



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Emor

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

May 6, 2011

Emor

Can You Change Yourself?



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

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ABSTRACT

We are now in that seven-week period between Passover and the holiday of Shavuot (“the Festival of Weeks”). This time of “Counting the Omer” – a commandment identified in this week’s Torah portion – is marked by an intense journey of character refinement. Each of the forty-nine days of this seven-week period corresponds to one aspect of our seven emotional attributes – love, discipline, harmony, endurance, humility, bonding, and nobility – as they manifest in combination with each other (for a total of forty-nine combinations). So in the first week, we began refining the emotional attribute of love, love within love, discipline within love, harmony within love, and so forth. The second week, we worked on the seven aspects of discipline, and this week we are working on the seven dimensions of harmony.

However, this work in character development begs the question: Can we indeed do much of anything to change our personalities?

We are, after all, born with innate characteristics, which may be impossible, and definitely “unnatural,” to change. We are also creatures of habit, assuming patterns that can be very difficult to alter. Further, we see that everything in this universe doesn’t really change in any fundamental way. Minerals remain minerals, vegetables are always vegetables, and leopards do not “change their spots.” Why then should humans be different? Just as we cannot change many of our physical features, some would argue that we cannot change our emotional selves either. That is certainly the conclusion of the prevailing Darwinian-Freudian theory of man, which holds that we are just evolved beasts driven by a self-centered Id.

Based on this premise, change appears impossible. However, the Torah posits another premise – one that upsets the entire theory of an unchanging existence.

This sermon explains the viewpoint of the Torah that we can change because we are not human animals but divine humans. Illustrated with two humorous fables and one inspiring story of a hip-hop rapper.

Addendum: In this spirit, we also look at the latest spectacle of the royal wedding in England, which close to 3 billion (!) people watched across the globe. Is there anything more to this obsession than simply celebrity voyeurism?

CAN YOU CHANGE YOURSELF?

1. Opening Joke

Little Lucy comes home from school where she had begun learning, in biology class, about the origin of our species. A bit confused by what she has heard in school, little Lucy asks her mother: “Mommy, where do we come from?”

Beaming with pride, Lucy’s mother replies: “Grandma came from a beautiful shtetl near Lodz. Grandpa came from a city in Czechoslovakia. Their parents were very pious and kind. When we go back a bit more, our family traces its roots to a great middle age Torah scholar called the Rashba. And when go even further back, we come from the best pedigree of all: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.” The mother concludes, “Lucy, always remember and be proud of your distinguished roots and ancestors.”

When her father came home from work, Lucy repeats her question.

But the father’s answer is quite different. He says, “Well, my little Lucy, going back a few million years we originated from apes. Before that, our ancestors were amphibians. Before that, one celled bacteria, and the farthest back we have traced so far is that our first origins came from a ball of gas.”

The confused girl runs back to her mother and blurts out: “Mom, I don’t understand. Dad just told me that we originate from apes, amphibians and bacteria, and you told me that we stem from Adam and Eve and our other great ancestors. Which one of you is telling me the truth?!”

“We both are,” says Lucy’s mother, “Your father is describing his side of the family, while I told you about my side of the family.”

2. Counting the Omer

This week we read in the Torah:

And you shall count seven complete weeks following the [Passover] holiday when you brought the *omer* [a measure of barley] as an offering until one day after the seventh week, when there will be a total of fifty days. On that day you may present new grain as an offering to God ... This day will be celebrated as a sacred holiday ... ¹

We are now in that seven-week period between Passover and the holiday of Shavuot (“the Festival of Weeks”) which falls on the fiftieth day. This seven-week period of “Counting the Omer” is marked by an intense journey of emotional refinement. Each of the forty-nine days of this seven-week period corresponds to one aspect of our seven emotional attributes – love, discipline, harmony, endurance, humility, bonding, and nobility – as they manifest in combination with each other [for a total of forty-nine combinations].

So in the first week, those of us who have undertaken this practice began with the emotional attribute of love, working to refine love within love, discipline within love, harmony within love, and so forth. The second week, we worked on the seven aspects of discipline, and this week we are working on the seven aspects of harmony.

¹ Leviticus 23:15-16, 21.

3. Can We Change?

This work in character development, however, begs the question: Can we indeed do much of anything to change our personalities?

It does seem that we come into this world with a particular, distinct nature, and it seems “unnatural” to try to change it.

Animals, for instance, do not work on themselves and their relationships. They are who they are, and that’s that. Animals don’t go to therapy, don’t take Prozac and simply play out their lives according to their built-in instincts and mechanisms.

True, we can train an animal to jump through hoops and perform other tricks, but we cannot fundamentally change their nature (as Dr. Moreau² tragically discovered).

4. The Parable of the Cat

The famous parable of the cat drives this point home:

Two philosophers were arguing whether animals can be trained and changed to behave like humans. The first thinker pointed to a cat that was trained to be a waiter in a fancy restaurant. Dressed in coat n’ tails, the feline served patrons walking on its hind legs with its nose and whiskers elegantly thrust into the air.

Seeing this marvel, the second philosopher opened a bag, releasing several mice which scurried in different directions. The cat, still in his tuxedo, immediately dropped on all fours to pursue the mice, leaving the dinner he was carrying strewn across the floor.

² *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H.G. Wells.

5. The Fable of the Scorpion and the Frog

And then there is the famous fable of the scorpion and the frog:

A scorpion wanted to cross a river and asked a frog to carry him across. The frog demurred, fearing the scorpion would sting her. But the scorpion argued that if he did so, they would both drown.

Thus persuaded, the frog allowed the scorpion to climb on her back and ferried it halfway across the river, at which point the scorpion did indeed bite her. Dying, the frog managed to croak out, "Why did you do that?" And the scorpion, now sinking with her, replied, "I cannot change my nature."

6. Darwinian-Freudian Theory

It is true that we humans cannot change many things about our physical selves, and some would argue that we cannot change our emotional selves either. That is certainly the conclusion of the prevailing Darwinian-Freudian theory of man, which holds that we are just evolved beasts driven by a self-centered Id.

The proponents of this theory point to brutal examples of man's bestial behavior when his survival – real or perceived – is at stake ... such as when ravenous people resort to cannibalism to satisfy their desperate hunger.

So what hope do we have in attempting to change our natural tendencies?

If, for example, someone is born with an angry gene, or has acquired an angry personality at young age – either due to overexposure to an angry parent, or as a result of deeply embedded resentment built up over the years – can we actually expect that this person will cease reacting with bouts of fury? Or, if another person is stingy by nature, can we ever expect him to become generous?

I mean, think about it: How many people have you actually met that have changed their personalities?

7. Changing Behavior

The argument is often made that we really can't change our essential natures, but we can change our behavior.

What is expected of civilized beings is not that they transform their insides, but that they abide by a common law that dictates mutual respect. It is hoped that the façade of behavioral discipline will hold the inner beast at bay for most of the population ... with only a few anomalies in the shape of monstrous criminals stuffed behind bars. Fear of punishment, in this system, is the determining deterrent that stops humans from gravitating to their natural selfishness.

But left to their own, people will naturally return to their primal roots – beasts struggling to survive at all costs.

Not a pretty picture, but do we have an alternative?

8. The Good News

Now, for the good news.

Every assumption is based on its initial premise. Every theory is defined by its axioms.

The reason we assume that we cannot change our personalities is because our initial impression is that everything in this universe doesn't really change in any fundamental way. Minerals remain minerals, vegetables are always vegetables, and leopards do not "change their spots."

Existence, as we experience it on a sensory level, is static. Yes, things move about but they do not fundamentally change their natures and do not transcend their inherent boundaries.

Based on this premise, change appears impossible.

However, there is another premise – one that upsets the entire theory of an unchanging existence. This premise is posited by the Torah.

The Torah doesn't define existence by the way we humans perceive it with the naked eye, but by its true *inner* character. And this is because the Torah is the blueprint of existence.

9. Blueprint of Existence

When we look at an already-built structure we see the outer layer – its body. When we look at its blueprint, we see its internal engineering – its soul.

The Torah, which defines things as they truly are, opens by describing man – not as a five-foot skeleton, not as a creature of intelligence and feelings, not as a being that is born and dies – but as *divine*.

The first thing we are told is that the human being is created in *divine image* and has at the core a *divine persona*.

This declaration changes the entire picture. Were we mere *human* personalities, then our personality could change no more than land can become water or earth can transform into heaven. But because we are divine, we are not ruled by nature. Indeed, we have super-natural power.

10. Shyne (Inspirational Story)

No one knows this better than Moshe Levy Ben David.³

Born out of wedlock to a young woman of Ethiopian-Jewish heritage in Belize, young Moshe – then named Jamal Michael Barrow – did not know his father who initially refused to acknowledge him.⁴ He knew only one thing – that the poverty defining his life was not going to hold him back because he had come from the rich heritage that included Moses and King David.

³“Taking a Shyne to Judaism” by David Brinn, *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, Nov. 12, 2010.

⁴His father, who later did admit paternity, was Dean Barrow, a wealthy lawyer and for a time Belize's prime minister.

In essence, from his earliest years, Moshe understood the divine roots of his soul.

When his family moved to the US, he discovered that he had a major musical talent which, through a series of near-miraculous events, led to a record label and astonishing fame in the hip-hop world. He became known world-wide as the rapper “Shyne.” But with his fame also came some serious challenges.

Attacked on the street, he began to carry a gun, and he had it with him when a brawl broke out in New York nightclub. Someone pulled out a gun and so did he. Before the night was out, three people had been wounded, and Moshe had been charged with attempted murder. He was eventually convicted of lesser charges, but sentenced to a ten-year prison term.

And now we are talking about major change. In prison – among neo-Nazis and radical Islamists – astonishingly, Moshe reconnected with his Jewish roots and with the source of his divine soul. He worked hard on divesting his personality of its violent tendencies, and he never doubted that he could do it.

Upon release, he immigrated to Israel where he is now living as a committed Jew, fully observant of Torah law, studying in yeshiva part-time and assisting Jewish outreach.

But fame has not left him alone. Signed last year to another recording contract with Def Jam/Warner Brothers, he has pledged to record only inspirational rap tunes, devoid of vulgarity and violence. His aim now is to change the world by bringing attention through to his music to poverty and injustice. As he put it, summing up his total makeover:

“With my first album ... I was wounded and I was just crying, complaining. Already on my second album, there wasn’t any misogyny, but I was still ... a beast. But on my new records, I’m finally Ben David. I’m still a warrior on the front line but it is clean.”

How is that for proving that a person can change ... and change in hugely dramatic ways.

11. Difference Between Life and Death

The key to such dramatic change is understanding the basic difference what is natural and what is divine. And having the willpower and courage to choose one over the other. Indeed, the difference is so vast it is like the difference between life and death. What is divine is living, dynamic, ever-changing and expanding. What is natural is static, only shrinking, decaying, aging and dying. That very fact tells us that what is natural is doomed from the outset.

In rabbinic law there is a question about what can be categorized as *mayim chayim*, meaning “living waters.”⁵ If a spring were to dry up within the foreseeable future, the law dictates that even while the spring is active it cannot be called “live,” because its demise is an inevitability. If something will ultimately die, it cannot be considered truly alive in the first place.

Eternity, in other words, is not discovered at the end of the road, but at the beginning. It is *inherent* – just as our divine image is part of our earliest formation and inherent to our being.

12. Difference Between Divine and Human

We may not know much about the Divine, but one thing we know that it is not – human (that is, physical). The Divine is a source of constant energy flowing from the essence of it all. It is dynamic and alive, and always open to change.

By stating that the human being is made in the divine image [as Lucy’s mother in the opening joke so clearly understood], we are compelled to rethink the very nature of our beings ... to acknowledge that “we are not human beings on a spiritual journey; we are spiritual beings on a human journey.”⁶

⁵ Mishne, Parah 8:9.

⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in *Le Phénomène Humain*: “We not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” Often paraphrased as: “We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey.”

Indeed, the Divine behooves us to rethink how we view all of existence. For the entire universe is pulsating beneath the surface with vibrant and dynamic divine energy. By seeing ourselves as created in divine image, we can begin looking at the universe in a new way and then recognize our ability to change existence as a whole.

[But then we have our second voice, the voice of Lucy's father, that we are merely products of nature, evolving from lower species, with little hope for real and lasting change. In this view, we are victims of circumstances. The choice which voice to follow is ours. This is the choice that faces us in virtually every step of our lives: Will we choose the path of all "nature," the "common" road, which argues that the more things change the more they stay the same, "nothing is new under the sun." Or will choose the "road less traveled," the one that proudly declares that we can reach "above the sun," and create change and newness in our lives and in the world.]

13. Changing the World (Optional)

And this is why it is so often said that if you change yourself, you will change the world.

Today, we need that change more than ever before – concrete change, but also change in our attitude.

Just a few days ago, the *New York Times* reported the results of a poll which showed that Americans are more pessimistic than ever about their economy and their future:

Amid rising gas prices, stubborn unemployment and a cacophonous debate in Washington over the federal government's ability to meet its future obligations, the poll presents stark evidence that the slow, if unsteady, gains in public confidence earlier this year that a recovery was under way are now all but gone.⁷

⁷ "Nation's Mood at Lowest Level in Two Years, Poll Shows" *New York Times*, April 21, 2011.

In short, our economic woes have worn us down.

But this attitude is wrong. Absolutely wrong. We are not victims of circumstance. We create circumstances. It is no big feat to be riding high when everything is going smoothly and the economy is humming along. The challenge is: Can you rise to the occasion when things are not going that well and everyone is fearful and weak?

This is the deeper meaning of “Counting the Omer” – that we have the power to change ourselves and the world ... that we have the ability to refine the unrefined and transform the selfish into the selfless ... that we can indeed *bring on* a better world.

14. Call to Action

We have that power because of our divine origins. This very fact creates an infinitely higher standard of what we can expect of ourselves and of others. It motivates us to reach places we may never have considered imaginable. Above all, it gives us the power to change our very nature – even if it is deeply ingrained into our genes and personalities due to heredity or training.

So, to answer our original question: Can you change your personality?

No, if you view it as a human physical personality. Yes, if you recognize that it is divine.

And how do you begin?

This time of “Counting the Omer” is a golden opportunity. It’s not too late to get started – there is more than thirty days to go! And numerous guides exist – both in book form and online – to help you.

In conclusion, let me wish you a most wonderful journey discovering your divine nature and refining your human one, so you can be the best you can be and make the whole world a better place. Amen.

15. Addendum: Mazal Tov Prince William and Princess Kate!

The marriage of Prince William and Princess Kate has consumed half the planet! *The New York Times* estimates that around 3 billion (!) people watched the wedding.

We may never know whether that number is accurate, but no doubt that the wedding captured the attention of a tremendous number of people.

Here are some recent news reports:

ASSOCIATED PRESS: “With a smile that lit up TV screens around the world, Kate Middleton married Prince William in a union that promised to revitalize the British monarchy.”

THE SUN: “Royal wedding fever swept the nation and the world today, as more than two billion people across the globe tuned in to watch Prince William and Kate Middleton marry. People turned out across Britain's streets, squares, pubs and churches to hold a variety of bashes. And because of the Royals' popularity overseas, millions of people across the globe were glued to their screens to watch the nuptials. Royalists in South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and China all flocked to celebrate the wedding.”

In reading these reports about the royal newlyweds I could not help myself from asking, what is it about this event that made billions of people stop what they are doing and tune in to this wedding?

Perhaps it is a good distraction from the tumultuous lives that people are experiencing globally, but three billion people? That's a big number! What is it that fascinates us about this wedding?

Yes, people are under the spell of celebrity-hood. The media have made it extremely easy to escape our own lives and live vicariously through the lives of others. Global broadcasts have given us a new option: Instead of dealing with our own life challenges and responsibilities, we play out our lives through projecting and identifying with the drama of celebrities and superstars, even the spectacle of British royalty which wields little power today.

But we are taught , as the Baal Shem Tov so beautifully put that everything is by Divine Providence. If a leaf is turned over by a breeze, it is only because this has been specifically ordained by divine will to serve a particular function within the purpose of creation. And every single thing that we see or hear contains some instruction to us in our service of the Divine.

According to this principle, this royal infatuation must contain some deeper lessons for us. When an event captivates so many people, we should be asking what does this teach us about ourselves?

A few quick thoughts come to mind:

The Talmud teaches us that "even the head well-digger and distributor of water is appointed from heaven."⁸ How much more so when it comes to people who have been chosen and are respected as royalty, stretching back centuries. Even if they are not living up to their roles and expectations, the mere fact that they wear the crown is seen by Torah as a sign from heaven. "The kingdom below reflects the kingdom above," our sages tell us.⁹

The mystics teach us that this sovereign element exists in each one of our psyches and souls. It is called *malchut* – a Hebrew word which describes a sense of royalty and dignity that it the birthright of every human being. By virtue of us being created by the Divine King in the divine image, we are each a "monarch" in our own right, a "king" in microcosm.

Whether they know or not, whether have earned or not, Prince William and Princess Kate touched the unconscious nerve in people across the globe – 3 billion and counting – desperately seeking to find some dignity, some royalty in our otherwise depersonalized and demoralized lives.

Dignity is a rare commodity in these fast-paced times. Dignity is often lost in the robotic consistency of depersonalized machines and technologies. But dignity is a critical need in living a purposeful life. It

⁸ Berochot 58a. Baba Batra 91b.

⁹ Berochot ibid.

is the dignity of significance – knowing that you matter, that you have an indispensable role to play in this world. It is the dignity of change – being confident that you are not trapped in old routines and patterns, and in the “natural” process of decay and death ... knowing that despite the seemingly fixed features of human nature and character, you can change and improve things, now and forever.

Indeed, it is the dignity of redemption –notwithstanding the inertia of the status quo, you can refine yourself and the world around you, and bring personal and global redemption.

As we ponder the spectacle of this royal union, perhaps it wise to peer deeper and realize that it is teaching us to discover a royal union in our own lives. The royal wedding of a "kingdom below" is perhaps giving us a taste of the "kingdom above" and pointing to majesty in our otherwise dishonorable world. Amen.