



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Shemot

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January 13, 2012
Shemot

I Am A Child and I Believe



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

Who is closer to the truth – adults or children? Ostensibly it would seem that a mature adult, whose mind and emotions are fully developed, would be able to access the truth more than an undeveloped child. Indeed, for many years, until just recently, secular psychology saw a child as a “dumb” adult-in-the-making. The Puritans even saw children as “born in sin” and as little savages that needed strong measures to keep them in line!

The Torah sees things a bit differently. Actually, quite differently. For in the Torah view a child is the closest possible thing to the truth. The simplicity of the child touches – far more than any adult – the essence of all existence! Indeed, it is the developed mind of the adult that conceals and blocks the experience of pure truth.

In this sermon, we look at the first Torah reading in the Book of Exodus, where Moses is born and where he is first addressed by God at the Burning Bush ... as a child.

We also learn from the Baal Shem Tov, how to be a child ... and believe.

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I Am A Child and I Believe

I AM A CHILD AND I BELIEVE: A PEEK INTO THE WORLD BEYOND LOGIC

1. From the Mouths of Babes (humor)

A Kindergarten teacher was observing her classroom of children while they were drawing. She would occasionally walk around to see each child's work. As she got to one little girl who was working diligently, she asked what the drawing was. The girl replied, "I'm drawing God." The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like." Without missing a beat, or looking up from her drawing, the girl replied, "They will in a minute."

One day a little girl was sitting and watching her mother do the dishes at the kitchen sink. She suddenly noticed that her mother has several strands of white hair sticking out in contrast on her brunette head. She looked at her mother and inquisitively asked, "Why are some of your hairs white, Mom?" Her mother replied, "Well, every time that you do something wrong and make me cry or unhappy, one of my hairs turns white." The little girl thought about this revelation for a while and then said, "Momma, how come all of grandma's hairs are white?"

A teacher was giving a lesson on the circulation of the blood. Trying to make the matter clearer, she said, "Now, class, if I stood on my head, the blood, as you know, would run into it, and I would turn red in the face.." "Yes," the class said. "Then why is it that while I am standing upright in the ordinary position the blood doesn't run into my feet?" A little fellow shouted, "'Cause your feet ain't empty."

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."

2. The Wonder of Children (Story)

I'd like to begin by relating a story which you may have heard before. But though the opening may be familiar, I guarantee that the end is not.

In 2007, a *Washington Post* reporter named Gene Weingarten asked the following question: "What would happen if one of the greatest violinists alive, playing on a Stradivarius worth several million dollars, was plunked into the sterile environment of a subway station at the height of rush hour on a dreary Friday morning? Would anyone stop to listen? Would anyone recognize the genius, the soaring beauty of the playing? Would the greatest of musicians be able to touch these rushing creatures?"

To get an answer, Weingarten decided to conduct an experiment for which he engaged Joshua Bell, one of the finest classical musicians in the world, generally acclaimed as America's greatest living violinist – Joshua Bell. (A Jew by the way, the latest in a long line of Jewish violin-playing aristocracy.)

Joshua Bell plays regularly before awe-struck crowds across the globe. His instrument is a violin crafted by Antonio Stradivari in 1713, at the end of the Italian master's career. It was owned by Bronislaw Hubermann, who founded the Israel Philharmonic. Joshua Bell purchased the violin at an auction for \$3.5 million dollars. He and his violin are musical mastery at its absolute height.

In any case, the young Jewish violinist agreed to play the violin for free in the subway... This would be the test of what type of society we live in.

This is what happened, as you know, or if you don't know, you can probably guess:

Although Bell put his heart and soul into his music, eliciting pristine, resonant notes from his instrument, more than 1,000 people walked by the master without a second glance.

As the *Washington Post* later reported, many of these people were very well to do professionals who worked in or around Washington. They included lawyers, CEO's, managers, investors, consultants, tradesman, bureaucrats, policy analysts, computer programmers, doctors, and so forth.

Only seven people stopped, although almost thirty threw in some coins into his violin case – at total of \$32 plus change.

Weingarten wrote up the results of his experiment in a detailed article in the April 8, 2007 edition of the *Washington Post*, two days before Joshua Bell accepted the Avery Fisher Prize, the greatest honor a classical musician in America can receive.

But now, let me tell you something else ... something utterly astounding.

If you ever have a chance to watch the full 45-minute video of Bell's performance in the subway, you will see something amazing.

A couple of minutes into the video, something very revealing happens. A woman and her preschooler emerge from the escalator. The woman is walking briskly and, therefore, so is the child. She's got his hand.

The woman is obviously in a rush. But her little old son – about three years old – this cute black kid, keeps twisting around to look at Joshua Bell. He is craving to pull over and listen, but his mother will not let. She is in a rush, and she is shlepping him toward the door.

But he will not give up. He is consumed by the music. He keeps on turning his head toward the violinist. So his mother does what she has to do. She deftly moves her body between her child's and Bell's, cutting off her son's line of sight. As they exit the room, the little kid can still be seen craning to look.

And – quite astonishingly – the *same exact scene* can be observed again and again.

Every single time a child walks past, he or she tries to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scoots the kid away!

This reminds me of what the Talmud teaches:

All babies are born with a knowledge of Godliness, of soulfulness, of spirituality. Then life slowly starts to choke the music out of them.

And when our children wish to stop and hear the music, we are often too busy to let them marvel at life itself. Slowly, we teach our children to become deaf to the music of life...

3. What is a Child?

So let me ask you:

Who is closer to the truth – adults or children? Ostensibly it would seem that a mature adult, whose mind and emotions are fully developed, would be able to access the truth more than an undeveloped child. Indeed, for many years, until just recently, secular psychology saw a child as a “dumb” adult in the making. The Puritans even saw children as “born in sin” and as little savages that needed strong measures to keep them in line!

The Torah sees things a bit differently. Actually, quite differently. Its perspective is, in fact, the exact opposite from the secular view.

A child is the closest possible thing to the truth. The simplicity of the child touches – far more than any adult – the simplicity of the essence of all existence! Indeed, it is the developed mind of the adult that conceals and blocks the experience of pure truth.

4. I Am A Child and Believe

Looking at this week’s Torah reading, we find that the Midrash has an interesting take on the God’s approach to Moses at the Burning Bush. There God’s says to the bewildered Moses, “I am the God of your father.”¹

¹ Shemos 3:6.

God used this formulation so as not to frighten Moses and even appeared to him as the image of his father, says the Midrash. Once Moses was no longer frightened, He said, “I am not your father, but the God of your father.”²

5. The Baal Shem Tov’s Attitude

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, told his students:³ “After all the profound levels of understanding that I attained in the supernal roots of the Torah and its commandments, and after all the spiritual pleasure that I experienced, I put everything aside to serve God in simple faith. *Ich bin a na’ar un gleib* – I am a child⁴ and believe! And even though it is written: “A child believes everything,” it is also written: “God protects the innocents.”⁵

In a similar context, Rabbi Shmuel Kaminka relates the following story concerning the Baal Shem Tov:

In the city of Satinov, there was a scholar who once, on a Friday following the prayers, immersed himself in deep contemplation on the existence of God. Poring over different texts from the early philosophers, the scholar could not reach any clarity, to the point that he remained perplexed and confused in his ponderings.

Sensing the scholar’s predicament, the Baal Shem Tov came from Medzibush to see him. The Baal Shem Tov approached him and said in Yiddish: *Ihr klert tzi es iz doh a Go-t. Ich bin a na’ar un gloib*. “You are wondering whether there is a God. I am a child and believe.”

² Midrash Rabbah, Shemos 3:1. Also see the Midrashic commentaries Yefei Toar and Maharzav.

³ Rabbi Avrohom of Slonim writes that he heard this from the mouth of Rabbi Noach Milechvitz.

⁴ *Na’ar* means both a child and a fool. In this context fool is not used in a derogatory way (as someone who is beneath and lacks intelligence), but as someone who, like a child, suspends all his faculties to connect through simple faith to the Divine beyond intelligence and knowledge.

⁵ Psalms 116:6.

6. The Power of Innocence

The Baal Shem Tov was obviously not advocating childishness or illiteracy. He was trying to teach an invaluable life lesson.

Each of us has two dimensions to our being – mirroring two dimensions in the Divine experience:

- 1) Our expression. The way we express and reveal ourselves through our faculties. In Chassidic language this is called *giluim*, literally “revelations,” or defined expressions – which include all the ways we manifest in this world. These expressions all have distinct parameters and limits.
- 2) Our essence, which is beyond any form of defined expression and limited parameters.

As humans created in the Divine Image, these two dimensions within us are rooted in and evolved from two dimensions of the Divine:

- 1) *Giluim*. Divine expressions. How God expresses Himself through wisdom, majesty, beauty and all the Divine emanations and attributes in the cosmic order. Though they are all expressions and extensions of the Divine, each has its own definitions and parameters.
- 2) *Atzmus*. The Divine Essence, which is beyond any form of expression and definition.

7. Touching the Essence

There are times – and perhaps this defines most of our lives – when we experience and relate to the “revealed” expressions of the Divine. Just as most of the time we engage life through our own defined expressions. This is clearly a very important part of our lives – the way we interact with each other and with God in a defined expressive fashion.

But, when we want to connect with the essence of God, with God Himself, beyond any form of expression, then we need to suspend our defined *giluim* and stand like a child, stripped of all sophistication and knowledge, and pour our soul out to God, our Father.

If we allow our adult attainments and our sophisticated appreciations to control us, then we may reach great heights, but we will only be able to access and relate to the Divine revelations.

The only way to access *Atzmus*, the Divine Essence, is to suspend our faculties and stand like an innocent child, and pour our heart out to God.

8. The Power of the Child

This is what the Baal Shem Tov told his students and the scholar:

“After all the profound levels of understanding that I attained in the supernal roots of the Torah and its commandments, and after all the spiritual pleasure that I experienced” – after all the *giluim* – “I put everything aside to serve God in simple faith. *Ich bin a na’ar un gleib* – I am a child and believe! And even though it is written: “A child believes everything,” it is also written: “God protects the innocents.”

Based on this, let us now revisit the psyche of the child and that of the adult. The innocent child, precisely because its faculties are not yet developed, is the closest we will ever be to the truth – to our own essence and to the essence of God.

The simplicity of the child and its innocent faith touches – far more than any adult – the simplicity of the essence of all existence! While the developed mind of the adult, may experience great revelations, at the same time it conceals and blocks the experience of pure truth.

No matter how old we are, each of us has our inner child intact. Nothing can be healthier than getting – and staying – in touch with our child, with our own innocent essence, and allowing it to inform all our *giluim*, our defined experiences, expressions and faculties.

Let us learn from the Baal Shem Tov – a scholar far greater than any one of us – how to suspend our intelligence for something far greater:

I am a child and I believe! Amen.