



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Pikudei

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Pikudei

Living in a Cloud



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

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ABSTRACT

A big difficulty people have with religion is its seemingly all-encompassing and uncompromising nature. They ask:

Does the Torah allow me to express myself as an individual? If I have to eat what the Torah says I have to eat, if I have to wear what the Torah says I have to wear, if I have to live as the Torah tells me to live, then how can I be me?

These are all very good questions. And they are addressed in the Torah itself, via a clear description of a cloud (as opposed to a cloudy description of clarity).

The cloud is a fascinating concept, especially when it comes to today's technology. There is the iCloud, and cloud computing, and cloud services and working “in the cloud.”

Like the cloud of the Internet, the Torah directs us without coercing us; it allows us to experience the cocoon without babying us; it allows us to connect with the world without chaining us to it.

This is what we learn from this week's Torah reading which describes the Cloud of Glory – the divine cloud which bestows upon us a rainstorm of blessings, saturating us with life and truth.

No umbrellas required.

LIVING IN A CLOUD

1. Due Date (Joke)

Chaim and Chana, a nice, young, Jewish, religious couple, were expecting their first child. A few days before her due-date, Chana suddenly started going into labor. It was a Shabbat and on Shabbat, Jewish law forbids driving a car. But, because the Torah is the Book of Life, if there is a situation when a life is at stake, one may certainly (and some say, is obligated to) violate any number of Shabbat laws, which includes driving to the hospital. Giving birth is certainly a situation where life is at stake, so Chaim called for a taxi to take Chana and himself to the hospital's maternity ward.

Because Chaim wanted to try and minimize the Shabbat violation for all involved, he mentioned to the dispatcher that he'd really prefer a non-Jewish driver.

The taxi quickly arrived. When Chaim and Chana were getting into the cab, they overheard the dispatcher's voice crackle over the taxi's two-way radio: "So, tell me Tony - have you picked up the anti-Semites yet?"

2. Torah's All-Encompassing Nature

This humorous bit conveys a few truths, for instance: 1) how what we say is not always perceived the way we mean it, 2) how the Torah holds life in the greatest esteem, and ... 3) the taxi driver's name was Tony.

But the main truth this bit conveys is the one I want to address for the next fifteen minutes or so, and that is: the Torah's all-encompassing nature.

Take a mitzvah like keeping Shabbat and consider it's hundreds of sub-laws ... which govern what exactly we can do on Shabbat ... how far we can walk (which might lead us to wonder if we can run, hop or jog) ... if we can drive under special circumstances (and since they didn't exactly have cars 3,000 years ago, what's that about anyway)?

The extensiveness of the Torah and its seemingly all-encompassing and uncompromising nature is one of the reasons some Jews have a problem with Judaism. And they ask some reasonable questions such as:

Does the Torah allow me to express myself as an individual? If I have to eat what the Torah says I have to eat, if I have to wear what the Torah says I have to wear, if I have to live as the Torah tells me to live, then how can I be me?

Who really can blame a person for feeling threatened and overwhelmed when faced by the yoke of the Torah?

Take waking up in the morning. One would think it would be a simple process: Wake up, turn off your alarm clock, and jump in the shower. No sir. Says the Code of Jewish Law: When one wakes up, one should *be bold as a leopard, light like an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven.*¹ Then it goes on to describe how to wash one's hands, how to get dressed, what blessings to say, and that's just the beginning ...

No wonder that Judaism frightens people. It is difficult for many to embrace such an all-embracing experience.

Fear not my friend, the same Torah that outlines detailed guidelines for every facet of life, also outlines what exactly the Torah's enveloping embrace is all about - and it does so in this week's reading, *Parshat Pikudei*. We will see what it says and use our modern-day technology to help us understand it in a very relevant way.

3. The Cloud of Glory

The last five verses of this week's Torah reading are very cloudy - literally! No less than five times is the word for "cloud" - *anan* - mentioned here:

¹Shulchan Aruch quoting Avot 5:20.

And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Sanctuary/Mishkan. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud rested upon it and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. When the cloud rose up from over the Mishkan, the children of Israel set out in all their journeys. But if the cloud did not rise up, they did not set out until the day that it rose. For the cloud of the Lord was upon the Mishkan by day, and there was fire within it at night, before the eyes of the entire house of Israel in all their journeys.²

What is this Cloud all about, and why is it mentioned so many times? And what did it have to do with the Israelites' travels? Why did they follow it?

Perhaps most importantly, what message does this cloud hold for us today, more than 3,000 years later?

4. The Cloud as GPS

Various Midrashic works discuss³ this cloud and its purpose. There are many details, and different opinions, but in summary:

The Cloud of Glory was the official bodyguard and navigator of the people of Israel in the desert. Whenever the Cloud would stop to rest, the people would rest with it. Whenever the Cloud journeyed on, the people journeyed with it. Similar to the role of a modern-day GPS, the Cloud set forth their course.

(A cynic might point out that it took the people forty years to traverse a distance that should have taken them forty weeks max. The scholar might respond to the cynic that perhaps the travelers did not follow the GPS's directions...)

²Exodus 40:34-38.

³ See Mechilta, opening of Beshalach; Bamdbar Rabba 1:2; Tanchuma 3; Braita d'Melechet Hamishkan 14; .

In addition to a divine navigation system, the Cloud was also the cocoon that protected the people from the desert's harsh, sometimes brutal, elements. Similar to a young bird who, in its infant stages, needs the protection of the nest to build up its strength to fly, the Israelites needed the Cloud's protection. It was the Cloud which nurtured the infant Jewish nation so that they would one day be able to enter the Land of Israel, spread its wings and fly.

The Torah says, and the Midrash explains, that the Cloud surrounded the people like a canopy, but it also permeated them from within and filled them with divine glory.⁴

5. Then and Now

But that was then and this is now.

Perhaps the Jews in the desert were surrounded and guided by a divine cloud. But the closest we get to a cloud today is when we fly somewhere – and even then, being sandwiched like Panini isn't exactly a "divine" experience.

Ah, as a matter of fact, this advanced age of ours helps the Torah make more sense than ever before. For we are taught that we can learn how to serve God from everything in this world. (Indeed, everything that God created, He created only to express His glory.⁵)

The metaphors and analogies that the world around us provides – from the rapid-fire innovations of transportation to the discoveries of alternative energy sources to the breakthroughs in the biological and molecular sciences – provide us with unprecedented ways of looking at and understanding the Torah, ways that our grandparents could never have dreamed of.

And this is true when it comes to the Cloud of Glory as well.

⁴ Indeed, this is celebrated with the mitzvah of sitting in a Sukkah on Sukkot.

⁵ Avos end of chapter 6.

I don't know if you heard about it, but today there is this little thing called technology. Technology provides never-before-known metaphors to help us understand the Torah in new and astounding ways. Therefore, because we can today *understand* the Torah (and even Godliness) in ways never before possible, we actually have the opportunity to *experience* the relevance of Torah like never before!

6. Cloud Computing

One technological term, which has become very popular in the past few years, is “the Cloud,” as in “cloud computing.”

According to Wikipedia:

Cloud computing is a phrase used to describe a variety of computing concepts that involve a large number of computers connected through a real-time communication network such as the Internet ... In science, cloud computing is a synonym for distributed computing over a network and means the ability to run a program or application on many connected computers at the same time...

In common usage, the term “the Cloud” is essentially a metaphor for the Internet. Marketers have further popularized the phrase “in the cloud” to refer to software, platforms and infrastructure that are sold “as a service,” i.e. remotely through the Internet.

Before the Cloud, everything that happened on a computer happened on the computer. There was no connection between what programs or software existed on your computer and all the other software that existed all over the world.

Then came along this thing called the Cloud. Now, anyone anywhere can access pretty much anything at any time from his or her bedroom computer, or iPad, or even phone. The cloud, similar to a rain cloud, is comprised of all these different particles or droplets, and one can make it rain whenever one wishes. Or make it stop raining by logging off.

But while this Cloud is everywhere, it is also nowhere. On one hand, the Cloud surrounds you and allows you to access the most profound things but, on the other hand, the Cloud doesn't trap you. The Cloud guides you, but it does not control you. The Cloud can protect you, backup your files, and it can also nurture you, show you how to update your software and troubleshoot your glitches. The Cloud can provide you with apps, but it is you who has to apply them.

Does the Internet, the global manifestation of cloud computing, hinder your individuality or enhance it? Well, just ask Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Google. (I mean, WhatsApp was just purchased by Facebook for \$19 billion, just to demonstrate the concretized power of this Cloud.)

But if someone says, hey, I don't want to charge my computer, or I don't want to sign unto a wireless connection, then the Internet just won't work for that someone. If someone doesn't enter the Cloud, it is irrelevant to that someone. This is that person's choice. But if someone is willing to join, to sign up and connect, then the Cloud becomes an all-encompassing and connecting resource like no other.

7. The Analogy⁶

This week's Torah reading teaches us that parts of Torah and Judaism are analogous to the Cloud. On one hand, the Torah surrounds us and allows us to access the most profound things but, on the other hand, the Torah doesn't trap us. The Torah guides us, but it does not control us. The Torah can protect us, backs us up, nurtures us and rejuvenates us. The Torah can provide us with apps called mitzvahs that help us experience life in a vibrant and dynamic way, but at the end of the day it is we who have to put these apps to use.

In short, Torah is only as overwhelming as the Internet is.

⁴ See Likkutei Sichot vol. II, pp. 31 et al.

Sure, the Internet could be very overwhelming if your inbox has 36,000 unread messages in it and you are watching funny cat videos on YouTube when your boss thinks you're working. But, the Internet doesn't *have* to be overwhelming. As a matter of fact, the Cloud provides multi-billion-dollar international companies the ability to crunch trillions of pieces of data in seconds and to organize it in such a way that would be deemed miraculous by a previous generation. It also provides the individual with the ability to connect with millions – even billions – of people with the simple click of a button.

This means, when utilized properly, the Cloud is irreplaceable and fundamental to cohesive growth. You just have to sync up and tune in. In other words: the Internet's Cloud is as powerful as you want it to be.

Torah and Judaism works the same way.

If you have 36,000 unopened and unread messages in your Jewish inbox, (which you consider Spam,) and you seem to have forgotten your password to your Jewish account, then yeah, Judaism could seem very stifling, even asphyxiating, and overwhelming.

But, when you realize that all you have to do is click within yourself to open your messages, and that you never forgot your password because your password is ingrained within your very soul – for your password to your account is your essence, indeed, you *are* your own password – then the Torah's Cloud of Glory becomes essential to crunching the numbers of life and organizing existence in the most profound and most divine way possible.

Yes, both the technological cloud and the Torah's cloud are everywhere. Just as oxygen is everywhere. The only question is: Do you sync up with it or do you prefer to see breathing and living as a claustrophobic experience?

The Cloud of Glory, which is the Torah, is all encompassing and it surrounds us, but only in such away that allows us to journey and fly to places otherwise unknown. It protects us and allows us to express ourselves – if we so choose.

8. Syncing Up

Like the cloud of technology, the cloud of Judaism is everywhere. The only question is: Do you wish to sync up with it? These are the pros in deciding:

The Technological Cloud...

1. Allows you to connect with people all around you, people on your left, people on your right, people in front of you and people behind you.
2. Levels the playing field. Anyone can enter the Cloud. It lowers the lofty and lifts the lowly. The expert is brought down to the Cloud's level; the novice is brought up to its level.
3. Provides protective software for your hard drive and removes all obstacles, outdated software, and viruses. It clears the way for you to connect and journey through the world.
4. Envelopes your device but doesn't overtake it. It permeates everything you do, but allows you to do it; it provides the ones-and-zeroes so that your life can move in high algorithm.

The Cloud of Glory...

1. Allows you to connect with people all around you, people on your left (politically, philosophically), people on your right, people in front of you (older and more experienced) and people behind you.
2. Levels the playing field. Anyone can enter the cloud. It lowers the lofty and lifts the lowly. The cloud allows the scholar and the layperson to both get online. Cloud of Glory, the Cloud of Judaism allows all people, scholar or layperson, old or young, religious or not, to journey through the wilderness of life on a level path.
3. Provides protective software for your hard drive and removes all obstacles and viruses. It clears the way for you to connect and journey through the world. But it doesn't merely guide you, it also protects you. The wilderness that is life can be a very dangerous and influential place. The Clouds protect us from any harm or negative influence.

4. The Torah envelops you without overtaking you, it creates navigation and maps so you can travel to great heights, yet it does not coerce you into a mold. Like the Internet, its form allows you access to infinite possibilities of individuality.

9. Shabbat Example (Optional)

Now, let's apply what we have just learned to the example of Shabbat, for Shabbat is a fundamental mitzvah in the Torah and one that very aptly fits our metaphor.

Shabbat, with all its laws and intricacies, is one of those mitzvahs that some people have difficulty relating to. Sure, we all appreciate the beautiful, almost romantic, concept of lighting candles Friday eve – after all, it brings light into this world, and who doesn't like that? But what's so wrong if I watch TV on Shabbat? Isn't Shabbat a day of rest? TV helps me relax. Can't I flick the light-switch so I can see where I'm going in a dark hallway? And does God really mind if I cook some fresh food so that I can have a hot Shabbat day meal?

Applying the technological cloud metaphor, we know that the Torah is a cloudlike structure – in a sense that it creates a global platform and network for us to connect with our Creator, with the people around us, and with every living thing in the entire world. And its primary apps are called mitzvahs.

One of those mitzvahs, Shabbat, is how we connect with Reality itself. So, does one need to watch TV to connect with Reality? Does one have to cook to connect with Reality? Is it necessary to flick on the light-switch in order to see Reality's light? Of course not! And once a week we celebrate the fact that our Reality is deeper than TV, tastier than cooking, and more illuminating than electricity.

It is called the Day of Rest because on Shabbat our material selves are given a rest – but only so that our *spiritual* selves may be more awake.

This is called Judaism in the cloud, the Cloud of Torah. Never foggy, always clear; never misty, always mystical.

10. In Conclusion: When It Rains It Pours

Pun 1: When a cloud becomes king, does it reign?

Pun 2: Says one raindrop to another: Two drops are company; three are a cloud.

We all know that clouds are formed when condensation from earth evaporates and rises upward. When the cloud grows to a large-enough size, it bursts and its accumulated wet-wealth pours down upon the earth. This is what we call rain. (Or, if it's cold enough, it falls down in the form of rain's flaky cousin: snow.)

Rain, the fruit of the cloud, represents the heavenly blessings. Rain is a gift, by which all things grow. The opposite of rain is drought, and that is no blessing at all. As we read in the *Shema* prayer: *I will give rain for your land at the proper time, the early rain and the late rain...*⁷

The mystics teach⁸ that just as rainclouds are formed and fed by the evaporated moistures rising up from the earth, ultimately giving birth to a rainstorm, so too on a certain level are the Clouds of Glory composed of the energy we create when doing mitzvahs here on this earth. These energies, produced by the living moisture created by our holy work and divine deeds down on earth, rise up to create great clouds of glory that will rain down infinite blessings upon us. (In Kabbalistic terms this is called *ohr chozer*, reflective or refractive light.)

Today is *Shabbat Chazak* a Shabbat of strength and power, (when we conclude a book of the Torah, and exclaim *chazak chazak v'nitchazek*, "be strong, be strong and may we be strengthened"). And on this Shabbat I would like to leave us all with this thunderous blessing:

May we all live in the glorious clouds of heaven. May our heads always be in the clouds, and feet too. And may these soft clouds embrace us while allowing us to embrace them back. May these clouds guide us lovingly, and never coerce us forcefully. And may these clouds constantly connect and protect us wherever we may be.

⁷ Deuteronomy 11:14.

⁸ See Sefer Halikutim-Tzemech Tzedek, entry on 'clouds' (*ananim*).

And, may these clouds grow and grow through the rising energy of our good deeds here on this earth. May they grow so big, that on this Shabbat these clouds will burst open and pour down upon us a mighty deluge of blessings, a powerful rainstorm of heaven's droplets, soaking us through to the bone, saturating us with the waters of Torah and its divine streams of knowledge.

Ultimately, may these clouds and rains and storms lead to the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic words: *And the world will be filled with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the seabed.*⁹ May it happen speedily in our days!

Say it cloud and clear – *Chazak chazak v'nitchazek!*

Shabbat Shalom!

⁹Isaiah 11:9.