



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Vaeira

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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Vaeira

**Why Are So Many Jews
Alienated from their Tradition?**



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

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ABSTRACT

Two *New York Times* articles – striking in their contrast – jumped out at me last weekend. One was a cover story, which described the fascination and admiration enveloping this year’s football phenomenon: Tim Tebow, who is a fervent Christian not ashamed to make his faith show. The other was a confession by Matt Gross, the *New York Times* travel writer, that – of the world’s 200 nations – there is only one he has not visited nor wishes to visit: Israel.

What is it about Jews and their alienation from things Jewish?

The fault lies in the detachment of faith from reality, in the divorce of ritual from the spiritual. Witnessing so-called devout people behaving in obnoxious ways only deepens the gap between religion and refinement.

Today, more than ever, we are in desperate need of the psycho-spiritual application of Torah in order to demonstrate its *personal relevance* and how it refines our lives and makes us more sensitive, loving people, living up to our greatest potential.

This week’s Torah reading reminds us about Judaism’s profound spirituality and relevance, as it demonstrates to us the four paths to true freedom – a powerful formula that can help us each free ourselves today from all the forces and demands, including our psychological fears, that enslave us.

WHY ARE SO MANY JEWS ALIENATED FROM THEIR TRADITION?

The Four Paths to Freedom

1. Tebowing

You know the one about two fellows who get lost flying in a hot air balloon. Down below they suddenly see a group playing golf. The two lost passengers yell down: "Where are we?" One yells back at them: "You're in a hot air balloon." Before they know it, a gust of wind abruptly whisks their balloon away, and they remain as lost as they were with no direction to follow. They look at each other with a bewildered expression. "What was that?" one asked the other. "I have no clue, but one thing is for sure: the guy below who responded to our call was surely a Rabbi." "How do you know that?" "Simple. Because what he said was true, but irrelevant"...

Two *New York Times* articles – striking in their contrast – jumped out at me last weekend:

One was a cover story, which described the fascination and admiration enveloping this year's football phenomenon: Tim Tebow.

An unlikely quarterback for the Denver Broncos, Tebow is a devoutly religious young 24-year-old, who unabashedly expresses his Christian faith, both on the field and off. His fervent bows after scoring touchdowns have captured the imagination of America, with people emulating his behavior, in what has become known as a new verb – tebowing.

"Around the world, people are 'tebowing' – [that is] kneeling in prayer, with head resting on one hand, oblivious to surroundings – just as Tebow does after victories," writes Dan Barry in *The New York Times*.¹

In a world ruled by celebrities with beauty queens at their sides, Tebow glaringly stands out as "an unmarried, self-declared virgin with no supermodel on his arm."

¹ See http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/14/sports/football/fascinated-by-tim-tebow-on-more-than-sundays.html?_r=1&scp=8&sq=tebow&st=cse

Dan Barry posits many theories as to the fascination with Tebow, including, in his words: “Finally, and it cannot be denied, Tebow’s very public conviction about his faith resonates (Isn’t he a model for how to live?), intrigues (How can he be so certain?) or annoys (Can’t he keep it in the church pew?). If he were not in the playoffs, perhaps we would not care as much. But since he is, his extraordinary athleticism and proven heroics – including two college championships and a Heisman Trophy – are routinely forgotten in favor of a more mystical possibility.”

That’s one.

2. The Jewish Contrast

And now for the contrast, and don’t you know he is a Jew.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have another *New York Times* article, entitled “Lost in Jerusalem,”² from the travel critic Matt Gross, who explains his repulsion for – of all places – Israel.

Gross writes: “As a traveler, I am not a particularly choosy person. I will go pretty much anywhere, anytime... But, in fact, of all the world’s roughly 200 nations, there was only one ... that I had absolutely zero interest in ever visiting: Israel.”

He adds that “this surprised friends and mildly annoyed my parents, who had visited quite happily. As a Jew, especially one who travels constantly, I was expected at least to have the Jewish state on my radar, if not to be planning a pilgrimage in the very near future. Tel Aviv, they’d say, has wonderful food! But to me, a deeply secular Jew, Israel has always felt less like a country than a politically iffy burden. For decades I’d tried to put as much distance between myself and Judaism as possible, and the idea that I was supposed to feel some connection to my ostensible homeland seemed ridiculous. Give me Montenegro, Chiapas, Iran even. But Israel was like Christmas: something I’d never do.”

² See <http://travel.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/travel/lost-in-jerusalem.html>

But then ... Gross went to Israel. And he reports: "I couldn't get out of it."

The Jewish paradox apparently always remains hanging.

What is it about Jews?

Tim Tebow has no problem demonstrating his faith in full blown glory. Matt Gross – and so many other Jews – self profess their disassociation and alienation with Judaism.

Clearly, faith has become detached from reality, as ritual has become divorced from the spiritual. Witnessing so-called devout people behaving in obnoxious ways only deepens the gap between religion and refinement.

Today, more than ever, we are in desperate need of the psycho-spiritual application of Torah in order to demonstrate its *personal relevance* and how it refines our lives and makes us more sensitive, loving people, living up to our greatest potential.

Religious commitment is meant to be experienced not by rote, but with renewed vitality each day. This is possible only if we allow our souls to experience tradition with a deep spirituality and personal application, and not be just trapped in the mechanical ritual and habits of our bodies.

3. Kabbalah's Biblical Roots

But some skeptics ask: Where in the Torah – in the written Torah, that is – is there reference made to the spiritual, the mystical? The Torah seems to be nothing more than a body of laws, do's and don'ts.

A distinguished rabbi once actually criticized a colleague of mine for using the word "spiritual" in his talks, because, he claimed, "Spiritual is a foreign concept to Judaism," going on, "Why are you allowing Torah teachings to be contaminated by New Age ideas, by this ... by this ... spiritual thing?!" he stammered, barely able to utter the word "spiritual," as if it were an anathema. He then went on to castigate my friend for teaching Kabbalah to those who were under the age of forty.

My friend responded: “Do you teach *Modeh Ani* to your children?”

[*Modeh Ani* is a morning prayer recited right upon awakening. In it you acknowledge God for returning your soul to you after a night’s sleep.]

“Of course,” he said, “of course I teach my children this prayer.”

My friend then challenged him: “And what do you tell your child when he or she asks you what is my soul, where did my soul go to during sleep, and what does it mean that my soul is now being returned to me – how do you explain this to your child? Or do you tell your child that you will have to wait till you’re forty years old before we can explain to you the meaning of a soul?”

Indeed, for these spiritual concepts – like what is the soul – we need the language of spirituality. And this language should not be dismissed as some exotic, inaccessible thing called “Kabbalah.” In truth, matters of soul and spirituality are the ABC’s of Judaism, as evidenced in the *Modeh Ani* prayer. The opening of the Torah is that the human was created in the Divine Image, with God imbuing His breath and spirit into the human body. This is the fundamental premise upon which the entire Torah rests – that we are responsible to live up to our soul’s Divine calling.³

4. Foundation of the Torah

The basic foundation of the entire Torah is that God created the universe (as we know from the very first verse of Genesis) and gave the human race laws by which to live.

Torah is based on the fact that we have a relationship with God, and we are required to cultivate this relationship – to know God, to love God, and to stand in awe of God. Indeed, all the commandments of the Torah

³ Regarding the care taken not to teach Kabbalah (especially under 40) – 1) This is referring to the formal sturdy of the mystical teachings, not the basics of knowing that we have a soul etc., 2) This prohibition was removed by the Arizal, who stated that today it is a mitzvah to teach “this wisdom” (the inner Torah). And even more so, by the Baal Shem Tov and the Chassidic masters.

are obligations that every man, woman and child is required to fulfill – and now ... not at age 40. And to learn how to do this, we must be educated from the earliest age.

No, spirituality is not a foreign concept to Judaism. It is the essence of the entire Torah, which requires us to establish a relationship between the mundane and the Divine, the bridge between heaven and earth, the material and the spiritual. And we can only do this by infusing our physical lives with Godly energy.

5. Two Dimensions

There are two dimensions of this process, corresponding to the two dimensions in Torah:

- 1) The body of Torah – Talmud, halacha, Jewish law – teaches us the divine mechanics about how to live our lives, the “whats” and the “whens.”
- 2) The soul of Torah – the esoteric and mystical – teaches us the inner spirit of all the mechanics.

Like a body and a soul both are necessary, the fusion of both creates one complete unit.

We have been trained and taught not to teach Kabbalah per se, but to teach the basics of Judaism – to teach about the soul and its connection to God ... to teach that Torah is not only a body of laws, a conglomerate of tradition and history, but a document of inspiration.

Torah is a rich spiritual text that addresses the real issues of life. Torah is instruction (from the word *horaah*), a guiding light that illuminates the paths of life, addressing all our challenges – our pain and joy, our childhood and growth, our health and wealth, life and death, and everything in between, over and under.

Thus, based on the Torah, Judaism is not just a culture and a religion; it is a comprehensive blueprint – and yes, a spiritual blueprint – for life.

6. Still With Us

This is why the Torah is still with us today. Not only because it is the Jewish constitution (though there is truth to that) but because – above all – it carries the eternity of the Divine, and yes, the spiritual and sublime, that transcends the vicissitudes of time and space.

Timeless, yet always profoundly relevant and timely.

And this is one of the biggest challenges that Torah teachers face today: How to explain its teachings so that they are relevant to our lives. How to apply them so that they resonate and are indispensable to us.

Which brings us to this week's Torah reading.

7. God Speaks

This week's Torah reading opens with God's words to Moses:

“I am God (Y-H-V-H). I revealed Myself to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, by the name of El Sha-dai, but by My name, Y-H-V-H, I did not make Myself known to them.”⁴

What is the difference between El Sha-dai and Y-H-V-H? And isn't the name Y-H-V-H also mentioned earlier when God appears to the Patriarchs?

These different levels of divine revelation are obviously mystical and spiritual by definition, and can only be properly understood in that context. Even Rashi, the classical Torah commentator, who explains the verse according to the literal interpretation comments here, that God is saying to Moses: “I did not reveal My quintessential truth,” represented by the divine name Y-H-V-H, to the Patriarchs.

What we have here are clearly different spiritual expressions of the Divine. God's quintessential truth expressed in Y-H-V-H in contrast to the name El Sha-dai which represents a more limited manifestation of God's expression.

⁴ Exodus 6:2.

8. What's in a Name?

There is a well known myth that Eskimos (or as they should be properly called by their respectable name, Inuit) have one hundred names for the word snow (in fact, they have as many names for snow as we do in English). This urban legend is based on the belief that the language of different people reflects their unique experiences and cultures. Since Eskimos live in a predominantly snowy climate they developed many different words that express different aspects and variations of snow.

What is not a myth, however, is that the Torah has many names for God – as many as seventy. Most of us don't know that. And this is because when we don't have much interaction with a particular experience, we can not be sensitive or even care about its nuances.

Thus, a casual or superficial take on God will not yield many names. Contrast that with the people you know and care about. How many names and nicknames can you come up with? Names that you use in different modes and situations.

An intimate relationship with God dictates many dimensions of the experience, hence the many names the Torah employs in describing the different manifestations of the Divine experience.

[Indeed, the chief work of Kabbalah, the Zohar, explains that the Divine Essence has no name, and cannot be alluded to in any which way. But Divine *revelation* manifests in multitude of forms.]

9. Above and Below

The great Torah scholar and Kabbalist, Rabbi Menachem Emnuel Ezariah of Pano, who lived in the 15-16th century, and also the Shaloh, who lived in the same time period, explain that the Torah essentially “speaks about that which is above [the spiritual] and alludes to that which is below [the physical].”

In other words, Torah is a spiritual document that “speaks in human language.” This does not mean that the verse is not to be taken literally,⁵ but the root and source of the literal is in the sublime. Or as Nachmanides (the Ramban) writes: “The entire Torah are names of God.”

Therefore, it should be no surprise that there are many direct references in Torah to the spiritual, beginning with the first description of the human being, created in the “image of God.”

10. Direct Glimpse

Unique to this week’s Torah portion is the fact that we catch a direct glimpse of the Divine names, the different manifestations of Godly energy, which is generally concealed in other parts of Torah.

In other words, we are able to relate to the Divine on intimate terms. And in so doing we discover the path to true freedom in our lives.

11. What is True Freedom?

What is true freedom?

To most of us, freedom simply means to be free. But if we want to experience freedom in its true form, if we want to be free in the fullest sense of the word, we have to appreciate the different manifestations of the freedom experience, just as we appreciate the different manifestation of the Divine.

Freedom. The word captures the essential progress of the modern Western world – the free world. But what does freedom actually mean? And are we actually free? Even when we have no enemies without, aren’t we enslaved to our needs and desires, our own fears and inhibitions – our internal, psychological enemies? And what about all the forces and demands imposed upon us by work, material

⁵ After all, we have the axiom that *ayn mikra yotsei m’idei pehsuto*.

responsibilities, obnoxious bosses and all those whom we are dependent upon? Aren't we victims of forces of oppression that can debilitate us no less than an opponent wielding a weapon?

So how is it possible to achieve true freedom?

12. Four Paths to Freedom

In this week's reading, the Torah reveals four different paths to freedom.

When God tells Moses that He will redeem the Jewish people from their Egyptian bondage, God uses four different terms for the word redemption:

*"I will take you out from the suffering of Egypt; I will deliver you from their bondage; I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will make of you My nation, and I will be a God..."*⁶

Practically speaking, these four expressions of freedom reflect four stages of Exodus:

- 1) First, the end of the long 210 year oppressive bondage: "I will take you out from the suffering of Egypt."
- 2) The end of all hard labor, which stopped six months before the Jews actually left Egypt: "I will deliver you from their bondage."
- 3) The actual exodus, physically leaving Egypt and the elimination of the Egyptian enemy: "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments."
- 4) The Jewish people become a free nation, driven by a higher mission, servant only to God: "I will make of you My nation, and I will be a God to you."

⁶ Exodus 6:6-7.

13. The Blueprint

All events in the Torah, especially the central one of the Egyptian exodus, offer us a psycho-spiritual blueprint to guide us in the challenges of our own lives.

The redemption from Egypt represents transcendence. *Mitzrayim* (the Hebrew word for Egypt) means boundaries and constraints, referring to every limitation and inhibition that confines us – physical, emotional or spiritual. The redemption from *Mitzrayim* gives us each the power to achieve personal and collective freedom from all our constraints, whether it is an unhealthy relationship, a state of emotional despair, or anything that is blocking us from achieving our goals.

But to do so requires a close-up look at the different phases of redemption, so that we can acclimate ourselves to the process and align our efforts accordingly.

14. Four Steps

Four steps are necessary to be free from any given “trap” in our lives, all with the help from above:

- 1) “I will take you out from the suffering of Egypt.” First you must get out of the immediate line of fire. As long as you remain in an abusive situation, in range of a force that is hurting you, you cannot begin the journey toward freedom. This first step away from the immediate cause of your suffering is only a first step, but it is critical: If you don’t “stop the bleeding,” healing cannot begin. This step is often the hardest of them all, because after protracted years of pain you can become resigned and even accustomed to the oppression, to the point that it becomes so much part of your life and your being that it is hard to recognize the “enemy,” or even acknowledge that there is an “enemy” (what we call today: denial, but what was called back then: *deNile*), and distinguish friend from foe.

2) "I will deliver you from their bondage." After you are taken out of the actual destructive situation, you must be *delivered* from the hold of the oppressive force. Even after their hard labor ended the Jewish people still remained in Egypt, under the effect of extensive exposure to their depraved culture and centuries of genocide. Thus the need to be delivered and break free from the psychological hold of being a "slave" for so long.

3) "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments." Finally *you* get out of "prison," but the enemy (or a similar one) is still lurking. At this stage you need an "outstretched arm" to embrace you and hold you tight and secure, reassuring you that you will be safe. And "great judgments" that eliminate the enemy, and ensure it does not return. Even after the Exodus, Egypt remained a superpower and indeed, they pursued the Jews. Until they were utterly defeated at the Red Sea.

4) "I will make of you My nation, and I will be a God to you." The first three phases were all about freeing yourself from the enemy. But you still are not free until you discover who you are. Freedom is not merely the absence of slavery – getting away from the past and escaping the negative. True freedom is a state of being on its own – the ability to be true to yourself, your true self, and live up to your inner calling and spiritual destiny. Even after the enemy is vanquished you want a life that is not defined by the negative, even by being opposed to the enemy (like anti-anti-Semitism). You want to build your life in a way that stands for something great (not against something), and a life that will never again allow you to be enslaved, exploited or constricted in the first place.

All life's problems begin by allowing yourself to be subjected and enslaved to man-made conventions. When you worship money, power, connections and social status – you bring upon yourself an imposing "master" that will subjugate your freedom and ultimately annihilate your inner dignity.

Ultimate freedom means freeing yourself from human devices. It means discovering your divine calling and responding to that calling with all your faculties and resources. Only then can you call yourself a free man or woman.

15. Full Circle

So we have now come full circle to where we started.

As I said at the outset, today more than ever we need to experience the spirituality of the Torah. And this spirituality cannot just be the domain of the spiritual seeker. For each of us has the obligation to infuse our rituals with life, passion and vivacity.

May we all live up to the Maggid of Mezeritch's interpretation of v'chai bohem, "and you shall live by them [the Torah's commandments]" – and you shall make them come alive for you and for those around you. And may that commitment set you free. Amen.