael in particular. We can either find ourselves in an overgrown jungle, or find ourselves in a beautiful garden. If we learn to trace Truth's pattern from amidst our experiences and encounters, we can reap the enjoyments available to you Torah can be either recognized as a beautifully arranged, calming garden, or mistaken for a catastrophic mess of disparate details. If we are to recognize Torah and tap into its' untold riches, we must learn to see its' artistic arrangement and structure of thought. In recognizing the breadth of intricacy and beauty within Torah, we become capable of enjoying the sights and garnering the energy available within the Torah's garden.

In understanding the structure of the blueprint, itself, we acquire the lenses through which to perceive and appreciate all of Torah's endless pleasures. Having a broad framework enlivens the details, providing structure, support and breadth to each element it subsumes. The broader the context, the brighter each detail can shine. When we have principles guiding our perspective, we find ourselves anchored in reality to a greater extent.

The Gemara presents the centrality of context in Judaism with an astonishing interpretation of a verse. The Torah describes

### Talmud Bavli, Yoma 72a

**Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "And this is the Torah which Moshe placed [sam] before the children of Yisrael" (Deut. 4:44)? If one merits, the Torah becomes a potion [sam] of life for him. If one does not merit, the Torah becomes a potion of death for him. And this idea is what Rava said: For one who is faithful to her, Torah, and immerses himself in it with love, it is an elixir of life;**

### תלמוד בבלי, מסכת

### יומא דף עב/א

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי:  
מאי דכתיב: (דברים ד:מד)  
"וזאת התורה אשר שם  
משה" זכה, נעשית לו  
סם חיים. לא זכה,  
נעשית לו סם מיתה.  
והינו דאמר רבא: דאומן

but for one who is not faithful, it is a potion of death.

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said that Rabbi Yonatan raised a contradiction: It was written: **"The precepts of the Lord are upright, gladdening the heart"** (Ps. 19:9), but it is also written: **"The word of the Lord refines"** (Ps. 18:31). The word for refines, *tzerufa*, literally means to burn or melt. He reconciles these verses as follows: For one who **is deserving**, the Torah **gladdens him**; for one who **is not deserving**, it **burns him to death**. Reish Lakish said: This lesson emerges from that second verse itself: For one who **is deserving**, the Torah **refines him for life**; for one who **is not deserving**, it **refines him for death**.

לָהּ, סָמָא דְחַיִּי, דִּלָּא  
אוּמָן לָהּ, סָמָא דְמוֹתָא.  
אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר  
נַחֲמָנִי: רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן רָמִי,  
בְּתִיב: (תהילים יט:ט)  
"פְּקוּדֵי ה' יִשְׂרִים"  
מִשְׁמַחֵי לֵב", וּבְתִיב: (שם  
יה) "אֲמַרְתָּ ה' צְרוּפָה?"  
זָכָה, מִשְׁמַחְתּוֹ, לֹא זָכָה,  
צוֹרֶפְתּוֹ לְמִיתָה. רַבִּי  
שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן לֵקִישׁ אָמַר:  
מְגוּפִיָּה דִקְרָא נִפְקָא,  
זָכָה צוֹרֶפְתּוֹ לְחַיִּים. לֹא  
זָכָה צוֹרֶפְתּוֹ לְמִיתָה.

In the above Gemara, Rabbi Yehoshua records a fascinating interpretation of a verse commonly recited when removing the Torah scroll from the Aron. While describing how Moshe placed the Torah before the nation of Yisrael, the verse uses the word שָׂם, meaning placed. However, audially this word is essentially identical to the word for a potion, elixir or drug, סָם. Traditionally, such coincidences within the language of Torah are seen as intentional and, therefore, pregnant with meaning.

Accordingly, Rabbi Yehoshua explains that there is, indeed, a veiled implication within the Torah's words. The Torah acts as a potion upon its' recipient. As with all drugs, the effects can vary significantly depending on an assortment of variables, including the constitution of the person imbibing in the drug. Here, Rabbi Yehoshua argues that Torah's influence on a human being is also proportionate to the type of person who is absorbing the Torah. If the individual is faithful to Torah, with an understanding of its' general meaning and an interest in growing by means of its' guidance, then the Torah acts as an elixir of life to that individual. In contrast, if a person indulges in the Torah without the proper

advance fortification, he finds himself at risk of being poisoned by the very thing which could have brought life and vitality into his system.

In a much shorter work, known as *Derech Etz HaChaim* – which is itself really an introduction to the longer Kabbalistic work, *Klach Pitchei Chochma* – Ramchal described this need for context from another angle, appealing towards reason and natural sensibilities about the importance of thinking about big questions in our lives.

### **The Path to the Tree of Life**

Most of humankind spend their entire lives thinking about their practical needs and business concerns, concerns of the local moment. But why don't we focus our hearts for even one moment to also think about substantial matters: what am I? Why do I exist in this world? Or, what does the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed is He, desire of my life? What is the end-goal of all this? Asking these questions is the greatest and most powerful antidote one can use in overcoming our natural drives – it is simple, yet its abilities are great, and its' fruits are numerous. A person should set aside a minimum of one hour each day, free from all other thoughts, to contemplate solely upon this matter.

### **מאמר דרך עץ החיים**

הלא האדם רב שנות ימיו  
עומד לחשב חשבונות עסקיו,  
עסקי חיי שעה. ולמה לא ישים  
אל לבבו אפלו שעה אחת גם  
לזאת לחשב מחשבת ממש:  
מה הוא? ולמה בא לעולם? או  
מה מבקש ממנו מלך מלכי  
המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא?  
ומה יהיה סוף כל עניניו?  
זאת היא התרופה היותר  
גדולה וחזקה שתוכל להמציא  
נגד היצר, והיא קלה, ופעלתה  
גדולה, ופריה רב שיעמד  
האדם בכל יום לפחות שעה  
אחת פנוי משאר כל  
המחשבות לחשב רק על הענין  
הזה שאמרתי.

We aren't wired to search for truth at all costs. Asking questions and clarifying the bedrock concepts of one's life is difficult yet infinitely rewarding. We are charged by Ramchal with the responsibility of seeking out our identity; of clarifying one's purpose in the world; of understanding the meaning behind our thoughts and action in this life. This is deemed so vital that a person should dedicate "a minimum of one hour each day", in Ramchal's words, to consider these questions and their implications for our lives. It is to this extent that our greatest teachers encouraged the

reflection on fundamental questions bearing immense practical application, rather than the more local considerations which generally fill our thoughts.

It is interesting to note that the more foundational something is, the most precious it is seen as being. In other words: it is not merely that some ideas are more important than others; in their being more important, they also carry a certain special weight. They *mean* something more than other ideas. They possess what is called כְּבוֹד, *Kavod*, literally meaning *gravitas* or weight. Kavod speaks of the significance an entity bears and the respect it deserves in recognition for what or who it is and represents. In every close familial or social relationship, the Torah calls upon members of Yisrael to recognize and attribute the requisite Kavod of that relationship – as the practical actions vary and pertain to each specific circumstance, of course.

Not only humans, but items and even ideas require Kavod. There are items which, according to Torah, are special and sacred, and aren't to be used for anything else or by anyone else except the unique person who is meant to be involved. The idea of specificity and individual roles and responsibilities is hardwired into the Torah's entire narrative about Yisrael. It is particularly true regarding items such as utensils used in the Beit HaMikdash – the Holy Temple in Jerusalem – and sacred writings such as the Torah scroll, Tefillin or Mezuzot. Items which carry the name of God all bear the highest level of Kavod and must be treated with the utmost sensitivity.<sup>1</sup> Even with regards to the foods we eat we find attention in rabbinic writings towards avoiding discarding foods which are otherwise usable, known as בִּלְתִּישְׁחִית. The sensitivity to value is pervasive throughout the guidelines of Torah.

This is also why the scholars of our people implored us to always study Torah in terms of principles. Principles bear the greatest Kavod by virtue of their broad applicability. The Sifrei, a Tannaic commentary on Devarim, records a discussion about how a person should go about studying Torah. Should I just pick up any Jewish book and start reading? Is there a more

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<sup>1</sup> The guidance pertaining to this can be found in Rambam's Hilchot Sefer Torah 10:2

efficient way to study? When I'm reading, what should I be trying to take away from the text? Or, on a deeper level: is there a better way to learn whatever it is I'm learning, in such a way that I can extract more meaning and insight from any given detail of Torah I happen to study? Here, the great leader of Yisrael, the second-century CE president Rabbi Yehudah the Prince records the nation's tradition on the matter as follows:

**Sifrei, Ha'azinu Ch. 306**

Rabbi Yehudah would say: One should gather words of Torah as principles; for if he gathers them as particulars, they weary him and he is at a loss of what to do. An analogy: One going to Caesarea and requiring one hundred or two hundred *zuzim* for expenses – If he takes them in *perutot* (small coins), they weary him, and he is at a loss; but if he melts them into *sela'im* (large coin), he can change them wherever he wishes.

**ספרי, האזינו פרשה שו**  
רבי יהודה אומר: לעולם הוי  
אדם בונס דברי תורה כְּלָלִים,  
שְׂאֵם בּוֹנֶסֶן פְּרָטִים – מִיִּגְעִים  
אוֹתוֹ, וְאֵין יוֹדֵעַ מָה לַעֲשׂוֹת.  
מִשָּׁל לְמֶלֶךְ שֶׁהָלַךְ לְקִיסְרִי  
וְצָרִיף מֵאָה זָזִי אוּ מֵאֲתָתִים זָזִי  
הוֹצֵאָה: נוֹטְלִים פְּרָט – מִיִּגְעִים  
אוֹתוֹ, וְאֵין יוֹדֵעַ מָה לַעֲשׂוֹת;  
אֲבָל אִם מְצַרְפֵּם, וְעוֹשֶׂה אוֹתוֹ  
סְלָעִים – פּוֹרֵט וּמוֹצִיא בְּכָל  
מָקוֹם שִׁירְצָה.

One should strive to learn whatever information he does as principles, rather than as details. In the analogy, Rabbi Yehudah compares miniscule details of information to a heavy pocket of loose small change; whereas a broad and sturdy principle of knowledge is likened to a light, thin and versatile hundred-dollar bill in one's hand. With a principle, you are free to travel as you like, secure in your ability to apply to new circumstances – the conversion is easy. But an individual filled with details that lack the clarity and applicability of a principle is bound to feel wearied and insecure with his knowledge.

Foundations secure an individual in his own life; details within those foundations help to flush out the way these foundations manifest. Life, filled with scattered details without any overarching principles to justify the details, winds up exhausting and unfulfilling. Gathering our learning into broad and applicable principles of thought and action breathes vigor and purpose into the moments of life. In letting our learning become more

than data, we recognize the כבוד and preciousness of wisdom and Torah itself. While details are the “nuts and bolts” of our lives, principles shed light and meaning onto every detail and enhance the significance of their constituent parts.

As we continue forward into exploring Rambam’s Thirteen Principles, which provides the general structure of this book, we should bear in mind how precious these ideas are. Their value is relative to their uniqueness. They coalesce into the unique system of values which allows for the structured survival and thriving of Yisrael.

Our tradition about the centrality of principles goes deeper. One opinion in the Midrash – a collection of traditions and rabbinic interpretations on the Torah from the first-century CE – maintains that what Moshe ultimately learned from God on Sinai was Torah *as principles*. Towards the end of the book of Shemot, when Moshe descends from Mount Sinai after all the events of the revelation, the Midrash picks up on an anomaly in the text. The words used in describing Moshe’s descent are peculiar – and, as usual, the Midrash does not let the irregularity slide by. The verses describe God *giving* Moshe the Torah after forty days spent studying together, rather than describing it as having been *learned* by Moshe. Wouldn’t it have been more accurate to say Moshe learned it, rather than God gave it, if the subject matter at hand is what Moshe received? Explains the Midrash as follows:

#### **Midrash Shemot Rabba 41:6**

“And He *gave* to Moshe” (Ex. 31:18) – Rabbi Abahu said: throughout the forty days that Moshe spent up above, he would learn Torah and then forget it. He said to God: Master of the universe! I’ve spent forty days, yet I know nothing! What did the Holy One do? Once the forty days were complete, the Holy One gave it to him as a gift – as it says, “and He *gave* to Moshe”. But did Moshe really learn *all* of Torah? Does it not say of the Torah,

#### **מדרש שמות רבה מאו**

דָּבָר אַחֵר: (שמות לא:יח) “וַיֵּתֶן אֶל מֹשֶׁה”, אָמַר רַבִּי אַבְהוּ, כָּל אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם שָׁעָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְמַעַלָּה, הָיָה לוֹמֵד תּוֹרָה וְשׁוֹכֵחַ, אָמַר לוֹ: רַבּוֹן הָעוֹלָם, יֵשׁ לִי אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, וְאֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ דָּבָר! מָה עָשָׂה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא – מִשְׁהַשְּׁלִים אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם נָתַן לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מִתְּנָה, שָׁנְאָמַר: “וַיֵּתֶן אֶל מֹשֶׁה”. וְכִי כָּל הַתּוֹרָה לָמַד

"Its' measure is lengthier than the land; it is more expansive than the seas" (Job 11:9)? Rather, the Holy One taught it to Moshe as principles – as it says, "as He *principled* (as in כָּלַל; literally: finished) in speaking with him".

מִשֶּׁה, וְהָא כְּתִיב בַּתּוֹרָה (אִיּוֹב י"א:ט) "אֲרָכָה מֵאֶרֶץ מִדְּבָר וּרְחֹבָה מִנֵּי יָם", וְלֹא אֲרָבָעִים יוֹם לְמִדְּבָר מִשֶּׁה? אֵלֹא כָּלָלִים לְמִדְּבָרוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמִשֶּׁה, הָיָה: "כְּכֹלּוֹתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ".

In an interesting play on words, the Midrash finds another allusion in the verse to how Moshe learned from God. The verse says that God gave Moshe the Torah "as He finished speaking to him" - כְּכֹלּוֹתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ. The word for "as he finished", כְּכֹלּוֹתוֹ, is built of the same letters which comprise the word for a principle, כָּלַל. Accordingly, the Midrash expounds the verse to mean that it was only once Moshe received the Torah *as principles* was he then able to properly descend the mountain. What Moshe came away with from his learning with God was principles; we, too, are charged to emerge from the experience of Torah study with a deeper grasp of the underlying principles expressed in the words of Torah.

Rambam, who we will learn much more about in chapters to come, exemplified this approach throughout his teachings and writings. Many of his books share the express goal of outlining the structure of certain aspects of the Torah. At the conclusion of Rambam's commentary on Mesechet Berachot, he proceeds into a lengthy tangential discussion about divine justice and reward and punishment. At the conclusion, he explains why he felt it necessary to include this important discussion within the commentary at this point. He writes as follows:

**Rambam's Commentary to Mishnah, Berachot 9:7**

... This isn't the most fitting place to speak further about this idea. But my approach, consistently, is that wherever there is any hint to a matter of faithfulness – I will explain some part of it. For me, it is more important to

**פירוש המשנה להרמב"ם, מסכת ברכות טז**

... וְאֵין מְקוֹם זֶה מֵתִאִים לְדַבֵּר בּוֹ עַל הָעֲנִיָּן הַזֶּה, אֲלֹא שְׂדֵרְכִי תָמִיד בְּכָל מְקוֹם שֶׁיֵּשׁ אִיזָה רָמֵז בְּעֲנִיָּנִי אֲמוֹנָה אֲבֹאֵר מִשְׁהוּ, כִּי חֲשׂוֹב אֶצְלִי לְהַסְבִּיר

explain a foundational principle than anything else that I teach.

יסוד מִהִסְדּוֹת יוֹתֵר מִכָּל דְּבָר  
אַחֵר שֶׁאֲנִי מְלַמֵּד.

The impact of this statement can be lost on one who lacks an appreciation of the sheer amount of teaching and explaining Rambam did in his lifetime. This was a man who masterfully arranged and explained the entirety of the Oral Torah in his crowning achievement, the Mishneh Torah. Someone who wrote the first comprehensive commentary on the Mishnah since the composition of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. A brilliant doctor who authored numerous original and authoritative medical guides while serving the Sultan of Egypt. A scholar whose writings have been among the central texts of Yisrael for the past eight hundred years. A historic leader who led the Jewish community in Egypt and inspired an intellectual and religious revolution which lasted centuries. For Rambam to step aside and inform his readership of his perspective on teaching principles provides us a valuable insight into his orientation towards Torah and structure overall.

There is another aspect in Rambam's words which bears mention. Rambam has established an interrelationship between Emunah and Yesodot; as he puts it, it is when he is addressing עֲנִינֵי אֱמוּנָה, *matters of faithfulness*, that Rambam launches into the presentation of Yesodot. In other words, Rambam sees Emunah itself as a foundational idea, deserving frequent attention and clarification. We will find the relationship between these two concepts to be significant, both in our understanding of Emunah as well as in clarifying Rambam's closing words to the Thirteen Principles.

The truth is, though, that this is not limited to Torah. In every area of our lives, we crave clearly defined terms. We want to know what our role is, what's expected of us by our social settings; we hate being left without resolution to a story; we're bothered when we can't find the words to explain how we feel. That's even why we're willing to pay extravagant prices for high-definition TV screens: anything which can provide us sharper focus, brighter colors, and a more vibrant picture of reality.

In another monumental letter written by Rambam, known as Iggeret Teiman or Letter to Yemen, Rambam stresses this idea of the importance of orienting one's self towards the underlying context of things. In speaking to the Jewish communities of Yemen who had written to Rambam, seeking advice in the dark world of harsh persecution and existential threats by radical Muslim Almohad tribes who were savaging the continent at the time, Rambam offered clarity, insight and courage to those enduring these difficult circumstances. Amongst his numerous insights is introduced the following idea:

### **Rambam, Iggeret Teiman**

Here, it is proper for you to give your attention towards understanding what I am about to say. Know, that no human would ever imagine to take one statement from a flow of connected ideas, and [attempt to] learn from it. Rather, it is necessary to see what precedes the idea, and what follows it, in order complete the idea and know the purpose of its' being said – then, one may learn from it. If it were possible one a human to learn from ideas disassociated from that which precedes and succeeds it, it would be possible for one to say that God, may He be blessed and exalted, warns us in the Torah against listening to any of our prophets, nor to pay heed to them or their signs! After all, it says (Deut. 13:4), "Do not listen to the words of that prophet"! Similarly, one could suggest that the Holy One commands us to serve idolatry! – after all, it says (Deut. 11:16), "And you will serve other gods, and you will bow to them" – along with many other similar things as this. The meaninglessness is evident; one does not evince proof from any verse at all,

### **רמב"ם, אגרת תימן**

וְכַאן רְאוּי לָךְ לְתַת דַּעְתְּךָ  
וּלְהַבִּין מַה שְּׁאוּמַר. דַּע כִּי  
לֹא יִתְכַן שֶׁהָאָדָם יִכְרֹת דְּבוּר  
מִסִּים מִדְּבָרִים רְצוּפִים וְיִלְמַד  
מִהֶן, אֲלֵא חַיִּב לִרְאוֹת מַה  
לִפְנֵיו וּמַה לְאַחֲרָיו כְּדִי  
שִׁישְׁלֵם הָעֲנִין וְיֵדַע מִטֶּרֶת  
אוּמְרוֹ וְאֵז לִלְמַד מִמֶּנּוּ. וְאֵלּוּ  
הָיָה אֶפְשָׁר לְאָדָם לִלְמַד  
מִדְּבָרִים כְּרוּתִים מִמָּה  
שֶׁלִּפְנֵיהֶם וּמַה שְּׁלְאַחֲרֵיהֶם,  
הָיָה אֶפְשָׁר לְאוּמַר לוֹמַר כִּי  
ה' יִתְבָּרַךְ וְיִתְעַלֶּה הַזְהִירָנוּ  
בַּתּוֹרָה מִלְּהַשְׁמֹעַ לְשׁוֹם נְבִיא  
מִן הַנְּבִיאִים וְשֶׁלֹּא נִפְנֶה אֵלָיו  
וְלְאוֹתוֹתָיו וְהוּא אָמַר "לֹא  
תִשְׁמַע אֶל דְּבַרֵּי הַנְּבִיא  
הַהוּא" (דְּבָרִים יג:ד). וְכֵן הָיָה  
אוּמַר כִּי ה' צִוָּנוּ לַעֲבֹד  
עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה וְהוּא אָמַר  
"וְעַבַּדְתֶּם שֵׁם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים  
וְכו'" (דְּבָרִים יא:טז), וְכֵל  
הַדּוּמָה לְזֶה רַבִּים מְאֹד בְּכָל  
דְּבוּר. וְזֶה בְּטוּלוֹ פָּשׁוּט, לְפִי  
שֶׁאֵין לִלְמַד מִפְּסוּק בְּלָל עַד

until he knows the intention of the idea  
from its' context before and after; then,  
he may understand the idea.

שְׁתוּדַע בּוֹנֵת הַפְּסוּק מִמָּה  
שֶׁלִּפְנֵי וּמִמָּה שֶׁאַחֲרָיו וְאַז  
יִבֵּן עֲנִינוּ.

Here, perhaps to the greatest extent, we find how a stress on context and the clarification of foundational ideas comes to the forefront of our engagement with wisdom. Rambam stresses that no one would intelligently expect to understand a single isolated piece of data without seeing it within its' original context. Reading any book in such a manner would lead one to horrifically inaccurate understandings of the matter at hand; in some cases, this would be just a benign error, while in others, the results of such irresponsible judgement could be catastrophic. If, for example, the total idea at hand is how to use an advanced medical instrument, using one sentence out of context as the basis for one's understanding could have lethal consequences.

Therefore, continues Rambam, one can never entertain to understand, say, a single phrase from the Torah without considering its' broader contextual placement with the Torah at large: what book is it within? What other subjects are discussed in juxtaposition with it? What are some common denominators linking the flow of ideas in the overall passage? Are there any recurring vocabulary cues present within the text? Finally, what unique aspect of wisdom is this particular nuance of language, implication or inference yielding forth into the unique harvest we each reap from Torah's boundless crop.