



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Shoftim

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

August 30, 2014
Shoftim

Jewish Politics



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

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ABSTRACT

Who is an expert on the Holy Land? Republicans or Democrats? Right-wingers or left-wingers? And can you trust their opinion?

You wouldn't go to a mechanic for your annual medical physical, would you? If you did, you would walk out of there with new tires and an oil change. You wouldn't take your automobile to a medical doctor for its annual inspection, would you? If you did, your car would be told to cut down on those chocolate fudge brownies and to blow the cobwebs off the treadmill.

So why would you go to a politician to understand the Holy Land? Just as medical doctors are experts in medicine, not automobiles, so too politicians are experts in politics, not holiness.

The only expert on Israel, and its sanctity, is the Torah. And the Torah says there is no such a thing as a rightwing or leftwing Jew.

This sermon demonstrates how a Jew is not meant to veer to the right or to the left, but to copy the one divine Torah, study it and live by it. This is the mission of the Jew.

The above message is encapsulated in the story of a tiny Torah scroll that journeyed from a Bar Mitzvah in Bergen-Belsen into the arms of Colonel Ilan Ramon on the Columbia Space Shuttle. This Torah went from the pits of hell to the heights of heaven – as every Jew must as well.

ARE JEWS RIGHTWING OR LEFTWING?

1. Politics & Religion (Joke)

A congregant asks his rabbi, “Rabbi, you’re a man of God. So why is it that you are always talking about politics, when I, a politician, am always talking about spiritual matters?”

“You have discovered one of the principles of human nature,” the rabbi replies.

“And what’s that rabbi?”

“People like to discuss things they know nothing about.”

2. Expert Advice

No one really knows yet everyone talks. Politicians most of all. But do they really know anything outside the purview of the political world? And why would anyone pay attention when they wax on subjects beyond their ken?

I mean, you wouldn’t go to a mechanic for your annual medical physical, would you? If you did, you would walk out of there with new tires and an oil change. You wouldn’t take your automobile to a medical doctor for its annual inspection, would you? If you did, your car would be told to cut down on those chocolate fudge brownies and to blow the cobwebs off the treadmill.

So why would you go to a politician to understand the Holy Land? Just as medical doctors are experts in medicine, not automobiles, so too politicians are experts in politics, not holiness.

If someone is a lawyer by trade and is an expert on the law, you would go to him to understand the law. (As you should!) If someone is a doctor by trade, and is a medical expert, you would consult with her to under-

stand the nuances of medicine. If someone is a politician, a political expert, you would go to that person to discuss political scheming and geopolitical thingamabobs.

Applying this logic then, if you would want to understand Israel, the Holy Land, you would not go to a doctor, or a lawyer, or a politician; rather you would go to the expert on the Holy Land, on Israel, and on the Jewish people.

And who is that expert?

The only expert is the Torah.

3. Rightwing vs. Leftwing

That being the case has not stopped the pundits – both from the right and the left. And we find that Jews themselves are divided into right and left wings.

Recently, these divisions have been magnified by events in Israel, and the public conversation has been dominated by differing political views of the conflict. With the proliferation of social media, the positions people take are no longer limited to the talking heads, journalists and politicians – it seems like every single individual has a voice and certainly anyone with an Internet connection can fuel the conversation.

With the anti-Semitic vitriol that has poured out on Facebook and other social media during the past few months, many Jews, both on the right and the left, are asking how they should respond to this unmitigated hatred.

There are two general takes on Jews, Judaism and Jewish ideas – one take leans more to the left, while the other more to the right. And each Jew looks for a solution to any problem (including that of modern anti-Semitism) through his or her prism.

With regard to Israel, there are Jews who have leftwing opinions and Jews who have rightwing opinions. With regard to Halacha, Jewish law,

there are Jews who are frantically liberal and leftwing, and there are Jews that are fanatically conservative and rightwing.

There are Jews who watch only FOX NEWS, and Jews who watch only CNN, and Jews who watch only AL JAZEERA. There are Jews who only read the *New York Times*, and Jews who only read the *Washington Post*, and Jews who only read the bulletin boards in synagogues.

There are Jews who are allergic to Obama as if here were a double cheeseburger with bacon; and there are others who embrace Obama as if he were yummy bowl of Bubby's matzo ball soup.

During the recent/current Hamas war, these polar opposites were highlighted. Some Jews that banked hard left and others banked hard right. (I guess some were on the east bank and some on the west bank...) But whose is the true path - that of the right wing extremist or the bleeding-heart liberal?

Sure, it is every human being's inalienable right to choose his or her path, and I am not questioning this right. My question is: Is there a correct way for a Jew to think? Or, are they *both* correct?

Is it more Jewish to be right wing or left? Or maybe these wings have nothing to do with Judaism altogether? What does the Torah say?

4. Parshat Shoftim

This week's Torah reading, *Parshat Shoftim*, is packed with instructions. The Jews stand on the threshold of the Holy Land, and they know that Moses will not be going with them. They need practical direction on how to implement a righteous infrastructure and a just government system that will be incorruptible.

As we know all too well, we Jews are great when we are the wandering underdogs, but danger lies once we enter into the Promised Land and are given positions of power. How are we to structure that power in a holy way? How not to veer toward tyranny on the one hand, or anarchy on the other hand?

Most importantly, how to serve God without abusing God? As we have seen throughout history, and as is tragically still demonstrated in the Middle East, people have always managed to twist the idea of “God” to serve their own nefarious ends. Just look at the Crusades and Inquisitions of the past, and then look to ISIS and Hamas of today – all of whom have claimed that God told them to slaughter the so-called infidels.

How, then, as a Jewish Nation entering the Promised Land for the first time, are we to create divine policy and pure infrastructure?

Says the Torah: “Listen to your priests and judges.”

*According to the law they instruct you and according to the judgment they say to you, you shall do; you shall not divert from the word they tell you, either right or left.*¹

And then God instructs the Jews to appoint a king, a ruler of the Jewish people. And what should the king do once he is appointed? How shall the king rule? What should be his politics?

*And it will be, when he sits upon his royal throne, that he shall write for himself a duplicate of this Torah scroll before the priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord, his God, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to perform them, so that his heart will not be haughty over his brothers, and so that he will not turn away from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, in order that he may lengthen his days in his kingdom, he and his sons, among Israel.*²

Twice within ten verses the Torah instructs us not to turn away from it, neither to the right nor to the left. We all know how we can veer right or left. We all know what it means to be either rightwing or leftwing. Why does the Torah tell us not to be either? And how can we ensure that we aren't?

To understand better what this means, we need to explain a unique Hebrew phrase used here for a “duplicate Torah” – *Mishneh Torah*.

¹Deut. 17:11.

²Deut. 17:19-20.

5. *Mishneh Torah*: Two Meanings

There are two meanings to this word, *mishneh*, and each provides part of the answer to our dilemma - as whether a Jew should be rightwing or leftwing.

The great 11th century commentator, Rashi, cites the Talmud³ that *Mishneh Torah* means "two copies of the Torah." The proof is that *mishneh* comes from the Hebrew word for two, *shnay*. Therefore, the king should write two Torah scrolls, one that is placed inside his private treasury, and the other that goes out with him wherever he goes.

Then Rashi cites the Targum Onkelos that translates *mishneh* as "copy," and relates it to the word *shinun*, which means to "study." Therefore, the king should study and repeat the words of the Torah as he copies it.

So, according to one interpretation, *Mishneh Torah* means two copies of the Torah, and according to the second it means one copy that is studied and repeated.

And this is what the king was required to do once he took leadership. This is how the king was meant to rule the Land of Israel, and how the people of Israel were meant to lead their Jewish lives.

6. Devarim

The Book of Deuteronomy - or Devarim in Hebrew - is called *Mishneh Torah* because, in it, Moses repeats all of the laws that God gave at Sinai and in the four previous books in general.

The Greek word, Deuteronomy, means "repetition of the law" or "a second law," and it can erroneously be interpreted as meaning that there are two different Torahs, with different laws and different takes on the Divine. This may be Greek thinking - this is certainly not Jewish thinking.

In Jewish thinking there is one divine Torah, and only one. In order to implement this one divine Torah into our everyday lives, we have to

³ Deut. 17:11.

⁴ Sanhedrin 21b.

copy this Torah and we also have to study this Torah; we have to repeat it and internalize it until it becomes part and parcel of every fiber of our being.

Perhaps if we were Greek, we could think there are (God forbid) two Torahs – a leftwing Torah and a rightwing Torah. But since we are Jews – whether we call ourselves “religious” or “secular,” and whether we read this newspaper or that – we have *one* Holy Torah. Our Torah does not veer to the right nor to the left. It is a Torah that is true and genuine when applied to all people, circumstances, and situations.

And it says:

Make copies of this Torah, one that will remain in your inner domain and one that you will take with you wherever you go, so that when you have a question – any question – you will know on which path to walk and how not to stray to the right or to the left.

7. A Journey from Hell to Heaven (Inspirational Story)

The oneness of Torah, and how this oneness can play out in two opposite extremes – leftwing or right, heaven or hell, in the celestial firmaments above or the dark pits of earth below – is demonstrated in the heart-wrenching story of the first Israeli astronaut, Ilan Ramon.

Ilan’s mother was a Holocaust survivor, who walked out of the hell of Auschwitz and into the Holy Land of Israel.

Ilan was born on June 20, 1954 in Ramat Gan and grew up in Beersheba. He became an Israeli Air Force fighter pilot and rose to the level of colonel.

In 1981, as Shavuot, the festival of the giving of the Torah was about to begin, a squadron of eight F-16A fighter jets flew from the Holy Land to bomb a nuclear reactor in Iraq, just outside of Baghdad. With today’s

upheaval in that region of the world, this mission was more prophetic and essential than anyone could ever imagine. Ilan was the youngest fighter pilot on this highly secretive and daring mission to preempt Iraq's development of a weapon of mass destruction, thus protecting his Jewish brothers and sisters – and, indeed, the entire world!

In 1997, Ilan was selected to become the first Israeli astronaut in history. He was designated to train for a space shuttle mission with a multispectral camera for recording desert dust. One of the heads of this project was a gentleman named Yehoyachin Yosef, known as Yoya, an Israeli atmospheric physicist.

After dinner one evening, Ilan and Yoya retreated to Yoya's study. Ilan noticed a small wooden box atop one of the bookshelves. He asked Yoya what it was and Yoya told him that it was a tiny ark, which contained a miniature Torah scroll. Yoya then went on to relate to Ilan the unbelievable story behind this tiny Torah scroll:

Yoya was born in 1931 in Berlin, Germany. With the rise of the Nazis, all of his father's companies were confiscated. As the hell increased, young Yoya was separated from his parents and was sent to the death camp Bergen-Belsen.

There was a rabbi from the Netherlands in the camp, named Rabbi Simon Dasberg, who made it his mission to continue his rabbinical duties even in this darkest hell. Rabbi Dasberg found out that Yoya would soon turn thirteen years of age, and asked him if he would like to become a Bar Mitzvah boy? Yoya said yes, but how? The rabbi said: Don't worry, I will teach you, if you are willing.

Every morning, at 4 AM, the rabbi would wake Yoya, take him down to the table where they would study from a tiny Torah scroll that the rabbi had smuggled into the camp.

One day, the rabbi told Yoya that time for his Bar Mitzvah has come. He arranged everything – the windows were covered with blankets, and there was the Torah on the table ready for Yoya to read.

As Jews watched from their bunk beds, the rabbi conducted a genuine prayer service in the hell of Bergen-Belsen. When it was time for Yoya to read, there was a knock on the door, and everyone froze. The rabbi went to the door, opened it, and there was Yoya's mother. The rabbi, in some miraculous way, found his mother and smuggled her into this part of the camp.

Yoya recited the blessings on the Torah as Jews have been doing for thousands of years, read his Torah portion from the tiny Torah, and gave his Bar Mitzvah speech. Then someone offered him a tiny piece of chocolate that he had been hiding for the occasion.

After the Bar Mitzvah ceremony, Rabbi Dasberg took Yoya aside and said, "Here is the Torah from which you just read; I want you to take it."

Yoya said: "I can't take it. I'm just a kid; kids don't take Torah scrolls."

Rabbi Dasberg told Yoya that in all likelihood he, as an elder man, will not leave the camp alive, and Yoya, as a young boy, may very well survive. "Take the *Sefer Torah*, but on one condition: You must tell the world this story, the story of what happened here."

Ilan went home that night shaken to the core. After thinking about it, he asked Yoya if he could take the tiny Torah scroll on the Columbia mission.

And so, Ilan, whose mother and grandmother survived Auschwitz, took with him into space a pencil sketch, "Moon Landscape," drawn by 16-year-old Petr Ginz who died in Auschwitz; a microfiche copy of the Torah given to him by then Israel's President Moshe Katsav; a barbed wire mezuzah; a dollar from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson – and, of course, the four-and-a-half inch tall *Sefer Torah* given to him by Yoya.

On January 21, 2003, during a live teleconference from aboard the space shuttle Columbia, Ilan held the Torah aloft: "This was given by a rabbi to a scared, thin young boy in Bergen-Belsen," Ilan said from the space

shuttle. "It represents, more than anything, the ability of the Jewish people to survive. From horrible periods, black days, to reach periods of hope and belief in the future."

Thus did Yoya fulfill his promise to Rabbi Drasberg to share this story with all the world.

On February 1, over West Texas, ten days after showing the tiny Torah to the world, and a few minutes prior to reentry, the Space Shuttle Columbia tragically exploded and all its members perished up in the heavens.

Yoya, interviewed for a documentary entitled, *Space Shuttle Columbia: Mission of Hope*, said that this Torah demonstrated to all the world, "how a person can go from the depth of hell to the heights of heaven."

In the same documentary, President of Israel, Shimon Peres, said this Torah demonstrates how we Jews can go from the depth of despair to the heights of hope - how not only a human being can carry a scroll, but that a scroll can carry a human being.

8. Our Mission on Earth (Conclusion)

Every single Torah scroll in the world is exactly the same. So is every Jew. At our core, each and every one of us is a Torah scroll, a scroll that can light the candle of divine light in the darkest hell, or broadcast to all the earth from the heights of heaven.

You want to know what message to post on Facebook, how to respond to Jew-haters? You want to know if you should be leftwing or rightwing? Just know what the Torah says that a Jewish king and every Jew must do:

And it will be ... that he shall write for himself a duplicate Torah ... And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord, his God, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to perform them, so that his heart will not be haughty over his brothers, and so that he will not turn away from the commandment, either to the right or to the left...

We are one Jewish people, with one Torah. As we have done through the millennia, we shall continue to copy it, study it, and teach it to the world.

There are no rightwing Jews and there are no leftwing Jews. There are just Jews, traveling down the path of Torah and using the wings of our good deeds to reach the greatest heights.

This is Judaism and this is Jewish politics. We do what's correct, as dictated by the Torah. When we do this, the world is at peace.

This is our mission on earth – to share with all humankind the light of the Creator of heaven and earth.

This is the mission of the Jew. And this is the mission we will fulfill.

Shabbat Shalom!