



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Mishpatim

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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January 28, 2011  
Mishpatim

**Two Sermons**

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# Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart

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Enter the Heart”

Shemot > Mishpatim > Is Logic Logical?

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## ABSTRACT

We humans pride ourselves with our rational minds and superior intellect, with our ability to objectively process and comprehend the world around us. But how many of our decisions are actually driven by our intellect rather than by our emotions? When we fall in love, for example, and make a life-long commitment to another person, is that a rational move? And even when we are logical, what is the basis of our logic?

As logical as we may think we are, more often than not we behave in illogical – or supra-logical – ways. For example, how often do we learn from our mistakes and do not repeat destructive patterns?

With economic turbulence shaking everyone up, when many institutions we considered reliable and sensible turn out to be neither – it is an excellent time to rethink what we trust and the way we process information coming our way. In the current climate of fear and uncertainty, with our existing infrastructures in fragile shreds, now is the time to revisit our mindsets and comfort zones.

With much humor and colorful stories, this sermon dissects the very nature of logic itself and shows how our subjective emotions impact on the way we process information – in illogical rather than logical ways. And it demonstrates how the addition of one single letter – not a word, but a *solitary letter* – in the opening of this week’s Torah portion can transform the way we think about ourselves and our existing systems.

Shemot

Mishpatim

Is Logic Logical?

## ARE WE RATIONAL OR IRRATIONAL BEINGS?

### 1. The Logical Question (Joke)

An engineer, a physicist, a mathematician, and a mystic were asked to name the greatest invention of all time. The engineer chose fire, which gave humanity power over matter. The physicist chose the wheel, which gave humanity the power over space. The mathematician chose the alphabet, which gave humanity power over symbols. The mystic chose the thermos bottle.

-“Why a thermos bottle?” the others asked.

-“Because the thermos keeps hot liquids hot in winter and cold liquids cold in summer.”

-“Yes ... so what?”

-“Think about it,” said the mystic reverently. “That little bottle ... how does it know?”

### 2. Philosophers on the Logic of Science

Sir Karl Popper, the Austro-British philosopher of science, wrote in his work, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*:

Science is not a system of certain, or well-established, statements. Nor is it a system which steadily advances towards a state of finality. Our science is not knowledge: it can never claim to have attained truth, or even a substitute for it ... *We do not know: we can only guess.* And our guesses are guided by the unscientific, the metaphysical (though biologically explicable) faith in laws, in regularities we can uncover/discover ... The old scientific ideal of episteme – of absolutely certain, demonstrable knowledge – has proved to be an idol. The demand for scientific objectivity makes it inevitable that every scientific statement must remain tentative for ever...”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* by Karl R. Popper, p. 278-280.

Popper is not alone in his conclusion. The physicist, Werner Heisenberg, demonstrated that the so-called “laws” of physics are at best probabilities. The great mathematician, Kurt Goedel demonstrated the same for mathematics. Goedel’s Theorem showed that there exist meaningful mathematical statements that are neither provable nor disprovable, now or ever. Not simply because human thought or knowledge is insufficiently advanced to prove them, but because the *very nature of logic* renders them incapable of resolution, no matter how long the human race survives or how wise it becomes.<sup>2</sup>

You may be surprised, but this principle – that logic is built on axioms beyond logic – is actually stated in this week’s Torah reading. What is even more surprising is that the Torah teaches us this invaluable wisdom with the addition of a single letter.

### 3. One Small Letter

The Torah begins with God’s words to Moses: “And these are the laws that you shall set before them [the Israelites].”<sup>3</sup>

The Midrash<sup>4</sup> explains that the opening word “and” – indicated by a single Hebrew letter *vov* – intentionally connects this sentence to the prior narrative which related the experience at Mount Sinai. Why the emphasis on this connection? To stress that just as the first laws, the Ten Commandments, were given at Sinai, so too, were these laws.

But why would we ever doubt it? Because the laws enumerated here are rational/logical laws.<sup>5</sup> We could assume that only religious laws were given at Sinai, but these rational/logical laws originated with man.

<sup>3</sup> As Goedel put it: “No axiomatic system containing arithmetic can demonstrate its own consistency, so we can never know for sure whether our system is consistent. Any such system must have true statements which are unprovable within the system.”

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 21:1.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Rashi on Exodus 21:1.

<sup>5</sup> Mishpatim – the term used here for laws – refers to the rational laws. Aydus and chukim, two other names used in the Torah to describe laws, refer to commemorative and supra-rational laws, respectively

The Torah tells us that it is not so. The foundation of these logical laws comes from above – the foundation of logic is beyond logic.

One letter in the Torah tells us what brilliant thinkers like Popper, Heisenberg and Goedel concluded only thousands of years later...

#### 4. Logic is Supra-Logical

The logical fact is that true logic is built on something beyond logic – it is, inherently, what scientists call supra-logical. This does not mean that it is illogical. Something that is illogical is beneath logic – it is plain stupidity. Something that is supra-logical is above logic, is beyond logic, or it precedes logic.

The most logical thing of all is that *something* precedes logic.

Why is that the case? Because there is no true absolute basis for morality if it is created and driven by human logic alone.

Anything devised by human logic can be destroyed or altered by that very same logic. If morality is based on consensus, and basic human freedoms are granted to us by man-made institutions, then these same man-made institutions can retract our freedoms.

This is why the Founding Fathers of the United States of America stated so plainly in the Declaration of Independence: “All men are *created* equal ... they are endowed *by their Creator* with certain *unalienable* rights.” They knew that if these rights and freedoms did not come from God, then they could not be said to be unalienable. If they had been granted by King George or even by Congress, then they could be taken away by them as well.

## 5. Fake Logic

Now if logic itself is built on supra-logical axioms, why then are we so mesmerized by it?

I mean who hasn't admired the deductive reasoning of Sherlock Holmes and his side-kick Dr. Watson?

A story is told about the great duo's exchange during a camping trip. After a good dinner and a bottle of wine, they retire for the night, and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges his faithful friend:

-“Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”

-“I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes” replies Watson.

-“And what do you deduce from that?”

-Watson ponders for a minute. “Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe. What does it tell you, Holmes?”

-Holmes is silent for a moment. “Watson, you idiot! Someone has stolen our tent!”

No, we are not mesmerized by logic because it is funny. So why are mesmerized by it?

The answer is: We aren't. We fake it.

Most of our choices and activities are not determined by logic alone. Love, passion ... all our vices ... music, romance, magic – are all driven by forces that we know are not really logical.

Why is it then, when it comes to God, so many people suddenly insist on logic? They demand rational proof for God's existence.

And there purports to be one. It goes like this: Anything organized directs us to someone that created that organization. A building points to an architect. A book to an author. A sonnet to a composer. And our universe – which is infinitely more organized and elegant than anything

else in existence – points to a Creator, a cosmic engineer that put it all in place.

Now, a lot of people reject this argument as being insufficiently logical. Why? It seems to be as good a proof as any in science.

I think they don't reject the argument – what they reject is its conclusion, its logical consequence. The existence of God implies personal responsibility. If God exists that means that each one of us must be responsible for our behavior and accountable to God. So, suddenly, they come up with all kinds of rebuttals and rationalizations.

And speaking of rationalizations, how often do people use logic to build smokescreens in order to hide their real intentions? Or, how often do they hide irrational, irresponsible behavior behind rational excuses? A belief in God interferes with such self-serving sophistry because it demands an unwavering loyalty to truth.

Such subjective self-interest – or bias – has the power to distort even the most rational person. As the Torah succinctly and bluntly puts it: “Bias blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the just.”<sup>6</sup>

No wonder that those sophisticated scholars and clever rationalists dismiss those who believe in God as simple-minded fools.

## 6. Simple Faith

A story is told<sup>7</sup> about a great scholar in the city of Satinov who, one Friday following the prayers, immersed himself in deep contemplation on the existence of God. Poring over classical philosophical texts, he could not reach any clarity, to the point that he became confused in his ponderings.

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Hassidic Movement intuited the scholars predicament, and he came from Medzibush to visit him. When he arrived, the Baal Shem Tov told the scholar without pre-

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<sup>6</sup>Deuteronomy 16:19.

<sup>7</sup>This story is attributed to Rabbi Shmuel Kaminka.

amble: "You are wondering whether there is a God. [Let me tell you,] I am a fool, and I believe."

With these words the Baal Shem Tov left and returned to Medzibush. The scholar thought to himself: "Who revealed to this man the secret of what I was thinking? Clearly this is a proof and a sign that there is a one and only Creator Who reveals secrets to those that revere Him."

On another occasion the Baal Shem Tov clarified for his disciples what he meant by his statement:

"After all the profound levels of understanding that I attained in the supernal roots of the Torah, and after all the spiritual joy that I experienced, I put everything aside to serve God in *simple faith*. Now I am a fool and I believe!"<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the Baal Shem Tov was using the word "fool" to make a point. In fact, he spoke Yiddish and used the word *na'ar* which can mean either a fool or a child – his message being that simple faith requires the suspension of sophisticated rationalizations.

On another occasion, he illustrated his point with this parable:

There was once a king who invited two people to the palace – one a simple farmer, the other a scholar. When the scholar arrived, he was amazed by the various chambers he passed through in the palace. He admired the trompe l'oeils, the tapestries, the frescos. He spent so much time staring and examining the riches that were displayed before him that finally the guard said, "Sir, we are closing up, you must leave." The scholar was astounded, "But what about my audience with the king?" Said the guard, "You missed your appointment." But, when the simple farmer came, he didn't appreciate and couldn't care less about the finery. He only wanted to know, "Where is the king?" The trappings did not divert him from his purpose.

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<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Avrohom of Slonim writes in *Yesod HaAvodah* that he heard this directly from Rabbi Noach Milechvitz.



## 7. Logic and Leadership

So let me ask you:

Is it possible that generations of great thinkers have denied God's existence and built sophisticated philosophies – and social systems based on these sophisticated philosophies – all in order to conveniently avoid the personal responsibility that God demands of us?

And if that is true, what does that say about our political and economic structures? What does it say about our honesty and integrity? And what does it say about our common sense?

During the height of the space race in the 1960s, NASA quickly discovered that ballpoint pens would not work in the zero gravity confines of its space capsules. After considerable research and development, the Astronaut Pen was developed at a cost of \$1 million. The pen worked in zero gravity, upside down, underwater, on almost any surface including glass and also enjoyed some success as a novelty item back here on earth. But why didn't they just use a pencil?

Which brings me to another question: What kind of security can we expect in this convoluted world?

If 9/11 wasn't enough to shatter the illusion of our invulnerability, then the recent financial collapse has certainly undermined our faith in the very foundations of our cherished economy. It has shaken to the core the principles of our trust and confidence in subjective human devices – our capitalist system based on the logical principles of supply-and-demand. And more upheaval is sure to come.

With all our man-made institutions under attack, with our security under question and all the economic uncertainty still brewing – the little letter that links all laws of morality to Sinai looms larger than ever.

Our man-made logical structures have wandered away from Sinai. They need to reconnect to the mission statement given at Sinai and re-stated by our Founding Fathers: "In God We Trust." And "One Nation Under God."

For each of us to immunize ourselves from the uncertain winds blowing around us, we must insert the extra *vav* that reconnects our logic and rational laws to Sinai – to the firm and unwavering foundations of faith and trust in the Almighty.

In an insane world like ours, where innocent suffer and evil prosper, in a world full of contradictions and paradoxes – we can take some comfort in knowing that the insanity is a result of a logical system that refuses to acknowledge its supra-logical Creator.

If we cannot sense that God is the true reality of all of existence, and we have the ability to rationalize away this fact because it makes us uncomfortable, then it surely makes more sense that our world be insane than sane.

## 8. True Sanity

True sanity means embracing the world beyond logic.

So let's do something not logical together:

Let us be bold enough to defy all the fear and insecurity around us by passionately embracing our absolute foundation of faith in God. Let us crawl out of our comfort zones and shake up the world a little – with a revolution of goodness.

For every negative thought you have, counter it with two positive actions. As we witness wild behavior of different sorts, let it inspire us to go beyond our own norms of kindness. Instead of doing the logical thing – being overwhelmed by all the uncertainty, or battling fire with fire – let us transcend our logic and just become better people.

It may be the most logical thing we have ever done. Amen.



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Shemot > Mishpatim > Holy Thieves

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## ABSTRACT

What do we do with pasts that we are ashamed of?

One of the greatest dilemmas in life is dealing with mistakes that we have made: Can we redeem our past sins or even crimes in any sense of the word – where we have hurt others either out of ignorance or malice?

This week's Torah reading takes up laws of behavior between human beings, and it states: "If a burglar ... robs in broad daylight, to kill him would be an act of murder."

The Torah verses which come before and after this statement are clearly meant to teach us the penalties for stealing. Yet, in the middle of it all, the Torah is also concerned with the welfare of the thief! In the name of true justice, the Torah still recognizes his rights and seeks to protect his life, even though he has committed a crime.

Why does the Torah care so much about the thief?

A colorful Baal Shem Tov story illustrates for us the virtues even of a ... thief, teaching us how we have the power not only to correct our ways, but our very transgressions can become tools for good, for they can help us reach spiritual heights which those who have not transgressed can never reach.

Shemot

Mishpatim

Holy Thieves

## CAN WE REDEEM OUR MISTAKES?

### 1. Only in Israel (Humor)

- Only in Israel has the telephone operator been known to respond, when asked for a restaurant number, “Don’t eat there, it’s lousy. My cousin had the worst meal of her life there.”
- Only in Israel has the bus driver been known to give up his seat to a pregnant woman because nobody else did, and then wait for the passengers to notice that the bus wasn’t moving.
- Only in Israel has the bank robber been known to kiss the mezuzah on his way out the door with the loot.

And this brings us to the subject of today’s sermon, which is “Holy Thieves.”

### 2. The Torah and Thieves

As it happens, this week’s Torah reading takes up – among other laws of behavior between human beings – the laws against stealing.<sup>1</sup> And the Torah states:

If a burglar is caught in the act of breaking in [at night], and is struck and killed, it is not considered murder. However, if he robs in broad daylight, then to kill him is an act of murder.<sup>2</sup>

Here, the Torah distinguishes between a burglar that comes in stealthily at night with deadly intent, and one who robs in daytime.

Regarding the latter, the literal expression used by the Torah is: “If the sun shines on him, he has blood,” meaning that if he robs in broad daylight, it is clear that he has no such deadly intent.

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<sup>1</sup>Exodus 21:37 and 22:1-3.

<sup>2</sup>Exodus 22:1-2.

And so then to kill him is considered murder – that is, “he has blood” which should not be wrongly shed.

The Torah verses which come before and after this statement are clearly meant to teach us the penalties for stealing. Yet, in the middle of it all, the Torah is also concerned with the welfare of the thief! In the name of true justice, the Torah still recognizes his rights and seeks to protect his life, even though he has committed a crime.

Why does the Torah care so much about the thief? We are about to find out.

### 3. Holy Thieves (Story)

In Hassidic literature, a story is told of a young widow who once came crying to the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Hasidic Movement that her only child was gravely ill. “The doctors have given up hope,” she wept, “Please, please do something to save my child.”

The Baal Shem Tov, whose heart was always open and especially to widows and orphans, reassured her and sent her home promising to do everything in his power. He then proceeded to gather together a *minyan* of ten holy *tzaddikim* to pray for the child’s immediate healing.

But to no avail. As much as they tried opening the gates of heaven, they sadly were unsuccessful. The Baal Shem Tov sensed that the decree in heaven was sealed and could not be reversed by their prayers.

The Baal Shem Tov, however, was not one to give up. He fell upon an idea. He asked his driver to prepare his horse-drawn wagon. And they took off for the forest. There, he directed the driver to a particular spot, a dangerous area where thieves lurked.

When they arrived, the Baal Shem Tov climbed off the wagon, and within a few moment he was surrounded by a band of thieves. But when their leader recognized the Baal Shem Tov, he put down his weapon and with astonishment asked: “What are *you* doing here in the wild?”

The Baal Shem Tov replied: "I am here because I need your help ... I need ten thieves to pray for a sick child." The thieves didn't understand, but out of respect for the Baal Shem Tov, they complied. And so a *min-yan* of thieves was assembled, and they prayed with the Baal Shem Tov.

The child miraculously recovered.

Later, when the Baal Shem Tov was asked by his surprised students, "How were you able to accomplish with ten thieves what you could not accomplish with ten holy men?" the Baal Shem Tov famously replied: "I saw that all the gates in heaven were locked, and I needed someone to break in..."

#### 4. Personal Application

This story is not meant to condone theft or any other crime. But it teaches us a very important lesson – that crimes *can* be turned into good deeds.

Once we have transgressed, we have the power not only to correct our ways, but our very transgressions can become tools for good, for they can teach us new ways to "break into heaven" – that is, to reach spiritual heights which those who have not transgressed can never reach.<sup>3</sup>

No, none of us are common thieves. But is there anyone among us, indeed any person on this Planet Earth who has never hurt another, intentionally or unintentionally? Is there any person who has not failed or fallen in some way?

I don't know of any.

As human beings, we all have our share of shortcomings and our share of transgressions. Whether we have lapsed and betrayed ourselves, others or God (or all the above), whether we have committed small sins or grave ones, everyone of us knows in his or her heart, what they are all capable of.

<sup>3</sup> "In the place where *baalei teshuvah* stand, even *tzaddikim* cannot stand." Talmud, *Berachot* 34b. Rambam, , Laws of Teshuva 7:4.

So none of us needs to feel alone. King Solomon declared long ago “there is no holy man on earth that has done good and not sinned.”<sup>4</sup>

But, also, let us not console ourselves with that fact.

## 5. Other Insights Into Human Error

This week’s Torah reading deals with many of our human ways of harming each other. And it is quite humbling.

Just last week, we were reading about the sublime spiritual experience of the encounter with God at Mount Sinai, only to be brought down to earth this week and reminded of our all-too-human frailties, and what we are capable if left unchecked.

Yet, the Torah does not mean to depress us. Quite the contrary. It is telling us that by recognizing our weaknesses and potential failings ... by being accountable and assuming responsibility ... by rectifying our errors ... we actually demonstrate the ultimate human dignity and purpose.

And what is that? To repair a broken a world.

Because we ourselves are broken, when we repair ourselves, we repair the world.

To paraphrase a well-known saying: To err is human, to repair divine.

When we rise to the occasion and correct a mistake of the past, we manifest the majestic Divine Image within us, the Divine Image in which we were created. We manifest the ability to transcend our mortality, to go beyond our human frailties, even to go beyond our pasts, and come out stronger than before.

And this is the ultimate redemption of our past wrongs – the power to *transform* our pasts ... to use the knowledge coming from illicit sources to open up unprecedented channels of holiness and sanctity.

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<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:20.

I'd like to relate two true stories here of people who erred, went off on a wrong path, and then used their past mistakes to reach great heights.

## 6. From India to Israel (Story)

This is the life story of the well-known Jewish writer Sara Rigler. As a young woman, Sara set off for India seeking God.<sup>5</sup> There she embraced Hinduism with both arms. She relates trying to pray at the cremation grounds by the Ganges River, as random body parts – hands, legs, heads – were scooped up and dumped onto the burning pyre. She recalls retching from the smell of the burning flesh, yet trying to find God through this gruesome experience.

There were many things that Sara did during her 15 years in an ashram that any religious Jew would find odious but, eventually, this path of apparent transgression led her to Jerusalem and to authentic Judaism. A fully observant Jew for many years now, Sara today has built on her past experiences in her writing career, and she is a well-known address for those Jews seeking a way home out of Eastern spirituality.

Was she wrong? According to the Torah, she was of course. Was she right? According to the Torah, she was right too – in seeking and never stopping to seek until she arrived at the truth. And her experiences of the past taught her what was important in life as she poignantly relates<sup>6</sup> in one of her articles:

When the area in which her ashram was located was hit by a storm which rendered many people homeless, Sara's heart went out to the stricken. Since the ashram had many unoccupied guesthouses, Sara wanted to welcome there those in need. But the guru refused. The reason: "The rarefied atmosphere of the ashram would be brought down by housing 'you don't know what kind of people.'"

<sup>5</sup> "From India to Israel: One Woman's Journey," by Sara Rigler, see: <http://www.aish.com/sp/so/48893542.html>

<sup>6</sup> "Mataji vs. Mother Theresa" by Sara Rigler, see: <http://www.aish.com/sp/so/48892787.html>



Sara begged and pleaded. But the guru was adamant – the ashram was meant to be a spiritual retreat, not a social service institution. When Sara hung up the phone, she wept.

There was much spirituality in the ashram but little kindness, Sara concluded, and she went forth to search out path of loving your neighbor that was first paved by Abraham and later legislated by the Torah. And, along the way, she found that Judaism contained just as much spirituality as Hinduism, if not more. Because she learned this first hand, she has been able to communicate it to the lost souls that find their way to her door.

## 7. LSD and God (Story)

This second story was related to me by a rabbi who was surprised when a fellow in one of his weekly classes stood up and made the following confession:

“I grew up in an observant home, went to yeshiva, read Hebrew and regularly attended synagogue. Then, as a teenager, I simply drifted off. It wasn’t speaking to me. My family was heartbroken but I essentially rebelled, and left everything that was Jewish. This was in the late 1960s and early 1970s so I adopted a hippie lifestyle, and discovered God through my LSD experiences. This is how my spirituality was nourished.

“For many years I was not a practicing or active Jew. Then one day, I was on a plane flying from the East Coast to the West Coast, and I was somewhat high and dozing off in a trance, when suddenly I heard from the back of the plane ... *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*. And I saw there was *minyan* of Jews praying, and I felt drawn to the back of the plane. I jumped up and joined them, and for the first time in many years, I prayed with them. I literally was able to sense right there on the plane the supernal angels and the cosmic forces on a very profound spiritual level that lies in these words – *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* – in the prayer service.

“This began a journey in my return to Judaism where I began to pray regularly, keep Shabbat and keep kosher, and today I am more observant than my family. Now, what I would like to ask you rabbi is this: Without LSD back then, I would not be a practicing Jew today. It was that which brought me to God again. So is LSD bad?”

The rabbi who was just asked this question in front of 40 to 50 people knew that they were looking to see what he would say. Would he endorse LSD?

So the rabbi said, “What’s LSD? Does that stand for Let’s Start Davening?”

No, seriously, he didn’t say that.

The rabbi answered like this:

The issue is not LSD or any other drug, but the journey that we’re on and the path that brought us there to this time and place. And what you are really asking is if we are meant to annihilate our past? The answer is no – we are meant to transform it.

Imagine, said the rabbi, someone who falls into a coma. After months of trying every possible intervention the doctors have given up hope. Until one doctor suggests injecting this comatose person with a massive dose of drugs, as a last ditch attempt to shake up his system and revive him. The high risk effort works and the man comes back to health. Would anyone suggest that using the drugs is a healthy approach for a healthy person?! Of course not. These drugs have the power to kill any healthy person. But in an instance of desperation to save a life, you do whatever it takes.

Many Jews today, continued the rabbi, are in a spiritual coma when it come to their own religion. The fact is that some Jews were revived through non-Jewish and even alien methods. We do not understand God’s mysterious ways, but perhaps to save spiritually comatose people, it is necessary to employ such bizarre experiences – which you would never offer to any healthy breathing human being.

This does not condone any transgressions or the use of any drugs. Indeed, the Talmud warns us<sup>7</sup> that one who says, “I shall sin and then repent” is “not given the opportunity to repent.” But *after the fact*, we cannot dismiss the results of these unorthodox methods (even as we reject the methods themselves).

Redeeming the past means throwing away the peel – the unhealthy and inappropriate methods used, and extracting the fruit – the healthy result of reviving the soul from its comatose state. All of our past mistakes can be similarly redeemed.

## 8. Repentance as a Path of Return

What do we do with our pasts?

This is a typical question asked by many people today. As I said earlier, there is no person who has not made a mistake in the past. As human beings we are inherently imperfect, and we have our ups and downs. Many of us have made some serious mistakes and some less serious, but the fact is, life is made up of mistakes.

So what do we do with them all? What is the Torah approach?

Of course, if your past has been a healthy one, there’s no discussion. A healthy past is something you build upon. But when you’re dealing with a past that often includes sins or even crimes in any sense of the word – where you have hurt others either out of ignorance or malice – then what do you do?

What you do is transform those mistakes into good deeds. Let them be learning tools at the very least. This is what the Jewish concept of repentance is all about.

Repentance of past wrongs is called *teshuva* in Judaism and that literally means “return” – return to God, return to your authentic self, and return

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<sup>7</sup>Talmud, *Yuma* 85b.

to the Divine Image within that makes you human. And true and complete *teshuva* transforms “transgressions into merits.”<sup>8</sup>

True *teshuva* does not mean annihilating the past. It means recognizing and not judging or invalidating who you are and what you searched for. If your past brought you somewhere good, you cannot disown it. But you are not meant to embrace it and glory in it either. You must acknowledge the mistakes you made, resolve not to repeat them, and use them as springboards to better and greater things.

And when you do, the springboards built from previous errors will catapult you to greater spiritual heights than you ever dreamed of. And then even “crimes (not the crime itself, but the growth that it yields) will become good deeds.”

This is why the Torah actually seeks to protect thieves. Believing that, given a chance, even thieves will find the Divine Image within, return to their true selves, return to God, and transform their crimes into holy deeds.

May we do the same. May all our mistakes, errors, sins and transgressions become mere stepping stones to goodness. And may we reach ever greater heights of holiness with every step we take. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Talmud, *Yuma* 86b.