

# HEBREW WORD STUDY

EXPLORING THE MIND OF GOD

CHAIM  
BENTORAH

WITH LAURA BERTONE



WHITAKER  
HOUSE

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The definitions of *knowledge* in Study 25, “An Intimate Knowing,” and *jealousy* in Study 51, “God Is Jealous,” are taken from dictionary.com.

## Hebrew Word Study:

*Exploring the Mind of God*

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# Dedication

To my precious nephews:  
John, Michael, Nikko, and Dominic  
—Auntie Laura (Lolo)



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## Author's Note

Please refer to the alphabetical Glossary at the end of this book for definitions and explanations of historical, cultural, and linguistic terms followed by an asterisk (\*) where they initially occur in the text. Some of these terms may first appear in plural form. For clarity, in the case of a term consisting of two words, two asterisks (\*\*) will follow the second word of the term, and in the case of a term consisting of three words, three asterisks (\*\*\*) will follow the third word of the term.

As with other Semitic languages, the original Hebrew alphabet\*\* is consonantal, with no separate letters for vowels. Nevertheless, vowel sounds were used in the Hebrew language, because it is impossible to pronounce a word without using the sounds represented by *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*. In rabbinic Hebrew, the letters aleph, hei, yod, and vav can be used to denote a vowel. Additionally, around the seventh century AD, the Masoretic text introduced the *niqqud*, which are a series of dots and dashes placed near a consonantal letter to indicate a vowel. The normal pattern is: consonant, vowel, consonant, vowel. I use the *abajab*, or the consonantal alphabet, and follow a rabbinical tradition of defaulting to using the *a* whenever any vowel is needed, except in cases where I am explaining a certain word usage or grammatical expression. Additionally, while many academic texts use left-handed apostrophes for the aleph and right-handed apostrophes for the ayin, this text has been streamlined, using left-handed apostrophes for both.

Finally, in the Scripture quotations, brackets indicate words added or substituted for clarity and/or flow and boldface type indicates my emphasis.

# Preface

In Romans 11:34, the apostle Paul asks this rhetorical question: “*Who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?*” The Greek word translated “known” here is *egno*, which comes from the word *ginosko*. This is the same word Mary used when she asked the angel Gabriel, who told her that she would become the mother of the Messiah, “*How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?*” (Luke 1:34). In other words, she is asking how she could be pregnant given the fact she had never had a sexual relationship with a man. *Ginosko*, although rendered as “know,” is a word that is often used to describe intimacy. It is similar to the word used in the Aramaic, which is the language Mary spoke. That word is *chekam* (ܫܚܡܐ), which also refers to knowing in an intimate sense.

The question Paul is asking, therefore, is this: “Who has an intimate knowledge of the mind of God enough to be His counselor or advisor?” This verse is not saying we cannot know the mind of God at all—we just cannot know it enough to offer Him any advice.

Even though we cannot know the depths of God’s mind enough to be His counselor, God does reveal much about what is on His mind—especially about His relationship with us—through His Word. We may think we know the mind of God merely from studying the Scriptures. Yet we cannot really be sure that what we are reading is fully accurate in our modern English language versions. The Bible was written in ancient (Classical) Hebrew,\* Aramaic,\* and Greek\*—all of which are now dead languages.

The Bible translators do their best with the knowledge and skills they have to give us an accurate translation, yet with over 115 modern English translations, there is still much dispute over the proper rendering of certain words. The fact is, many translations reflect an understanding of God that may be subjective—and very different from the one the reader has. Hence, our true teacher is the Holy Spirit, and no matter how skilled and knowledgeable the translator may be, we still must pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit when reading God’s Word in an English translation.

In fact, I do not want anyone to read this book without first asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and following the teaching found in Colossians 3:15: “*And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.*” The Greek word translated “*peace*” here is *brabeueto*, which means “to arbitrate” or “to umpire.” You don’t need an umpire to call whether a baseball player is safe or out when the baseman catches the ball and touches the base before the runner ever reaches it. A call is needed when a runner touches the base at seemingly the same time the baseman touches the base with the ball. In the stands, fans of one team are screaming, “Safe!” while fans of the other team are shouting, “Out!” It is the umpire who makes the final decision.

In your study of God’s Word, the “umpire” is not your pastor, teacher, study leader, or even Chaim Bentorah. It is the Holy Spirit and whether or not you feel His peace in your heart. If you feel no peace about something I write because it goes against what your preachers or teachers have taught you, or what your own Bible study has indicated, I would encourage you to pray about it and ask for the Holy Spirit’s guidance. If, after asking for the Spirit to guide you, you still feel a lack of peace in your heart, then don’t feel you need to accept it. All I ask is that you seek the Spirit’s leading to bring you into the knowledge He wants you to have and not allow Chaim Bentorah or any other teacher or preacher to stand in your way.

Having said that, I would like to point out that it comes as a surprise to many Christians to learn that there are literally hundreds of words in the Hebrew over which scholars strongly disagree regarding their proper, twenty-first-century English renderings. In fact, many linguists will tell you that we cannot possibly know the real depth of certain words in the Hebrew and express them in our modern English language. For instance,

the Hebrew word *racham* (רחם) could be translated as “love,” “tender mercies,” or “lovingkindness.” It could also denote the following: a very personal and individualized blessing, strength, protection, assurances, guidance, consolation, support, spiritual gifts, the gift of faith, repentance and forgiveness, persistence, fortitude, and cheerfulness. The list can go on and on, and yet we still cannot find an adequate word for *racham* (רחם). Perhaps God never intended for us to have a sufficient English word for it. Perhaps He wanted that word to have a fluid meaning so it could speak to us individually, so the Holy Spirit could whisper a personal message to us.

I recently heard a rabbi say that Hebrew is a spiritual language, the language of God, and thus many words have an eternal meaning that we will never have a complete understanding of until we are joined with Him in eternity. I like that idea because it suggests we will spend eternity learning and coming to understand the mind of God.

This concept can be illustrated by the marriage relationship. A husband may spend a lifetime learning the mind and heart of his wife. The more time he spends with her, the more he learns what is going on in her mind, but he will never have a complete understanding of it, at least not in this life. As much as his wife might share her heart and mind with her husband, it would still take more than a lifetime for him to comprehend them completely.

Then again, is that not one of the joys of becoming one with your mate—learning what the person you love the most is thinking and then knowing their thoughts so well that you know exactly the right anniversary or birthday present to purchase for them? Is it not a couple’s desire and quest to learn each other’s minds that draws the two closer together to form a bond that no one else on this planet can share with them, not even their own parents?

But what is greater still is when husband and wife seek to understand the mind and heart of God together. The closer they draw to God’s mind and heart, the closer their bond will be to each other and to Him, with the three sharing each other’s hearts and minds.

Jewish tradition teaches that one is to never study Torah\* alone. Some students of Torah will actually pay someone to study the Word of God

with them so they will not have to do it by themselves. For over ten years, one of my former students, the coauthor of this book, has been my study partner. The word studies I have chosen to include in *Hebrew Word Study: Exploring the Mind of God* are ones my study partner and I have worked on together, and many of the insights about God’s love came from her experience in caring for her nephews—all the loving things her heart expressed to them and the loving bond she created with them. Although she does not share my academic background in biblical languages, she has a lifetime of experiences that I do not have. Through her relationships with her nephews, and her intimate walk with Jesus, she revealed to me a deeper understanding of the heart and mind of God as a Parent and Guardian. And I discovered a deeper understanding of many of the words that we studied.

Again, there are numerous words in the original biblical languages that have secondary meanings and translations. In the following word studies, I have chosen many renderings that you may not find in any English version. For example, the Hebrew root word for “anger” is *’aneph* (אנה). The term originates from the sound a camel makes—a snorting. The word even sounds like a camel’s snort! Why does a camel snort? For several reasons: anger, frustration, or because it is being forced to do something it does not want to do. A camel also snorts when it is in heat and desires intimacy. Thus, *’aneph* (אנה) is an expression of great emotion that could reflect anger, frustration, desire, passion, grief, and many other possibilities. Only the context and tradition will tell us which English word to use.

For instance, we may read in our English translation that God’s anger was kindled, and the original Hebrew word rendered “anger” is *’aneph* (אנה). In such an instance, why could we not say that His grief, His disappointment, or His sorrow was kindled? Perhaps the sin that aroused this emotion in God has separated His people from Him. Why could we not say that His passion for them was aroused, His longing and desire for intimacy with them was kindled, but He cannot fulfill His longing for intimacy because it has been blocked by their sin? Once more, translators use the context, tradition, and cultural influences to determine their word choices. These elements are very important, but I ask again that we add to this the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As I wrote in a previous book, *Hebrew Word Study: Revealing the Heart of God*, in no way does this book seek to undermine any of our modern translations. It is my belief that all of our contemporary English versions of the Bible were translated by men and women skilled in biblical languages and linguistics. Every word in the dozens of modern English translations was prayerfully considered, and it is my position that even though various translations may contain different meanings, expressions, and nuances, they all reflect the inspired Word of God. They also demonstrate the ambiguity of the Classical Hebrew language and the infinite greatness of God.

Yet, over the years, as I tried to be true to the traditional translations of many words, I was persuaded to consider many alternative renderings that are more in line with a love relationship with God than a business relationship, which seems to be what many Christians have with Him. Sadly, I believe the fear of punishment and going to hell drives many Christians' relationship with God. Perhaps a relationship with the Lord of "I scratch Your back, You scratch my back" is not what it is all about. Maybe our church attendance, tithing, and good deeds are not about winning rewards from God or gaining eternal life in heaven, but rather about having a deep connection with a God who wants to share His unconditional love with us. Did God send His Son to die for our sins merely so that we would accept Jesus as our Savior and have our ticket to heaven? Once that is accomplished, why serve God any longer? If He will forgive all our sins, why not go out and live it up in a sinful lifestyle? Perhaps God made the basis of our salvation faith and not works so that our reason for living a life that is pleasing to Him would be motivated by love and not by a desire to gain favors from Him.

Someone reading this preface might conclude from my emphasis on God's love that I do not believe in a hell, punishment for sins, or even a devil. The fact is, I believe in these things more than I have ever believed in them. Even so, as I draw closer to God in my love relationship with Him, as I increasingly learn not to be afraid of Him, to realize that no matter how many mistakes or sins I commit, they will all be placed under the blood of Jesus, I find that my motivation not to sin doesn't come from a fear of going to hell but a fear that I will break the heart of the God whom I love.

Speaking for my coauthor and myself, it is our prayer that after you read this book, you will no longer be afraid that God will punish you for your sins and send you to hell. We pray that your love for Him will grow to the extent that your greatest fear will be that you might disappoint the God whom you cherish, that you might wound or even break His heart. God doesn't send people to hell. What sends people to hell is their refusal to accept His free gift of salvation, their choice to leave God out of their life, their choice not to accept His love. Our ultimate prayer is that someone who does not know God will pick up this book, fall in love with Him, and choose to follow Him in an ever-deepening relationship of mutual devotion.

—*Chaim Bentorah*

## Study 1

# God Declares His Thoughts

*“For who hath known the mind of the Lord?  
or who hath been his counsellor?”*

—Romans 11:34

**A**s I wrote in the preface to this book, Paul is asking a rhetorical question in the above verse. The answer is obvious. Who has ever known the full mind of the Lord? No one has, just as people cannot fully know each other’s minds. Sometimes we do not even know our own minds! In Romans 11:34, the Greek word translated “mind” is *nous*, which refers to the intellect or the reasoning capacity. In Aramaic, the word is *ra’ina*, which, in Judaic literature, is not only used for one’s mind or reasoning capacity but also for one’s desires.

Isaiah 55:8 gives us additional insight into God’s thoughts: “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.*” Here, the Hebrew word rendered “thoughts” is *machshabah* (מחשבה), from the root word *chashab* (חשב), which means “plans, purpose, thoughts, and imagination.” It is used for someone who invents something new. It is also an ancient word for a machine.

### *God Expresses His Thoughts Through His Creation*

It is true that we cannot really know the plans and thoughts of God that He does not voluntarily reveal to us. For one thing, if He did

reveal something deep, most likely, we would not understand it. Thus, the thoughts He communicates are on a need-to-know basis.

Yet, let's look closely at another verse, Amos 4:13: "*For, lo, he that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the high places of the earth, the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name.*" God forms the mountains, creates the wind, declares His thoughts to man, makes the morning darkness.... Whoa, wait a minute. Back up. "Declares His thoughts to man"? Apparently, God reveals some of His thoughts to us in avenues others than words. He declares them in the mountains and in the winds. Throughout all of His creation, He reveals thoughts that He intends for us to understand and embrace.

When was the last time God declared His thoughts to you in this way? Was it when your pet dog jumped up on your lap and for no reason at all gave you a sloppy kiss or stood waiting at your door when you came home, all excited about your arrival? Did something inside of you say, "God has just shown me through one of His creatures something of the nature of His love"? Through even small aspects of His creation, God gives us examples of His unconditional love—loving us no matter who or what we are. A dog doesn't care if you are handsome, beautiful, plain, or disfigured. It doesn't care about the color of your skin, your nationality, your political inclinations, or your religious beliefs. It just loves you. And God has proven through His Word that He loves us just as we are. (See, for example, Romans 5:8.)

I read a news story about a little girl who became lost in a forest. A search party spent hours looking for her, bringing her pet dog with them, and when they drew close to where she was, the dog began to bark, leading the rescuers to her. The article said that afterward, the little dog never left the girl's side. Have you ever felt like a little lamb who was lost in the woods? Is God any less faithful to us than that little girl's pet dog was to her? You are never alone. God is always by your side. I believe the little girl's dog, a piece of God's creation, was given to show us the faithfulness of our heavenly Father.

### *God Looks into Our Eyes with Love*

There are some people who have the mistaken idea that I am a pretty smart guy and can figure out things about God. However, like you, I have

learned that there are some things about God I am able to figure out, but there are many other things about Him that I cannot figure out, many things I will never figure out while still on this planet. I mean, I would sure like to know just what God was thinking when He pulled off a few of His “stunts” in my life! But then, the prophet Isaiah told us that God declares His thoughts to us, and Isaiah made this declaration under the inspiration of God’s Spirit. Well, I am ready, God: tell me what You are thinking, because I sure can’t figure it out!

I think it would help if we began by exploring the different Hebrew words translated as “thought” in Isaiah 55:8 and Amos 4:13. As I pointed out earlier, the root word for “thoughts” in the verse from Isaiah is *chashab* (חשב), which means “plans, purpose, thoughts, and imagination.” These are what God declares to us through His creation. However, in Amos 4:13, which says that God “*declareth unto man what is his thought,*” the Hebrew word for “thought” is *secho* (שחור). Before I tell you the origins of *secho* (שחור) and what it means, I need to interpret the Hebrew word for “declareth,” or “tells.” That word is *magid* (מגיד), which comes from a Semitic root\* word as well as the Persian word *magi*, from which we get our modern word *magic*. The Hebrew root is *nagad* (נגד), which was borrowed from the Persian and means “what is most precious.”

To be fair, in his well-regarded lexicon,\* Benjamin Davidson claims this word is in a *hiphal*\* (causative) form. Hence, the root word is *nagad* (נגד), which is an Akkadian\* term meaning “to make a declaration that is clear and straightforward.” Therefore, we might say this means looking into someone’s eyes when saying something. I believe the prophet was making a play on words\*\*\* and that the meanings of the Persian and Akkadian root words were intended to factor into this expression. In other words, when God *nagads* (נגד), He is in some supernatural way looking directly into our eyes and declaring His *secho* (שחור), His thoughts, to us. To use a simple illustration, God makes His thoughts to us as plain as my neighbor’s dog, Sparky, carrying his food bowl over to his master and looking into his eyes with expectancy.

*Secho* (שחור) also comes from a Semitic root from which the Hebrew word *shachah* (שחח), meaning “to worship,” is derived. I found this root word used in a Ugaritic\* text that tells the story of the goddess Anat who

fell in love with a mortal man and entered into intimacy with him. The word conveys that intimacy, that expression of total love.

The Masoretes,\* a group of Jewish scribe scholars who worked between the sixth century and the tenth century AD, made the first letter of *shachah* (שחח) a sine (שׁ), which has an “s” sound, rather than a shin (שׁ), which has an “sh” sound. This change would make the root word *shayach* (שיח), meaning “to meditate” or “to make a complaint.” With the sine (שׁ), the word would be *sacha*, meaning “to be intimate.” The change comes from placing a dot on the right side of the shin rather than on the left side. Just one altered dot in the Masoretic text (written seven hundred years after the birth of Christ) changed “intimacy” to “complaining.” That dot was not in the original inspired text; it was placed there by man. Although many Christians hold up the Masoretic text as being almost inspired, the Jews do not, and they are not afraid to disagree with the Masoretes. I disagree with them, too. I don’t believe God looks into man’s eyes and shares His complaints—or that He even meditates on His complaints about man. I believe God looks into man’s eyes and declares His deep, intimate love for those whom He has created.

As you continue to read this book, whose purpose is to reveal the mind of God to you, know that the foremost thought that expresses the mind of God toward humanity is His love for us in Christ Jesus. That is the central theme in everything this book expresses about God’s mind. Thus, when I deal with words like *anger*, *wrath*, or *jealousy*, I will be looking at them through the lenses of God’s perfect, unconditional love. If a particular Hebrew word is traditionally incompatible with the word for “love,” like the Hebrew word for “anger,” I will be looking at the various alternative renderings for this word. You will find that every Hebrew word used in our relationship with God that has a negative English expression has a positive, loving expression as well. I will insert a positive English word in the particular study verse that is being considered and allow you to decide if it fits or not. I only offer a suggestion, a viewpoint, a possible alternative. It is up to you to decide if I hit the target or missed it.

## *Most Precious*

In my work, I drive a disability bus, and once, as I was waiting for one of my wheelchair clients to finish shopping, a flock of seagulls landed in the parking lot. The seagulls migrate at that time of year, and they pass over Lake Michigan, often coming inland to find food. As I offered part of my Egg McMuffin to one of the seagulls, he walked up to me, opened his mouth, and said, “Yik.” I watched this seagull as he began to dance around and fluff up his feathers. His feathers were pure white, almost like fur, with little areas of pure black. The contrast was beautiful; he was beautiful.

The seagull and his friends just danced around my bus, showing themselves off. When anyone else walked by, these birds would just politely move away, unflustered, and then return for more Egg McMuffin. I could not help but think that only a God of pure love could have created such beauty. But why create this beautiful creature? Maybe because these birds made me begin to feel God’s loving presence, His *secho* (שחזר), His mind.

Even as the seagulls took off to continue their migration, I remained basking in the warm, glowing intimacy of God. With that little piece of His creation, God had looked me in the eye and, in a supernatural way, declared to me that I was most precious to Him. That is the meaning of *magid* (מגיד), or “declare.” And in this *magid* (מגיד), I found *secho* (שחזר), His mind, bringing me into His loving intimacy. In that moment, when He revealed His mind to me, I realized that He was most precious to me, as I was to Him. Suddenly, all my problems no longer mattered.

Emily Dickinson once said, “A wounded deer leaps highest.” All my troubles, all my wounds, only cause me to leap higher into the arms of Jesus. They only serve to make me to open my heart further to God so that I am able to enter His *secho* (שחזר) and hear the words He is speaking to me.