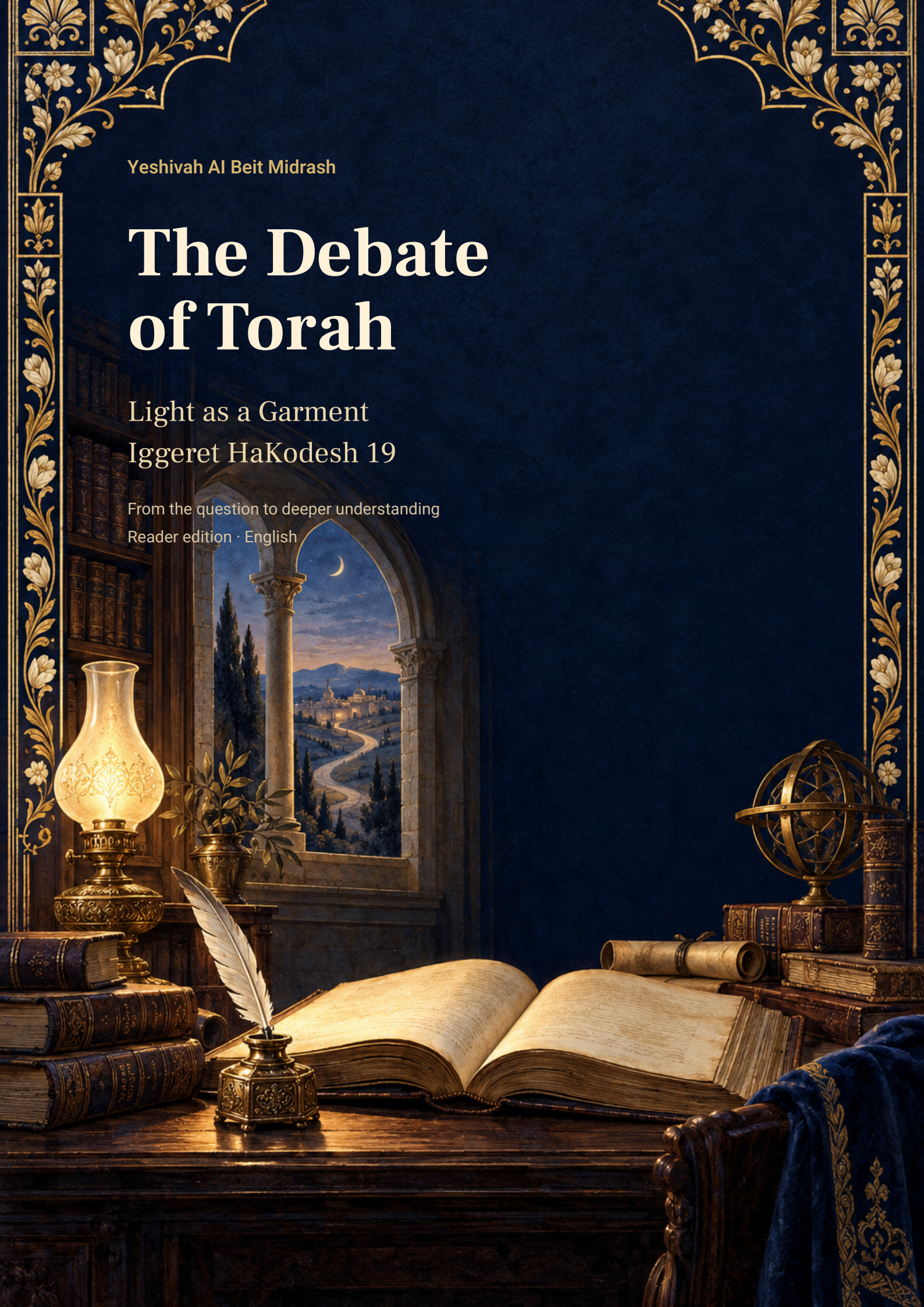


Yeshivah Al Beit Midrash

The Debate of Torah

Light as a Garment
Iggeret HaKodesh 19

From the question to deeper understanding
Reader edition · English



A small question can open a wide door

A verse not explicitly explained. A chain of words written again. Two simple questions in Iggeret HaKodesh 19 open a door to depth: light and garment, understanding and what is hidden within it. This is the series' starting point—a small textual detail, in the tradition of studying Rashi, the Talmud and Tanya.

Around the royal study-hall table meet three AI “learners”: ChatGPT, Claude and Grok, chosen for the current team. One proposes, another challenges, and each sharpens the other. We do not assume that one model combines every strength. Wide searching and rapid comparison meet careful mutual criticism.

The inquiry was conducted under rabbinic supervision, with human review and guidance. At the end, agreement emerged on what had become clear and what still needed study—in the spirit of “et vahev besufah”, the Talmud’s image of debate ending in love. The following pages trace this path from the question to sources, proposals and insights.

A first taste: ten concise findings

1. Light is inner wisdom; its garment is revealed Torah (Tzemach Tzedek).
2. The verse is relevant; why its explanation is missing remains open.
3. The continuation fits; a special intent in “etc.” is not proved.
4. The Rebbe marks the chain: “The repetition requires examination.”
5. A wording difference alone does not explain why repetition is needed.
6. A grammatical reading must first establish which text is being read.
7. The Ari qualifies the higher aspects: they are within Zeir Anpin.
8. Clothing is not identity; grasping the lower does not reveal all the higher.
9. The qualification supports a proposal, not a decisive solution.
10. Inner wisdom is present in Torah even when hidden from apprehension.

A | Reading the opening carefully

What gives rise to the two questions?

A. A verse without an explicit explanation

The epistle begins, “**He wraps Himself in light as in a garment, etc.**” It immediately turns to the Ari’s account of Moses’ apprehension. How does this discussion explain the verse? What are the light and the garment? The connection is not made explicit in the epistle.¹

B. An order stated again

First, an influence is described as passing from chochmah, through binah, to the lower sefirot. At that lower place, Moses’ prophecy apprehended the inner dimension. The text then denies inner apprehension above it—and describes the same order of clothing again.¹

The detail that drives the inquiry

The question is not only what the second sentence means. We must understand what it does after the first sentence has already been stated.

Two notes from our Rebbe

The Tzemach Tzedek notes of the opening: “**The explanation of the verse is missing.**” The Rebbe marks the repeated passage: “**The repetition requires examination.**” Both notes direct us to the question itself and invite serious study.^{2,4}

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The light clothed in the garment

The Hebrew word *salmah* means a garment. The Tzemach Tzedek explains the verse through two aspects of Torah: what is revealed and grasped by our understanding, and the inner depth clothed within it.²

The garment: the revealed expression

The external aspects of *chochmah*—the illumination that descends from it and is suited to apprehension—are related to revealed Torah. They are described as a garment. The garment allows the light to appear in a way the recipient can encounter.

The light: the inner wisdom

The inner dimension of *Abba*, meaning inner *chochmah*, is linked in this explanation to Torah's inner reasons and the hidden light. The epistle likewise says that the reason we understand contains “the inner dimension and mysteries of wisdom.” What is not open to our understanding is not absent from Torah.^{1, 2}

What was answered, and what remains

A clear substantive link has been found between the verse and the epistle. Knowing the connection, however, does not explain why the Alter Rebbe did not state it explicitly.

What does “etc.” add?

The verse continues, “He stretches out the heavens like a curtain.” Yahel Or contains an explanation connecting that continuation too with Torah as an intermediary. It therefore belongs to the subject; this still does not prove that the Alter Rebbe wrote “etc.” to hint at that particular explanation.³

C | A few terms needed for the reading

What can be grasped through a garment?

The epistle distinguishes a higher level in itself from what flows from it to a lower level. This distinction lies at the heart of the question about Moses' apprehension.

Inner and external aspects

In this discussion, pnimiyut means a level's inner aspect; achorayim means its external and lower aspects, suited to being conveyed to a recipient. We therefore always have to ask: the inner aspect of which level?¹

Clothing

A deep idea can be conveyed through a simple explanation. The explanation brings something of the depth to the listener, but that does not mean the listener has grasped the whole idea. The example helps frame the question: when a higher level is clothed in a lower one, what exactly becomes graspable? The example alone does not determine the details of the kabbalistic account.

The place of apprehension

NHYM stands for netzach, hod, yesod and malchut—the four lower sefirot named in the epistle. The Alter Rebbe places Moses' prophetic inner apprehension there. This does not mean that all the inwardness of the higher levels clothed there became apprehended.¹

Prophecy and wisdom

Later, the epistle distinguishes revelation in prophecy from the apprehension of sages. This explains how the Ari can discuss higher levels without diminishing Moses' unique prophecy. The distinction helps explain the content; it still does not explain the repetition itself.¹

The same chain—what is new?

The first time

Inner apprehension of chochmah and keter is denied. The external aspects of chochmah are described as clothed in binah, whose influence reaches NHYM. The ending states: **“There was his prophetic apprehension ... from the inner dimension of NHYM.”**¹

The second time

The text says: **“But above NHYM he had no inner apprehension.”** Then comes the repeated passage: **“Except ... the external aspects of chochmah ... in binah ... within the inner dimension of NHYM.”** These quotations are shortened for comparison.¹

The scope of the question

The Rebbe marks “Except ... of NHYM” and writes, “The repetition requires examination.” The question concerns the chain repeated after the statement of denial.⁴

The difference we found

“Above NHYM” expressly broadens the denial. “Within the inner dimension” highlights where the higher illumination is clothed. Yet clothing and the place of prophecy were already stated the first time. There is a wording difference; its role still needs explanation.

Even a grammatical distinction needs care. An online vocalized text and a printed-page image do not match in every word. An explanation must not be built on a grammatical change before establishing which text is being read.

Attractive proposals that needed another look

“The first is positive; the second is negative”

This brings out two emphases, but both formulations contain denial and affirmation. Even if the second denial is needed, the question remains: why does the whole chain follow it again?

“A Midrash and a verse come next”

The continuation quotes the “fallen fruit of wisdom” and “You shall see My back.” They matter to the content. To explain the repetition, we must show how that repetition specifically prepares them. A new source appearing afterward is not enough.

“One paragraph is light; the other is garment”

This appealing division does not fit the wording: both descriptions discuss external aspects and clothing, and the first already mentions inner chochmah. Light and garment are a key to the content, but the paragraphs do not divide that way.

“To the end” versus “within”

This is useful: the first marks how far the influence reaches; the second stresses clothing within. But “there was his prophetic apprehension” is already in the first description. The difference needs to be explained through the source and context.

From proposals to the source

These proposals were not erased from the path. Each taught us what to examine—and led to a sharper question: does the Ari’s source itself contain a qualification explaining the mode of apprehension?

F | A statement followed by a qualification

The detail found later in the Ari's discussion

The epistle cites the Ari's Likkutei Torah in Ki Tissa and Vayikra. The Rebbe's note emphasizes reading the two together. This does not establish one Tanya paragraph for each Torah portion.^{5, 6, 7}

Do not stop at the beginning of the portion

The beginning of Vayikra discusses Moses in relation to the back of yesod of Abba and the front of yesod of Imma. Later comes an explicit qualification: **"Only from the yesod aspects of Abba and Imma alone, and only as they are within Zeir Anpin, not above in their own place."**⁷

Abba and Imma are names here for chochmah and binah. Yesod names a particular aspect within the configuration, and Zeir Anpin is the lower level within which their clothing is discussed. The qualification limits both the aspect and its state: within the lower level, not above in its own place.

Why does this matter for the repetition?

The source itself now gives us a pattern of attribution followed by limitation. We can try reading the repetition in Tanya similarly: Moses' apprehension is connected to chochmah and binah, but must not be credited with apprehending their inwardness in their own place.

A finding and a proposal are different claims

The qualification is explicit in the Ari. Saying that it explains why the Alter Rebbe repeated the chain is an interpretive proposal still being tested.

The stronger proposal—and the question left open

A possible reading of the repetition

First, the epistle identifies the source of the influence and the place of prophecy. After the general denial, it restates the mode of apprehension: the higher aspects belong to Moses' apprehension as clothed within the inner dimension of NHYM. Repetition may sharpen the relationship between a higher source and apprehension in a lower place.

What supports this proposal?

The Vayikra qualification gives it a real basis. Steinsaltz's commentary also suggests reading the repetition through what is clothed inside the lower levels. The proposal no longer rests on the word "within" alone.^{7, 10}

What does it still fail to explain?

The first formulation already says that the aspects are clothed in one another and that prophecy occurs within NHYM. The need for the entire repetition therefore has not been proved. Moreover, "within Zeir Anpin" in the Ari does not automatically supply every detail of "within the inner dimension of NHYM." The parallel in Sha'ar Ruach HaKodesh concerning netzach and hod does not by itself add yesod and malchut.^{1, 8}

The inquiry's conclusion

The proposal is better grounded and more precise; it still does not decisively resolve "the repetition requires examination." Progress means understanding more exactly what the source gives us—and what remains to ask.

Another round of the same idea is unnecessary. A new source or argument that changes our understanding of the repetition can reopen the study.

What we learned, and where to read

The verse: the Tzemach Tzedek explains the connection between light and garment and the epistle's content. Why that connection is not explicit, and a special intention in "etc.," were not proved.

The repetition: a qualification in the Ari strengthens a possible reading of the repeated account. The need to repeat the entire chain remains open.

The method: a small detail can lead to a large distinction. We learned to separate the source of an illumination from the place of its revelation; what is present inside a garment from what the recipient apprehends; and explaining a sentence's content from explaining its place in the argument.

This is the inquiry's treasure: questions on the surface opened further depth in the wording and a map of sources to read. Further study can begin with a clear sense of where light has been found and where an explanation is still sought.

Main sources

1. Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh 19—the complete text.
2. Yahel Or, Psalms 104, pp. 396–397—light and garment.
3. Yahel Or, p. 398—the verse's continuation.
4. Glosses and Emendations to Tanya, p. 398—the repetition.
5. Lessons in Tanya, note 5—combining the two sources.
6. The Ari's Likkutei Torah, Ki Tissa, pp. 138–139.
7. The same work, Vayikra, pp. 142–144; qualification on p. 144.
8. Sha'ar Ruach HaKodesh 1:4—the limits of Moses' prophecy.
10. Steinsaltz on Epistle 19—a proposed reading of the repetition.

The reference numbers in the text are clickable. The source names in this list also open the relevant reading.