

*Sod Hashem Liyreyav:*  
The Expansion of a Useful Concept

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# *Sod Hashem Liyreyav:* The Expansion of a Useful Concept

*Natan Slifkin*

## Introduction

In popular discussions concerning the knowledge of the natural world possessed by the Sages of the Talmud, the concept of *sod Hashem liyreyav*, “God’s secret is for those who fear Him,” is often cited. The source of this phrase is a verse in Psalms:

לְסוֹדָאֱלֹהִים וְבַר יִתְרוֹ לַיהוָה יֵעָמֵם: (ספר תהילים כה יד)

The counsel (or “secret”) of the Lord is for those who fear Him; to them He makes known His covenant. (Psalms 25:14, JPS translation)

Simply speaking, this verse serves to restrict certain knowledge, of an esoteric nature, to the God-fearing. However, in the Talmud, this verse is cited to refer to the concept of knowledge about the natural world being divinely revealed to Torah scholars. This is often described in terms such as the following:

Many times the Sages describe natural phenomena with which they could not possibly have had a personal acquaintance. The Talmud explains their amazing knowledge with this verse, ‘The secret of Hashem is for [i.e. revealed to] those who fear Him’ (see *Sotah* 4b, *Sanhedrin* 48b, *Niddah* 20b). (R. Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Tehillim* (ArtScroll/Mesorah 1977) vol. I p. 313)

Despite this concept being well-known and utilized by many subsequent Torah scholars, there has not yet been any study of its nature and the parameters of its usage. This paper engages in such a study, and also examines how the principle was utilized subsequent to the Talmudic era.

## In the Talmud

The phrase *sod Hashem liyreyav* appears only a few times in the Mishnah and Talmud, and the cases can be divided into three general categories. Not all of these relate to the concept of divine revelation, and we shall proceed from the least relevant to the most relevant.

### I. Turbans and Torah Scholars

A curious appearance of *sod Hashem liyreyav* in the Talmud is as an explanation of the etymology of the word *sudra*, “turban”:<sup>1</sup>

(R. Zeira asked:) [What is the significance of the word] *puria* (bed)? (R. Yehudah answered:) That reproduction (*peru u'revu*) takes place on it. [What is the significance of the word] *bor zinka* (dried-out water pit)? That this pit is clean (*bor zeh naki*). [What is the significance of the word] *sudra* (turban)? God’s secret is for those that fear Him (*sod Hashem liyreyav*). (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbos* 77b)

The idea here appears to be that a turban is a head covering worn by those that fear God. It seems difficult to accept that this is intended as a serious explanation of the etymology of the word. However, elsewhere we find that the linkage of *sudra* to *sod Hashem liyreyav* is used for halachic purposes:

How should one who enters a bathhouse act? He should say, “May it be Your will, God my Lord, that You bring me inside in peace...” before he enters, then he should remove his shirt, open his belt and remove his hat... we see from here (that he can loosen his belt before removing his hat) that a hat does not possess sanctity, and this is only with regard to a hat, but not a *sudra*, as it is written “*sod Hashem liyreyav*.” (*Maseches Kallah* 10)

Nevertheless, this still does not necessarily mean that the word *sudra* was considered to be etymologically related to *sod Hashem liyreyav*; it may simply be that the linguistic similarity was used to highlight the fact that a turban was considered to be an item of clothing that possessed religious value.

Possibly along similar lines, we elsewhere find the Talmud referring to R. Papa as a *sudani*.<sup>2</sup> Some understand this term as being identical to *sudna*, which is explained elsewhere in the Talmud to refer to a beer-brewer.<sup>3</sup> Others relate it to the word to

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<sup>1</sup> Translation following Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*.

<sup>2</sup> *Berachot* 44b; *Menachot* 71a; *Niddah* 12b.

<sup>3</sup> Alternate view cited by Rashi to *Menachot* 71a, referring to *Pesachim* 113a.

*sadeh* (“field”) and render it as “countryman.”<sup>4</sup> But Rashi and *Aruch* explain it to be based on the word *sod*, “secret.” They relate it to *sod Hashem liyreyav* and therefore understand *sudani* as a title for Torah scholars to whom these secrets are revealed.

## II. Reaching the Right Conclusions

One context in which *sod Hashem liyreyav* is employed is as a proclamation in response to people reaching a halachic conclusion that, unbeknownst to them, was received as a tradition from Sinai. There is one case in which this is used:

...When R. Yosi ben Durmaskit came before R. Eliezer in Lod, R. Eliezer said to him, What is new in the Beit HaMidrash today? R. Yosi replied, They counted votes and concluded that Ammon and Moab must give the poor man’s tithe in the Sabbatical year. R. Eliezer wept and proclaimed, “God’s secret is for those that fear Him, and He has made his covenant known to them”; Go and tell them, Do not be concerned about your tally, I have received a tradition from R. Yochanan ben Zakai, who heard from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher until it was a law transmitted to Moses at Sinai, that Ammon and Moab must give the poor man’s tithe in the Sabbatical year. (Mishnah, *Yadayim* 4:3<sup>5</sup>)

Does R. Eliezer mean that they could only possibly have reached this conclusion with divine guidance? This would seem to be too strong a claim; there could be any number of ways in which this conclusion was reached. It would seem more reasonable for him to be merely citing the verse to praise them for reaching the correct conclusion. However, in the corollary of this case, *sod Hashem liyreyav* is employed very literally. The corollary of the above case is a passage discussing Do’eg and Achitophel, where the Talmud states that they did *not* reach the correct halachic conclusions, and relates this to their *lack* of fear of Heaven:

Rav Mesharshiya said: Do’eg and Achitofel could not understand *halachot*. Mar Zutra objected: This is one about whom it is written, “Where is one who could count? Where is one who could weigh? Where is one who could count [all these] towers?” (Isaiah 33:18), and you say that they could not understand *halachot*?! Rather, it is that they could not derive the [correct] *halachot* from their studies, as it is written, “God’s secret is for those who fear Him.” (B. Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 106b)

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<sup>4</sup> *Otzar HaGeonim*, cited in Aharon Maggid, *Beit Aharon* p. 467; Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, offers this as a tentative suggestion, noting that the etymology of the word is unknown.

<sup>5</sup> The story also appears with minor variations in *Tosefta Yadayim* 2:7 and Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigah* 3b.

Is Mar Zutra saying that their lack of fear of God actually impeded them from reaching the correct conclusion, or is this merely a way of deriding their inability to evaluate the *halachot* correctly? Since Mar Zutra's point is that their intellectual abilities were unrivalled, it seems that he is claiming that their lack of fear of God actually interfered with their intellectual abilities. Only someone possessing fear of God will reach the correct conclusions in their halachic studies. However, while Mar Zutra is broadly employing *sod Hashem liyreyav* as an ingredient that is constantly present in Torah study, it does not appear to necessarily involve supernatural revelation.

### III. Knowing Physical Facts via Supernatural Means

There are three instances in the Talmud where *sod Hashem liyreyav* is used to refer to knowledge about the physical world being obtained via supernatural assistance. The first is in the context of a discussion in the Talmud regarding the minimum duration of seclusion that can render a woman as a *sotah*. The duration is determined to be that required for the first stage of cohabitation to take place. Various Tannaim give different definitions of this amount of time, including Ben Azzai. The Talmud comments as follows:

Rav Yitzchak bar Rav Yosef said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Each one evaluated it based on himself. But surely there was Ben Azzai, who was not married? If you want, I can say that he married and separated; and if you want, I can say that he heard it from his teacher; and if you want, I can say "God's secret is for those who fear Him." (B. Talmud, *Sotah* 4b; similarly in Jerusalem Talmud, *Sotah* 4a)

What is the meaning of the word "secret" in this context? Does it mean that the duration named by Ben Azzai was the correct amount, which was unknown to the others? This would be difficult, as there is no indication that the matter is thereby decided in favor of Ben Azzai. It thus appears that the word "secret" is used in that the information could not otherwise be known by Ben Azzai. It was unobtainable and unknown via ordinary means, but since Ben Azzai was God-fearing, it was divinely revealed to him.

The second case where *sod Hashem liyreyav* is used to refer to knowledge about the physical world being obtained via divine assistance further confirms this interpretation of the word "secret":

Mar Zutra son of Rav Nachman asked Rav Nachman: “What is podagra<sup>6</sup> (inflammation of the toe joint) like?” He replied: “Like a needle in living flesh.” How did he know this? Some say: He himself suffered from it. And some say: He heard it from his teacher. And some say: “God’s secret is for those who fear Him, to them He makes His covenant known.” (Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 10a, also *Sanhedrin* 48b)

It is not much of a secret that podagra feels like a needle in living flesh; that is known to everyone who suffers from it. But it ought to have been a secret to someone who does not suffer from it. The Talmud is suggesting that it may have been known to him via some form of divine revelation.

(Interestingly, modern microscopy reveals that one of the primary causes of podagra, gout, occurs when *needle*-shaped crystals are formed in joints by excess uric acid. However, since one of the Talmud’s explanations is that Rav Nachman derived his knowledge about it from his own suffering, this indicates that he was speaking about the sensations experienced rather than the physical shape of the cause of podagra; and the sensation is that of having needles driven into the flesh.)

The third and final case in the Talmud where *sod Hashem liyreyav* is used to account for knowledge of physical facts is as follows:

Why was Rabbi Elazar called the authority of the Land of Israel? As there was a case of a woman who came before Rabbi Elazar, and Rabbi Ami was sitting before him. R. Elazar smelled her, and said to her, “That is the blood of desire.” After she left, Rabbi Ami investigated, and she said to him, “My husband was on the way, and I desired him.” R. Ami proclaimed on Rabbi Elazar, “God’s secret is for those who fear Him.” (B. Talmud, *Niddah* 20b)

It is difficult to understand why R. Ami would have concluded that R. Elazar must have obtained this information via divine revelation. For, just as in the previous cases there were other options as to how the information was obtained, the same is surely true here; R. Elazar may have examined earlier such cases, and therefore learned to correlate the smell with the cause. Perhaps R. Ami was merely employing this verse in praise of the extraordinary feat of expertise that R. Elazar displayed, regardless of how he obtained this knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> The English word “podagra” is identical to the Talmudic term פּוֹדָגְרָא, both taken from the Greek ποδάγρα; see Samuel Krauss, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch, und Targum*, p. 422, s.v. פּוֹדָגְרָא.

## Analysis: A Limited Concept

When one considers the cases in which *sod Hashem liyreyav* is used to refer to knowledge about the physical world being obtained via divine assistance, several interesting observations can be made.

First of all, when one surveys the Talmud as a whole, the instances where *sod Hashem liyreyav* is raised are revealed to be strangely few. There are scores of cases in the Talmud where the Sages require knowledge of the natural world, and the vast majority of them make no mention of *sod Hashem liyreyav*. It is only invoked on three occasions! Furthermore, we see clearly on several occasions that the Sages did *not* consider themselves to have such a source of information. For example, the Talmud states that the rabbis learned agricultural information from the descendants of Seir.<sup>7</sup> Rav relates that he spent eighteen months with a shepherd in order to learn about the blemishes that affect sheep.<sup>8</sup> R. Shimon ben Chalafta is described as having performed experiments to discover information.<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Zeira stated that his lack of knowledge of the natural sciences rendered him incapable of rendering rulings regarding menstrual blood.<sup>10</sup> We also find that Rebbi considered that the sages were proven wrong in astronomy by the gentile scholars, which demonstrates that he did not consider their information to have been divinely inspired.<sup>11</sup>

Second, in the first two cases, *sod Hashem liyreyav* is only presented as one option amongst three, and its position in third place may indicate that it is rated as a last resort; and in the third case, it is unclear that there is an acknowledgement of divine revelation being demonstrated.

Third, in no case does the person who possessed the information claim to have obtained it via *sod Hashem liyreyav*. One could counter that modesty would prevent this, but it is still worthy of note.

Putting these three observations together, it is clear that *sod Hashem liyreyav* is, at best, of very limited application. The Talmud is open to the possibility of the Sages receiving knowledge via divine revelation, but only in a handful of cases that are otherwise difficult to explain, and even in those cases it does not present *sod Hashem*

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<sup>7</sup> *Shabbat* 85a.

<sup>8</sup> *Sanhedrin* 5b.

<sup>9</sup> *Chullin* 57b.

<sup>10</sup> *Niddah* 20b.

<sup>11</sup> *Pesachim* 94b.



*liyreyav* as the certain basis for the knowledge. Contrary to the description of this phenomenon that we cited in the introduction, which referred to it occurring “many times,” the three citations are the only instances where it appears. And contrary to it being the explanation for something “with which they could not possibly have had a personal acquaintance,” in each case there are alternate explanations of how they might indeed have had access to the knowledge via ordinary means.

### ***Nevuah, Ruach HaKodesh, and Halachah***

The concept of *sod Hashem liyreyav* appears similar to a number of other concepts in Jewish thought. It appears to be a form of prophecy, a supernatural process of revelation whereby God discloses information. R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook explicitly identifies *sod Hashem liyreyav* as a form of prophecy.<sup>12</sup>

Although the era of the Prophets finished long before the Talmudic era, and many have assumed that prophecy itself likewise ceased, this is not the case. The Talmud states that while prophecy was removed from the prophets following the destruction of the Temple, it was not removed from Torah scholars.<sup>13</sup> Ephraim Urbach and others have shown that prophecy, albeit in a scaled-down version, continued throughout the Talmudic era.<sup>14</sup> Heschel contends that such quasi-prophecy was even considered extant in the medieval period.<sup>15</sup> None of these scholars make any mention of *sod Hashem liyreyav*, and have apparently overlooked it, but it nevertheless appears to be of the same category.

Other similar concepts include *bat kol*, messages in dreams,<sup>16</sup> and *ruach hakodesh*.<sup>17</sup> The Talmud states that *ruach hakodesh* departed with the deaths of

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<sup>12</sup> R. Kook, *Mishpat Kohen* 96 p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> *Bava Batra* 12a. For a discussion of the views of the Rishonim on this passage, see Rabbi Aaron Cohen, “The Parameters of Rabbinic Authority: A Study of Three Sources,” pp. 109-112 and especially note 48.

<sup>14</sup> Ephraim Urbach, “When Did Prophecy Cease?” (Hebrew); *The Sages – Their Concepts and Beliefs*, pp. 564-567, 577-579; Frederick E. Greenspahn, “Why Prophecy Ceased,” p. 44; Benjamin D. Sommer, “Did Prophecy Cease,” pp. 39-40, 44-45.

<sup>15</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, “On the Holy Spirit in the Middle Ages” (Hebrew).

<sup>16</sup> The Talmud (*Chullin* 133a) relates how Rav Safra learned information via a dream.

<sup>17</sup> Ramban to *Bava Batra* 12a states that the prophecy which was maintained amongst Torah scholars after the era of prophets was *ruach hakodesh*, a different version of prophecy which occurs by way of wisdom, without visions. For a discussion of the relationship between

Chaggai, Zechariah and Malachi.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, it also relates that Rabban Gamliel knew someone's name via *ruach ha-kodesh*.<sup>19</sup> It thus seems that *ruach hakodesh* was considered to have continued, but in a reduced form.

But since *sod Hashem liyreyav* involves supernatural revelation, this raises a problem. R. Tzvi Hirsch Chayes raises the question of how, if information is obtained via *sod Hashem liyreyav*, it can be used in the halachic process, since there is a principle of *lo baShamayim hi*—the Torah is not in Heaven, and supernatural revelation may not interfere with the halachic process.<sup>20</sup> Several rabbinic scholars answer this question by noting that *sod Hashem liyreyav* is not used for revelations of halachah per se, but rather for revelations of scientific facts that have ramifications for halachah.<sup>21</sup> R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook also provides an alternate answer, that it is only prohibited to receive new halachot via supernatural means, but resolving questions of doubt may be done this way. Some contemporary Torah scholars suggest that *sod Hashem liyreyav* does not refer to any form of supernatural revelation via *ruach hakodesh*, but rather to divine assistance in ascertaining facts which they identify as being part of the *da'as Torah* that all great Torah scholars possess;<sup>22</sup> however, it is difficult to see how this solves the problem of *lo baShamayim hi*.

While the popular view is that principles such as *lo baShamayim hi* show that supernatural sources of information are never allowed to interfere with the halachic process, the truth is much more complex. There is extensive scholarly literature on the interaction between halachah and supernatural sources of information.<sup>23</sup> Urbach

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prophecy and *ruach ha-kodesh*, see Herbert Parzen, “The Ruah Hakodesh in Tannaitic Literature.”

<sup>18</sup> *Sanhedrin* 11a.

<sup>19</sup> B. *Eruvin* 64b, *Tosefta Pesachim* 2:9 and *Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah* 7b.

<sup>20</sup> Maharatz Chayes to *Sotah* 4b.

<sup>21</sup> Chida, *Shem HaGedolim*, “R. Yaakov HaChassid” and *Birkei Yosef, Orach Chaim* 32:4; R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Mishpat Kohen* 96 pp. 207-208. See too *Mishneh LeMelech, Hilchot Ishut* 9:6, end. Oddly, R. Tzvi Hirsch Chayes himself employs similar reasoning in his commentary to *Yoma* 75a.

<sup>22</sup> Reuven Noach Cohen, *Imri Reuven* to *Sotah* 4b, Tzvi Kreizer, cited in Avraham Noach Klein, *Daf al haDaf* to *Sotah* 4b.

<sup>23</sup> Albert I. Baumgarten, “Miracles and Halakhah in Rabbinic Judaism”; Ephraim Urbach, “Halachah and Prophecy” (Hebrew); Alexander Guttmann, “The Significance of Miracles for Talmudic Judaism.”

concludes that there were differences of opinion amongst the sages as to whether such sources of information were admissible.<sup>24</sup>

## In the Rishonim: Expansion and Appropriation

The Talmud relates a story in which R. Shimon son of Rabbi took offense at a student of his who did not stand in respect when he passed by. R. Shimon protested to his father that he taught this person much Torah; how could he not stand up for him? Rabbi responded, “Perhaps he was sitting and thinking about them (i.e. the Torah that he learned from him, and therefore there is no loss of respect implied).” Tosafos focuses on why Rabbi said that this person was specifically thinking about the Torah that he had learned from R. Shimon, noting that whatever part of Torah he had been thinking about would have excused him from standing up. He concludes that Rabbi had divined via *sod Hashem liyreyav* that the person was specifically thinking about the Torah that he had learned from R. Shimon.<sup>25</sup>

Tosafos’ explanation is odd on two counts. First of all, if Rabbi had really divined what this person was thinking, why would he say that only “perhaps” the person was thinking this? Second, there is a much simpler explanation for why he specified that the person was thinking about the Torah he had learned from R. Shimon—he was attempting to assuage R. Shimon’s anger in the best way. The fact that Tosafos is ready to use this explanation notwithstanding this alternative indicates that Tosafos perceived *sod Hashem liyreyav* as something that was widely in use and therefore readily applicable. Yet our own analysis of the Talmud indicates that its usage was much more restricted.

Rambam makes use of *sod Hashem liyreyav* in a very mild way, without involving any idea of supernatural inspiration, citing it merely in reference to the fact that certain matters—Creation and the account of the Divine Chariot—ought to be kept secret and restricted to those for whom they are appropriate.<sup>26</sup> But Raavad personally invokes *sod Hashem liyreyav* in a way that initially appears similar to the prophetic sense in which it was used in the Talmud. In his introduction to his commentary on *Eduyot*, Raavad takes all responsibility for any errors in his work, while he attributes all that is correct to his being in possession of the “secret, as per *sod Hashem liyreyav*.” In one gloss on the *Mishneh Torah*, after stating his view, he adds, “and thus was

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<sup>24</sup> Urbach, “Halachah and Prophecy,” p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Tosafot to *Kiddushin* 33a, s.v. *Shema bahen*.

<sup>26</sup> *Guide for the Perplexed*, introduction.

revealed to me by way of *sod Hashem liyreyav*.”<sup>27</sup> On another occasion, he concludes his gloss with the words, “Blessed is God Who has revealed His secrets to the one who fears Him.”<sup>28</sup> Along similar lines, elsewhere he states that “for many years *ruach hakodesh* has been present in our *bet midrash*.”<sup>29</sup>

R. Moshe Sofer and R. Avraham Kook write that Raavad’s usage of the phrase *sod Hashem liyreyav* was intended to refer to special divine revelation, the same as when it occurs in the Talmud.<sup>30</sup> Heschel reaches the same conclusion.<sup>31</sup> Others claim that it is merely a figure of speech;<sup>32</sup> some specify that it was an acknowledgement of the divine source of his intellectual capabilities in general.<sup>33</sup> Twersky reviews the literature on this topic, and after showing that other such phrases speaking of knowledge being revealed from Heaven were commonly used in the medieval period in cases where there was clearly no mystical meaning, concludes that it is merely a literary device referring to his conviction in the truth of his statements.<sup>34</sup> (Note that this is not a viable explanation of the usage of the phrase in the Talmud.)

## In the Acharonim: Further Expansion

In the Acharonim, we find that the concept of *sod Hashem liyreyav* is both extended to the post-Talmudic period and also expanded laterally to be posited as a basis for other statements in the Talmud (beyond those that the Talmud itself suggests were made via *sod Hashem liyreyav*).

There is a dispute amongst the Rishonim regarding which blood found in eggs is considered to be part of a forming chick and renders the egg non-kosher. R. Chizkiya da Silva notes that R. Yosef Karo sides with one group, and writes that he “pronounces upon him *sod Hashem liyreyav*, for the scientists have written the

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<sup>27</sup> Raavad to *Hilchot Beit HaBechirah* 6:14.

<sup>28</sup> Raavad to *Hilchot Metamei Mishkav Umoshav* 7:7.

<sup>29</sup> *Hilchot Lulav* 8:5.

<sup>30</sup> R. Moshe Sofer, *Responsa Chasam Sofer, Orach Chaim* 208; R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Mishpat Kohen* 96 p. 208.

<sup>31</sup> Heschel, “On the Holy Spirit in the Middle Ages,” p. 193.

<sup>32</sup> R. Moshe Ibn Chaviv, *Kappos Temarim, Sukkah* 33b.

<sup>33</sup> R. Avraham Gurwitz, *Ohr Avraham, Chagigah* 13, p. 288.

<sup>34</sup> Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquieres: A Twelfth Century Talmudist*, pp. 292-300.

same.”<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to determine whether this is intended literally to refer to divine guidance, or if it is merely an expression of praise and approval.<sup>36</sup>

A much more dramatic expansion of *sod Hashem liyreyav* occurs with R. Moshe Sofer. As we have seen, he was of the view that *sod Hashem liyreyav*, in the sense of divine revelation, was even available to Ra’avad. But he also expands it to be underlying many Torah rulings. He writes that despite the gentiles’ extensive experiments and empirical investigations, their knowledge of anatomy and physiology is still eclipsed by that of the Sages, which he states is “entirely due to *sod Hashem liyreyav*.”<sup>37</sup> A similar statement is made by Rabbi Menashe Klein.<sup>38</sup>

But by far the most radical expansion of *sod Hashem liyreyav* occurs with the kabbalist Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv (1841-1925). He not only expands *sod Hashem liyreyav* to cover every single statement made by the Sages of the Talmud, but even makes this a mandatory belief:

The main thing is: everyone who is called a Jew is obligated to believe with complete faith that everything found in the words of the Sages, whether in halachos or aggados of the Talmud or in the Midrashim, are all the words of the Living God, for everything which they said is with the spirit of God which spoke within them, and “the secret of God is given to those who fear Him.” This is just as we find in *Sanhedrin* 48b that even regarding something which has no application to Halacha and practical behavior, the Talmud asks regarding [the Sage] Rav Nachman, “How did he know this?” and the reply given is [that he knew this because] “The secret

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<sup>35</sup> *Pri Chadash, Yoreh De’ah* 66:5.

<sup>36</sup> Da Silva himself did not ascribe scientific omniscience to the Sages of the Talmud, as others were wont to do; on another occasion he notes that R. Dosa, whose view was adopted by R. Yosef Karo, has been since proven to have made a scientific error (*Pri Chadash, Yoreh De’ah* 80:2, regarding whether there are non-kosher animals with horns). While this does not rule out his accepting supernatural inspiration in select cases, it perhaps makes it less likely.

<sup>37</sup> *Chasam Sofer al HaTorah*, Leviticus 20:25. Cf. *Torat Moshe to parashat Shemot*. Yekutiel Kamalher, *HaTalmud VeMadai Tevel* p. 11, similarly cites *sod Hashem liyreyav* in support of the notion that information discovered by modern science was already known by the Sages. However, we see that R. Moshe Sofer did not apply *sod Hashem liyreyav* in a similarly broad way to the Rishonim; in his novellae to *Niddah* 18a he states that Rambam’s medical training enabled him to be more accurate in his statements about anatomy than Rashi and Tosafos. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that, as we saw earlier, R. Sofer did take Raavad literally when he claimed to have been the beneficiary of *sod Hashem liyreyav*.

<sup>38</sup> *Responsa Mishneh Halachot*, 13:217.

from God is given to those who fear him....” (*Leshem Shevo Ve-achlama, Sefer HaDe’ah*, Sec. II, *Derush 4, Anaf 19, Siman 7* p. 161)

R. Elyashiv’s usage of *sod Hashem liyreyav* is also extraordinary in that he also applies it to halachic statements of the Sages, raising the problem of *lo baShamayim hi* that others solved only by stating that *sod Hashem liyreyav* does *not* apply to raw halachic statements. Michael Berger details further numerous problems and contradictions which arise with postulating that all the Sages’ pronouncements in halachah were divinely inspired.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, it appears that R. Elyashiv’s position is also held of by many ultra-Orthodox Jews today.

Aside from *sod Hashem liyreyav* being expanded laterally to encompass every statement in the Talmud, it is also extended so as to apply not only to the Sages of the Talmud and the Rishonim, but even to the Torah scholars of today. Thus, in an introduction to a collection of biographical sketches of recent Torah scholars, we are told that *sod Hashem liyreyav* grants them (quasi?)-prophetic ability to divine solutions to the questions that are presented to them:

This exceptional capacity to apply knowledge culled from ancient texts to modern-day problems is more than the simple sum of its parts: the endless hours of study and thought, and the brilliance of mind and intensity of concentration. Somehow, it must also encompass the special gift of “*sod Hashem l’yireav*,” the Divine secrets that G-d imparts to those who fear Him. This, too, is part of the makeup of a *gadol beTorah* and guides him in ways that cannot be reduced to scholarship *per se*. This very same factor guides the *gadol* in dealing with problems that appear to be extra-halachic in nature, appearing to belong to other disciplines, such as politics, sociology, or psychology. (Nisson Wolpin, *The Torah Personality*, p. 15)

## Conclusion

*Sod Hashem liyreyav* has two distinct meanings in the Talmud. One is that reaching correct halachic conclusions is seen as being correlated with fear of God. The other is that God sometimes reveals information about the physical world to select people.

The Talmud rarely invokes this latter concept, mentioning it only on three occasions, and even in those three cases, not as a definitive interpretation of events but rather only as one possible explanation as to how something was known. In most cases where scientific information was needed, it was *not* obtained via *sod Hashem liyreyav*, even though this sometimes means that the Sages were forced to admit error.

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Berger, *Rabbinic Authority*, pp. 86-96.

In the medieval period, the usage of *sod Hashem liyreyav* becomes more liberal. Tosafos is already much more willing to see the Sages as having made use of such sources of knowledge, and according to some, Ra'avad saw himself as able to make use of it.

With the *acharonim*, we begin to see a dramatic expansion of *sod Hashem liyreyav*. It becomes widely employed, to the extent of it allegedly accounting for *every* scientific statement of the Sages. While most consider it problematic to apply it to halachic statements, some even apply it in this area. And it is expanded not only to other statements in the Talmud, but also as the definitive explanation for contemporary Torah scholars being equipped to deal with extra-halachic matters.

Why was the application of *sod Hashem liyreyav* expanded so much? One reason is that with the spread of kabbalah, the idea of receiving knowledge via prophetic or quasi-prophetic inspiration became widely accepted, and it would seem natural for the sages of the Talmud to possess it to an even greater extent. Another possible reason is that the concept of the decline of generations, itself part of enhancing the prestige and authority of the sacred texts, requires that the statements of the ancients must be granted greater credibility than statements of people today. There are two basic ways of accomplishing this; the ancients can be claimed to have been wiser, or to have been divinely inspired. *Sod Hashem liyreyav* is an easy way to enhance the authority of ancient texts, as well as the revered Torah scholars of medieval and modern times. This process can be done without any appearance of innovation, since the principle appears in the Talmud itself. However, as we have seen, it has been expanded far beyond its original Talmudic usage.

In my monograph *The Sun's Path At Night*, I demonstrated how the fact of the Sages sometimes possessing incorrect beliefs about the natural world was widely acknowledged by the Rishonim, and yet this view gradually became less accepted to the extent that today there are some people who are in denial that any rabbinic authority ever subscribed to such a view. In this study, we see the other side of the same coin. The opposite belief, of the Sages possessing supernatural knowledge of the natural world, was dramatically expanded, from its original appearance in the Talmud as a rare possibility to its *definitively* accounting for *every* statement made by Chazal in both halachic and non-halachic contexts. This is yet another example of how the rationalist and rational approach to the Talmud has steadily declined in traditional circles to the extent that it has sometimes been written out of existence.

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