



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Behar-Bechukotai

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

May 18, 2012
Behar-Bechukotai

Sinai and the Internet



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

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ABSTRACT

Should we ban the Internet? And if not, how should we protect our young – and ourselves – from the vices (which are many) of cyberspace?

This question is now being debated in many circles. And tomorrow, some 40,000 frum men (women not invited) are expected to pack Citifield Stadium in New York – an interesting venue to condemn modernity – for an emergency meeting about the evils of the Internet.

What should our attitude be to all this? Should we ban the Internet from our homes? Is that even possible? And then, why not ban mobile devices and other electronic communication tools that can also lead someone astray? And finally, and most importantly, what is the Torah’s attitude to technology? What did the rabbis of old do when, say, the printing press was discovered in the 15th century? Did they ban books?

So what should be our approach to new ways to access information – good and bad – when we cannot really filter out one from the other?

This question is surprisingly not new. The first information revolution – which took place 3,324 years ago, and which we celebrate next week as the holiday of Shavuot – has for us some astonishing lessons about dealing with today’s information revolution.

What does the Internet have with Sinai rings like the opening question on this week’s Torah portion: What does Shemitah have with Sinai – which is similar to the question, what is a Greek doing in a Sukkah? The Greeks, the Germans and an empty pit – all add up to a formula for dealing with our challenges today.

As we prepare for the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, we read this week's Torah portion, whose opening words about Sinai offers us powerful lessons about managing the Internet and our fast changing world.

SINAI AND THE INTERNET

God is in the Details

1. Parental Controls (Humor)

The Steinbergs purchase a new computer. Naturally, 9-year old Sarah is much more savvy than her mother in setting up the myriad new programs that come with it. And as she gets it going, she innocently asks her mother, "Mom, what level of parental controls would you like me to give you?"

That's what it has come to. Children are able to control what their parents are looking at...

But seriously...

2. Banning the Internet

Are parental controls doing any good whatsoever? Should we just ban the Internet? Because how else can we protect our young - and ourselves - from the vices (which are many) of cyberspace?

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3. Sinai and Shemittah

The opening of this week's Torah portion begins with the laws of *shemittah*, the sabbatical year that took place every seven years, and it begins with a pointed reminder:

God spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai, telling him to speak to the Israelites and say to them: “When you come to the land that I am giving you, the land must be given a rest period, a Sabbath to God...”¹

The sages and commentaries are perplexed by this reminder. They ask: “What does *shemittah* have to do with Sinai in particular? Were not *all* the commandments given at Sinai?”

¹ Leviticus 25:1-2.

And they answer that this teaches us an additional point ... that “just as with *shemittah*, its general principles and its finer details were all given at Sinai, likewise, all of them were given – their general principles [together with] their finer details – at Sinai.”²

But then, what is the significance of this correlation? What is the need to underscore that all the Torah’s laws, both their general principles and finer details were given at Sinai?

4. A Greek in a Sukkah

This statement – “What does *shemittah* have with Mount Sinai?!” – has become a Jewish euphemism used to voice any odd relationship between two seemingly unrelated matters!

When someone glaringly stands out like a sore thumb, or a concept is used in a context that is totally bizarre, Jews are known to use one of these quaint phrases:

“*Mah shemittah aitzel har Sinai?*” (meaning, “What does *shemittah* have to do with Sinai?”)

Or: “*Es past azoi vi a yoven in Sukkah!*” (meaning “This fits like a Greek in a Sukkah!”)

It’s interesting to note the reference to a “Greek” – rather than to say, a Roman, Persian, or Babylonian. This saying is clearly emphasizing the distance between the Greek and Jewish cultures, which others have noted as well. For example, the 3rd century, Latin Church Father, Tertullian, summarized the incompatibility of Hebraism and Hellenism in his famous quip, “*Quid Athenae cum Hierosolymis?*” (meaning, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?”)

Of course, we know that Hellenism and Judaism were fundamentally incompatible. So incompatible that Jews undertook a seemingly suicidal war against the Greeks – which they famously won, and which we

² Rashi citing *Torat Kohanim* at the beginning of our chapter.

celebrate to this day as the holiday of Chanukah. They went to war because of the Greek insistence of stripping Judaism of its Divine connection.

As we say in the Chanukah prayer: "The evil Hellenic regime rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and violate the decrees of Your will."

To the Greeks, the human being was supreme. If perfect (that is not handicapped in anyway) man was akin to god. To suggest that there might be anything more transcendent than man's crowning glory - the intellect - was heresy.

Torah as a philosophical system? The Hellenist had no objection to it per se, and they respected Jewish philosophy as part of the great human quest for knowledge. As well, the Greeks embraced morality dictated by human logic and driven by reason. But to suggest it came from God and transcended the human intellect - to that the Greeks could not abide. Why the need to bring God into the picture and emphasize that this is "Your Torah" and "Your will"?!

They tried to be reasonable. They said, "Let's get together. We certainly have a lot to learn from each other. We'll visit your Temple, you'll visit our stadiums. We'll open a comparative religions department in Jerusalem's new Hellenist University. You know, if we apply some Aristotelian methodology to your biblical myths, we might come up with some interesting results. Just get rid of this insistence on God."

And that's where the Jews drew the line.

5. Why God? (Optional)

And then the Greeks retaliated. They forbid keeping kosher and studying Torah. Torah scrolls were publicly burned, and swine were sacrificed over sacred Jewish books to defile them.³ And most significantly they forbid circumcision. To the Jews, this was the physical, tangible sign of their covenant with God. And it was the one thing the Greeks – who worshipped the perfection of the human body – found most abhorrent. To them, circumcision was a mutilation.

Jews resisted, and the Greeks went about driving the point home in a crude and cruel fashion. Rabbi Berel Wein relates this graphically in his *Echoes of Glory*:

Women who allowed their sons to be circumcised were killed with their sons tied around their necks. The scholars of Israel were hounded, hunted down and killed. Jews who refused to eat pork or sacrifice hogs were tortured to death ... Even the smallest hamlet in Judah was not safe from the oppression of the Hellenists. The altars to Zeus and other pagan deities were erected in every village, and Jews of every area were forced to participate in the sacrificial services.⁴

Until then, this type of religious persecution was unknown. No one in the ancient world declared war on other people's religion, because the attitude of polytheism was "I'll worship your god, you worship mine. The more gods the merrier." In the polytheistic world no one died for their religion. No one, except the Jews.⁵

6. What Happened at Sinai

What was wrong with the Greeks perspective, that the Jews were so adamantly rejected, to the point that they went to war against them?

In one word the answer is Sinai.

³ Maccabees 1:41-64.

⁴ Wein, Berel, *Echoes of Glory*, p. 63.

⁵ Spiro, Ken, *Crash Course in Jewish History*, Chapter 28

At Sinai, when the Jews were given the Ten Commandments, God began with:

“Anochi Hashem Elokecho” – “I am your God.”

Why do the Ten Commandments open with this statement? The Ten Commandments are relatively simple and logical laws – do not murder, do not steal, honor your parents, etc. Why the need to begin with “I am your God”? Because without connecting rational laws to *God* – no matter how rational and reasonable they may be – man can always find reasons to create an exception to the rule.

If we rely merely on human compassion and reason, everything can be justified.

7. The Nazi Example (Optional)

Just witness what the rational and cultured Germans did 60 years ago! They turned their science and reason into the most efficient killing machine ever devised by man!

A colleague tells of his Uncle Irving arriving in Berlin in 1921 and being astonished at the warmth and politeness of the German people. When he was lost, a mere passerby (who could not have missed his Jewish garb) personally escorted him to his destination. Ten years later, these same polite Germans declared Jews sub-human, and a mere twenty years later they escorted them to the gas chambers. That is what arbitrary and relative morality looks like in practice.

The Nazis defied basic morality – including the Sixth Commandment “you shall not murder” – because they defied the First Commandment, refusing to accept God as the source of life and freedom.

Without the God ingredient all man's best intentions can wreak devastation.

The American Founding Fathers understood very well this truth that the Greeks did not.

Greece today is again in the news, with their recent election shocking the world for having the Neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn securing 21 seats in parliament! Maybe they could learn something from the Founding Fathers that may help their economy as well...

They recognized the plain and simple truth, that morality is built on Sinai. They did not just speak of rights of citizens (like the Enlightened French) or rights of workers (like the Communist Russians) – they spoke of inalienable rights granted equally to all men by their Creator:

“We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Once that axiom was in place – that we are all children of the One God and created in his Divine Image – there was a solid foundation upon which all law and order could stand, for there was a recognition that it is a Divine Authority that has endowed *us all* with fundamental freedoms and with a moral system by which to live.

The sheer simplicity and brilliance of the opening of the Ten Commandments is undeniable. And take away that opening ... take away the bedrock of the First Commandment – that God is the source of freedom – and all else inevitably falls. With no Creator imbuing us with absolute freedom and defining for us a blueprint for life, all morality becomes arbitrary and relative.

8. God is in the Details

Now, at last, we can understand the question, “What does *shemittah* have with Sinai?!” and its answer: “Just as with *shemittah*, its general principles and its finer details were all given at Sinai, likewise, all of them were given – their general principles [together with] their finer details – at Sinai.”

God, as they say, is in the details. [Perhaps this expression can be traced to the Midrash and Rashi cited here: “all of them were stated - their general principles with their finer details - from Sinai”].

The children were lined up in the school cafeteria for lunch. At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. The teacher made a note and posted it on the apple tray: "Take only *one*. God is watching." Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. A child had written a note, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples."

The eloquence and beauty of Torah's blueprint for life is that not merely the general principles but also the fine details can all be traced to Sinai – to God. As such, we are assured that the truths and morals of Torah will forever endure and forever maintain their integrity. If we eliminate for just one moment the God detail, the God particle, we become vulnerable to the whims of man.

9. Our Part

This does not mean that we humans have no part in the development of Torah. Quite the contrary. We are charged with studying, probing, arguing and figuring out how to apply Torah to our ever-changing, daily lives. We are partners with God in creation. Yet, we do so with the Divine power vested in us. And most importantly, when we include the God particle in our search for answers, we are assured that we will transcend our mortal flaws and subjective distortions, and discover truth.

That was the message at Sinai – a message of staggering proportions – the first great information revolution.

10. The Internet Challenge

The first great information revolution at Sinai teaches us how to face the challenges of our current information revolution, including the Internet.

Sinai teaches us that the world – with all its pitfalls – was created by God not for us to destroy or to retreat from in fear, but to engage and transform. We have the power to influence it, with God’s help, before we are unduly influenced by it.

As they say: There are three types of people. Those that make things happen. Those that watch things happen. And those that ask: What happened?

Sinai gave us the power to make things happen – to see the advancements of our time as blessings, as harbinger of a better world. As such, we are charged with harnessing the technologies of our time and channeling them into a revolutionary force for good.

11. Nature Abhors a Vacuum

Ultimately the only way to fight the distracting and destructive elements available on the Internet is not to put up more walls. Of course, it’s a given that, to the greatest extent possible, we must have control over what our children watch and read. But they will inevitably grow up and do as they see fit.

The greatest way to battle the evils is to fill the void in our children’s lives (before boredom leads to other things) with a passionate force that is as powerful, if not more powerful, than the temptations available.

The Torah reminds us that when Joseph was thrown into a pit, “it was empty, there was no water in it.”⁶ This redundancy is read by commentators to mean that because it was empty of water, it was filled with snakes and scorpions.⁷

This teaches us the profound and vital psychological truth – nature (and the human psyche as well) abhors a vacuum.

⁶Genesis 37:24.

⁷See Rashi on the verse.

When you have an “empty pit” – be it an empty mind, heart or empty time – you are most vulnerable and “snakes and scorpions” will fill the void. You can build as many fortifications as you like, if the pit remains empty, infections will get inside and fester.

The only ultimate solution is to fill up the emptiness with a passionate force for a moral and spiritual revolution – to fill up your time with exciting and exhilarating initiatives. And then, there will be no time for nonsense.

For the best defense is a good offense.

12. Much to Learn

There is much to learn from the technological revolution, as long as we understand its role in our lives and see it as a final step in our dramatic search for unity throughout the universe.

With communication comes understanding. With understanding comes compassion. And with compassion comes a natural movement toward universalism.

All the developments in science and technology have taught us to be more sensitive to the intangible and the sublime. The forces behind computers, telephones, television, the internet, mobile and cloud technology, and so on – all are all invisible, and yet we fully recognize their power and reach.

Similarly, we must accept that the driving force behind the entire universe is intangible and sublime, and we must come to experience the transcendent and Godly in every single thing – beginning, of course with ourselves.

13. A Purpose to It All

A fundamental principle in Torah is that “nothing was created for naught,” and “everything in this universe was created to express Divine honor.”⁸

For example, gold was created for the Holy Temple, to be used for sacred purposes to refine and elevate our world, as the Midrash tells us.⁹ But in order that there could be free will ... in order that there could be the dignity of choice ... gold was also placed in the human domain, where we can choose how to use it – either for our selfish purposes, or in accordance with its true purpose.

The same is true for technology. Even though the actual machines are man-made, they are tapping into forces embedded in nature that have been part of God’s creation from the beginning of time. These formidable forces are meant to be used, like gold, to refine and sublimate the material world, and transform it into a spiritual environment.

As God’s partners in this drama and process, we have the free will to choose to use technology towards its intended end – namely to fill the world with Divine knowledge.

Just because some (or even many) people misunderstand and misuse technology doesn’t mean that technology is bad and it should be destroyed.

As the sages answered the Roman philosophers who asked why God doesn’t destroy the sun and the moon to prevent them from being worshipped as idols: “Should God destroy His world because of fools?”¹⁰

⁸ Avot 6:11. The end of the final chapter Avot which we conclude this week (according to the custom to study Pirkei Avot during the Shabbats between Pesach and Shavuot. Some continue this custom through the summer, until the Shabbat before Rosh Hashana).

⁹ Bereishit Rabba 37:2. Shemot Rabba 35:1.

¹⁰ *Avodah Zara* 54a.

14. Who Will be the Spiritual Steve Jobs?

By creating instruments and tools that broke down the gap dissonance between man and technology, man and machine, Steve Jobs helped to refine the material world and make it a more seamless channel for energy.

As such, he helped – knowingly or not – prepare the world for the ultimate refinement, when every cell of material existence will channel *Divine* energy, when (as the Prophet Isaiah said), “the world will be filled with the consciousness of God, as the waters cover the sea.”¹¹

The four horsemen of today – Apple, Google, Facebook and Amazon – are not the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. They are creating a seamless revolution in the world of technology – fusion in the tools we use.

There is just one thing missing – the spiritual component. The spiritual Steve Jobs. The Messiah who will create an equally powerful seamless revolution of spiritual fusion, integrating matter and spirit – the mundane and the divine – in all encompassing unity ... joining our ideals and our actions and our minds and hearts.

May we merit to bring about his arrival speedily, in our days, Amen.

¹¹ Isaiah 11:9.