



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Netzavim

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Netzavim

**Are You Bored?
The Relevance Of Torah**



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

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ABSTRACT

Are you bored? And how about Judaism: Do you find it monotonous?

Do you find Torah relevant to your life? Do you turn to the Torah for answers to your personal issues? When you read or hear the Torah being read do you feel it is speaking to you? Do you fulfill its commandments mechanically and by rote? Are you excited and passionate about your Judaism?

If you answered in the negative to any of these questions, you are not alone. Sadly, most Jews today do not find personal relevance in Judaism. They may look to Torah for legal guidance, and may embrace it due to a cultural influence or pressure, but most do not find Judaism personally exciting, exhilarating and relevant – definitely when compared to other things in life that they turn to for stimulation.

And, if you count yourself among them, are not passionate about your spiritual heritage, what fills the vacuum? Where do you find relevance? After all, vacuums lead to some of our worst problems.

Moses addressed this dilemma over three thousand years ago in one of the most compelling of his statements. It is part of our Torah reading this week – as, indeed, it is part of our Torah reading every year just before Rosh Hashana. And the entire book of Tanya is based on this verse – which is apropos as we honor this coming new year the 200th yearzeit of the author of this classic masterpiece, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (5573-5773/1812-1912).

But what is unclear about this verse that required an entire Tanya to be written to explain it? This sermon explains it, and the explanation couldn't come at a better time. With Rosh Hashana 36 hours away, we need to candidly evaluate the status of our lives: What drives and excites us? Does Judaism and God have anything to do with our deepest passions and desires? What role does Torah play in our personal lives?

Above all, we must answer the most compelling question: How can we make Torah indispensable to our modern times? How can we excite our children and ourselves with what Judaism has to offer?

ARE YOU BORED? THE RELEVANCE OF TORAH

1. Just 36 Hours Away

With Rosh Hashana just 36 hours away, let's talk about where we stand at this point in time.

Another year has passed. And – as can be said of every year – many good things happened, as well as many bad. Some have died, and some were born. Some have married and found love and bliss, while others have experienced loss and heartbreak.

The pessimist may conclude, paraphrasing the opening words of Ecclesiastes: “A generation has passed, a generation has arrived, and there is nothing new under the sun. Only the names and props have changed.”

But the optimist will counter: “Though there might be nothing new under the sun, over the sun, in the higher world of spirit, new energy is always brewing.”

The choice is ours: will we succumb to the pull of gravity and be dragged down to earth, and its tedious routines; or will we rise “above the sun” and experience renewal and rejuvenation.

As a new year approaches and a new energy is about to descend into our lives, let us all rise a bit above the sun. Rosh Hashana – and the renewal it brings – teaches us that we don’t need to remain stuck breathing “stale recycled air” that results from being trapped in the “greenhouse” of our wearisome lives “beneath the sun.” Or, we can transcend the earthy stratosphere and live dynamic, passionate lives.

The monotony of the daily grind is one of our greatest enemies. The vacuum that a monotonous life creates is extremely susceptible to boredom, and it makes us desperate for something, anything, that will relieve it.

Some of our gravest mistakes and deepest addictions are a result of the vacuum in our lives.

How can we ignite the forces of healthy passion in our lives? A passion that will fill us up

And can we connect this vitality to Judaism?

Can we find relevance in Torah for our modern contemporary lives?

2. Hot Air Balloon (Joke)

Two fellows 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 go. 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” ...

3. Moses' Address

This challenge of relevance was addressed by Moses over three thousand years ago in one of the most compelling of his statements. It is part of our Torah reading this week – as, indeed, it is part of our Torah reading every year just before Rosh Hashana. This is what Moses said:

The mandate that I give to you today is not beyond [or concealed] nor distant from you. It is not in heaven ... It is not over the sea ... It is something very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it...¹

What does “very close” mean? Physical proximity? Moses could not be referring to that, for a person can be standing very close to a Torah scroll, yet feel very distant from its contents. On the other hand, one may physically be many miles away from the Torah scroll and yet still feel close to it.

4. Very Close

By using the words “very close” Moses was teaching us one of the most critical lessons we will ever hear: that the Torah is *relevant* to you. The Torah is not merely a book of laws and legalities. It is not a book of stories and history. It is first and foremost a – not *a*, but *the* – Divine blueprint for existence. You can call it “life’s operator’s manual” written and given to us by the Cosmic Engineer that created all of life.

¹ Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

Torah comes from the word *ho'raah*, which means instruction, and also from the word *ohr*, light and illumination (*Torah ohr*). Indeed, Torah in Aramaic is *ohr'aisa*, which is a combination of two words: *ohr aisa*² – “carrier of light.” Torah illuminates and instructs us how to navigate our lives, like a roadmap and headlights that allow us to travel the dark and unknown roads of life. Like a light, Torah illuminates for us the path that will help us realize our deepest potential, and avoid the pitfalls that can cause us harm.

Imagine bringing home a complex new machine – say a new type of mobile phone – without an operator’s manual. You won’t know how to use the machine properly, what buttons to press, and you may even press the wrong ones, causing the machine to malfunction.

Torah is the operator’s manual that comes along with the most complex machine of them all called “life, and it guides us how to best use it for maximum benefit and minimum grief.

5. Why Distant?

So now the question arises:

Why would we think that this blueprint for life is “distant” from us, that Moses had to emphasize that it “is not beyond you nor distant from you. It is not in heaven ... It is not over the sea?”

The answer becomes quite apparent when we look at our own lives. We live in a material world that is driven by self-interest and doesn’t easily respond to a mandate to answer to a higher calling. Material (not spiritual) things are “close” to us. When we are hungry or tired we naturally feel it. It takes no effort. Spirituality on the other hand is an elusive entity that requires persistent effort.

² Sefer Hasichot 5704 p. 116.

Because ours is a material world that revolves around our physical needs, it serves to derail our spiritual quest to find a deeper purpose in it all. Where do we find direction? How do we access spirituality when we are surrounded by narcissism? Can we maintain higher integrity in a corrupt world? Is *spiritual passion* even possible in a pedestrian life?

Especially today, how many Jews find personal relevance in Torah?

6. Relevance

Ask yourselves: Do you find Judaism relevant to your life? Do you turn to the Torah for answers to your personal issues? When you read or hear the Torah being read do you feel it is speaking to you? Do you perform mitzvot mechanically and by rote? Are you excited and passionate about your Judaism, or do you find it monotonous and mechanical?

If any of the above fits your profile you are not alone. Sadly, most Jews today do not find personal relevance in Judaism. They may look to Torah for legal guidance, and may embrace it due to a cultural influences or pressure, but most do not find Judaism personally exciting, exhilarating and relevant – definitely when compared to other things in life that we turn to for stimulation.

And if you are not passionate about your spiritual heritage, what fills the vacuum? Where do you find relevance?

Taking this one blunt step further: Most of the things people do to relieve the monotony of their daily lives is not exactly Torah based.

When we don't find passion in healthy things – the vacuum, the hunger, the desperation – drives us to unhealthy things. Some of our gravest mistakes and deepest addictions are a result of the vacuum in our lives, causing us to be desperate for something ... anything ... that will relieve the tedium.

So it's quite easy to understand the dilemma Moses was addressing, how the Torah mandate can seem "distant" – very distant – from us...

7. Moses' Answer

As the true and sensitive leader he was, Moses did not shy away from this vital issue. In the last days of his life he addressed head-on the greatest challenge that would face the Jewish people throughout history: Spiritual relevance.

And this is why he used the words that he did.

“The mandate that I give to you today” may appear:

- “distant from you” - for in our material world the spiritual mandate can seem very far away and inaccessible
- “but it is not in heaven” - though some would relegate it to heaven, which we can only touch when we climb the mountain and live ascetic lives
- “and it is not over the sea” - though some might claim that it is for the old world, for the old country and not for modern days and times

The Torah is not there but here. It is a timeless blueprint for all existence which speaks to life in this material world, in this place, at this time.

These words resonate through the ages as the single most compelling challenge in life - to follow a spiritual path, to live a meaningful life.

8. But How?

Now that Moses established that Torah's mandate is “very close - relevant - to you,” the question looms:

As creatures trapped in the tentacles of the material universe, a world driven by self-interest and narcissism, how can we experience it as “close” and relevant? How do we access the relevance? What should we be teaching ourselves and our children to discover this “closeness?”

Moses answers this: “It is in your mouth (in your speech) and in your heart (in your thoughts, and in your actions, so] that you may do it.”

What do these three expressions mean? “Mouth,” “heart” and “do it” refer to the three “garments” (referred to in mysticism) of the soul – the three and only three ways the soul can express itself in this world: Thought (heart), speech (mouth) and action (do it).

With these three words Moses reveals the secret of finding the indispensable relevance of the Torah to our lives, and the key to living a dynamic Jewish life:

Educate and discover how Torah feeds and actualizes your soul and its faculties in your thought, speech and action.

9. The Tanya

And how do we achieve this?

Well, my friends, the answer lies in a classic work called the *Tanya*, composed by the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, whose 200th *yahrzeit* we honor this year (5573-5773; 1812-1912).

The Alter Rebbe writes on the cover page of the *Tanya*, that his entire book is “based upon this very verse – ‘for this thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it’ – explaining clearly how it is exceedingly close, in both a long and short way, with the aid of the Holy One, Blessed be He.”

What is unclear about this verse that required an entire *Tanya* to be written to explain it?

Moses declared that the spiritual Torah path is relevant (“close”), and the way we access its relevance is by educating and training ourselves in the method of how Torah feeds and actualizes our soul and its faculties in our thought, speech and action.

The *Tanya* comes to explain clearly *how* it is exceedingly close, in both a long and short way. Briefly the *Tanya* lays out a magnificent and comprehensive system, explaining how the soul and spirituality is our natural inherent personality, as well as the process how to access the innate soulfulness in every aspect of our thought, speech and action.

The key to discovering the Torah's absolute relevance (closeness) to our lives is to recognize the soul in the Torah, the soul in us and the soul in everything in existence. As long as we look only at the "body" of Torah – its mechanics – we will not appreciate its personal relevance to us, no more than we recognize the relevance of an obscure star in the distant sky. But once we uncover the energy and soul within, then we suddenly perceive the connection and intrinsic unity and symbiosis of everything.

10. Long Short Way (Talmudic Story)

Is finding spiritual relevance – and becoming intimate with your own soul – a difficult process? Yes and no. As in everything, there is a long and a short way, as the Alter Rebbe noted.

His words bring to mind a Talmudic story recounted by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah:

Once a child got the better of me. I was traveling, and I met with a boy at a crossroads. I asked him, "Which way to the city?" And he answered: "This way is *short* and *long*, and this way is long and short."

I opted for the "*short* and long" way. I soon reached the city but found my approach obstructed by gardens and orchards. So I retraced my steps and said to the child: "My son, did you not tell me that this is the *short* way?"

He answered: "Did I not tell you that it is also *long*?"³

By writing that Tanya explains "clearly how it is exceedingly close in both a *long and a short way*," the Alter Rebbe is telling us that Torah's path to spiritual growth has a "*short but long*" way and a "*long but short*" way.

Yogi Berra once said: When you come to a fork in the road, take it...

³ Eruvin 53b.

The “short but long” route is the quick answer to a complex life question. It addresses the symptoms, and offers a quick fix. The answer may be impressive and, when you hear it, you are pleased. Later, when you think it over, though, you realize you still have some unresolved issues with this answer. And so you must go on a long search to really get satisfaction.

The “long but short” approach addresses the root of the issue. Not just its symptoms. This path requires more patience and trust. You ask the question and, instead of hearing an answer, are directed to study something seemingly unrelated. That discussion leads you to another tangent, which takes you to a third, entirely unrelated concept. Along the way, you muse that this is all very interesting, but how does it answer the question?

But then, in an instant, everything clicks and you realize that, in light of the new perspective all this information has afforded you, you actually have no question at all. And by getting to the root of the issue many problems are solved all at once and many others pre-empted.

The Torah generally opts for the “long but short” route to spiritual growth in a material world.

The key thing to know is that the soul lies right beneath the surface, readily accessible and “close.” We have all the spiritual resources we will ever need to face any challenge in life. Yet, we are our own greatest enemy. Our material immersions blind us from seeing our own deep strengths. So, it is indeed a “long – but short – road.”

11. Practical Action

Let’s now translate this into practical action.

If spiritual relevance is about awareness – awareness of our own inner spiritual strengths, and of our soul’s calling – then how do we create awareness?

Only one way: By teaching ourselves and our children about it. By speaking about it. By doing everything in our power, and as often as humanly possible, to bring attention to the driving engine of our lives: our souls.

Our greatest enemy is not an active force or a power; it is actually a passive absence and lack of force. Our greatest enemy is ignorance and apathy.

A fellow asked his indifferent friend: What is worse, ignorance or apathy? His reply: I don't know and I don't care.

We need to create a revolution – a revolution of awareness: Parents at home, educators at school, ought to begin inculcating in children, on a consistent basis, that they each have a soul inside them, waiting to be released. A soul that was sent down to this earth on a mission, and nothing – absolutely nothing – is more important than discovering our unique mission and doing whatever it takes to realize it.

How many of us know this? How many of our children know it?

12. Poor Education

So many have not been taught this by their parents and certainly not in school ... And poor education is one of the most serious problems we face today – and the root of some many other issues.

Yes, our children are taught reading, writing and arithmetic, but they are not taught what makes life meaningful.

Today's best education will teach a student the skills to earn a respectable income. But what about life skills? How to love and be loved. How to be a giver and not just a taker. How to fulfill your life's mission and leave a permanent mark, rather than just survive and entertain yourself. These values are not taught in schools. Learning them is almost completely dependent on circumstantial factors – a good family (and that may not be enough), or bumping into the right mentor, or hitting rock bottom and learning from the bottom up.

The average American child annually spends 900 hours in school but more than that in front of a TV, watching about 8,000 murders before finishing elementary school. And that's not counting time on the Internet, or playing computer games, which are mostly about killing and winning.

So where will that child's values come from? Where will he or she learn about sensitivity to others, reverence for life and social responsibility?

13. Spirituality

The only force that will infuse our children with higher values and empower them to face the challenges of a material world is not more materialism, but – surprise: what is the opposite of matter? – spirituality.

Spirituality is a deep sense of the soul within each of us and the mission of the soul's journey in this life. No child on earth should be deprived of the need to discover meaning in life. Every boy and girl must know to ask the question, ingrained in his or her psyche from the youngest age, and that question is: What is my purpose? What is my mission? What is my calling?

The calling of our time is to imbue our children with a sense of purpose and mission in life. Spirituality has to become an essential ingredient in the education of every child, and an absolute prerequisite study for any aspiring leader, teacher or clergyperson.

Just think how this will empower your children to face the challenges that their material lives will bring them.

The message of the soul is the single most relevant message you will ever hear – and it is renewed each Rosh Hashana, which is the collective birthday of the human race. And that message is: You are indispensable.

You were born an original, don't become a copy. – Anonymous

Each one of you was created in the Divine Image with an exclusive imprint, unique to each one alone. Only you can fulfill your role and play your special music in the cosmic symphony. And the whole world apprehensively waits – and cannot be complete – until you actualize your life’s calling and make your unique mark and contribution.

14. Divine Image

Rosh Hashana celebrates this Divine Image, for it is the birthday of the creation of humanity.

As you prepare for Rosh Hashana – over this Shabbat, and tomorrow morning – set aside time to be alone. Sit down and try to access your deepest thoughts. Feel the soul within you. Feel the Divine Image within you.

Resolve to speak about the soul with your children on a daily basis, when they awake and before they go to sleep.

And then resolve how you will build your life this coming year in accordance with the spiritual mandate, remembering always that it is not in heaven ... it is not over the sea ... it is very close to you for it dwells in your very heart. Amen.