Pukhovitzer's Concept of Torah Lishmah

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By NORMAN LAMM

The study of Torah is one of the most fundamental commandments in Judaism; it outweighs all the other precepts.1 The question of what should be the motivation for such study depends upon how one defines the talmudic concept of Torah lishmah,2 usually translated as "Torah for its own sake." The definition of this teleology of study is, in turn, usually contingent upon one's general orientation to Jewish values: the role of the intellect as against ethical and ritual performances, inwardness vis-à-vis external acts, and so on. Moreover, the degree to which one insists upon pure motivation, i.e., study lishmah, depends upon the significance one attaches to the study of Torah as such: the more one esteems the act of study, the less one is disposed to demand lishmah, however one interprets the term; and the less one's relative emphasis on the study of Torah, the more likely is his insistence upon lishmah.3

The various definitions of the term Torah lishmah can generally be grouped in three categories, with the understanding that they are not mutually exclusive:

- a. The Functional Definition. Torah must be studied for the sake of the commandments under consideration. Lishmah thus means for the sake of the precepts dealt with in the Torah text being studies. This theme is often expressed as lilmod al menath la'asoth, to study in order to do (i.e., perform the commandment being studied).4
- b. The Devotional Definitions. Torah must be studied "for the sake of Heaven";5 for the love of God (rather than fear);6 or to attain certain mystical ends;7 or to achieve deveguth (communion) with God experientially.8
- 1 Thus, Peah 1:1-"The study of Torah excels them all," and elsewhere throughout the entire literature.
 - ² Sifre (ed. Friedman) Eqev, 48; Avot 6:1; Nedarim 62a, etc.
- 3 The documentation for this assertion is too extensive for, and essentially irrelevant to, the purposes of this article. An elaborate discussion and appropriate references may be found in my heretofore unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Study of Torah Lishmah in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin*, (submitted at Yeshiva University, 1966), chaps. v-viii. All that follows in this article concerning the general theme of the study of Torah, and especially study lishmah, is based upon sources discussed in greater detail in the above work.
- 4 Sifre, loc. cit.: Ber. 17a.: J. T., Ber. 15: Sefer Hasidim, ed Margoliot (Jerusalem 1950), No. 944; R. Elijah de Vides, Reshith Hokhmah (Jerusalem-New York 1958), Introduction, pp. 2a, 3b; R. Isaiah Halevi Horowitz, Shene Luhoth ha-Berith (Jerusalem 1959), pp. 99-101.
- ⁵ Ber. 5b; Midrash Tehillim (ed. S. Buber), 31:9; pp. 240f.; all through Seder Eliyahu, see Introduction by Friedman to his edition of this work, pp. 109–113.

 ⁶ Sifre (ed. Friedman) to Wa-ethanan, 32, p. 73a; Sotah 31a; J. T. Ber. 9:7 and Sotah
- 5:5; Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishnah, end of Makkot, and Code, Hil. Teshuvah, 10:4, 5; Sefer Hasidim, No. 289; Nahmanides, Commentary to the Pentateuch, to Dt. 6:5; Crescas, Or Adonai, 2:6, chaps. i and ii.
 - ⁷ Zohar Hadash, Tiqqunim, p. 63a, b; R. Hayyim Vital, Peri Ets Hayyim, beginning of
- Shaar Hanhagath ha-Limmud. 8 Keter Shem Tov, p. 19c; R. Pinhas of Korzec (Koretz), Liqqutim Yeqarim, p. 4b; R.

c. The Cognitive Definition. Study for the sake of knowing and understanding the Torah. In this definition, made famous by R. Hayyim of Volozhin (1749–1821), lishmah means leshem ha-torah, for the sake of the Torah itself.9

In this context, it is interesting to analyze the writings on the study of Torah lishmah by R. Yehudah Leib Pukhovitzer, a late seventeenth-century rabbi and preacher whose books reflect the kabbalistically oriented piety of his times.¹⁰ As a representative of this period, his works tell us something about the religious spirit and views of seventeenth-century Polish Jewry and about its religious and educational institutions and problems. This analysis is made particularly necessary because of some recent assertions about Puknovitzer's concept of Torah lishmah which this writer considers highly questionable.

Relying mostly on kabbalistic sources, Pukhovitzer fully subscribes to the functional definition of Torah lishmah:

He who studies lishmah merits both this world and the world-to-come, as is written in the Zohar. . . . The reason for this is that Torah (i.e., study) without [the performance of] the commandments is as nothing. Therefore one [who studies Torash lishmah] merits two worlds: one for his Torah and one for his commandments.11

He then cites, approvingly, two interpretations of the dictum of R. Meir, that "whosoever engages in Torah lishmah merits many things,"12 by R. Elijah de Vides, the first of which defines lishmah as studying with the intention of putting into practice that which is studied.¹³ Clearly, therefore, to study lishmah means to study Torah in order better to perform the commandments of the Torah.

This is no isolated passage in the works of Pukhovitzer. Elsewhere¹⁴ he supports the definition of lishmah by R. Isaiah Halevi Horowitz¹⁵—to carry out what God has commanded us. He considers this definition the peshat or literal signification of the term. 16 Other such references to the functional definition of the lishmah concept abound throughout his works.

Pukhovitzer also anticipates the cognitive definition of study lishmah that was later to be elaborated and popularized by R. Hayyim of Volozhin:

There are those who intend, by their dialectical skill (pilpul), to boast, as if to say, "What a wise man I am, how brilliant! I can, by my dialectical acumen,

Jacob Joseph of Polonne, Toledoth Yaaqov Yosef (Lwow, 1863) to Wa-yetsei, p. 28d, and to Shelah, p. 123d; R. Yosef Yitzhak of Lubavitch, Liqqutei Dibburim, Vol. III, No. 22, pp. 890-892; cf. Scholem, Gershom, "Devekuth, or Communion with God," Review of Religion, vol. xiv, no. 2 (January 1950), p. 125.

9 R. Hayyim of Volozhin, Nefesh ha-Hayyim, 4:3, based on Ned. 62a and commentary of R. Asher, addicated Avest de R. Nethers (Version A) to Avest 2.12

tary of R. Asher, ad loc.; cf. Avot de R. Nathan (Version A) to Avot 2.12.

10 Pukhovitzer, who died in Palestine in the 1680's, was the author of four works, mostly collections of sermons and some halakhic material. They are: Divre Hakhamim, Qeneh Hokhmah, Derekh Hokhmah, and Kevod Hakhamim. Information about him, which is quite sparse, may be obtained from Herman (Hayyim) Michael, Or ha-Hayyim, p. 464, Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. x, p. 92, q. v. 11 Qeneh Hokhmah, p. 18c.

12 Avoth 6:1.

13 Reshith Hokhmah, p. 3b. 14 Derekh Hokhmah, p. 24b.

15 Shene Luhot ha-Berith, pp. 99-101.

16 Derekh Hokhmah, p. 24b and d; Divre Hakhamim, Part I (Shaar ha-Avodah, chap. v), p. 43a.

discover forty-nine ways of proving 'creeping things' ritually pure," and thus become famous and praised amongst people, as happens so unfortunately often in our generation. Thus [do people study Torah] for other, ulterior motives which are unacceptable to the Lord. Rather, the main intent of discourse [in Torah] should be to arrive at the halakhic truth, to elucidate the truth; for by means of debate and dialectics is the truth elucidated.¹⁷

Although, in this particular passage, he does not explicitly identify the cognitive motive of study as *lishmah*, nevertheless the context clearly implies it, this section coming immediately after a description of Torah *not* studied *lishmah*.

Interestingly, Pukhovitzer's view of the relationship between Torah as such and its individual commandments prefigures the concept of Torah and *mitswoth* by R. Hayyim. The latter maintained that not only is Torah more significant than the other commandments, but it is totally inclusive; Torah is the whole of which the *mitswoth* are the individual parts. Whereas the general halakhic assumption is that Study is but one aspect of Practice (in that the commandment to study Torah is one amongst 613), R. Hayyim shows that Practice is only one aspect of Study. The *mitswoth* are individual *organs*; Torah is the hypostasized mystical *organism*. This conception, which undergirds the cognitive interpretation of *lishmah*, is adumbrated by Pukhovitzer as follows:

So one who engages in [the study of] Torah augments light and brings great effluence into all of its individual commandments, for all of them derive from the root and essence of the spirituality of the Torah; for it (Torah) includes them all, and they branch out from it, as is well known. However, one who engages in only one commandment (other than Torah) contributes power and light only to it alone and fills it with the capacity to draw upon the inner essence of Torah . . . for the whole sustains the parts, whereas the parts do not sustain the whole.¹⁹

Thus far we have seen that there is nothing exceptional in Pukhovitzer's writings on *lishmah*. He repeats the functional definition which has roots in tannaitic times, and anticipates the severely halakhocentric definition offered by the mitnagdic theoretician, R. Hayyim of Volozhin, as an alternative to hasidic *devequth*.

However, a problem arises with regard to Pukhovitzer's references to the second definition of *lishmah*, what we have called the devotional definitions, especially the kabbalistic. Or, to be more accurate, the problem does not really arise of itself at all, but has been raised for us by a distinguished contemporary historian who has professed to find in Pukhovitzer a reinterpretation of *Torah lishmah* and, with it, certain far-reaching social consequences.

Prof. Jacob Katz, describing the changing position of the kabbalist, writes: "A good deal of the prestige enjoyed by the scholar who pursued the study of Torah lishmah now passed to the man whose learning found expression not in public leadership, halakhic decisions, and the teaching of Torah, but in studying the Kab-

19 Divre Ḥakhamim, Part I, p. 42c.

¹⁷ Derekh Hokhmah, p. 25b.
18 See Nefesh ha-Hayyim, 1:6 and 5:30, end. This stands in contrast to the hasidic view that because God is uniformly immanent in all the commandments, Torah included, they comprise an essential unity, such that all of them and each of them provides access to God; so the Baal Shem Tov, quoted by R. Jacob Joseph, Toledoth Yaakov Yosef to Yithro,

balah and in performing the *mitzvot* in accordance with its dictates, a skill which only initiates were capable of appreciating."²⁰ This enhanced prestige of the kabbalist, according to Katz, resulted in "propaganda for the founding of schools for individuals who study Torah *lishmah*...." More significantly, he maintains that "*lishmah* is occasionally defined not as unselfish personal intention, but as engaging in mystical studies. We also know of the founding of such schools and of the support of scholars of this cloistered type."²¹ Katz here adds in a footnote that "R. Yehudah Leib Pukhovitzer prefers the founding of schools for the study of *Torah lishmah* over support for students of the Yeshivah."²² If Katz is right, then we have not only a completely new interpretation of *lishmah* with the most significant theoretical consequences, but the institutionalization of this new conception in the form of separate schools dedicated to this idea.

A careful analysis of the sources Katz cites will reveal, however, that they do not support his theory. We find no mention of such exclusive schools. And the writings of R. Yehudah Leib Pukhovitzer yield nothing as radical as the identification of *Torah lishmah* as the study of Kabbalah.

We have seen that Pukhovitzer repeatedly refers to the functional view of lishmah and also speaks of the cognitive definition. However, he also writes favorably of the kabbalistic definition of lishmah. He cites the Zohar's forceful condemnation of self-interest in the study of Torah: scholars who study because of the desire for reward, whether in this world or the next, are like barking dogs who cry out, "give, give"; such people are blind and heartless. Why then should one study? What is the proper motivation? The object should be redemptive: the classical kabbalistic ambition of releasing the Shekhinah from its exile and reuniting it with its "husband," the Holy One. Study lishmah means study for the purpose of contributing thereby to the unity of the World of the Sephiroth.²³ On the basis of this passage, Pukhovitzer fortifies his statement, previously mentioned,24 that study without lishmah causes man to merit only this world, whereas study lishmah brings him the blessings of both worlds: "By means of study lishmah one unites the Shekhinah up above, and thus the purpose of his study is to perform the work of his Master (i.e., to serve God's purpose); whereas those who study but not lishmah, all their effort is to sustain this world, and thus they serve themselves."25

Pukhovitzer often quotes later kabbalists for support in his denunciations of those who study Torah *she-lo lishmah*, i.e., for selfish reasons. He clearly describes what he means by *she-lo lishmah*—and he by no means intends those who fail to study the Kabbalah. Thus, in one lengthy passage, he cites R. Isaac Luria and R. Hayyim Vital as his authority for castigating those "who have made the Torah a spade to dig with, . . . who study in order to receive reward and additional stipends,

²⁰ Katz, Jacob, *Masoret u-Mashber* (Jerusalem 1958), p. 258. References will be to this original Hebrew edition, which contains full notes. Translations in this article are based mostly on the English edition, *Tradition and Crisis* (New York 1961) pp. 223f.

 ²¹ Ibid., in the Hebrew; the paragraph is missing in the English.
 22 Ibid., n. 23, referring to Pukhovitzer's Derekh Hokhmah, p. 26a.

²³ Zohar Ḥadash, Tiqqunim, p. 63a, b. See too Reshith Ḥokhmah, loc. cit.

²⁴ Supra, n. 11.

²⁵ Qeneh Hokhmah, p. 18d.

and also to be included amongs the heads of the Yeshivot and judges in the court, so that their names and reputations will cover the earth."26

It is clear beyond doubt that what Pukhovitzer has suggested is nothing new or startling; he is within the mainstream of normative Jewish piety. The kabbalistic definition of *lishmah*, which Pukhovitzer adopts along with the other two, is quite clear: the study of the classical texts, biblical and rabbinic, with a kabbalistic purpose in mind. It does not imply the study of kabbalistic texts. The mystical element in study *lishmah* has reference merely to the intention, not the content or subject matter. Were Pukhovitzer to propose anything as novel as the theory Katz attributes to him, he would have stated so explicitly. Furthermore, if Pukhovitzer had meant to define *lishmah* as the study of Kabbalah, and to imply along with it the social and institutional exclusiveness Katz speaks of, he would have emphasized this definition of *lishmah* as a way of reenforcing the element of exclusiveness. The fact is that he gives it no more prominence than he does to the functional and cognitive definitions, especially the former.

What might possibly be the cause of misunderstanding is the following:

This matter [the study of Torah she-lo lishmah] causes him to propose novellae which are not true (emeth), as is mentioned in the writings of Luria . . . "Each deed of a man causes an angel to be created, and therefore the angel will correspond to the deed. If one studies Torah lishmah, without any ulterior motive at all, so the angel created therefrom will be very holy, lofty, and faithful in all ways. So if he studies Torah without any errors, the angel will be without errors and mistakes. But if that Torah [studied] contained some evil thought, she-lo lishmah, or some errors or mistakes, so will the angel created therefrom possess an admixture of evil, for it will have been created from two elements, good and evil, and therefore [the angel] will not be faithful in all ways." And therefore that angel will bring him to [propose] novellae which do not accord with the truth (emeth).²⁷

The source of possible confusion here is the term *emeth*, truth. It often refers to the Kabbalah; it is so used regularly, for instance, by Nahmanides. It would, however, be stretching the imagination too far to attribute this symbolic signification to the word as used in the context of this passage. The term here unmistakeably means "truth" in its ordinary sense: ideas which correspond to the actual meaning of the material studied. Pukhovitzer here uses the word *emeth* quite pointedly as the opposite of *ta'uth weshibbushim*, error and mistakes.²⁸

The solitary reference to plumbing the "secrets of Torah" (the usual euphemism for esoteric knowledge) that I have been able to find in Pukhovitzer's works in connection with *lishmah* means only that mystical graces are the consequence of

²⁶ Quoted by Pukhovitzer, Derekh Hokhmah, p. 24d, from Vital's Introduction to his Ets Hayyim.

²⁷ Derekh Hokhmah, p. 25a.

²⁸ This was also the understanding of the unknown author of Hemdath Yamim who plagiarized Pukhovitzer and copied the passages mentioned with only slight modification, indicating that he too understood them in the conventional, non-mystical sense; see Hemdath Yamim, Part III, p. 50. On this work, see Yaari, Abraham, Taalometh Sefer (Jerusalem 1954); the article by Scholem in Behinot (1955), no. 8, pp. 79–95; and the three exhaustive articles by I. Tishbi in Tarbitz, vols. 24–25, and his Netive Emunah u-Minuth (Ramat Gan 1964).

but not the contents of studying lishmah.²⁹ R. Hayyim too refers to mystical illumination as the result of studying Torah lishmah; 30 but in the case of both writers, the subject matter of the Torah study remains the classical texts.

Having established that Pukhovitzer accepts all three standard definitions of lishmah in rabbinic literature and proposes no new understanding of the concept, it is important to follow through on Katz's thesis to see where his notion has led him. In doing so we shall discover that this one error in the interpretation of Pukhovitzer perforce results in invalid conclusions based upon it.

Having identified lishmah with the study of Kabbalah, and attributed this occupation to an emerging coterie of kabbalists—among whom he counts the Gaon of Vilna³¹—who held themselves aloof both from ordinary people and traditional halakhic scholars, Katz then claims the discovery of a new attitude towards the public support of scholars:

The support of the scholar is no longer considered an ordinary mitzvah for which there is ready reward, but a means to achieve devekut with the Shechinah—something of which the ignoramus is incapable, but which the scholar achieves in the course of his study and contemplations. It is clear that the intention here is to the Kabbalah scholar, to whom the concept of devekut applies in its mystical meaning.32

However, what might seem significant were we to accept the idea of a reinterpretion of lishmah, no longer appears important at all. Pukhovitzer's description of how attachment to the scholar is a form of deveguth with the Shekhinah³³ has nothing new to add to the theme of "support" for scholars, and hence no social or economic significance. It is merely his formulation of a relationship already proposed in the Talmud,34 to which Katz himself refers,35 in terms of the kabbalistic idea of the threefold soul. This very interpretation is attributed by Pukhovitzer to R. Elijah de Vides. It is, therefore, nothing more than a restatement in kabbalistic idiom of a well known talmudic idea, and has no relation to a new definition of lishmah as the study of Kabbalah.

Prof. Katz's assertion that this supposedly new idea was institutionalized in the form of special schools exclusively devoted to the study of Kaballah as lishmah is even more astonishing. To support his contention that such special schools were organized, Katz points to the "Kloiz" in Brody of which at least some members studied the Kabbalah. 36 He refers to an article by Gelber. 37 In this study, the author

²⁹ Divre Hakhamim, p. 43b, c. Note in this passage the use of the conjunction "also": Gam al yede zeh yukhal lizekoth le-limmud raze Torah. This unequivocally implies the nonidentity of the revelation of esoteric mysteries with the actual study of Torah lishmah.

30 Nefesh ha-Hayyim 4:21.

³¹ Katz, op. cit., p. 258, n. 23, relying on Klausner, Vilna bi-Tequfath ha-Gaon (Jerusalem 1942), pp. 16–20. This conventional view of the Gaon has, however, been challenged by Moshe Shmuel Shapiro-Shmukler. See his "Li-Demuth ha-Gaon mi-Vilna" in Hadoar (no. 33, 1926), recently reprinted in Reb Mosheh Shmuel we-Doro, published by Shapiro-Shmuklers sons and friends (New York 1964), pp. 30, 100f.

³² Katz, op. cit., p. 259. 33 Ibid., n. 25; Kevod Hakhamim; p. 46b. 34 Ketuboth 111b.

³⁵ Loc cit.

³⁶ Ibid., n. 23. 37 Gelber, N. M., Toledoth Yehude Brod in Arim we-Imahoth be-Yisrael, vol. vi, pp. 62f.

writes of the famed "Kloiz" and the "Sages of the Kloiz of Brody." This hall, right next to the Great Synagogue of Brody, was a meeting place and magnet for some of the most distinguished scholars of the age. In addition to Halakhah, there were those who studied Kabbalah as well. This small group, Gelber writes, had for their private use a small chamber attached to the "Kloiz" where only the prominent kabbalists prayed, using the Prayerbook of Luria. Only people over the age of thirty were permitted to join them in their studies, and only the kabbalists themselves were entitled to wear white garments on Sabbath and holidays.

However, all this proves nothing more than that those interested in Kabbalah tended to move in small, intimate circles; and this fact is of no significance at all either to the study of this period or the understanding of the concept of lishmah. Kabbalists always inclined towards their own societies, as witness the medieval German Hasidim and the Safed Brotherhood—indeed, the exclusive and elite group of which the Zohar itself speaks. Further, there is no mention here or elsewhere of these mystical studies as lishmah. In addition, the article by Shochet to which Katz further refers in this note³⁸ begins with a description of the various societies (haburoth) in the fifteenth century founded both for mystical and non-mystical studies. There is thus nothing startling or original about the mystics attached to the "Kloiz" in Brody, Gelber, in the article mentioned above, refers to special privileges for the students of Kabbalah in the "Kloiz" but also maintains that those over thirty, ostensibly non-Kabbalists, were permitted to join them in prayer. Shochet, describing the adult study groups in Safed, quotes a letter from a German Jew writing from Safed in 1607 and admiring the fact that the Safed kabbalists would, twice daily, after morning and evening services, break up into five or six classes and study such subjects as Talmud, Zohar, Maimonides, Bible, etc.39 Thus neither the Safed nor the Brody mystics were as isolated, ingrown, and self-contained as Katz would have us believe.

Nor is Katz's assertion that Pukhovitzer urges the establishment of schools for the study of Torah *lishmah* (i.e., for Kabbalah, according to Katz's view) over and above the support of Yeshivah students⁴⁰ any more valid. In a discourse or *derashah* devoted to the support of Torah, after promising and threatening in the fashtion of the times, Pukhovitzer specifically castigates rabbis and communities for neglecting poor scholars. Once, he complains, even poor people would seek out rabbis who would disseminate the teachings of Torah, and would support needy students; today only the children of the wealthy are taught Torah because they can afford to pay for it.⁴¹ Rather than cater to the rich and the self-seeking, Pukhovitzer suggests that in order to do one's duty, it is best, if one can afford it, to support one Torah student who studies for the sake of Heaven, either by lodging him or providing for him in the student's own home . . . for if, Heaven forfend, there are no kids, there will be no goats.⁴² This last metaphor, as well as his use of the term *baḥurim* in

42 Ibid.

 ^{38 &}quot;Study groups in the 17th and 18th centuries in Palestine, Poland, Lithuania, and Germany" (Hebrew), in *Ha-Hinnukh* (1957), pp 404-418.
 39 Ibid., p. 405.

⁴⁰ Katz, op. cit., p. 258, n. 23; Derekh Hokhmah, p. 26a.

⁴¹ Derekh Hokhmah, p. 26b.

the passage before it, indicates that he is speaking of youngsters, not accomplished kabbalists. He then bemoans the fact that most who study *she-lo lishmah* do not continue beyond the age of fifteen; who knows, therefore, if they will ever really study Torah *lishmah* and if they will remember what they learned.⁴³ Very simply, he feels that youngsters "graduate" too early from their courses of study, that they have never learned to study out of an appreciation of study itself and, hence, perhaps the whole educational system is a failure. Pukhovitzer therefore recommends the establishment in each community of regular schools not only for the young, but also for the more mature who are already gainfully occupied and will attend courses of Torah study after working hours, and who will study *lishmah*, i.e., not in order to receive stipends as do the "professional" scholars.⁴⁴ His emphasis on study for those over the age of fifteen is, far from urging mystic contemplation, an attempt to increase higher and adult education, and—shades of modernity!—not leave the study of Judaism to little children. This is an eminently practical *derashah*.

R. Yehudah Leib Pukhovitzer is, hence, a typical rabbinic scholar and preacher of his period, drawing heavily on kabbalistic sources, in the fashion then prevailing, in order to persuade his audience of his noble but unexceptional ethical and religious preachments. His view of the study of *Torah lishmah* runs the whole gamut of acceptable, normative definitions of the concept, and he deserves credit for anticipating the approach of R. Hayyim of Volozhin by about a century and a half. But there is nothing in what Pukhovitzer writes to warrant the conclusion that he advocates schools for mystics, or that he identifies the study of Kabbalah as yet another definition of the term "the study of Torah *lishmah*."

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Cf. Divre Hakhamim, p. 43c.

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