



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Toldot

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 5, 2010

Toldot

Two Sermons

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

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Bereishit > Toldot > Hypocrisy

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ABSTRACT

How disconcerting is it when, everywhere we look, we see this one constant: No single person’s actions (including our own) seem to be able to live up to the belief system we profess. People claim to have high standards – religious people in particular. Many wax eloquent about their divine, indispensable mission in life. Yet when it comes to behavior on a day-to-day level, we all fall short of our ideals.

Does this make us hypocrites? Or schizophrenics?

The dictionary defines hypocrisy, as “feigning to be what one is not.” But, to define “what one is not,” we must first define “what one is.”

This week’s Torah reading, which discusses the dual personalities of the twins, Esau and Jacob, helps us answer a critical question in our lives: Are we hypocrites when our behavior and our beliefs are inconsistent, or, is something else at work here?

The Torah requires us to recognize the two struggling forces within us, and not feel that we are hypocrites in our attempt to access our virtuous soul. Instead of seeing hypocrisy in our inconsistencies, we should be seeing in them our struggle to discover our true selves – a struggle that inevitably creates a dichotomy between what we believe and what we do.

ARE WE HYPOCRITES? UNDERSTANDING THE DISSONANCE WITHIN US

1. What is Hypocrisy?

We are gathered here today to consider some of life's most troubling questions, such as:

- Where do forest rangers go to “get away from it all”?
- If a parsley farmer is sued, can they garnish his wages?
- Would a *fly* without wings be called a *walk*?
- If a turtle doesn't have a shell, is it homeless or naked?
- Why do they lock gas station bathrooms, are they afraid someone will clean them?
- And the question of the hour: Is hypocrisy all right if we can pass it off as politeness?

Hypocrisy is our subject for today.

A teacher asked her student: “Now, Tommy, what is a hypocrite?”

He answered: “A boy who comes to school with a smile on his face.”

The dictionary defines hypocrisy this way: “From the Greek *hypo-krisis* ... the act of playing a part on the stage, or feigning to be what one is not, especially: the false assumption of an appearance of virtue or religion.”

How disconcerting is it when, everywhere we look, we see this one constant: No person's actions (including our own) seem to be able to live up to the belief system we profess. People claim to have high standards. Many wax eloquent about their divine, indispensable mission in life. Yet when it comes to behavior on a day-to-day level, we all fall short of our ideals. And sometimes far worse than that.

Does this make us hypocrites? Or schizophrenics?

2. Are we hypocrites or schizophrenics?

One friend unburdened himself the other day: “I can’t believe myself. Here I am dispensing critical advice to a colleague, and then I go off and make exactly the same mistake! How is it possible that I know one thing – and know it with certainty in every fiber of my being – and when it comes to action, I do the exact opposite? Am I a charlatan or just neurotic?”

Welcome to the real world.

All you have to do is open up the newspaper. Barely a day passes without another story relating a scandal that is an act of hypocrisy. In the past few years how many people have fallen who claimed to be representing “traditional values”? Then, of course, you have the critics, decrying the hypocrisy and depravity of others, only to be caught in their own web of deception shortly after.

It seems to be an American malady.

The difference between the values we profess as Americans when we are polled, and the shows we make popular on television, is vast. Our favorite TV shows are far more likely to feature murder, mayhem and sexual transgression than “morally driven” programming. This is because we compartmentalize our beliefs and our entertainment choices.

That’s how it is and has been throughout history. The divide between what people accept as proper in public and what they choose to enjoy in their private lives is nothing new in the history of the world or this country. The original founders of the United States of America had deep beliefs and values, as we see from their writings, but court records show all kinds of decadent behavior in the colonial society. Who has not read about Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress Sally Hemings?

So are Americans just plain old hypocrites, preaching values in public, while betraying them in private?

3. An International Problem

Mind you, this issue is by no means exclusive to America. A colleague of mine hosted a multi-cultural dinner at which hypocrisy was the subject. A Swiss gentleman shared that he truly despised his country, because, as he put it, "in Switzerland you sit around a table with family and friends. Everyone is smiling and oh so polite. Yet beneath the surface the very same people are engaged in betrayal and all sorts of illicit behavior." An Englishman popped up and begged to differ. "You've never been to England. I don't think there is a more hypocritical country in the world. Ostensibly people are so cordial, but all that smooth veneer masks a profound inner decadence and corruption." Not to be outdone, a woman from France chuckled and said: "We clearly have the monopoly on duplicity. Many people like to believe that France is the source of chic. Let me tell you, France is the original and biggest importer of hypocrisy."

Well, the debate raged for the claim of first prize in hypocrisy. It showed that everyone who experienced hypocrisy thinks that his version is the worst.

But in accusing our fellows of hypocrisy are we not being somewhat hypocritical ourselves?

4. Acting Out of Character

Let's take, for argument sake, a person who is unarguably virtuous. He has demonstrated in the past that he is giving and generous, and that he has a natural – and nurtured – sensitivity and love for others. One day we witness him behaving with uncharacteristic cruelty. Would you say that all his natural virtue is, really, one big hypocrisy, or that his cruel behavior expresses his hypocritical side?

As I said earlier, the dictionary defines hypocrisy, as "feigning to be what one is not." But, to define "what one is not," we must first define "what one is."

Who are we? Are we good people or selfish ones? Are we ruthless warriors or gentle creatures? Sharks or lambs? Are we driven primarily by

the relentless “survival of the fittest,” narcissistic and selfish, or by our divine selfless dimension?

As usual, the Torah provides us with ancient yet highly contemporary insight into a dissonance that has been plaguing humanity from the beginning of time.

5. The Twins – Jacob and Esau

This week, we read about the twin brothers, Esau and Jacob, and their multi-faceted personalities.

Esau is introduced as the hunter, Jacob as the scholar.¹

Esau seems violent and crude, as when he demands stew from his brother: “Give me a swallow of that red stuff! I’m famished!”² His wives prove a source of bitterness to his parents,³ and when he finds that his brother usurped his blessings, he vows murder.⁴

Jacob, on the other hand, is described as wholesome and quiet, and yet he deceives his blind father Isaac to claim the blessing intended for his brother. We find his dual nature in his names. Because he was grasping his twin brother’s heel as they both emerged from the womb, he is first called Jacob (or Yaakov in Hebrew from the word *ekev* meaning “heel”). Later, he is renamed Israel because he “has struggled with God and man and has prevailed.”⁵

Jacob’s duality is not exclusive to him. When the two brothers encounter each other after 22 years of profound hostility, instead of waging war, the warrior Esau embraces Jacob. The Torah relates: “Esau ran toward [Jacob], embraced him, fell upon his neck, and kissed him. And they both wept.”⁶

¹ Genesis 25:27.

² Genesis 25:30.

³ Genesis 26:35.

⁴ Genesis 27:41

⁵ Genesis 32:29.

⁶ Genesis 33:4.

Two opinions are posited whether Esau “kissed” his brother with a “full heart or “not with a full heart.” Either way he was duplicitous. After all, he had mobilized for battle, bringing 400 warriors with him,⁷ and Jacob was ready for the worst. So we have to be skeptical of his sudden turn-around and his loving embrace of Jacob.

Was Esau a hypocrite? Did he love or hate his brother? Was Esau a man of war or of peace? A killer or lover? Did he embrace his brother for pure or selfish reasons? And what about Jacob, did he love his brother, or was he also driven by ulterior motives?

So, who is the true Jacob? And who is the true Esau?

6. The Archetypes

This question takes on much larger proportions because Esau and Jacob represent the two archetypal forces – matter and spirit – which are at constant odds with each other. Their mother Rebecca sensed this when they were still in her womb, where they appeared to be fighting each other. Bewildered, she sought an explanation from God who told her that she was carrying “two nations” which were destined to battle with each other – and “when one will rise the other will fall.”⁸ and Rashi on the verse.

Their struggle is *our* struggle – it is the struggle between matter and spirit, between the secular and the sacred, between modern culture and faith.

Shall the twain ever meet? The answer is an unequivocal and resolute YES!⁹ But the struggle will continue for many years – for it is the purpose of existence that we should refine, sublimate and sanctify the material world, so it can become a home for the Divine.

In the meanwhile, who are we – good people or selfish ones, warriors or lovers? The answer, my friends, is that we are both and neither.

⁷ Genesis 32:7.

⁸ Genesis 25:23

⁹ See Rashi on Genesis 33:14.

Within our psyches, we have both a warrior-like Esau and a scholar-like Jacob. Indeed Esau and Jacob themselves have dual personalities. Jacob has the “Jacob” and “Israel” dimensions; Esau is both a warrior and a son of Isaac and Rebecca; he is Jacob’s *twin* brother.

7. The Tension Between Matter and Spirit

Matter and spirit – these two forces are in perpetual battle. An inherent tension exists between them and so they inevitably collide. Yet, in the end, they will be integrated.

Did the two brothers Jacob and Esau really love or hate each other? The answer is complex. On one hand matter and spirit are at each other’s throats. On the other hand, they truly are *twin* forces that ultimately will unite and completely embrace each other in a healthy, all-encompassing unity.

From the perspective of the tension, it may sometime appear hypocritical to act virtuously and pursue higher standards, while sometimes succumbing to our lowest common denominator. But from the perspective of our true selves, it is not hypocrisy at all. It is the desperate attempt to align our inner selves with our outer behavior.

This is the bottom line: Hypocrisy depends on what we believe lies at the essence of humanity. If we are truly beasts, then it would seem hypocritical if we behaved like human beings. If we are divine, then we are hypocritical when we behave like beasts.

8. Two Hassidic Stories

Two short stories from the pages of Hassidic literature demonstrate this point:

The first story concerns a complaint that was brought to the 18th century Hassidic Master, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, against his followers: “While they prolong their prayers and are careful with their performance of the *mitzvos*, their efforts are superficial and they do not truly uphold that level of piety!”

Rabbi Schneur Zalman replied: “Is it really so? Is it really so? If it is, then they are deserving of the verdict of the Mishna [which reads]: ‘One who does not limp and is not blind, yet pretends that he is, will not leave this world until he becomes one of [the handicapped]!’¹⁰

If this is true in the negative sense, how much more so in the positive. Since they act with love and fear of God in meditation and prolonged prayer, then surely they will not leave this world until it is truly so!”

The second story concerns a student of another the 18th century Rebbe known as the Tzemach Tzedek. This student was a businessman whose dealings took him to the business centers of the large cities of Russia as well as to several foreign capitals. As time went by, he became increasingly uncomfortable in these environments with his distinctive hassidic dress. Gradually, he adopted a more secular mode of attire on his business trips. Of course, he continued to visit his Rebbe in traditional hassidic garb.

Then, one day, he appeared before his Rebbe in his businessman’s attire. “Rebbe,” he announced, “I’ve decided to put an end to my hypocritical behavior. This is how I dress on all my travels, so why delude myself and others with my hassidic clothes?”

“Dear Yankel,” said the Rebbe, “do you think that I was not aware that you dress differently in Leipzig and Paris than you do here? But I thought that here you showed us your true self, and there you were the hypocrite....”

9. A Question to Ask

It is not simple.

So ask yourself: How do you look at yourself and at others?

If you see others as divine creatures, then no virtuous action they take – no matter how tainted it is by impure, ulterior motives – can ever be viewed by you as hypocritical.¹¹

¹⁰ Mishna, end of *Peah* 8:9.

¹¹ See Maimonides, *Laws of Divorce*, end of ch. 2.

Apply this principle to your relationships, and they will be transformed forever.

And especially, ask yourself: How do you see your spouse, your children, your loved ones, your friends? If you see the people around you as divine entities – and expect that of them – you will contribute greatly to bringing out the best in them.

10. Hidden Beauty

A children's story¹² tells of a gardener who tended the garden of a duke and duchess. In a corner of the garden he grew weeds, on which he lavished as much care as on the orchids and the roses. As a result the weeds grew and flourished, and he would routinely put huge, magnificent dandelions, thistles and milkweed on display in the mansion's drawing room. The bouquets he fashioned were so beautiful, his employers were highly pleased, but they never asked what they were.

One day the queen came to pay a royal visit to the duke and duchess and was astonished at the exotic flowers which she had never seen before – and she was quite an expert in horticulture. The gardener was summoned to answer the queen's questions, and he shyly confessed what these specimens really were – common weeds.

The duke and duchess were so embarrassed they fired him on the spot and sent him packing. But the story has a happy ending. The queen hired him for the royal palace and gave him full authority to continue to lovingly tend his weeds and bring out the hidden beauty in them.

Beauty truly is in the eyes of the beholder. How we see or don't see another person's true personality, what we expect or don't expect of the other, is a major factor in how the other will respond. If your child behaves inappropriately and you reinforce it by suggesting that he is being a "beast" (which dwells in all of us) that, in itself, may be the ultimate

¹²A lesser known story called "The Gardener" by Hans Andersen, author of "The Ugly Duckling."

hypocrisy – for it will undermine the emergence of the child’s beautiful nature. If, however, you convey the message to your child that she is a pure soul, and the “negative” behavior is an aberration – then that will become a very powerful motivating force for the child to live up to her potential.

The same is true for therapists and clients. A good therapist is sensitive and never judgmental, but at the same time will not help rationalize away low expectations. Recognizing the enormous potential and resilience of the human spirit, the therapist will do everything possible to elicit it from the client.

In our continuing journey toward embracing our mission, this week’s Torah reading teaches us a vital lesson. *Tiferet* (“beauty”) – the balancing force which is the domain of Jacob – requires us to recognize the two struggling forces within us, and not feel that we are hypocrites in our attempt to access our virtuous soul.

Instead of seeing hypocrisy in our inconsistencies, we should be seeing in them our struggle to discover our true selves – a struggle that inevitably creates a dichotomy between what we believe and what we do.

Now the challenge is to align the two. Let’s go for it.



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ABSTRACT

How do we ignite a dormant spirit? Bring hope to a desperate soul? Free an oppressed life?

The soul within each one of us is on fire, yet, our bodies are cold, down in the dumps, in a blue funk. How do we access our inner flame in a difficult world with so many material forces, financial pressures and personal anxieties numbing and suppressing our spirits?

This week’s Torah reading provides the answer. It tells the story of a battle between twin brothers, the scholar Jacob and the warrior Esau – a story which reflects the on-going battle within us: the conflict between spirit and matter, the tension created by the fire in our soul feeling trapped in a material world.

The struggle between Jacob and Esau teaches us how to discover the brightest light in the darkest places and come away with new tools to connect with our own soul. Through their story we come to understand why the soul must engage in subterfuge to gain the cooperation of the physical body, a subterfuge that sometimes requires a masquerade.

As the Baal Shem Tov explains through a powerful metaphor, just like Jacob dressed up as Esau to accomplish his goals, so must the soul dress up in a body.

This also explains the Jewish obsession with food, for it is one way that we entice our bodies to free the enormous potential within us that is waiting to be released, which can propel us to the greatest heights, the highest achievements, the most surprising successes.

LIGHT MY FIRE; LIGHT MY SOUL

1. What is a Soul?

What is a soul? The Book of Proverbs gives this answer: “The soul of a human being is the candle of God.”¹

And this is because the flame is the closest approximation that we have in this world to a soul of a human being, who was created in the image of God.

How is a soul like a flame? Well, consider that though fire is ignited from either a mineral (coal, petroleum) which is dead matter, or from wood (which is a dead tree), nevertheless it seems alive. Not just alive but constantly, restlessly flickering, moving, agitating. As well, a flame is always rising upward toward heaven in defiance of gravity which pulls everything else down to earth. And, a flame illuminates and warms its surroundings. These amazing qualities of a flame make it the best metaphor for a soul, which we cannot see so we cannot otherwise describe.

In the Jewish tradition, there is a great deal of focus around light and flame. We have the Shabbat candles, the multi-wick Havdalah candles, the holiday candles, the Hanukkah menorah. Any and every holiday is ushered in with a flame. We also light candles in sad moments – we light the Yahrzeit candle to remember the passing of a loved one, and the Yizkor candle on Yom Kippur for the same reason. When the Temple in Jerusalem stood, the menorah had pride of place – it was kindled each day and burned with an eternal flame.

So, the flame is a prominent symbol in Judaism, but perhaps never more so as *the* symbol for a soul, because all its features – the constant movement, the upward direction, its light, its warmth – communicate vitality.

¹ Proverbs 20:27.

2. Vitality

What is the difference between a live body and a corpse? Vitality – what we call a soul. The same exact body with a soul is alive, without a soul is dead.

Vitality is constant movement – young children are always moving, they never rest; older people are more sedentary.

Vitality is upward direction – animal complacency is not a human state; the human being is always seeking, always climbing another mountain, always trying to reach for the stars, while an animal walks on all fours staring at the ground.

An animal doesn't look up to the heavens so it is not motivated to climb, and perhaps for this reason it is at peace. Of course, animals live in the same habitats as they did hundreds of years ago, without any need for change. They don't need better homes, or cars, or technology, and they don't have any angst over the absence of these comforts and luxuries. They are not interested. Neither do they have to go to therapy. It's a different world they live in. It might seem quite enticing, when life isn't going well, to be a cow grazing in the meadow, but the part of us that is always looking upward – always seeking transcendence – won't let us.

And finally, vitality is illumination and warmth. People who are alive, who are energetic have the ability to ignite and inspire others. People who are warm are typically known as giving people. It is not a coincidence that selfish people are cold and bring others down.

3. Miser Story (optional)

A story is told of a great master and his student. There came a time when the student went off on his own and, using the wisdom he had learned from his master, established a successful business. But his success made him arrogant. He forgot his humble roots and began looking down at others. With time, he became the town miser.

One day his former master came to visit him and noted that the miser's lavish home was decorated with many mirrors. And so, the master

asked him, "What is the difference between a mirror and a pane of glass?" The miser answered, "It is very simple. One has silver smeared on the back, and the other doesn't. The silver causes the reflection."

And the master said, "When you don't have any silver [i.e. money] and the delusions it creates in your mind, you see the world in front of you. When the glass is covered with silver you see only yourself..."

4. The Trapped Soul

Now what happens to the soul of a selfish person [like this miser] – who thinks only of himself, who prefers to lead a sedentary existence in his comfort zone, who doesn't warm or illuminate others, who has ceased looking upward to the heavens?

His soul is trapped. It is imprisoned by his body, and it cannot express all its vital flame-like qualities.

Imagine what would happen if your body were trapped like that – tied up hand and foot, and left to await rescue in a dark basement? After a time of not being able to move around, your muscles would atrophy and you would become depressed; the physical trauma and psychological damage would be great.

This is exactly what happens to a trapped soul which is not permitted to flicker and illuminate and warm this world.

5. Soul Denied Expression

Now most of us are not that selfish, but how many of us are allowing our soul to truly express itself? How many of us have imprisoned our souls just as much?

It gets down to this: Are we fulfilling our life's purpose on this earth or not? If we are, our soul shines. If we are not, our soul is trapped.

It could well be that we have not discovered our life's purpose through no fault of our own. Our parents or our educators – instead of helping us discover and actualize our potential – have in fact crushed it.

Schooling can at times impede a person's potential. It can undermine a child's creativity. When you study the history of modern education, you realize that schools were established to maximize industrialization, and most education is still aimed at making industrialized society thrive.

Jewish education, of course, is nothing like that. Traditional Jewish education is not about industry or making money. Its focus is on what God wants from you – its focus is on your soul's mission. It teaches you how to use your God-given talents and skills to maximize your soul's potential.

In the opening passages of the Book of Genesis, the Torah describes the human being as created in the image of God. It says that God formed a body of clay and breathed into it a divine spirit.²

Note that the Torah does not speak about any other aspect of the human being – not about personality, psychology, or intelligence. It confines itself to these two aspects of the human being only – body and soul, matter and spirit.

If you read those passages carefully, you come to the conclusion that the Torah describes the human being as a flame – a fiery spirit – captured in matter.

And this is an amazing idea. To think of yourself this way is highly empowering. You are a divine flame, a spark of God, and you have the power to illuminate and warm a cold and dark universe. This is your ultimate mission as a human being, the highest purpose of your life.

If the flame that you contain is unable to express itself – if it cannot flicker and illuminate and warm the universe – it is trapped and atrophying inside you. And you are no doubt feeling it on the outside as well – you are unfulfilled, unhappy, lost.

So how do you release your soul? How do we ignite a dormant spirit? How do you free an oppressed life? How do you access your inner flame in a difficult world with so many material forces, financial pressures and personal anxieties numbing and suppressing your spirits?

² Genesis 2:7.

This week's Torah reading provides the answer. It tells the story of a battle between twin brothers, the hunter Esau and the scholar Jacob – and their story reflects the on-going battle within us: the conflict between matter and spirit, the tension created by the fire in our soul feeling trapped in a physical/material world.

6. A Controversial Story

The story of Jacob and Esau is one of the most controversial in the Torah.³

In brief, we learn that Rebecca (Isaac's wife) is pregnant, and it is a difficult pregnancy with twin embryos seemingly at war inside her womb. Bewildered, she seeks an explanation from God who tells her that she is carrying "two nations." These two nations are destined to do battle with each other, but eventually "the elder will serve the younger."⁴

When they are born, the elder (hairy Esau) becomes a hunter, the younger one (wholesome Jacob) becomes a scholar. One day when Esau returns weary and famished from the hunt, he demands some bean stew that Jacob is cooking. Jacob agrees, but in return asks for the birthright – the entitlement of the first born. Driven by physical need, Esau scoffs, "Here I am about to die [of hunger] – what good is a birthright to me?!"

Time passes, and the blind and aging Isaac decides to bless his firstborn son before he dies. (Isaac does not know, of course, that Esau has sold his birthright for a pot of beans.) He asks Esau to go out and catch some game and prepare for him a special dish, and then he will bless him. Rebecca overhears and moves into action. As soon as Esau is gone, she wraps Jacob's arms in furs so he will feel hairy like Esau to his blind father, and she cooks up a tasty recipe for Jacob to serve up.

Isaac is fooled and blesses Jacob with the blessing intended for Esau. When Esau returns he rages that his blessing was stolen and vows to kill his brother, who then flees for his life.

³ Related in Genesis 25:19-34, 27:1-41.

⁴ Genesis 25:21-23.

A bizarre story! How can a birthright be sold? A firstborn is a biological fact – first born, the order of birth cannot be reversed after the fact. How can a blessing be stolen? If Isaac intended to bless Esau, what difference would it make if he mistakenly blessed Jacob? He could have just restated the words of the blessing anew. And what's with all the food? The stew, the game dish, the tasty recipe?

7. More Than Meets the Eye

By-the-way, this story hardly puts our forefather Jacob in a good light. It's the kind of story that has led people to remark that if the Torah had not been given by God, it would surely have been written by anti-Semites. No Jewish author would have written it and brandished it proudly as the history of his ancestors. But, maybe there is more to this story than meets the eye. Maybe there is something else going on here, and maybe Jacob's behavior is praiseworthy after all.

We know that the Torah contains some of the most sublime ideas known to man, and that these ideas were not part of the civilized intercourse before the Torah made its appearance some 3300 years ago. Ideas such as: "Love your neighbor as yourself ... love the stranger ... protect the widow and the orphan ... render equal justice to the rich and the poor ... set servants free every seven years ..." were unique to the Torah. So, with its emphasis on ethics, why would the Torah include this story of a man who lies and steals? And then hold him as a patriarch with whom God converses and makes an eternal covenant?

The great 13th century sage Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (also known as Ramban or Nachmanides) says that the stories that the Torah tells actually describe supernal concepts and only allude to earthly events. So though these events did actually, *literally* occur, their origin is not on earth but in heaven.

Note that the two embryos were already fighting in Rebecca's womb. How could that be? Well, it could be if we see them as two nations, two forces, two archetypes – one representing matter, the other the spirit. And their conflict continues, with the spirit trying to outwit the sheer brute force of physicality. How? With food.

Did you ever notice how important food is to Judaism? When Jews celebrate any and all holidays, food takes center stage: For Hanukkah, we have potato latkas and donuts, for Shavuot blintzes, for Rosh Hashanah apple and honey, for Passover matzah and matzah balls ... Even Yom Kippur is an obsession with food which we *don't* eat (though the day before we eat double).

8. The “K” Food Group (optional)

Did you ever notice that a disproportionate number of traditional Jewish dishes start with the letter “k”? Think about it – kishke, kasha, kugel, kreplach, kneidelach, kichlech, kartofel ... Right? What’s with that?

There is a joke about a Jewish mother, who was dismayed that her little son refused to eat her star kreplach recipe. She was so upset that she sought the advice of a psychologist who suggested that she involve the child in the cooking process: “Don’t tell him what you are making – say it’s a surprise. By participating and then anticipating the result, he is bound to love it.”

So she did just that. She invited the little boy to break the eggs and help her mix the dough. As she took him step by step through the process, she excitedly narrated, “You see Sammy now we are going to make little triangles and put the fillings inside ... like this ... See?”

And sure enough little Sammy got really into it, and as the dumplings went into the broth, he couldn’t wait to taste them. The mother was thrilled and served him up a generous portion. With a smile, he spooned one into his mouth, and immediately spit it out. “Ugh, kreplach!”

Like that one? I’ll tell you another:

A story is told about a feudal landlord on whose land many Jewish serfs worked. Dealing with them over a period of time, he noticed that Jews were very smart. So he asked one of them “What is the secret of the superior intelligence of your people?” And the Jewish serf answered, “We eat a special type of schmaltz herring which is hard to get and very expensive. Asked the landlord,

“Can you get me some of it?” Reluctantly the serf agreed to do so for a thousand rubles.

After the Jew brought him the herring and the landlord ate it, he did not feel any surge in brainpower, and so he complained. The Jewish serf said, “You have to remember we’ve been eating herring for thousands of years, so you can’t expect one piece to make a difference over night.”

Thus a ritual developed. The Jew was delivering the herring, the landowner was transferring thousands of rubles, and months passed. Finally, the landowner got fed up. He said to the serf, “Something is seriously wrong. I’ve been eating herring till I’m growing fins, but I don’t see any difference.” The serf demurred, “Give it more time.” But the landlord would have none of it: “I won’t give it more time. I think this whole thing is a hoax.” “Aha,” said the serf, “You see, you’re getting smarter already.”

9. The Baal Shem Tov Analogy

So here is how the 18th century founder of the Hassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, explains the food orgy that accompanies Jewish holidays.

He tells a story of an aging king who wants to make sure that his son, the prince, will be a sensitive leader once he inherits the throne. As the son has been brought up exclusively in the palace with all the royal privileges, the king decides to send him to a far corner of the kingdom for some attitude adjustment. There, he is to dwell as an ordinary citizen among regular people and earn his living alongside them. Thus, he can better learn to understand the needs and problems of his future subjects.

Though the parting is painful, both understand this must be done. Yet, the father fears that the son might get so wrapped up in the demands of ordinary life, he will forget the real purpose of this undertaking. So to remind him, the father sends him a letter several times a year. When he gets the letter, the son wants to rejoice and celebrate, but how can he do so without revealing his identity as the prince? So he comes up with

a great idea – he announces a big party in the city without stating the reason. The people come, and while they are celebrating and enjoying the party simply because of the delicious free food, he is celebrating because he received a special message from his father about which they know nothing.

This is the story of the soul, explains the Baal Shem Tov. The soul once lived in the spiritual realms in a palace where everything was beautiful but where there were no challenges, anxieties, or temptations. So God sent the soul down to earth where it is not recognized, and where it must demonstrate what it is capable of accomplishing by bringing light into the world.

Every time a human being is born, God sends another soul into the physical world, even though He finds it difficult to do it and, of course, the soul doesn't want to go. We are born down here, and we cannot consciously remember where we came from.⁵

Even if we have a sense of it, we cannot fully remember.

But every once in a while – during the holidays – God sends us a reminder in the form of a spiritual message.

There is only one problem. The soul is trapped inside a body, which is not interested in spiritual messages. How can the soul get the body to cooperate?

So God says, "Give the body what it wants – all the good food [the kishke, kugel, kneidelach, and kreplach] – and the soul can meanwhile celebrate the spiritual message."

10. The Need for Subterfuge

This is the Jacob and Esau story.

Rebecca, the sensitive mother, understood what was going on. When she dressed Jacob as Esau (the scholar in garments of the warrior), she knew it was a masquerade to fool the material universe. And Jacob – the spiritual son – received the physical blessing intended for Esau, so

⁵ Talmud, *Niddah* 30b.

that he would learn, like the king's son, to teach the physical world to be receptive to the spiritual message.

Today, when we teach children we "bribe" them with sweets and treats. Children study to win the prize. This subterfuge is normal and necessary. But aren't we teaching them to deceive and manipulate? Of course not.

Children in their limited minds cannot appreciate that learning is something good in and of itself. Because of their narrower perception, we teach them something is good by creating a positive association. It's like a metaphor – would we say that a metaphor is a lie? If a teacher can't explain an abstract concept to a student, he or she uses a metaphor that the student can relate to. With time, the student will come to understand the more abstract concept.

The only problem is that some of us get distracted and we stay with the metaphor – the material, the treat, the sweet – and never move to the abstract, spiritual concept.

Of course, if you want to teach the world about God, you have to live in the world, engage and interact with the world, and speak the language of the world. The key thing is not to compromise the integrity of the original. The challenge is to enter the world and elevate the world without becoming consumed by it.

11. What is Reality?

Where is reality? Is it what occupies 95 percent of your time – all your material activities – or is it that remaining 5 percent, which is the real reason you are here?

We are essentially spiritual beings, but our souls are trapped in our material bodies, and most of the time, we are preoccupied with physical survival. So our soul is faced with a formidable challenge to find expression in a hostile universe.

Often we forget about our soul completely until some dramatic event – usually involving pain and suffering – cracks the shell of our complacency. But it doesn't have to be that way. The shell can be cracked by

wisdom – when we start thinking about why are we here in this world. As soon as we ask this question the soul trapped in the dank basement of the body gets a breath of fresh air. But it is hard to keep that crack open.

12. Call to Action: Free the Soul

A trapped soul is released through love, through acts of kindness and nobility – all the prescriptions of the Torah which are meant to lead us to an understanding that we are unique beings with unbelievable potential. We are meant to actualize that potential to illuminate and warm our environment and everyone else around us.

But that is not enough. We are charged not only to release our soul but also to entice our body to come along for the ride. We do that by “dressing up” in the garments of the physical universe. We feed and nourish our body with delicacies and delights, motivating it to join us in the celebration – while never forgetting that this is only a disguise. It is a way we have of training our body to join the soul in embracing its divine mission.

We all have a choice to actualize our potential or not – to choose dead matter or the living spirit, to choose life or death. We must all decide which we will manifest in this world. Being undecided is also a decision ... just like no answer is also an answer.

We can take dead matter and turn it into fuel. We can turn matter into energy. As Einstein taught us, matter is energy – it is just dense, compressed, trapped energy. But we can release it. That’s what we are meant to do.

Let us take this opportunity to open new doors and let in new light. The light of the soul fused with the power of the body, creating an eternal flame. Amen.

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