

THE EREZ SERIES

RABBI ADIN
EVEN-ISRAEL
STEINSALTZ

A CONCISE GUIDE TO
MAHSHAVA

AN OVERVIEW OF JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

A Concise Guide to Mahshava
First edition, 2020

Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.
POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 91040, Israel

www.korenpub.com

Original Hebrew Edition © Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, 2018
English translation © Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz 2020

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the Israeli Institute for Talmudic Publication.
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Steinsaltz Center is the parent organization of institutions
established by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz
POB 45187, Jerusalem 91450 ISRAEL
Telephone: +972 2 646 0900, Fax +972 2 624 9454
www.steinsaltz-center.org

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ISBN 978-1-59264-565-7, *hardcover*

Printed and bound in the United States

The Erez Series

Dedicated in loving memory of

Joseph "Erez" Tenenbaum

Whose love of learning, endless curiosity and zest for life
Survived the Destruction
And found full expression in his ultimate return to Zion.

By his son Zisman Tuvia



סדרת ארז

מוקדש לעלוי נשמת

יוסף צבי בן טוביה זיסמן טננבואם

(המכונה ארז)

"אוד מוצל מאש"

שלא נכבה בו אהבת לימוד, סקרנות אין-סופית, ושמחת חיים

ע"י בנו זיסמן טוביה

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Foreword

This book contains an anthology of passages that address profound questions. We focus not only on the content of the passages and descriptions of events, but on responses to questions such as: Why? What is the meaning of this? Much of the material brought here relates to the content of the other books in this series, but this volume also contains a selection of various problems and responses to general questions relating to the nation and the individual, to life, fate, and purpose. Essentially, one will find here a series of meditations and contemplations that are relevant to anyone insofar as he contemplates his own humanity.

The book draws from the writings of many authors that relate, each in their own way, to these essential questions. The array of sources includes works composed since the time of the Sages, beginning approximately in the eighth century, until the twentieth century. One will also find here thoughts and ideas from people who lived more recently, up to the present day. Arguably, one can say that the conceptual and spiritual world of most people up to World War I was similar to that of earlier times, while the modern world we live in can be understood, to a significant extent, as a different conceptual world. It is for this reason that modern writings constitute only a small part of this book.

In addition to longer passages, this volume includes aphorisms and some excerpts from poetry and hymns.

The many topics addressed in this book, which to a degree constitute a review of Jewish thought, are arranged here into three main sections: the Jewish year, the life cycle, and miscellaneous topics. The full list of topics can be found in the detailed table of contents at the front of the book.

At the end of the book there is an appendix that contains short biographies of the many personalities mentioned in the book.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

Introducing the Erez Concise Guides

A Jewish home, at any time or place, cannot be maintained based on the mere identity of its residents as Jews. Whether they conceive of themselves as religious, traditional, or secular, people need to have access to written expression of their tradition through which they can come to know, understand, and “enter” their tradition.

“To enter the tradition” can mean something different for each person. Some are simply curious, others have a particular interest, and there are undoubtedly many Jews who just do not want the worlds of the Jewish spirit to be closed to them. People therefore require bridges and gates to gain access. There is no obligation to use these, but their existence makes it possible for anyone – when that person so desires – to enter, or even to glance within; the way is clear and he or she can do so.

We have thus produced the Erez series which provides different gates by which one can enter the Jewish tradition. Just as it is told about Abraham’s tent that it was open from all four directions in order to welcome guests from everywhere, these books allow anyone, whenever he or she feels like it or finds something interesting, to enter into the tradition.

There are thousands of books that cover, in various ways and at different levels, the materials presented here. However, most of them require prior knowledge and no small amount of effort to be understood. In these volumes, we have striven to give anyone who seeks it a paved road into the riches of the Jewish world. More than merely a gate, we hope that these books can be said to offer their readers a “ride” into the tradition. Each person can get off whenever he or she desires and continue traveling when their interest is reawakened.

These volumes contain some of the fundamentals of Judaism. In each of them there are elements that can be considered *hors d’oeuvres* that can be snacked upon and others that are more comparable to entrees, that require more time for digestion. In either case, the invitation offered by Wisdom in Proverbs (9:5) is relevant: “Come, partake of my bread, and drink of the wine that I have mixed.” The books were deliberately designed to be accessible to everyone, whether he or she is highly educated or someone whose source of intellectual stimulation consists in occasionally reading the newspaper. Anyone can enjoy something, whether by means of an occasional taste, or by sitting down to a hearty meal. The way is open and anyone can find the gate appropriate for him or her, without effort.

We have aimed to keep the translation as true to the original Hebrew and Aramaic as possible. As some of these texts are not easy to understand, we have added clarifying comments in square brackets where appropriate. Further explication is appended in notes at the end of certain passages. When we have felt it appropriate to use a transliteration, the term transliterated is first explained and then followed by the transliteration in square brackets. At the end of each book we have provided a glossary of Hebrew terms mentioned in the series. Some of the terms found there may not be found in this book, as we have used the same glossary for all the volumes of the Erez series. *The Reference Guide to the Talmud* has a more extensive glossary as is necessary for that work.

Given the antiquity of the texts collected here, there are many occasions where it was impossible to avoid gendered usage and we have followed the texts themselves in using the male gender as the default.

Each of the volumes in this series stands alone, with only occasional citations connecting them. The first volume, *A Concise Guide to the Torah*, contains the translation of the Torah taken from the *Steinsaltz Humash*; we have abridged the commentary that can be found there. One can take this volume to the synagogue but also peruse it in the comforts of one's home.

The second volume, *A Concise Guide to the Sages*, is an anthology of rabbinic literature, organized by topics. One part includes rabbinic thinking associated with the Torah, while other topics are also addressed: the cycle of the Jewish year, the cycle of life in rabbinic eyes, as well as other topics where a person can find something that fits his or her needs.

The third volume, *A Concise Guide to Mahshava*, addresses spiritual matters. It contains an anthology of non-halakhic literature from the Jewish spiritual tradition: Kabbala, Jewish philosophy, the Musar tradition, and hasidic writings. Here too, the texts are presented in a manner that is accessible to all, in clear English. This volume addresses a broad array of topics: Besides comments and explanations on the Torah, there are sections devoted to the cycle of the Jewish year, the life cycle, and fundamental questions of human life such as parenthood, marriage, and death. There are many other topics addressed in this volume and one can open it at random and find wisdom that touches the soul.

The fourth volume, *A Concise Guide to Halakha*, is a survey of practical *halakha*. It does not delve into the sources of *halakha* and provide an opportunity for intensive study but serves rather as a guidebook to what the *halakha* instructs one to do in various situations. In this way the book offers

a summary of the *halakhot* of Shabbat and the holidays, of life cycle events, and of those mitzvot that any Jew is likely to encounter. If one wishes to act in accordance with the *halakha*, he or she will know what to do with the help of this volume. It is written in clear English with a minimum of technical language so that it is accessible to anyone, man, woman, or child. And if he or she decides to act accordingly, may he or she be blessed.

The fifth volume, *Reference Guide to the Talmud*, is a reprint of the work that was issued as a companion to the *Koren Talmud Bavli*. It is an indispensable resource for students of all levels. This fully revised, English-language edition of the *Reference Guide* clearly and concisely explains the Talmud's fundamental structure, concepts, terminology, assumptions, and inner logic; it provides essential historical and biographical information; it includes appendixes, a key to abbreviations, and a comprehensive index.

For improved usability, this completely updated volume has a number of new features: topical organization instead of by Hebrew alphabet, re-edited and revised text to coordinate with the language used in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*, and an index of Hebrew terms to enable one seeking a Hebrew term to locate the relevant entry.

These books are certainly not the entire Torah, but they are beneficial for any Jew to have in his or her home. If one finds something interesting, or is curious about something, these books offer a resource to investigate that topic. Even if one opens one of these volumes by chance, he or she will gain from reading them, both intellectually and spiritually. In short, these are books that it is convenient to have in one's home.

Our thanks are extended to all the people who participated in the project of writing these books, editing them, and finding the sources therein. We likewise would like to thank the publisher, and those first readers who offered helpful criticism and advice, and finally to those good people whose donations made it possible to create these books.

The Editors

Translator's Note

We have aimed to keep the translation as true to the original Hebrew or Aramaic (and in a few cases, Arabic) as possible. Some of these texts are not easy to understand and we have added clarifying comments in square brackets where appropriate. Some further explication is appended in notes at the end of some of the passages. When we have felt it necessary to use a transliteration, the term transliterated is first explained followed by the transliteration in square brackets. In general, we have striven to use gender-neutral language, though given the antiquity of the texts collected here, there are many occasions where it was impossible to avoid gendered usage and we have followed the texts themselves in using the male gender as the default.

We would like to express our gratitude to Feldheim Publishers for their permission to use their translations of the citations from the various writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

Life Cycle

Pregnancy and Birth

The formation of a human being begins with the act of intercourse from which a fetus is created. The fetus is then gestated, and ultimately born, with a new child coming into the world.

Each of these stages has an element of spirituality which affects the child. The holy intentions that one has during intercourse affect the soul that God entrusts to the couple. During the months of pregnancy, the fetus learns the entire Torah, and when it is born, it is affected by the holiness of the environment into which it enters. In essence, a person's good deeds are like his children; each deed contains the stages of thought, will, and action.

The Moment of Conception

At conception, God entrusts the couple with a soul, which will reside within the child to be born. The baby is accompanied by a spiritual image that corresponds to an image in the upper world. Before a person's death, that spiritual image departs, and this is a sign that he is about to die:

At the moment when a man undertakes to sanctify himself and engage in intercourse with his wife with his holy will, a holy spirit awakens in him, which includes [both] male and female elements, and the Holy One, blessed be He summons the messenger who is appointed over human pregnancies, and deposits with him that spirit, and tells him where to deposit it. . . The Holy One, blessed be He, infuses into that spirit everything that He infuses, and [the Sages of the mystical Torah] have explained this.


A person is accompanied by a spiritual image in this world, and parallel to this there is an image in the World to Come:

Then a spirit descends, and an image is with it, that which corresponds to its form above. He is created in that image and he walks in this world in that image. This is as it is written: "Surely man walks with an image" (Psalms 39:7). While this image is with the person, he exists with it in this world and in the next world, and the two of them are joined together as one.

Before a person dies his image departs from him:

When a person's time for leaving this world approaches, the evil spirit [that is a result of contact with the physical world] that had clung each day to the elevated image that was given to him comes and takes the image and uses it to rectify itself, and [the elevated image is repaired and] departs, and never again returns to that person. Then one knows that he has been turned away from everything [and is about to die].

(*Zohar* 3:43a)

 **Further reading:** For more on pregnancy and birth, see *A Concise Guide to the Sages*, p. 407; *A Concise Guide to Halakha*, p. 3.

During Pregnancy

The Talmud states that a person learns the entire Torah while in the womb, but when he is about to be born, an angel appears and strikes him on the mouth to make him forget it (*Nidda* 30b). Why does a person need to learn the entire Torah if he will subsequently forget it? It is impossible to understand God's Torah without divine assistance. However, if everyone remembered the Torah he had learned in the womb, he would not be able to receive reward for Torah study. Therefore, he forgets the entire Torah before birth and reacquires it only through hard work.

A person is incapable of understanding the Torah without divine assistance:

This Torah is concealed from the eyes of all living creatures, and humankind in this material world has no possibility to grasp even a tiny iota of it without divine assistance. . .

The reason that one forgets all the Torah he learned while in the womb:

Behold, if [understanding the Torah] is [solely the result of] an act of the eternal God, there will be no possibility for reward and punishment, since it all will necessarily be decreed by the Creator.¹ Therefore, one is made to forget all the Torah when he comes into the world so that he will subsequently acquire knowledge of the Torah by his own will, through effort, and by choice, with complete awareness.

The benefit of studying Torah in the womb even though it is subsequently forgotten:

The act of learning, the fact that one is taught all of the Torah in his mother's womb, is beneficial, as something of the divine assistance will remain etched within him such that he, with his earthly abilities, will be able to retrieve it This is the desired outcome of teaching a person all of the Torah before he comes into the world and then causing him to forget it: So that the matter will come to him through effort and by means of his choice. It is unattainable without divine assistance, but since it remains in his memory, he is able to retrieve it through his labor and effort.

(Rabbi Tzvi Elimelekh Shapira, *Benei Yisaskhar*, *Sivan* 1:5)

After Birth

From the time of the child's birth, it is incumbent upon the parents to ensure that he is surrounded by holiness. Doing so increases the chances of success in raising him to a life of Torah and the performance of good deeds. Each year on the child's birthday, the parents should reflect on the fact that they have merited tremendously; God has deposited with them a soul inside a body. They should consider the way to educate the child so that he will walk a straight path.

One should see to it that from the time of birth the child is surrounded by holiness:

Another crucial matter with regard to the newborn is that after he comes into the world he should immediately be surrounded by holy matters. It is known that the things that an infant, even one who is one day old, sees and hears have an impact on his development (recently, modern psychology has adopted this age-old insight). Therefore, the infant's being surrounded with holiness brings blessing and success for [his parents] to merit raising him or her to [a life that includes] Torah, marriage, and good deeds.

The merit and joy of raising and educating children:

The main thing [for parents] is to reflect on the greatness of the merit and joy that have come to them because the Holy One, blessed be He, deposited into their hands a soul in a holy body, relying upon them to properly safeguard this precious security by educating and guiding the child in the path that leads up to the House of God.

(Rabbi Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson,
Torat Menaḥem, Hitva'aduyot 5747, part 2, p. 37; 5742, part 4, p. 2190)

Good Deeds Are Called Children

The stages in the formation of the baby, conception, gestation, and birth, correspond to three stages in the formation of good deeds: thought, will, and action. Just as there is anguish involved in childbirth, so too, a person who intends to do a good deed in its entirety is required to exert himself and suffer.

A person's good deeds are called his children:

Observe that which the Sages said: A person's good deeds are called children (*Tanḥuma, Noah* 2). The truth is that they are indeed alike. There are three stages to childbirth prior to the actual emergence of the child: conception, gestation, and birth, and that which happens to a woman occurs likewise to a person serving the Creator, with regard to his progeny, i.e., his good deeds. The same three stages are necessary: first in the concealed realm of thought, then will, and then complete action, and this is the mystery of birth.

The pain of childbirth and the effort of raising children are also aspects of the performance of good deeds:

Therefore, it is like the case of a woman who, when she comes close to giving birth, begins crying out from the pain of the birth contractions. Afterward there is also the pain of raising children. Likewise, much anguish comes to a person before he completes an action for no other purpose than to serve God alone. [With] all this, perhaps [he will succeed].

(Rabbi Zev Wolf of Zhitomir, *Or HaMe'ir, Korah*)

A young hasid approached Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh, son of the Ba'al Shem Tov, and asked him to instruct him in the service of God so that he could reach the level of a saintly person.

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh said to him: "Certainly you know So-and-So, the wealthy man, whose father was a very wealthy man and left him a great fortune. Once, someone came to him and asked for his advice regarding how to become rich. The wealthy man said to him: 'I have no idea how to become rich; I inherited my wealth from my father. Go and ask another wealthy person, one who became wealthy with his own two hands, and ask him.'"

"I am the same," concluded Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh. "My holy father toiled so that I would be given a lofty soul, and he bequeathed to me his spiritual powers; I did not labor for this. Go to a saintly person who was born to simple people and who reached his level through his own labor and ask him how to do it."

When the soul comes to this world, it is anguished about the fact that it has been dispatched from the world of delight, merriment, and happiness, and placed in this world. Therefore, when a person emerges from his mother's womb he cries, because the soul is crying about its arrival in this world.

(Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, *Kedushat Levi, Likutim*)

The Giving of a Name

The parents are the ones who choose the name of their newborn child. Occasionally, a person chooses a new name for himself later in life.

A person's name is not only a means of identification; rather, it contains a spiritual meaning. According to the Kabbala, one's name expresses his heavenly roots and the unique mission that has been allocated to him to fulfill in this world.

The Significance of the Name Given by One's Parents

A person's name is linked to his soul. His parents receive a type of prophecy from above in order to give the child the name that is fitting for him.

When a person is born and his father and mother give him the name that they have thought of, this is not random or by chance; rather, the Holy One, blessed be He, puts that name, which is necessary for that soul, into [the parents'] mouths.

(Rabbi Yitzhak Luria (Arizal), *Sha'ar HaGilgulim*, Introduction 23)

A name expresses an object's spiritual life force, and therefore people are profoundly linked to their names.

An object's name is linked to its essence:

Whatever something is called in the holy tongue is its true name, the name at the root of its essence. For example, an ox [*shor*] in the lower [world] is called this due to the root of its life force above, which contains the three letters *shin-vav-reish*, שׁו"ר. This is the case with regard to all things ...

Even when a child is named after another person, his name fits the root of his soul:

Although we name our children after our ancestors or our relatives, as it says in the Midrash, nevertheless the Ari, may his memory be for life in the World to Come, revealed to us that even those names were not given by chance or by the will of the father and mother. Rather, the Holy One, blessed be He, is the One who places intelligence, wisdom, and knowledge into the heart of the father and mother to give a name that is from the root of the child's soul.

There is a very strong connection between a person and his name:

Because of this, people are extremely connected to their names. The proof of this is that if a person turns away from all of his other affairs and attends to one thing, and he focuses his eyes, heart, and thoughts on that one thing in total concentration ... nevertheless, if someone calls him by name, he will immediately disengage from his business and from his thoughts. All this is for the aforementioned reason, because his name is the root of his soul.

(Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch, *Or Torah, Bereshit* 14)



Further reading: For more on how the first man gave names to all the creatures, see *A Concise Guide to the Sages*, p. 5.

One's Name as an Expression of His Mission

Every individual has a mission in this world, and one's name expresses his unique mission. After our patriarch Jacob fulfilled the mission of his name Jacob, he was called "Israel," and was given an additional mission to fulfill in this world.

One's name alludes to the mission that he must fulfill in this world:

One's name is that matter that he was created to rectify; he was named for this. Therefore, evil people [who do not rectify that which they are supposed to rectify during their lifetimes] forget their names in the grave. But Jacob, not only did he rectify that for which he was named, but he merited being called by the name Israel as well [see Genesis 32:29].

A person is engaged in a mission all his days, and he is named for it:

All his days, a person is engaged in his mission, until he fulfills the mission and departs to the upper world. Jacob, who had already rectified that for which he was named, was given another name.

(Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, *Sefat Emet, Vayishlah* 5657)

One should pray that all those who are called by his name will have these good attributes, and not one of the evil attributes.

(Rabbi Yehuda HeḤasid, *Sefer Ḥasidim*)



Further reading: For the *halakhot* that relate to naming, see *A Concise Guide to Halakha*, pp. 7, 15 (for boys), and p. 30 (for girls).