



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Ki Tavo

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 16, 2011

Ki Tavo

Are You Feeling Despondent?



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

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ABSTRACT

Just the other day, a fellow approached a newsstand to buy a drink. When the vendor offered him the daily paper, the man declined saying: “I am too depressed as it is.”

Indeed, the headlines these days are dominated by bad news. Economic woes. Natural disasters. Abuse and family breakups. Our collective mood is despondent. Many people feel that they are very far from heaven – toiling for basic survival, like farmers in the field, with our technological progress only amplifying the contrast. Many are out of a job, or struggling to make ends meet.

For Jews in particular, the news coming out of Israel isn’t pleasant. The anti-Israel PR machine is working full force to convince the world how Israel and the US will be increasingly isolated if they don’t accept the Palestinian demand for an independent state without any security guarantees for Israel. The pressure keeps mounting with no comfortable future in sight.

But as the ultimate optimistic farm boy says, looking at a barn full of manure: “There’s got to be a pony in here somewhere.”

What do we Jews have to say about all this pessimism? It’s two weeks before Rosh Hashana – a time of hope and renewal – but do we know where God is? Can we reach for the stars when things below seem so grim?

The current Hebrew month of Elul – and this week’s Torah reading – holds the secret of how to access heaven on earth. It teaches us how we can hold infinity in the palm of our material hand and eternity in the mundane hours of our routine life; how we can experience the extraordinary in the ordinary, and yes, how we can touch the sky even as the news on earth isn’t very pretty.

ARE YOU FEELING DESPONDENT?

1. Depressing News

Just the other day, a fellow approached a newsstand to buy a drink. When the vendor offered him the daily paper, the man declined saying: "I am too depressed as it is."

Indeed, the headlines these days are dominated by bad news. Economic woes. Natural disasters. Arrests and betrayals. Abuse and family breakups. The world is not looking very good. Our collective mood is despondent. Many people feel that they are very far from heaven – toiling for basic survival, like farmers in the field, with our technological progress only amplifying the contrast. Many are out of a job, or struggling to make ends meet.

A fellow applying for a job was asked by the interviewer, "So what are you presently doing?" He replied: "I work for my brother." "And what does your brother do?" "He's looking for a job"

For Jews in particular, the news coming out of Israel isn't pleasant. The anti-Israel PR machine is working full force to convince the world how Israel and the US will be increasingly isolated if they don't accept the Palestinian demand for an independent state without any security guarantees for Israel. The pressure keeps mounting with no comfortable future in sight.

What do we Jews have to say about all this pessimism?

2. Pessimism and Optimism (humor)

Do we know the difference between the optimist and the pessimist?

The optimistic feels things are just fine. The pessimist feels thing can get much better.

The optimist proclaims we live in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist fears this is true.

An optimist is the guy who created the airplane. A pessimist is the guy who created the parachute.

3. A Pony Amid the Manure (Humor)

A family had twin boys whose only resemblance to each other was their looks. If one felt it was too hot, the other thought it was too cold. If one said the TV was too loud, the other claimed the volume needed to be turned up. Opposite in every way, one was an eternal optimist, the other a doom and gloom pessimist.

Just to see what would happen, on the twins' birthday their father loaded the pessimist's room with every imaginable toy and game. The optimist's room he loaded with horse manure.

That night the father passed by the pessimist's room and found him sitting amid his new gifts crying bitterly.

"Why are you crying?" the father asked.

"Because my friends will be jealous ... I'll have to read all these instructions before I can do anything with this stuff ... I'll constantly need batteries, and my toys will eventually get broken."

Passing the optimist twin's room, the father found him dancing for joy in the pile of manure. "What are you so happy about?" he asked.

To which his optimist twin replied, "There's got to be a pony in here somewhere!"

4. Where is God?

It's two weeks before Rosh Hashana - a time of hope and renewal, a time of optimism.

But I want you to ask yourself: Do you feel it? Do you know where God is? Do you know how to reach the stars even when everything around you seems so grim?

I would like to speak to you today about the current Hebrew month of Elul which holds the secret of how to access heaven on earth. It teaches how you can hold infinity in the palm of your material hand and

eternity in the mundane hours of your routine life; how you can experience the extraordinary in the ordinary, and yes, how you can touch the sky even as the news on earth isn't very pretty.

Yes, God can be found here on earth ... in the workplace, on the "farm," within the regular workday, not just in the spiritual experiences reserved for special locations.

This is one of the most beautiful and revolutionary contributions of Judaism, which teaches us that is that the Divine can and must be experienced in our material existence – not in meditative seclusion on a mountaintop, not through asceticism or self-depravation, but in our very physical lives and activities. On our terms. And even when things aren't looking very bright.

And this week's Torah reading teaches us exactly that.

5. Obligations of a Farmer

In this week's reading, the Torah obligates a farmer in the Land of Israel to collect the first fruits that ripen in his field and bring them in a basket to the Temple. The farmer brings the first fruit, and then all the other fruit remains his and will be consumed by the farmer and his family – but in a way that is infused with the spirit of the first fruit offering.

So, it is fitting that we should speak today about the farmer and the king.

It is a common metaphor in Jewish literature to describe God as the king, and humanity as the farmer toiling in the field. Perhaps if the sages were writing today, they would use the metaphor of the Prime Minister and the banker, or the CEO and the junior executive, but somehow it would not have the same ring (especially considering the reputation of today's CEO's...).

Certainly not when we are speaking about the month of Elul, the Hebrew month which precedes the High Holidays, when it is said that "the King is in the Field."

6. The Analogy of the King and Farmer

The 18th century Chassidic Master, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi – also known as the Alter Rebbe – explains what this means.¹

First Rabbi Schneur Zalman asks why there are no holy days in the month of Elul? After all, what makes a certain day a special holy day is the unique Divine energy that manifests on that day. Since Elul is the month of compassion – when the Thirteen Divine Traits of Compassion shine – should it not be a month of holy days? And yet it has none. The Rebbe explains this with the metaphor of the “king in the field”:

The king’s usual place is in the capital city, in the royal palace. Those wishing to approach the king must go through the appropriate channels in the palace bureaucracy and gain the approval of a succession of royal secretaries and ministers. They must journey to the capital and pass through the many gates, corridors and antechambers that lead to the throne room. Their presentation must be meticulously prepared, and they must adhere to an exacting protocol – in dress, speech and mannerism – when granted an audience with His Royal Highness.

However, there are times when the king comes out into the fields that surround the city. At such times, anyone can approach him. The king receives them all with a smiling face. The farmer behind his plow has closer access to the king than the highest ranking minister in the royal court.

And the month of Elul – which is to say *now* – is the time when the king is in the field. When God is with us on our terms, not on His.

This explains why Elul is not a month of holy days: The special uniqueness of this month is precisely in that we can find God in our mundane lives!

In Elul we are involved in our regular schedules. Indeed, the beginning of the work year marked by Labor Day always begins in Elul. Yet, at the same time, Elul provides us with the resources to discover the “King” in the field of our endeavors.

¹ Likkutei Torah, Re’eh 32b.

Let us pause and ponder on this thought for a moment. As we speak, the world around us is suffering from many malfunctions, the “field” is hurting and our institutions are failing, yet the King is with us in the “field” – in our very mundane realities, even as we may be covered by dust and dirt.

7. A Time of Preparation

But there is more.

Elul is also the time to audit our spiritual accounts and assess the year gone by. It is a time to prepare for the “Days of Awe” of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur by examining the failings of the past and making resolutions for the future. We have the power to actually repair and rebuild anything that may have been broken. And we do so by immersing ourselves in prayer and charitable activities, as the famous prayer of the High Holidays states:

On Rosh Hashana the judgment is written down, and on Yom Kippur the verdict is sealed ... who will live, who will die ... who by fire, who by water ... but *teshuva* (repentance), *tefillah* (prayer) and *tzedakah* (charity) cancel the evil decree.

Elul is the opportune time to do all this because it is a month when God relates to us in a more open and compassionate manner than He does during the other eleven months of the year.

For the other eleven months of the year, our lives alternate between the field and the palace – that is, between the stressful, material endeavors of life and the peaceful moments of rest or joyous celebration which are Shabbat and the holy days. That is when we abandon the process of earning our daily bread to enter into the royal presence. In the month of Elul, however, the king leaves the palace and comes out into the field.

8. What Happens Now?

What happens when the king comes out into the field? The field is not transformed into a palace, yet neither is the king any less a king when he greets the farmer in his soiled overalls. Back in the throne room, it is very different of course. Back in the throne room, there is an aura of sanctity that surrounds the king, and the sweat and mundane toil of the field seem a million miles away. So what happens now?

To answer this question is to understand the essence of Elul. But to do that, we must first examine the relationship between the palace and the field, between the very concepts of “holy” and “mundane.” Are they really as distant from each other as their very different faces suggest? Or is there some deeper connection between them, some common bond that unites them?

The world is constructed so that we must work to put food on the table. A glance at the calendar reveals that the “mundane” days of the year far outnumber the “holy.” Indeed, in creating us, God burdened us with a host of material needs and placed us in a world that requires a great deal of time in the field to satisfy these needs.

9. Toiling in the Field

There was a time when most everyone literally worked on the land, when most everyone plowed, sowed and harvested the crops for the table. Of course, today, family farms have been swallowed up by the agro-food complex, and the small farmer of yore is hard to find or has to make a living off the land in a more creative fashion.

That reminds me of the couple who were driving down a country lane on their way to visit some friends. They came to a muddy hole in the road, and their car got stuck, wheels spinning, mud flying. They were very upset, but not for long ... because a few minutes later, there appeared a farmer driving a team of horses before him.

He stopped and offered to pull them out of the mud for \$50. Their readily agreed, and minutes later the car was free. As they paid the farmer, he mentioned, “You know, you’re the tenth car I’ve helped out of the mud today.” They were amazed, “Really? When do you have time to plough your land? At night?” “Oh, no,” said the farmer, “At night I put water in the hole.”

So even though only a small percentage of people work the land and are actual farmers, we all labor for our bread in some way. We all work in the field – be it the wheat-field or cornfield, or the field of banking, steelmaking, medicine or politics. “The field” represents the entire spectrum of our workday endeavors.

Indeed, the field is the primary prototype employed by Torah law to distinguish between the “holy” and “mundane” days of the calendar. The passage in the Talmud that lists the types of work forbidden on Shabbat reads: “The categories of work are ... sowing, plowing, reaping, gathering sheaves, threshing, winnowing, picking the chaff from the grain, milling, sifting, kneading, baking...”²

Of course, each of these activities represents an entire spectrum which includes many different types of work, but the metaphor of the field and the elements of bread-making cannot be lost on us.

10. Building a Home for God

Furthermore, not once but twice, the Torah bids us to rest on Shabbat and juxtaposes that command with instructions how to build a Sanctuary for God, a palace for the King.³ The elements in building this spiritual edifice all involve manual labor. Indeed, they involve all the categories of work forbidden on Shabbat and holy days.

Furthermore, fifteen raw materials – including gold, silver, copper, wood, flax, wool and animal skins⁴ – are meant to be used to fashion a

² Talmud, *Shabbat* 73a and 74b.

³ Exodus ch. 31 and ch. 35.

⁴ Exodus 25:3-7..

dwelling for God in the physical world. As God told Moses, “They shall make for Me a Sanctuary and I will dwell among them.”⁵

The physical construction of this spiritual edifice mirrors our purpose on earth. For we are a spiritual soul in a physical body, and we accomplish our spiritual purpose when we imbue our material involvements with integrity and sanctity. In this way, our workday life – our work in the field – becomes a home for God,⁶ a palace where His goodness dwells.

Indeed, the Talmud tells us⁷ that when a soul ascends to heaven upon completing its earthly life, the very first question it must answer is: “Have you dealt honestly in business?” *This* question comes before any other having to do with prayer or Torah study or any other spiritual pursuit. So, it is clear that in no other area of life is our spiritual purpose in this world fulfilled *more* than in our day-to-day *material* dealings.

In other words, the work that occupies the “mundane” days of our lives, and from which we are to rest on Shabbat and the other holy days of the year, is actually “holy” work. It is the work of constructing the Sanctuary for God out of the materials of physical life. The mundane is mundane in appearance only – an illusion that is the result of the opaque veneer of physicality that conceals its divine reality and holy potential.

11. The Purpose of Holy Days

But if the mundane days are actually “holy,” what then are the so-called holy days of our lives? If the holy days are days in which the construction of the Sanctuary is to be halted, what relation – if any – do they have to the purpose of our souls’ descent into the material world? Are Shabbat and the holy days mini-vacations from life?

Shabbat and the holy days are elevations in the terrain of time, lookout points for a transcendent view upon its plains and valleys. Without these

⁵ Exodus 25:8.

⁶ *Midrash Tanchuma, Nasso* 16; also see *Tanya*, ch. 36.

⁷ Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a.

periodic glimpses from a higher, more detached, perspective, our involvement in the material may well become a trap. Instead of elevating the mundane, we may find ourselves being brought down by it.

Beyond its mundane surface, the material world hides a deeper truth – its potential to house the goodness of its Creator. The purpose of our workday lives is to reveal this potential, to develop the material world as a home for God’s goodness. But on the workdays of our life, this potential is all but invisible to us. It is obscured by its very nature. Our very involvement with the material prevents us from experiencing its spiritual essence. (Just witness the gloom resulting from economic forecasts). To do so, we must rise above all this. A holy day is a point in time in which we pierce the surface of our workday lives to behold the true face of our world.

12. The King Comes to the Field (Optional)

And that brings us around to Elul. For all the other eleven months of the year, our lives alternate between the holy and the mundane – between the material labor of life and the spiritual vision of that labor’s objective. For eleven months of the year, we must regularly take a rest from our physical labors in the field in order to rise above it and glimpse its true purpose.

But in the month of Elul, the king comes to the field.

The king is the heart and soul of the nation, the embodiment of its goals and aspirations. During the rest of the year the king is sequestered behind the palace walls. He can only be glimpsed – if at all – through a veil of opulence and majesty. But, even when he dwells in the palace, the king is a very real part of the farmer’s field. He is the reason for the farmer’s plowing and sowing; he is the object of his harvest. No farmer labors for the sake of labor. He labors to transcend the dust of which he and his field are formed – to make more of what is. He labors for his dreams. He labors for his “king.”

So is the king in the field an apparition out of its element? Hardly. We may not be used to seeing him here, but is not the royal heart, too, sustained by bread? His bread may be baked in the palace, but its raw ingredients are discreetly delivered through the service entrance. The golden tray on which the king's bread is served may not evoke the dirt from which the wheat grew, but the bread on the golden tray is the product of the field all the same.

The king in the field is making contact with the source of his sustenance, with the underpinnings of his sovereignty.

As for the farmer – when he sees the king in his field, does he keep on plowing? Does he behave as if this were just another day in the field? Of course not.

13. A Time Like No Other

Elul is not a month of ordinary workdays. Elul is a month of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary workdays. It is a time charged with holiness – a holiness that is to be found on and in the ground, in the raw earthiness of our daily grind. We might still be in the field, but the field reflects its holier potential due to the presence of the king among us.

Still, when the farmer sees the king in his field, does he run home to wash and change? No. For the king has come to the field, to commune with the processors of his bread in *their* environment and on *their* terms.

In the month of Elul, the essence and objective of life becomes that much more accessible. No longer do the material trappings of life conceal and distort its true purpose, for the king is paying a visit. But unlike the holidays of the year, when we are lifted out of and above our workday lives, the encounter of Elul takes place in our material environment, on our workingman's terms.

So if you're feeling despondent about your life or about the future of the world, remember that you are in the month of Elul, a time that offers new strengths – when you can greet the King as He, here and now in the lowly fields.

Left to your own resources you may gravitate to the myopic view from ground zero, and be overwhelmed by seeing only the dust and dirt. But know that you have the power today to see the “King” and the great potential even in the mundane field of your life and the challenging world around you. By increasing your Torah study, your prayer and charity in this month of Elul – in preparation for the High Holidays – you can connect with the King in the field, and in the process be lifted on His wings.

In conclusion, I would like to bless us all that we can advantage here and now of this special month and access its power to transcend the immediate vicissitudes of our daily lives. Amen.