

The Torah and the Natural Ways of the World

[View PDF](#)



Rabbi Cherlow is a well-known Rosh Yeshiva in Israel. He is a founding board member of the rabbinic group, Tzohar, and a member of various committees and organizations dealing with Jewish law and ethics. He is the author of numerous books and articles. This article appears in issue 3 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

The Torah opens with the account of the creation of the universe and human beings; the early generations of humanity; the lives of the Patriarchs, Matriarchs, and their children; the slavery in Egypt and the redemption from it—all of this long before the giving of the Torah. The Master of the Universe did not begin the Torah with “I am the Lord your God” and with the giving of the Ten Commandments, but rather with the story of creation—the deeds of human beings and the way the world operated before the Torah was given. The world functioned in its natural glory even before the giving of the Torah. This fact elicited various interpretations in the teachings of our Sages. One of these lessons found expression among our Sages in the phrase, *derekh erets kademah leTorah* (the ways of the world precede the Torah).

In order to understand the significance of this phrase, we must first analyze its various components. The phrase *derekh erets*, in the usage of our Sages, refers to the natural ways of the world. *Derekh erets* is the phrase the Sages use when speaking of earning one’s living through labor; interpersonal relations; principles of good behavior among human beings; natural needs; and all things that are in fact the ways of the world, the way in which the world operates. As for “Torah,” this is explained by many Sages to refer to “the giving of the Torah;” this phrase, in the view of our Sages, emphasizes the fact that long before the giving of the Torah there existed *derekh erets*, the ways of the world.

Does this refer merely to a chronological record? Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, of blessed memory, asserted that this historical fact has broader significance relating to the structure of the Torah. The Torah accepts the natural ways of the world. It does not create *derekh erets*, and certainly does not negate it. *Derekh erets* is the basis for the fulfillment of Torah.

The Torah takes the *derekh erets* that already exists in the world, and builds upon it a second level. This second level is the level of holiness, purity, the unique Torah teachings on relationships among human beings. Many times, the Torah delimits the boundaries of *derekh erets* and demands that human

beings restrict themselves by not following what they might want to do. For example, the Torah accepts the natural *derekh erets* of eating, but it establishes that there are forbidden foods, and that there are forbidden procedures such as the mixing of meat and milk. However, the starting point of the Torah is that human beings eat as a natural part of their functioning, and the halakha does not take issue with that. Sometimes, the Torah expands on the natural ways of the world, requiring humans to be more active and do more than is customary. For example, the Torah commands humans to be fruitful and multiply; according to our Sages, there is also a mitzvah to continue to expand the family even after the basic mitzvah has been fulfilled.

This position has numerous halakhic ramifications. In fact, all of halakha is based on this presumption. It is a common error to think that halakhic texts establish the image of a Jewish person in the world. What establishes this image actually has two sources: the Jew is a citizen of the world and is part of it, and in this respect functions in the framework of all humanity. However, the Jew also is unique, separate and alone, “not reckoned among the nations.” The Jew is, in his or her own way, sustained not merely from the natural ways of the world, but also from the higher level of humanity—the level that includes the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven, mitzvot, and holiness.

This worldview is the key to confronting many problems of our generation. For example, an inseparable aspect of the human personality is the deep connection with culture—as a creator of culture and as one who needs culture. In recent years, we have witnessed a flowering of religious people in many fields of culture, such as the arts and sciences. Naturally, this phenomenon entails many halakhic and intellectual evaluations on the question of the place of culture in the worldview of the religious person. These analyses are quite similar to those that took place in the previous generation on the topic of *Torah u’Mada* (Torah and general knowledge/science).

It is necessary to consider two basic approaches that are reflected in the various analyses of these questions. One approach begins with the premise that we are obligated to find justification for culture or general knowledge/science, and only through this justification is it possible to bring them into our worldview. Some find justification in that these areas enable us to better understand God. Others find justification in that engaging in these areas enables us to influence the world. Still others find justification in various economic concerns, while others find justification in that the non-involvement in these areas will cause spiritual tension—and that one must engage in these areas in order to find some relief. The common denominator of all these religious philosophies is that there is a need for justification.

However, there is no Torah source for this approach. For example, the Torah finds no need to justify the fact that our Patriarchs were wealthy, or that some of our biblical ancestors were physically beautiful, or that our biblical heroes searched for love. The Torah, as has been stated, sees the natural way of life as the foundation of existence. Thus, its expression of ideas relating to wealth, love, beauty, and so forth, is natural and unself-conscious. Likewise, the concern for earning a livelihood by the labor of one’s own hands, one’s partnership with the world, one’s cultural ties, one’s general knowledge—these are self-evident in the Torah. There is no need whatsoever for any justification, since these things are part of the ways of the world. On these foundations, we must build the second level: the prohibitions of mixed species (*kela’im*) that limit the fields of science and agriculture, the principles of modesty that delimit art, and so on with additional mitzvot.

The entire halakha is built this way. The laws of prayer do not establish the needs of humans. These needs are established by the normal ways of the world. Humans pray for what they need in light of the second level of the laws of prayer. The halakha does not essentially establish what is the proper rest for the Sabbath (see the Ramban on Parashat Emor); rest was determined in light of the definitions derived from the world of human beings; on these foundations did the Torah command the laws prohibiting

certain forms of work. The Torah did not essentially establish how a married couple should relate to each other; these relationships are established according to the ways of human beings. Yet, the halakha builds a second level—the laws of family purity. The halakha does not establish what people talk about and what is important for human beings to know; these are established in light of the ways of human beings. However, the halakha limits speech through the prohibition of *lashon hara* (gossip and slander), and through the laws of chastising those who are sinning or of rising to aid someone whose life is in danger.

Without the principle of *derekh erets kademah leTorah*, we would not be able to function properly in the Bet Midrash. We would not be able to make rulings on the laws of how people should dress. It would be impossible to rule on monetary cases if we did not have the principles of natural ownership according to the guidelines of society; it would be impossible to delineate the forbidden labors on Shabbat if we did not first understand the natural workings of the world. We would be obligated to devote the entire governmental budget to healthcare to save lives, and we would be unable to arrange the government's budget in the normal way governments arrange their budgets. The Torah itself indicates, when it discusses monarchy in Israel, the learning from the natural order of the world among the nations, "as all the nations around us." My argument is that although only some of the posekim (rabbinic decisors) have written directly on this topic, in fact all of the posekim throughout the Responsa literature base themselves in a permanent and fixed way on the foundation of the world and the natural way of life. The "news" of the Torah is not in the denial of this principle, but in adopting it, strengthening it, limiting it, sanctifying it, purifying it, and giving it boundaries.

I wish to emphasize that the principle of the naturalness of life is not reflected only in halakhic leniencies. On the contrary, many times it leads to halakhic stringencies of a significant level. It obligates us to relate to natural morality, to the proper interrelationships among people even when no halakha specifically is involved. In this framework, one accepts upon him or herself the ways of the world in the matter of the ethics of warfare and the struggle against military crimes. It obligates us to rest on Shabbat, not merely from the proscribed labors, but even from those things that interfere with Shabbat rest. In fact, in some cases it transforms the notion of *uvdin de'hol* (mundane activities typical of weekdays) into the category of Torah prohibitions, for it is concerned with the natural human ways of rest. It requires a married couple to establish a deep bond between themselves, far beyond the halakhic and legal principles found in the tractate Ketubot. At root, it obligates a religious person to play a role in the development of the world and its advancement on all levels—societal, intellectual, and cultural.

Therefore, the Torah personality resembles a pyramid, specifically in light of the descriptions in the Torah. First, he or she is a being created in God's image, called on to be fruitful and multiply, and to develop the world according to the natural and foundational principles upon which the world operates, in all areas of life, individual and public. Above this level is built the level of the Israelite nation. The Jew does not stand only as an individual before God, but as part of the entire Jewish nation. At the top level are placed the Torah and mitzvot, which nourish the lower stories with the dimension of holiness and clinging to the Master of the Universe. Strengthening this Torah position is the basis of many halakhot and the way of the people of Israel in its relationship with the entire world.