Reflections on Torah Education and Mis-Education

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Our community is deeply committed to the transmission of Torah from one generation to the next. We devote tremendous resources to ensure that our children and grandchildren become steeped in Torah knowledge and grow into Torah observant Jews. A critical concern must be how we and our schools transmit the words of Hazal to our students. Obviously, the teachings of our sages are of central importance; it is unfortunate, then, when the words Hazal are taught inappropriately. Religious education becomes mis-education.

In his introduction to Perek Helek, Rambam criticized a literalist, fundamentalist approach to the words of Hazal. Since the sages were wise and reasonable, their words obviously were filled with wisdom and rationality. When their statements seem to veer from reason, we must understand them as being symbolic, homiletical or hyperbolic—not literally true. It would be absurd to call for an acceptance of the literal truth of aggadic and midrashic statements which violate reason or which have later been shown to be factually incorrect.

According to Rambam, those who insist on the literal truth of all the statements of Hazal are not only doing a disservice to our sages, but are corrupting our religion. “This group of impoverished understanding—one must pity their foolishness. According to their understanding, they are honoring and elevating our sages; in fact they are lowering them to the end of lowliness. They do not even understand this. By Heaven! This group is dissipating the glory of the Torah and clouding its

lights, placing the Torah of God opposite of its intention." Rambam believed that demanding acceptance of Hazal's words even when they were patently unreasonable or incorrect, was not a demonstration of loyalty to the rabbis; rather it was a serious demeaning of their intellectual credibility. Reasonable people would come to dismiss the rabbis as serious thinkers, and would lose confidence in their religious authority.

Rabbi Abraham, son of Rambam, noted that one must not accept the truth of a statement simply on the authority of the person who stated it. Rather, we must use our reason to determine its validity. Moreover, it is intellectually unsound to accept blindly the teachings of our sages in matters of medicine and natural science, since these were not their areas of expertise. "We and every intelligent and wise person, are obligated to evaluate each idea and each statement, to find the way in which to understand it; to prove the truth and establish that which is worthy of being established, and to annul that which is worthy of being annulled….We see that our sages themselves said: if it is a halakhah [universally accepted legal tradition] we will accept it; but if it is a ruling [based on individual opinion], there is room for discussion.[1]

Rambam and his son argued that one need not and must not suppress reason to be a religious person. We should not be expected to surrender reason when we evaluate rabbinical statements. Nor should we teach Torah to our children and students in a manner that demands blind obedience and suspension of reason. Otherwise, they will grow up one day and realize that we have taught them irrational or incorrect things; this will cause them to mistrust everything we have taught them.

These thoughts have come to mind recently due to a number of specific cases.

1.A ten year old boy's day school class was told by their Torah teacher that dinosaurs never existed. Since rabbinic tradition teaches that the world is less than 6000 years old, it is not possible that scientists can be correct when they state that dinosaurs lived on earth millions of years ago. The boy told his teacher that he recently visited the Museum of Natural History in New York City and saw dinosaur bones with his own eyes! How could the teacher deny that dinosaurs existed? The teacher responded: "you did not see dinosaur bones. What you saw were dog bones that became swollen during Noah's flood."

2. A science teacher in a modern Orthodox day school was dissecting a sheep's larynx as part of a science lesson for her eighth grade class. Some students noticed that the wind pipe was in front and the food pipe was behind it. The

students said: this can’t be correct. We learned in Torah class that the food pipe is on the left and the wind pipe is on the right. That is why we recline to the left on Passover eve at the seder, so that the food will go straight down the food pipe. If we leaned to the right, the food would go to the wind pipe and we could choke. The teacher asked the students to look at the sheep’s larynx: they could see for themselves that the pipes were located one behind the other, not side by side. A student suggested that this may be true for sheep, but could not be true for humans. The teacher pointed out that the physiology for humans was the same. After class, the teacher discussed this issue with various Jewish studies teachers and administration members. Most had assumed that the pipes were side by side. Even when presented with the scientific facts, they were reluctant to accept this information. One teacher said: “I would find it difficult to teach something that goes against Hazal.” (But he apparently would not find it difficult to teach something that was demonstrably false!)

3. A junior high school class was studying the laws relating to washing hands in the morning. The teacher explained, following the Shulhan Arukh (O.H. 4:2-3), that the hands are washed in order to eliminate an evil spirit (ruah ra’ah). One is not allowed to touch the eyes or other sensitive parts of the body before washing hands, otherwise there is a danger that the evil spirit will cause harm. One student asked: what is the meaning of evil spirit? Most people in the world don’t wash their hands in the ritually prescribed way first thing in the morning. They touch their eyes and ears—but no harm seems to happen to them! Does the evil spirit only affect religious Jews, and no one else? The teacher told the student he was being impudent, and that it was a principle of faith that we should trust the wisdom of our sages. If the Shulhan Arukh says that there is a dangerous evil spirit on our hands in the morning, then that is absolute fact, not subject to doubt on our part.

4. While studying the Torah portion dealing with the marriage of Yitzhak and Rivka, students were told by their teacher that Rivka was three years old when she provided water to the camels of Abraham’s servant, and when she soon thereafter married Yitzhak. This, of course, is a midrashic teaching. A student asked: how was it possible for a three-year-old girl to water camels? It would have required far too much strength for any child so young. Moreover, if she were only three years old, why did her father ask her if she were willing to leave home to marry Abraham’s son: she would have been far too young to make such a decision. Also, is it reasonable to think that a forty year old man like Yitzhak would actually marry a three-year-old girl? The Torah’s description of Rivka certainly implies that she was much older than three. The rabbi responded: if

Hazal say that Rivka was three years old, that's how old she was! There is no room for further discussion.

5. A kindergarten student brought home a packet with pictures describing the story of Megillat Esther. One of the pictures depicted Vashti with pimples and a green tail. The child's parent asked the teacher why she had included such an odd picture, when there was nothing in the text of the Megillah that warranted such a bizarre rendition of Vashti. The teacher replied that that is how she had learned the story, and that it was based on a midrashic description of Vashti. The parent asked why the teacher did not tell the students that this was from the midrash, and not in the text of the Megillah. The teacher responded that the teachings of Hazal in the midrash provide the true meaning of the text, and that there is no need to differentiate between the biblical text and rabbinic interpretation.

The above cases, reflective of the educational approach of many religious schools and individuals, are symptomatic of serious problems in the way our community transmits Torah teachings. The fundamentalist, literalist position—so vehemently criticized by Rambam—still holds sway among many Orthodox Jews. It is incumbent upon rabbis, teachers and parents to steer Torah education towards a rational and reasonable understanding of the words of our sages.

Torah and Science:

Since One God created both Torah and science, it is axiomatic that Torah and science can never be in fundamental conflict. Torah and science are manifestations of One God, the Author of truth. If Torah and science appear to be at odds on certain points, then either we have not understood Torah properly or we have not done our science correctly.

Scientific knowledge has progressed tremendously since ancient times. Each generation has contributed to the cumulative knowledge of humanity, and this process continues in our generation; it will continue in future generations as well. With the advent of new tools of research, scientists have been able to expand the horizon of scientific knowledge. If ancient or medieval sages believed that the earth is flat, that the earth is the center of the universe, or that the sun orbits around the earth—this can hardly be surprising, since that is what their level of scientific knowledge was in those times. Nor can they be faulted for not knowing things that were discovered or theorized long after their deaths. Rashi thought that the Atlantic Ocean was "the end of the world"; Rambam believed that the Ptolemaic system of astronomy was correct; Hazal thought that eclipses were

signs of Divine wrath rather than predictable natural phenomena. It would be absurd to defend the outdated scientific views of these sages, since we now know that their views have proven to be incorrect. The sages based themselves on the best available scientific information; but later research and discoveries have led to more precise and accurate information. We need to address issues based on the current level of scientific knowledge. Let us turn to the question of the age of the universe, in light of Torah tradition and modern science.

Ancient Jewish sages calculated the age of humanity by adding up the ages of Biblical characters from the time of Adam. There were differences of opinion as to the exact age, since the Biblical account leaves some room for interpretation.[2] The Bible itself does not use the anno mundi (from the creation of the world) dating system, and the dating system that we currently use (5766 at the writing of this article) seems to have become widespread only after Talmudic times. The Tosafot (Gittin 80b, Zo Divrei Rabbi Meir) wonders why it is permissible to date bills of divorce from beriat olam, when in fact early divorces (and other documents) were dated based on the year of the ruling king of the land in which Jews resided.[3]

In fact, though, the current dating system does not date from the creation of the world, but from the creation of Adam. Literalists assume that the age of the world is reached by adding the first five days of creation to Adam's age. This would mean that the world was created less than six thousand years ago—hence the impossibility of anything existing before that time. But we have unequivocal fossil evidence of beings that existed millions of years ago, and other scientific evidence that the universe came into being billions of years ago. The literalists solve the dilemma by denying the existence of anything prior to 5766 years ago. They dismiss scientific evidence as inaccurate, false, or based on wrong scientific assumptions. They stake their faith on the truth of the world being 5766 years old. Dinosaurs could not have existed millions of years ago; when we see dinosaur bones, we are really seeing "dog bones that were swollen during Noah's flood"; or bones that God planted just to fool us into thinking the world was older than 5766; or bones which have been dated wrongly due to the ineptitude of scientists.

Yet, does the Torah really require us to deny scientific evidence in order to justify the anno mundi dating system? The Rambam would argue that the opposite is true, namely that we should seek truth and thereby come closer to the Author of truth. If science has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that dinosaurs existed millions of years ago, then we need to reject the literalist view that the universe is 5766 years old.

It has been pointed out that the six days of creation were not 24 hour days. Indeed, the sun was not created until the fourth day, so there could not have been a sunset or sunrise on the first three “days”. The word “days” might better be understood to mean “periods” of indeterminate length. At each period of the creation, there was a development from a simpler stage to a more complex stage. Since these six “days” of creation could have lasted billions of years by human calculation, then dinosaurs had ample time to live and become extinct before Adam and Eve were created on the sixth “day”.

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan has cited classic rabbinic texts asserting that the world is much older than the 5766 years implied by our current dating system. The Sefer ha-Temunah, attributed to the Tanna Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Kanah, suggests that there were other worlds before Adam was created. The Midrash Rabba on Bereishith 1:5 teaches that there were “orders of time” prior to the first day of creation recorded in the Torah. The Talmud records the view that there were 974 generations before Adam (Hagigah 13b).

Most interesting is the view of Rabbi Yitzhak of Akko, a student and colleague of the Ramban and one of the foremost Kabbalists of his time. In examining one of Rabbi Yitzhak’s important works, Ozar ha-Hayyim, Rabbi Kaplan discovered that Rabbi Yitzhak adduced that the universe is a bit over 15.3 billion years old! This theory by a medieval kabbalist, based on interpretations of Biblical and rabbinic texts, is remarkably close to the calculations of modern science that dates the “Big Bang” at approximately 15 billion years ago.[4] Rabbi Yitzhak felt no need to offer farfetched explanations to keep the universe within the 6000 year range. He, and his many pious colleagues and students, had no problem at all positing a universe that was billions of years old; they did not see this calculation as in any way impinging on the truth of Torah. It is significant, then, that we have legitimate traditions in Torah Judaism that view the universe as being far older than 5766 years.

Our schools should not be teaching our children that dinosaurs did not exist. They should not be telling children that the dinosaur bones are just “dog bones swollen in the flood of Noah’s time”. This is not Torah education, but mis-education. Not only is there no religious necessity to teach such nonsense; it is a religious mandate NOT to teach falsehood. To cloak falsity in the clothing of religion is to undermine true religion.

Likewise, in the matter of the location of the wind pipe and food pipe, it is educationally and morally unsound to teach patently false information in order to “validate” the mistaken notions of sages of earlier generations. The Talmud

(Pesahim 108a) states that reclining backward or to the right is not a valid way of reclining, adding the explanation that leaning incorrectly may endanger a person by causing the food go down the wind pipe. Rashi states that this explanation refers to leaning backward. Rashbam, though, takes issue with Rashi and cites his teachers who claimed that the esophagus was on the right; when a person reclines to the right, this causes the epiglottis to open, increasing the possiblity of choking. (The more usual explanation is that the wind pipe is on the right, so that leaning to the right may result in choking.) Although neither Rambam nor the Shulhan Arukh cite this explanation, it was cited by the Magen Abraham and the Taz—and became a widespread teaching.[5] Yet, it is factually incorrect—and therefore certainly should not be taught as the reason why we recline to the left.

When teaching children to recline to the left at the seder, a suitable explanation is that in antiquity free people ate while sitting on couches. They reclined to the left so that their right hand would be available to hold their food. If someone should ask: don't we lean to the left because that is where our food pipe is, the answer is: some people mistakenly thought this was the reason, but it is not the correct reason. The food pipe and wind pipe are not side by side.

As a general principle, we need to emphasize to our children and students that Hazal's statements on science were based on their level of scientific knowledge. Our sages themselves admitted that the wise men of the non-Jews had greater knowledge in some scientific matters (Pesahim 94b). Rabbi Haim David Halevy observed: "If it becomes clear through precise scientific method that a specific idea expressed by our sages is not entirely correct, this does not mar their greatness, Heaven forbid, and their greatness as sages of Torah. Their words relating to Torah were stated with the power of the holiness of Torah with a kind of divine inspiration; but their other words on general topics were stated from the depth of their human wisdom only.[6]

Ruah Ra'ah:

Many of our sages in earlier generations believed in demons (shedim), malevolent metaphysical forces (e.g. ayin ha-ra), astrology, and other such things. So did many of the wise and learned non-Jews of those times. These beliefs are not only cited in the Talmud but in some cases also have entered into a number of standard halakhic codes. How are we to understand these sources, and how are we to explain them to our children and students? Let us consider one such concept, ruah ra'ah, as an illustration of how to address this issue.

The Shulhan Arukh (O.H. 4:2) rules that one must pour water three times on each hand upon awakening, in order to remove the ruah ra'ah, an evil spirit that clings to the hands. In 4:3, the Shulhan Arukh states that before washing the hands, a person should not touch his mouth, nose, ears or eyes. Since the unwashed fingers have a ruah ra'ah on them, touching these sensitive organs is dangerous.

Various commentators have offered explanations of the nature of this ruah ra'ah. Some say that it clings to the hands because during sleep a person's hands may touch various parts of the body and become unclean (physically and/or spiritually). Others say that sleeping is akin to death; just as one needs purification when coming into contact with death, so one needs purification when awakening from sleep. The Zohar states: "For when a person is sleeping, his spirit flies away from him, and as his spirit flies off, an impure spirit is ready to settle on his hands, defiling them. So it is forbidden to offer a blessing with them without first washing."[7]

While the halakha mandates the ritual washing of hands in the morning, is the belief in ruah ra'ah a religious requirement? Can the washing of hands be explained in another way?

Rambam cites the rule of washing in the morning, in the laws of prayer (4:2-3). Washing of the hands (and face and legs as well) is part of the proper preparation for coming before the Almighty in prayer. Rambam does not mention ruah ra'ah at all! He apparently believed that the obligation to wash before prayer was a matter of physical cleanliness and ritual purification, but was not connected to ruah ra'ah. Taking Rambam's approach, then, we can observe and teach the practice of ritual washing in the morning without conditioning it on a belief in ruah ra'ah.[8]

While Rambam dismissed the notion of ruah ra'ah as the reason for washing hands in the morning, other sages were not as forthright. Though doubting that ruah ra'ah can cause bodily injury, they were reluctant to reject a belief recorded in the Talmud and other rabbinic texts. They resolved the problem by proposing that the ruah ra'ah existed in past times, but has lost its efficacy in modern times. The Maharam ben Habib, for example, pointed out: "in our times, we have never seen nor heard of anyone touching his eyes with unwashed hands in the morning, who then became blind [because of this]; therefore [it must be that] ruah ra'ah of the morning is no longer found among us."[9] The opinion that ruah ra'ah has lost its efficacy in our times was also expressed by the MaharShaL, Eliyah Rabbah and others.[10]

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, a great posek who was also devoted to the Zohar, noted that there are many topics that transcend our understanding, including the concept of ruah ra'ah. The ruah ra'ah refers to matters in the spiritual world which are beyond our power of reason to comprehend. Yet, when he describes the fulfillment of the hand-washing, Rabbi Halevy provides a meaningful and reasonable explanation: "Since the intention of the heart is the essence of fulfilling commandments, it is fitting that one should think at the time of washing that in this way he prepares himself for the service of the Creator, just as a priest who washed his hands in the Temple."[11]

Obviously, we must observe and teach the halakha of the ritual washing of hands in the morning. But we are not obliged to believe or inculcate a belief in ruah ra'ah. When teaching the Shulhan Arukh's text on ruah ra'ah, we can explain that many people believed in this concept in those days; that Rambam did not even mention the term in his codification of the rules of washing in the morning; that it is not religiously required to believe in this concept. It can also be pointed out that various sages suggested that ruah ra'ah has lost its efficacy in our times, i.e. that it is no longer a relevant concept for us. We can explain hand-washing as a ritual purification after sleeping at night; or as a ritual purification in preparation for prayer. It is inappropriate to insist that children believe in ruah ra'ah as a tenet of our religious tradition. It is wrong to teach that touching one's eyes, nose, mouth or ears with unwashed hands will cause bodily harm. It is pedagogically and intellectually unsound to compel students to accept things that are demonstrably false, and to dress such teachings in the garb of religious truth. This can only lead to the degradation of religion in the eyes of the students as they grow older and more sophisticated in their thinking. They may come to equate religion and superstition—a very dangerous and unfortunate eventuality.

The Nature of Midrashic/Aggadic Statements:

While some rabbinic opinion has favored a literalist interpretation of the words of Hazal, other rabbinic opinion has sharply rejected this approach.[12] Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes, an ardent defender of the wisdom of Hazal, made an obvious point: "There are several subjects in the Gemara whose meaning cannot be taken in a literal sense, because the text expounded literally would depict God as a corporeal being, and would also at times involve an act of blasphemy. We should, and we are, indeed, duty-bound to believe that the transmitters of the true Kabbalah, who are known to us as righteous and saintly men and also as accomplished scholars, would not speak merely in an odd manner. We must therefore believe that their words were uttered with an allegorical or mystical

sense and that they point to matters of the most elevated significance, far beyond our mental grasp."[13] Rabbi Chajes offered examples of rabbinic teachings that were stated rhetorically in order to stir the curiosity of listeners; that expressed profound ideas in figurative style; that employed parables and hyperbole. To take these midrashim literally would be to misunderstand totally the methods and the messages of Hazal. [14]

Rabbi Haim David Halevy pointed out that Hazal often disagreed with each other in their midrashic interpretations. It is impossible that two opposite opinions can both be historically true. For example, the Torah reports that after the death of Yosef a new Pharaoh arose over Egypt. Rav suggested that this referred to an actual new Pharaoh. Shemuel, though, interpreted this to mean that the same Pharaoh made new decrees against the Israelites. These statements cannot both be true.[15] Neither Rav nor Shemuel offered historical evidence or tradition to support his view; rather, their opinions flowed from their own reading of the Biblical text.

Hazal's interpretations were often made to convey a moral lesson, not to comment on actual historical events. For example, Rav Nahman suggests that Yaacov and family, on their way to Egypt to reunite with Yosef, stopped at Beer Sheva and chopped down trees that had been planted by Abraham. They took this wood with them to Egypt, and kept it throughout the centuries of their captivity. When they left Egypt, they brought this wood with them, and used it in building the Mishkan in the wilderness. [16]This is a beautiful way of tying together the history of the Israelites with their original ancestor, Abraham. Yet, there is no reason to assume that Rav Nahman did historical research that led to this interpretation, and there is no compelling reason to believe that he had an ancient oral tradition on this point; nor did he claim to have one. The significance of his interpretation has nothing to do with its historicity, but everything to do with the lasting influence of Abraham on the children of Israel.

Since Hazal utilized various literary and rhetorical techniques, it is essential to approach their statements with care. It is also essential to recognize that their interpretations reflect their own particular views, rather than a clearly defined, divinely ordained oral tradition.

Hai Gaon taught that the aggadah included statements by rabbis where "each one interpreted whatever came to his heart." We do not rely on the words of aggadah, but view them as personal opinions.[17] Sherira Gaon taught that aggadah, midrash and homiletical interpretations of the Bible were in the category of umdena, personal opinion and speculation.[18] The Gaon Shemuel

ben Hofni stated: “If the words of the ancients contradict reason, we are not obligated to accept them.”[19]

The non-literalist view of Hazal’s statements has a long and distinguished tradition including the Gaonim, Shemuel ha-Naggid, Rambam and his son, Ramban and so many others. In more recent times, the view was well expressed by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who noted that “aggadic sayings do not have Sinaitic origin….Nor must someone whose opinion differs from that of our sages in a matter of aggadah be deemed a heretic, especially as the sages themselves frequently differ.”[20]

When we teach midrashim/aggadot, we must be sophisticated enough to view these passages in their literary and rhetorical context. We must not force a literalist interpretation, especially when such an interpretation violates reason, or when alternative valid interpretations are also available.

Some sages examined the Biblical stories and calculated that Rivka was three years old when she watered the camels of Abraham’s servant. This calculation, recorded in Seder Olam, assumes that Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Yitzhak immediately after the Akedah. Yet, the Torah itself does not specify if this occurred immediately after the Akedah or if there was a lapse of some years between stories. The Tosafot (Yebamot 61b, vekhein hu omer) reports a rabbinic calculation which concludes that Rivka was fourteen years old at the time she watered the camels! Thus, even within classic rabbinic literature there is a difference of opinion as to how old Rivka was. The view that she was three years old apparently wishes to underscore the unusual, even miraculous, qualities of Rivka. The view that she was fourteen years old apparently wishes to understand the text in a more realistic light. Rivka obviously was old enough and mature enough to water camels, to decide to leave home to be married, and to marry Yitzhak.

When discussing the age of Rivka, then, it is fine to relate the rabbinic tradition that she was three, as a midrashic way of underscoring the unusual qualities of Rivka, just as a midrash has Abraham discovering God at the age of three. But it should also be noted that a valid rabbinic tradition holds that Rivka was actually fourteen at the time (and Abraham was forty, forty-eight or fifty-two when he discovered God). This view, of course, is more reasonable. No parent or teacher should insist that a child or student must believe that Rivka was three “because Hazal said so”. Hazal also said she was fourteen! Midrashic statements are often made to convey a lesson, not to record historical truth. In presenting midrashim, we need to examine their underlying lessons.

When the midrash is taught as though it is an integral part of the Biblical text, this does violence to the Biblical text—and also to the midrash. Students should always be able to differentiate between what is stated in the text, and what is later rabbinic interpretation. This is especially true when midrashim present supernatural or very odd details; students may come to believe that these midrashic elements are actually part of the Bible. If they later reject these strange midrashim, they may feel they are actually rejecting the Bible itself—and this may lead to much spiritual turmoil.

A well known tendency of midrash is to glorify the righteous characters and to vilify the wicked characters. Biblical heroes become larger than life in their goodness; and Biblical villains are characterized by all sorts of vices and defects. This is part of the story-telling and moralizing method of midrashic literature. This midrashic method should be taught to students, so that they become familiar with the style of Hazal in praising the righteous and condemning the wicked. This method will help us to understand the midrash's presentation of Vashti.

The text of the Megillah tells us very little about Vashti. We do not know why she refuses to appear at the command of the king. Her refusal could be interpreted very positively: she was modest, and she was courageous in refusing her husband's inappropriate command. But the midrashic mindset wants to vilify Ahashverosh—and also his wife. It is suggested that Vashti descends from the wicked Nebuchadnezar; that is why she is a "good" match for Ahashverosh. They are both corrupt people. If she is part of Nebuchadnezar's evil family, she too must be evil. Then why didn't she appear at Ahashverosh's command? The reason could not be because she was modest or courageous; that would impute virtues to her. So the midrash suggests, perhaps with outlandish humor, that Vashti was stricken with hideous physical defects—pimples and a tail—so that she was embarrassed to appear before the king and his retinue. That is why she refused to come. This depiction deprives Vashti of moral virtue, and makes her a comical character punished with physical defects symbolic of her wicked soul.

I wonder what the point is of teaching this midrashic interpretation to kindergarten children. It is unlikely that they will understand the midrashic method underlying this description of Vashti. Teachers may like to teach this in order to make the children laugh and have their imaginations aroused. Yet, in the long run this lesson does damage to the children unless the teacher makes it very clear that this is a midrashic vilification of Vashti, not the description found in the Megillah's text. Hazal never claimed that their midrashim were to be indistinguishable from the Biblical text, nor should we make that claim for them.

The points made in this article should seem fairly clear and obvious to all those interested in proper Torah education. Yet, the fact is that much mis-education is found in our homes, synagogues and schools. A simplistic, literalist approach to the words of Hazal continues to be influential—and very widespread. This is not only intellectually and pedagogically unsound: it is a degradation of Torah and Hazal, as pointed out by the Rambam. We all need to raise our voices for the sake of Torah, truth and the religious wellbeing of our future generations.

[1].See his Ma-amar Odot Derashot Hazal, printed in the introductory section of the Ein Yaacov.[
[2] Azariah de Rossi (1511-1578) pointed out the discrepancies in the rabbinic calculations in his Meor Enayim, Vilna, 1865, in the section Yemei Olam. See especially pp. 64f and pp. 223f.
[3] See Isaac S. D. Sassoon, Destination Torah, Ktav Publishing House, Hoboken, 2001, pp. 4-5.
[4] Aryeh Kaplan, Immortality, Resurrection and the Age of the Universe: A Kabbalistic View, Ktav Publishing House, Hoboken, 1993, p. 9. See also Nathan Aviezer, In the Beginning, Ktav Publishing House, Hoboken, 1990.
[5] Rambam, Hilkhot Hamets U-Matsah 7:8; Shulhan Arukh, O.H. 472:3, and the Magen Abraham and Taz on this passage. The Tur, O.H. 472, inverses the opinions of Rashi and Rashbam.
[6] Asei Lekha Rav, Tel Aviv, 5743, 5:49
[7] The Zohar, translation and commentary by Daniel C. Matt, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004, vol. 1, p. 70. See also note 524 on p. 69.
[8] See the discussion of the Arukh ha-Shulhan, O.H. 4, where he cites others who view the hand-washing as preparation for prayer.
[9] Cited in note 8 of Yalkut Yosef, by Yitzhak Yosef, Jerusalem, 5745, volume one of Tefillah, pp. 9-10.
[10] Ibid.

[11] Mekor Hayyim, Jerusalem, 5743, vol. 1, 2:5. For a discussion of Rabbi Halevy's approach to halakha and kabbala, see Marc D. Angel with Hayyim Angel, Rabbi Haim David Halevy: Gentle Scholar and Courageous Thinker, Urim Publications, Jerusalem, 2006.
[12] For a discussion of both traditions in rabbinic literature, see my article "Authority and Dissent: A Discussion of Boundaries," in Tradition, 25:2, Winter 1990, pp. 22f.
[13]The Student's Guide to the Talmud, London, 1952, p. 201. See also his discussion on p. 208f.
[14] Ibid., chapters 26-30.

[15] Asei Lekha Rav 5:49.
[16] Midrash Rabbah ha-Mevoar, Jerusalem, 5748, vol.4, Bereishith 94:4
[17] Ozar ha-Geonim, ed. B. M. Lewin, Jerusalem, 5692, vol. 4 (Hagigah), pp. 59-60.
[18] Ibid., p. 60.

[19] Ibid., pp. 4-5,

[20] Joseph Munk, “Two Letters of Samson Raphael Hirsch, a Translation,” L’Eylah, April, 1989, pp. 30-35.