



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## BEREISHIT > Vayeishev

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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November 26, 2010  
Vayeishev

**Two Sermons**

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## Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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Bereishit > Vayeishev > Antidote to Pain

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### ABSTRACT

This week’s Torah reading tells us that, at last, Jacob has settled in the land of his father, and all he wants to do is to tend his flocks and dwell there in peace. By this time, Jacob has been through a lot, and he seems entitled to a rest.

But does he get it? No.

The obvious question here is: What was wrong with Jacob’s request to live in peace? Why did he not deserve some rest after all his trials and tribulations? And to apply that question to our own lives and times: Do we not have the right to retire in peace at some point, after struggling for years to earn a living, being virtuous and abiding by God’s laws?

Looking around, the answer to us, like to Jacob, seems to be: No. Life, as we know it, is full of challenge and pain. Indeed, there is no life without pain. That’s how it is. But why does it have to be so?

This sermon explores the purpose of existence, the meaning of pain in the world, and the antidote to it. It explains that Jacob was not entitled to rest, to be at peace, because Jacob was an archetype, a model – he was setting the pattern for all his descendants, and indeed for the whole world, to follow. So God said to him: “You know that you cannot have private peace unless there is peace in the entire world.”

And the truth is that – though we are not archetypes like Jacob – as long as we know there are other people out there who are in pain, we can never be at peace. But being sensitive to their pain will lessen their pain and ours also.

So when God refused to grant Jacob's request for peace, He was giving him instead the greatest blessing of all – the gift of empathy, the gift of uniting with others in their pain. Jacob could not have known the benefits at the time. He could only endure his pain. But in return he received ... eternity.

## THE ANTIDOTE TO PAIN: WHY IS LIFE SO PAINFUL, AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

### 1. No Rest for the Weary

This week's Torah reading tells us that, at last, Jacob has settled in the land of his father, and all he wants to do is to tend his flocks and dwell there in peace. "*Jacob desired to settle in peace,*" says Rashi, the classic Biblical commentator.

By this time, Jacob has been through a lot:

- First, he was forced to flee his childhood home, because his twin brother Esau threatened to kill him.<sup>1</sup>
- Then, deceived by his scheming uncle, Laban, he had to labor twenty long years under his uncle's domination.<sup>2</sup>
- After he managed to escape Laban's clutches, he had to risk all to confront his brother before being able to return home.<sup>3</sup>
- No sooner had he set up camp in Canaan, than his daughter Dinah was violated, and his sons laid waste to the city of Shechem to avenge her.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 27:41-44.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, chapters 29-31.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, chapters 32-33.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis, chapter 34.

- To avoid resulting trouble with neighboring tribes, Jacob had to pick up again. On the journey, his beloved wife Rachel died in childbirth.<sup>5</sup>

Now he just wants some peace. Seems fair and just.

And is he going to have it? No.<sup>6</sup>

Jacob's next trial is the disappearance of his favorite son Joseph, and his elder sons' report that the boy had been devoured by wild animals. Jacob's grief is immeasurable. (In fact, however, Joseph is alive, having been sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers.)

The obvious question here is: What was wrong with Jacob's request to live in peace? Why did he not deserve some rest after all his trials and tribulations?<sup>7</sup>

And to apply that question to our own lives and times: Do we not have the right to retire in peace at some point, after struggling for years to earn a living, being virtuous and abiding by God's laws?

Looking around, the answer to us, like to Jacob, seems to be "No." Life, as we know it, is full of challenge and pain. Indeed, there is no life without pain. That's how it is.

If anybody, Jews should know it.

Back in the "good old days," an old Jew in Moscow was asked what the greatest happiness is. The old Jew replied: "In my opinion, it is to be born and live in our great country!" And so he was asked "And what is the greatest disaster?" The old Jew said: "The greatest disaster is to have such happiness."

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis, chapter 35:16-20.

<sup>6</sup> As Rashi states (from the Midrash), at the opening of this chapter: "*Jacob desired to settle in peace, but the agony of Joseph pounced upon him. For when the righteous wish to settle in peace, God says: 'Is it not enough for the righteous what is prepared for them in the World to Come, that they also ask for a tranquil life in this world?'*"

<sup>7</sup> And according to Rashi (see previous note) - why does the tranquility in the World to Come preclude finding peace in this world?

## 2. The Mysteries of Life

Sometimes, it is hard for us to understand what life is about. After all, we didn't ask for it; it was just given to us. And we know so little about the product.

When you go to the store, and you ask for a particular product, you have a chance to examine it, read the label, consider the specifications. If it's not exactly what you want, you buy something else. But here we have a product – which is *our own existence* – and we know so little about it. We never chose it – we had no say what parents we got, what circumstances (rich or poor) we were born into, where we landed on earth (America, Europe, sub-Saharan Africa), what kind of education we received (religious, secular, public, private).

So we have been dealt a deck of cards without anyone even asking if we wanted to play the game. And then we find that to play the game means often getting disappointed, hurt, wounded and scarred, and sometimes even suffering a great deal.

## 3. Prepare in the Good Times (Optional)

Of course, in the middle of any anxiety-ridden experience, it is next to impossible to be philosophical and examine the underpinnings of existence. Even if we have the presence of mind to consider various arguments and explanations, we have little tolerance – we just want the discomfort or pain to go away. Therefore, it is important to consider these issues in good times, so that we are better prepared to face the next challenge when it does come, as it surely will.

Trying to explain the existential nature of pain to a suffering person is like trying to tell a child that a dark room is nothing to be scared of. You might as well be talking to a stone wall. Because the fear paralyses the child and blocks any ability for it to reason. The only thing that will help is to turn on the light in the room, take the child by the hand and walk in. After one or two times, the child will build courage and strength. But that does not happen overnight. Preparation is a part of building that strength to face the trauma when it comes.

Indeed, preparation is great Torah virtue, which we learn from Joseph. Why did Joseph become the most powerful man in Egypt after the Pharaoh? Because he had the wisdom to prepare in time for plenty for the time of famine. It seems a logical thing to do, but that is not how most of us behave. Most of us, when we have plenty, we tend to enjoy it and take it for granted. When we lack it, we moan and groan.

That is human nature. We all have the tendency to push off difficult things for another day. When things are going well, we always think we have another day to prepare. Until time runs out.

So the key here is not to wait until a trying moment arrives, as it inevitably will. But to prepare for it now, when it is still possible to have a clear head to take on these difficult issues.

#### 4. Defining Life

Now, understanding the nature of challenge – which is often accompanied by pain and travail – requires defining life to begin with.

To do so, we look into the Torah, the Book of Genesis, when human life comes into being. When the animals, fish, birds and celestial bodies are created, God says “Let there be ...” and so it is. But when the human being is created, a much more complicated process is involved.

Incidentally, did you know that science can now duplicate this process? Yes, scientists have come so far that just the other day they decided to challenge God to a man-making contest. You haven’t heard about this? Well, that’s because the results were less than something worth reporting to the Nobel Prize Committee. Here’s what happened:

God agreed to the contest providing that they would do it like in the good old days, when He created Adam from the dust of the earth. The scientists said, “Fine.” But as they went to scoop up some soil, God said, “No, no, no. You get *your own* dirt!”

[Seriously speaking though,] when God created man, the Torah relates: “God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils a breath of life. Man thus became a living spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

This verse contain the secret of life – it tells us that life has two parts: dust and breath. And this teaches us that human life is composed of two diametrically opposed forces: One is matter, the dust of the earth, which is symbolic of earthiness. Dust of the earth is what we tread on; it is the lowest part of the earth. The other is spirit, the breath of God, a part of the divine, the most sublime thing in existence.

And God created the first human being, Adam, in this way and placed him – along with his mate, Eve – in the Garden of Eden for a purpose: to work it and to protect it.<sup>9</sup>

The 11th century Torah commentator Rashi, says that “to work” correlates with the positive commandments of the Torah, the do’s. And “to protect” correlates with the negative commandments of the Torah, the don’ts. So, we human beings are meant to do something productive with our life. Our job is to work (to choose to do positive things) and protect (to avoid the wrong things). Because that is what our life – endowed with free will – is about: making the right choices and avoiding the wrong choices.

## 5. Free Will

Our free will is our most Godly attribute, given to us when God created us in His image, when He said, “Let us make man in our image and likeness.”<sup>10</sup> Animals do not have free will; they are driven by instinct. We, however, have a choice. And there is no force, no cause that determines what we choose. That is Godly. Because only God has no previous cause.

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 2:7.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 2:15.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 1:26.

It is true that many things are predetermined for us – our genetic makeup, our society, our upbringing. But we have free will when it comes to moral choices – choosing between good and evil, right and wrong.<sup>11</sup>

A cynic once said, “We must believe in free will; we have no choice.”

Why did God give us this divine power? Why did He take the dust, the lowliest thing of the earth and give it His breath, and with it a taste of Godliness which is free choice?

Because had God created only a divine spirit, He would have created a spiritual clone which would have had no other option but to be spiritual – and what would have been the point? But a divine spirit imbedded in the dust of the earth (the lowest element God could have possible chosen) is not a clone. The material body does not sense its spiritual source, and thus it is driven by its own selfish agenda. Only the soul within the physical body can have free will to choose between two paths: the path of dust and matter, or the path of breath and spirit.

What is more, by being a part of the earth’s foundation, the human being received the capacity to lift all of creation to a higher level. When you want to lift a stack of items from the floor, you must pick it up from the bottom. If you grab it in the middle, a part of it is likely to get detached. So if the universe is meant to be lifted to a higher place, you have to get at the bottom, at the earthy dust level and work from there.

But why lift it at all?

To make even the dust a fitting dwelling place for the divine.

And thus God took a gamble – a perfect God created a state of imperfection. He created a human being that was not a clone of the spiritual. He formed us from the lowest of all elements, and endowed us with the divine power of free will so complete that we can even deny God, our Creator.

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<sup>11</sup> Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, Laws of *Teshuvah*, Chapter 5.



The ultimate gift we can give someone we love is the ability to reject us. Most of us seek to control those we love, because we don't want to lose them. But there is no greater joy than setting those we love free – so they can fly away and return of their own volition. And that is exactly what God has done by giving us free will.

## 6. Potential for Evil and Pain

There can be no true free will without there being choices – good and bad. And, therefore, in order for the field of choice to be real, God had to create potential for evil, potential for suffering, potential for pain.

And God had to restrain Himself and allow us to exercise our free will even when that meant the possibility of causing each other pain. That must be very painful to God – to see everyone's pain, knowing He can stop it, and yet not stopping it in order to “play by the rules” so that we can be allowed the independence to choose wisely.

Now, the pain need not be there, but the potential for pain must be there. Because the whole point of human life is for us to perfect its imperfect state. And the presence of the imperfection implies a potential for pain.

If we, in exercising our free will, choose to be selfish and cause others pain – because they are in conflict with our needs and desires – then pain will go from potential to actual. They will suffer and down the road so will we.

This is exactly what happened in the first instance of pain that the Torah records.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. When they did so – despite the warning that they would die – mortality and pain moved from potential to actual. These two evils began to inhabit the planet.

Note that this tree was called the Tree of Knowledge – not a Tree of Understanding, or Tree of Wisdom. And the word “knowl-

edge” in the Torah carries a very deep meaning. It is the word that Torah uses when referring to intimate relations: “And Adam knew Eve.”<sup>12</sup> So the Tree of *Knowledge* implies intimate connection with good and evil.

## 7. More Dust, More Pain

Because of the choice that Adam and Eve made, humanity has had a hard road to hoe, literally. Human beings had to labor in the dust to produce their daily bread. The more they immersed in the dust of the earth, in materialism, the more sin was taken from potential to actual, and the more misery and pain.

The history of humanity shows that selfishness bred more selfishness, as generation after generation wandered away from their purpose to perfect an imperfect world, instead introducing new levels of dust and pain. But, of course, many good – even great things – were done as well. And we have advanced as human beings because the power of good (which comes from a divine source) is ultimately more powerful than the power of evil.

Our choices determine – not in the moment, perhaps, but over the long term – how the world is shaped. Our choices collectively determine how much pain we will endure on the individual, collective and cosmic level. We can’t make specific calculations – and trace any particular suffering to a corresponding cause – because humanity is a very large organism, but we can say with certainty that our choices do determine how much potential pain is taken out of storage, so to speak, and becomes actual pain. Our choices also determine how much healing takes place.

## 8. Jacob’s Case

Having defined life and pain, we can now return to the case of Jacob, and answer the question we asked at the outset: What was wrong with

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<sup>12</sup>Genesis 4:1.

<sup>13</sup>Genesis 3:17.

Jacob's request to live in peace? Why did he not deserve some rest after all his trials and tribulations?

Because Jacob was an archetype, a model – he was setting the pattern for all his descendants, and indeed for the whole world, to follow. So God said to him: “You know that you cannot have a private peace unless there is peace in the entire world.”

In Hassidic parables, there is character called a *tzaddik in peltz*, “a holy man in a fur coat,” which is another way of saying “a selfish man.” Because there are two ways to get warm in a cold room: 1) by putting on a fur coat and warming yourself, or 2) by lighting a fire so that everyone is warmed. If Jacob got his wish and rested, he would have been a *tzaddik in peltz*.

Jacob, because he was Jacob, was not entitled to a private peace.

Like Jacob, spiritual leaders of humanity are also not entitled to peace. It is told of the Mittlerer Rebbe, Rabbi Dovber,<sup>14</sup> that when individuals came to see him in private audience seeking his advice on personal matters, he often would break out in a sweat. It wasn't because it was humid in the room, or that he had to exert himself physically in any way. Rather, he sweated because he lived through the pain and suffering that these people related to him. Indeed, as he explained, he would always look within his own soul to identify (however subtly) with a problem shared with him. Only then would he offer advice.

Most of us do not have such profound empathy. We are not spiritual leaders who can so personally feel the pain of the world, but we do have the responsibility to be sensitive to others. We are all part of one organism, and when even one small piece is hurting, the entire organism is affected. And certainly, we are all acquainted with people who touch our lives who are emotionally/spiritually weaker than us. And we are responsible for them.

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<sup>14</sup> Rebb Dovber Schneuri (1773-1827) was the second spiritual leader of the Chabad Lubavitch. He is also known as the Mittlerer Rebbe.

## 9. Antidote to Pain

Feeling the pain of others and doing what we can to alleviate it is the best antidote to the pain we feel. It is the best way of beginning our own healing process.

Indeed, the sages teach that “Whoever requests compassion for others (in need), and is in need of the same thing, he will be answered first.”<sup>15</sup>

But as long as there is pain in the world, we should be very careful not to ask God to let us rest so we can be at peace.

The truth is, as long as we know there are other people out there who are in pain, we can never be at peace. But being sensitive to their pain will weaken their pain and ours.

So when God refused to grant Jacob’s request for peace, He was giving him instead the greatest gift of all – the gift of empathy, the gift of uniting with others in their pain.

In effect, God said to Jacob and us all, “I’m not going to give you a pain killer so that you can ignore the world around you. I’ll give you the greatest gift of all – the capacity to empathize with other people’s pain and ultimately abolish the root of all pain and not just your symptoms.”

So, it might have seemed unfair at first glance – that, after so many years and so many travails, the man was entitled to a break and he didn’t get it. But, in retrospect, it was the greatest blessing. Because what happened? Joseph’s loss and his enslavement in Egypt ultimately led to a chain of events which ended with the descendants of Jacob becoming the Nation of Israel and receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Jacob did not know that at the time. He could only endure his pain. But in return he got back ... eternity. And he gave rise to a people who would live and survive it all. And, thank God, we are among them.

So right now, if we are suffering or being challenged in any way, we can learn from Jacob’s story and realize that we are in the same position.

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<sup>15</sup>Talmud *Baba Kama* 92a.

It is as if we are climbing a spiral staircase, winding our way to the top, each revolution taking us upwards while requiring us to turn our backs on our destination. And so, we cannot see the light at the top, but this very well might be the last turn before we reach the pinnacle.

At the moment, the climb might be very difficult, but there is some comfort in knowing that there is a purpose to it all – a bigger picture, a picture as huge as the cosmos.

Though we cannot see the forest for the trees, the light at the end of the tunnel, the happy ending, nevertheless as a result of our trials, great things are happening. Our invincible divine spirit is overcoming the dust, and the final redemption is at hand. May it come speedily in our days, Amen.

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<sup>16</sup> The Baal Shem Tov compared our limited perception in suffering to a “spiral staircase” – *shvindel trep* in Yiddish



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### **ABSTRACT**

Every one of us has a dark side – deep, dark crevices, where our worst lurks. Freud and other psychologists say we can never truly tame that dark “beast” within, the force that can cause us to think and behave in ways that make us ashamed.

What does Chanukah – the holiday of light – have to say about these shadowy corners of our psyche? Can we do anything about our darker side, or are we doomed to live with it?

We are certainly not doomed. That could never be the Jewish view.

Indeed, Judaism sees the ugly, dark side of man as having redeemable features. That dark is considered a form of inverted or concealed light – a black hole, so to speak. There is a Godly aspect even to the dark side, it is just that we have to look more deeply for it and work harder to reveal it.

This sermon takes us on a trip into the cosmic void of existence, coming out with newfound light and energy that can only be revealed in the darkest places.

## CHANUKAH: ILLUMINATING THE DARK SIDE

### 1. Chanukah Joke

Is everybody ready for Chanukah? Done your gift shopping? After all, there are eight days of presents to give.

Last year, my mother gave me two sweaters for Chanukah. And, of course, the next time I visited her, I made sure to wear one. As I greeted her, instead of the expected compliment, she said, "What's the matter? You didn't like the other one?"

Not my mother ... just a joke. My mother is much smarter than that. Last year, she gave me two *identical* sweaters.

### 2. The Miracle of Chanukah

As we anticipate the beginning of Chanukah, the Holiday of Lights, it is fitting to talk about ... darkness.

The story of Chanukah begins in darkness. The Greeks had unleashed the first campaign of religious persecution in recorded history and, in reaction, the Jews loyal to Torah rebelled. In so doing they unleashed a war that lasted twenty-five years and challenged the might of the Greek Empire.

The most conservative estimates say that it was a fight of about 12,000 poorly armed people against 40,000 professional soldiers. And miraculously the Jews won.<sup>1</sup>

When the victors arrived at the site of the desecrated Temple, they found only one cruse of pure olive oil with which to light a make-shift menorah. That one cruse should have lasted, at most, one day but it lasted eight, emphasizing the victory of light over darkness.

Today, we light the Chanukah menorah (or *Chanukiah* as some call it) at nightfall, placing it in a window or door, or some other place visible

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<sup>1</sup>See *Crash Course in Jewish History* by Ken Spiro, chapters 28-29.

from the street. In this way, we publicize the miracle – of the victory of light over dark, of the few over the man, of the weak over the strong – and in this way we continue to transform darkness into light.

### 3. Darkness and the Story of Joseph (Optional)

In the Jewish calendar, Chanukah corresponds to the Torah readings which relate the story of Joseph – another story which begins in darkness.

Having aroused the jealousy of his brothers, Joseph finds himself captured by them and thrown into a pit. Though at first they mean to kill him, they relent and sell him into Egyptian slavery instead. Undaunted, Joseph does well as a slave, rises through the ranks, only to be falsely accused of assaulting his master's wife.

Thrown into prison, he distinguishes himself among the prisoners, and even interprets the dreams of the Pharaoh's baker and vintner. Through an odd twist of fate, his ability to analyze dreams leads to his freedom.

One night the Pharaoh is disturbed by an intense dream of seven fat and seven lean cows, and then another dream of seven thick and seven slim stalks. And, when no one can interpret the dreams satisfactorily, Joseph is brought out of prison. He interprets the dreams as a prediction of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. As a result, he is charged with overseeing the management of the empire's grain storehouses and given the title of viceroy of Egypt, a position second only to that of the Pharaoh himself.<sup>2</sup>

So there is another story of a stellar rise from a dark pit to the brightest light, "from prison to the throne."<sup>3</sup>

### 4. Two Types of Light

Of course, there are different types of darkness and different types of light.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis chapters 37-41.

<sup>3</sup>Ecclesiastes 4:14.



The mystics explain that we have two types of light – direct and indirect. Direct is any type of light that shines directly – for example, the sun, fire, flame, light-bulb. The indirect does not radiate light; it is hidden and concealed. It is a powerful light but we have to work to reveal it, and it is even greater than the direct light.<sup>4</sup> The direct light does not always have the power to vanquish darkness, but the indirect light – because it comes from darkness – does.

The indirect light comes out in a crisis, and by virtue of its origins, it is stronger. It is a light that is revealed when we manage to pass a test, as we did all those many years ago at Chanukah [and as Joseph did].

## 5. Best of Times, Worst of Times

Today we are living in a dark time. Our national confidence is weak; people are struggling financially; the economic meltdown has forced us to confront the flaws of our capitalistic system. We see how fragile and how weak our foundations really are. Before the economy crashed, everything was soaring, and then it came painfully crumbling down. And we still don't see real signs of recovery.

Interestingly, psychologists have established that the pain of losing \$1000 is stronger than the pleasure of gaining \$1000. The obvious reason for this is our sense of entitlement. When we gain, we expect it. When we lose, we are much more upset.

We live in challenging times, which are showing us what people are made of. In this context, the advice of the sages comes to mind. They said that the true character of a man comes out *in kiso, kaso, koso* – literally, “his pocket, his anger and his cup.” They meant that when a person's pocketbook/wallet is affected, when he is angry/upset, and when he is drunk, that's when his true colors emerge.

Or, as Eleanor Roosevelt said, “A woman is like a tea bag. You don't know how strong she is until you put her in hot water.” Without hot water, without pressure, you don't know.

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<sup>4</sup> See Ecclesiastes 2:13.

That is also a message of Chanukah. To make the fuel for the Temple menorah, the olives had to be pressed. Olive oil does not come out without pressure. Some of the most valuable and beautiful things emerge from pressure, darkness and pain – take the diamond for example, or the birth of a child.

A butterfly emerges from a cocoon. It was once a caterpillar. It has to go through a period of darkness, a state of near death, and to struggle to break free .... until it emerges as a beautiful butterfly.

The same is true of anything worth having in life, a period of darkness and confusion is necessary for the next stage to emerge. Creativity is the child of frustration. Every revelation and paradigm shift is preceded by a void and vacuum, as the “old skin” sheds making place for a “new layer.”

## 6. The Ferris-Wheel of Life (Optional)

Everything that is happening on the outside is also happening within. The dark and the light are both reflected in the world at large and in our personal lives. And that makes it so much more meaningful, because even if we can't always change the world directly, we can change ourselves.

We have stages in our lives when we are in the light and when we are in darkness. On the simplest level this means our moods. There are times when we are up and optimistic, and there are times when we feel aimless and despondent, when we feel we are in the dark place. This is part of the human condition.

As one Hassidic Master said, “Life is like a Ferris-Wheel. Don't be depressed when you are on the bottom because the wheel will turn. But don't be arrogant when you are on the top, because the wheel will turn again.”

Incidentally, have you heard the joke about the woman who went on a Ferris-Wheel while her husband, who was afraid,

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 32:25-29.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12:1.

waited below? Well, something went wrong and, when the machine came to a jolting halt, she fell out right at his feet. Concerned, he asked, "Are you hurt?" She replied, "Of course, I'm hurt. I went around three times, and you didn't wave once!"

When we appreciate the cycles of life, we accept that every transition – by its nature – will bring some pain, disorientation, confusion and even loss. But this discomfort is necessary for growth. When things are good, we have a tendency to want to hold onto that state, but then we'd never move forward.

Life is a long journey which sometimes moves through light and sometimes through darkness. What we learn from the story of Chanukah [and from the story of Joseph] is that the darkness has a purpose and it can bring out some of our greatest strengths.

## 7. The Dark Side

There is a certain darkness within, a darkness that we carry within us that we don't much like to talk about. But we *all* have our shadows – a dark side, a shameful side. And we do our best to suppress it and keep it from others.

In Freudian psychology the dark side is called the id – it is the animalistic part of man, driven by narcissism and the overriding drive for survival. And people, when pushed to the limits, have been proven to do anything to survive; they will break taboos, engage in cannibalism and participate in unspeakable acts.

There is a lot of support for the Freudian theory that the dark side of the person is our most dominant driving force. So, an argument can be made that the dark side of the person – the "worst" within – is the true side, and the other elements of personality (the ego and superego) are superimposed on the id just to make us look good.

The classic story that illustrates the shadowy side of humanity is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. It is a story of a young hedonist who is so enamored with himself that he offers to sell his soul if only he would not age. His wish is fulfilled and, as he

descends into a life of debauchery, it is his portrait that shows the effect of his acts upon his soul. As he becomes more cruel and sadistic, the painting becomes more grotesque. He himself, however, has managed to avoid all consequences ... Until the end, that is.

The premise of this understanding of the dark side is that if there are no consequences, a person can and, at times, will stoop to behave like a sadistic animal. Therefore, our society has built in consequences, social standards, deterrents and penalties.

But the Jewish understanding is somewhat different – as demonstrated and celebrated by the Chanukah miracle of light.

Judaism sees the ugly, dark side of man as not being the essence of the human being. Beneath the id lies the Yid – a divine spark that is always good and always intact, no matter how we behave on the outer levels. Furthermore, even our dark side has redeemable features. As we say in the daily *Shema* prayer: “Love God with all your heart.”<sup>5</sup> But the Hebrew for heart is spelled oddly – *levavcha* – with two *beits* instead of one (*libcha*) – teaching us that we are meant to love God with both sides of our heart, with our good inclination and our evil inclination.<sup>6</sup>

The dark side (the “evil inclination”) is considered a form of inverted or concealed light – a black hole, so to speak. There is a Godly aspect even to the dark side, it is just that we have to look more deeply for it.

As we say in daily prayers [at the beginning of blessings introducing the Shema]: “Blessed are You God ... who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates all.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5.

<sup>6</sup> *Mishne Berachot* 54a.

<sup>7</sup> Paraphrase of Isaiah 45:7.

## 8. Jewish View

The Torah teaches that man was created in the image of God, but that following the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden a certain contamination – called mortality – entered the earth. As a result, the image of God was concealed, but certainly not annihilated.

As a result of this, however, we have two voices inside of us – the voice of the animal soul and the voice of the divine soul, sometimes called the good and evil inclinations.

From the Jewish perspective, our divine image remains always intact but it is constantly countered – and sometimes even hijacked – by the dark side.

The battle of life is choosing good over evil, virtue over selfishness. Win the battle and you fulfill your purpose. When we all win our battle, the Final Redemption will arrive, and the evil inclination will be vanquished once and for all.

Unlike other religions, Judaism rejects the notion that the dark side is stronger than the light side. It is a question which side we will embrace, which side we will allow to prevail.

According to the *Zohar*, Satan is not evil *per se*, rather his role is to test us and in this way help us reveal our strengths. Satan wants us to embrace the light and in this way reveal what is good about the dark side. And when we rise to the occasion, he cheers. When we fail, he cries.

## 9. Transformation

Winning over the dark side though is not enough. That is only the beginning. Our job in revealing its deeply hidden lights is not complete until we transform the darkness into light.

As the sages say: “Who is truly powerful? He who transform his enemy into a friend.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>*Avot de Rebbe Natan*, chapter 23.

One would think that, with all that the Jews have suffered, to conquer their enemies would be enough, but it's not. If we have not turned our enemies into our allies, we have not fulfilled our true purpose and the darkness was not truly redeemed.

"You shall love God with all your heart," with both parts of your heart – the part that inclines to good and the side that inclines to evil. And to transform that evil inclination to serve God.

In other words, your dark side has a purpose and you are meant to capture it, harness it, co-opt it and use it for good.

So, how do you do it? It's one thing to bring light into a dark room. But how do you get that room to glow on its own?

It is by discovering that light within your dark side, the good in your moments of difficulty and pain.

## 10. Growing Through Pain

People who have grown through challenges achieve a dimension of refinement and awareness and insight that can never be equaled by those who did not go through what they did.

Likewise, those who have fallen and hit bottom, and then repented the errors of their ways are much better people than they would have been had they never fallen.

In fact, the *Talmud* states<sup>9</sup> that there are two ways of doing *teshuvah* – of returning to God through repentance. One is returning from fear of punishment; the other is returning out of love. The first kind of repentance is good and will certainly transform the person's future. But returning to God from love is a passionate act which actually transforms the past.

It does so by turning the negative energy that had been unleashed by transgression and transforming it into a form of positive energy<sup>10</sup> – literally, it does so by turning darkness into a beacon of light.

<sup>9</sup> *Yuma* 86b.

<sup>10</sup> See *Tanya* chapter 7.

The radio talk show host, Joey Reynolds, a recovered drug addict, has devoted his life to helping others. He says himself that he would not be doing all the good that he does today, if he had not hit bottom and come back. He might have lived a quiet life as an investment banker and that would have been fine. But because he did not live a quiet life, because he suffered, fell and returned from the pit, he has been able to achieve so much more.

Incidentally, serious addictive personalities are usually very passionate people. Calm, even-tempered people don't obsess like addicts do. So an obsession and any type of compulsion is a very powerful energy. Of course, it can be highly destructive, and the key is to channel it into positive and constructive activity.

## 11. The Holy Force of Sexuality (Optional)

The same applies to sexuality – a very potent force in society.

While other religions view sexuality as a necessary evil (without which procreation of the species would not be possible) and consider celibacy a higher value, Judaism considers sexuality – the highest expression of intimacy – a holy force.

Indeed, in the day when the Temple in Jerusalem stood and the Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, was operational, neither the High Priest, nor the Chief Judge could be celibate – they had to be married.

Yes, sexuality is a potent force, and it can be easily distorted, but this is true for any force of passion and holiness – the more powerful, the more potential damage it can do, but also the more light it can bring into the world. And, because it is so potent, it must be treated with extra care, with extra caution.

The place of the most intense holiness was the Holy of Holies in the Temple. No one could enter it except the High Priest, and then only once a year on Yom Kippur when he had to purify himself especially for the task. This intense degree of holiness could not tolerate the tiniest blemish. It was as sensitive as an eye is to one speck of dust or to one stray eyelash.

As we all well know – a grain of sand on the hand is nothing; a grain of sand in the eye is irritating if not painful. It is all relative, of course ... as Einstein taught us ... and as the Yiddish Theory of Relativity illustrates: “Three hairs on your head are not much. But three hairs in your soup?”

So, wherever there is a lot of holiness, there is the possibility of a lot of distortion. And this is why sexuality is so highly regulated in Judaism ... because it is the most potent force in existence. And such potency can cut two ways – it can create life and bring the most amazing beauty into the world, or it can destroy life.

And this is why the dark side is often connected to sexuality. But as everything we have been talking about, it need only be properly channeled to reveal its light.

## 12. In Times of Darkness

Today, despite all our great achievements and technological breakthroughs, psychologically and spiritually we often find ourselves in darkness, so that we sometimes feel that we are stumbling around, not knowing where to turn and what will be. This is especially true regarding relationships, intimacy and the deeper forces at work in our psyches. But this very darkness presents us with a tremendous opportunity.

Because what happens around us may not be within our control, but what happens in our personal lives is certainly within our control.

Chanukah teaches us that we have the power to not only vanquish darkness but to transform it. When things are going badly, we have to know that this is an opportunity to discover redemption. We may not be able to do it alone, we may need someone to help us who is objective and wiser – someone who has been through fire and returned. But help is always available, because God makes sure of it. There is always someone to pull us out of the pit, to throw us a rope.

And especially now, we can use the special power of Chanukah to pierce the darkness.



### 13. The Everlasting Menorah

Chanukah menorah commemorates the Temple menorah. Of course, the Temple was destroyed two thousand years ago, its menorah darkened ever since.

But the light of Chanukah has never been extinguished and never will, as Nachmanides writes, “these [Chanukah] lights will never disappear.”<sup>11</sup>

Can the effect be stronger than the cause? This is an example when it is true. This is an example of how darkness creates a greater light than light does.

Chanukah was born in dark times, and yet its light still burns, and its flames have burned through crusades, inquisitions, pogroms and the Holocaust. As we well know, Jews have gone to great length to light the Chanukah menorahs in the concentration camps and gulags, because in that terrible darkness the light of Chanukah burned especially bright.

Natan Sharansky, in his book *Fear No Evil*, tells the story of lighting a make-shift the Chanukah menorah in the Soviet gulag, where it was promptly confiscated. He went on a hunger strike to get it back. And so he was summoned to the camp director’s office, and there he struck a deal to be allowed to light the menorah in the sole presence of the director – a certain Major Osin – which allowed Osin to save face in front of the gulag’s population. As Sharansky describes the bizarre ritual that followed:

*Major Osin was an enormous, flabby man of around 50, with small eyes and puffy eyelids, who seemed to have long ago lost interest in everything but food. But he was a master of intrigue who had successfully overtaken many of his colleagues on the road to advancement ... I could see that he had enjoyed his power over [the prisoners,] the zeks and liked to see them suffer. But he never forgot that the zeks were, above all, a means for advancing his career, and he knew how to back off in a crisis ... As I looked at this predator, sitting at an elegant polished table and wearing a benevolent smile, I was seized by an amusing idea.*

<sup>11</sup> Nachmanides on Numbers 8:2.

*“Listen,” I said, “I’m sure you have my menorah somewhere. It’s very important to me to celebrate the last night of Chanukah. Why not let me do it here and now, together with you? You’ll give me the menorah, I’ll light the candles and say the prayer and, if all goes well, I’ll end the hunger strike.”*

*Osin thought it over and promptly the confiscated menorah appeared from his desk ... “I [also] need eight candles,” I said. (In fact I needed nine, but when it came to Jewish rituals I was still a novice.) ... Osin took out a handsome inlaid pocketknife and deftly cut me eight candles [from the one large candle available].*

*I arranged the candles and went to the coat rack for my hat, explaining to Osin that “during the prayer you must stand with your head covered and at the end say ‘Amen.’”*

*He put on his major’s hat and stood. I lit the candles and recited my own prayer in Hebrew, which went something like this: “Blessed are You, God, for allowing me to rejoice on this day of Chanukah, the holiday of our liberation, the holiday of our return to the way of our fathers. Blessed are You, God, for allowing me to light these candles. May you allow me to light the Chanukah candles many times in your city, Jerusalem, with my wife, Avital, and my family and friends.”*

*[And] inspired by the sight of Osin standing meekly at attention, I added in Hebrew: “And may the day come when all our enemies, who today are planning our destruction, will stand before us and hear our prayers and say ‘Amen.’”*

*“Amen,” Osin echoed back. He sighed with relief, sat down and removed his hat. For some time we looked silently at the burning candles.*

[Some way of turning darkness into light and vanquishing formidable enemies!]

So when you look at the flames of the Chanukah later this week, listen to what the flames tell you. They will tell you that no one can extinguish them – not any enemy past or present – and that they will burn through good times and through terrible times.

That’s the power of Chanukah – invincibility that comes from passing through darkness.

May you always be blessed with abundant light. But at times when things may be a bit hard, may Chanukah empower you that your lights burn bright and may nothing extinguish them. Indeed, *it will be so* if you want it to be so, for you have the power to transform darkness into light. To take even the dark side and find in it redemption. And turn your personal dark side into good and beautiful light.

And may we all help each other in that regard. Amen.