



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Tetzaveh

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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February 11, 2011

Tetzaveh

**Two Sermons**

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## Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart*

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*Enter the Heart”*

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Shemot > Tetzaveh > World Upheaval and You

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### ABSTRACT

What are we to make of the recent upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt (which are now spreading to Jordan)? How are they going to play out across the rest of the Middle East and the world? Should we be concerned? How will they impact us and Israel? What does the future hold?

It is too early to tell the immediate effects of the current uprising in the ancient land of the pharaohs, but we Jews, as the oldest nation in that part of the world, have a unique birds' eye perspective on the meaning of these events. Because our holy texts have pretty much predicted this would happen – not specifically perhaps but certainly in global terms – and have also explained why and what we should do about it.

For example, the Midrash, commenting on this week's Torah reading which describes the ritual lighting the lamps of the menorah, equates its light with the light of the Final Redemption at the end of days. And it also explains that the various elements used in the building of the Sanctuary – in particular the gold, silver, copper and reddened ram's skins – correspond to the four major kingdoms/empires of history – which grew out of the root archetypal kingdom of Egypt: Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome.

What is the connection between these empires and the materials with which the Sanctuary was created? For one, these materials were melded, beaten, and shaped into holy objects, thus taking something which is materially coarse and refining it for a holy, spiritual purpose.

The Midrash further explains that, in this fashion, God was telling the Israelites that by building a Sanctuary for Him –

so that He can dwell in their midst – they will be able to survive despite persecution by these brutal empires. And not only survive, but thrive and transform them and the world as well. All this has happened, and these empires have vanished while the Jewish people remain.

But the Jewish people have a job to do – to be a “light unto the nations,” in the words of the Prophet Isaiah.

Just how – practically speaking, and here and now – is the subject of this sermon.

## **TROUBLE IN THE LAND OF THE PHARAOHS: WORLD UPHEAVAL AND YOU**

### **1. Communications History (Joke)**

Digging to a depth of 1,000 meters last year, French scientists found traces of copper wire dating back 1,000 years. The French came to the conclusion that their ancestors had a telephone network centuries ago.

Not to be outdone by the French, British scientists dug to a depth of 2,000 meters. Shortly thereafter British newspapers reported: “Archaeologists have found traces of a 2,000-year-old fiber-optic cable in England and have concluded that our ancestors had an advanced high-tech digital communications network a thousand years earlier than the French.”

One week later, Israeli newspapers reported the following: “After digging as deep as 5,000 meters in a Jerusalem marketplace, Jewish archeologists have found absolutely nothing. They thus concluded that 5,000 years ago the Jews were using wireless.”

Now, you don’t need wireless or Facebook or Twitter to know that the world is in an upheaval today. But what are we to make of the most recent events in Tunisia and Egypt? And how are they going to play out

across the rest of the Middle East and the world? How will they impact us and Israel? What does the future hold?

All the media – journalists, commentators, pundits, bloggers – are weighing in on the immediate and short-term consequences of this turmoil. But there is a bigger picture – a broader perspective.

## 2. Revolution in Egypt

When Chou En-Lai, the first Premier of the People’s Republic of China, was asked by Western journalists to assess the impact of the American and French Revolutions, he quipped, “It’s too early to tell.”

So, it is too early to tell the immediate effects of the current uprising in the ancient land of the pharaohs.

One thing is sure though, we Jews, as the oldest nation in this part of the world, have a unique historical perspective on the meaning of these events. Because our holy texts have pretty much predicted this would happen – not specifically perhaps but certainly in global terms – and have also explained why and what we should do about it.

I do not mean to brag about Jewish prophecy or prescience. What I do want to do is to help us all make sense of these events and find out how exactly we should respond. And this is only possible if we are able to see the bird’s eye view, rather than merely adopting the myopic vision of here and now.

## 3. Lighting the Lamp

The opening of this week’s Torah reading discusses the lighting of the lamps of the menorah with pure olive oil. Why does the Torah single this out among all the other rituals of the Sanctuary already outlined in last week’s reading?

The Midrash<sup>1</sup> helps us answer this question by equating the light of the menorah with the light of the Final Redemption in end of days. And it further explains that the various elements used in the building of the Sanctuary – in particular the gold, silver, copper and reddened ram’s skins<sup>2</sup> – correspond to the four major kingdoms/empires of history – which grew out of the root archetypal kingdom of Egypt. These four were: Babylonia (corresponding to gold), Persia (corresponding to silver), Greece (corresponding to copper) and Rome (corresponding to reddened skins, for Rome was also known as Edom, which means “red.”)

What is the connection between these empires and the materials with which the Sanctuary was created? Indeed, two of these empires (Babylon and Rome) actually *destroyed* the Temples. So why would their rise be intimated in the materials used to *build* the sanctuary?!

For one, the materials were melded, beaten, and shaped into holy objects, thus taking something which is materially coarse and refining it for a holy, spiritual purpose.

The Midrash further explains that, in this fashion, God was telling the Israelites that by building a Sanctuary for Him – so that He can dwell in their midst – they will be able to survive despite persecution by these brutal empires. And not only survive, but thrive and transform them and the world as well. The Midrash states:

[God told the people:] “Although you will see how these four formidable empires will glorify and aggrandize themselves and rise against you, know that I will plant redemption even in your subjugation. [And you will know this] from the oil for the lamp,<sup>3</sup> which refers to the light of the Messiah.”

This explains why the Torah singles out this ritual to highlight the implied message of hope, and to emphasize God’s promise that the Jews will prevail over all the empires.

<sup>1</sup>Midrash *Tanchuma* (Terumah) 7. See *Shemot Rabba* 35:5.

<sup>2</sup>Exodus 25:3-4

<sup>3</sup>This is another one of the offerings that the Jews brought for the Sanctuary (Exodus 25:6).

Indeed, we have prevailed. We are still here but every one of these empires is long gone. But the Final Redemption and the utopia of the Messianic Era – when all nations are supposed to beat their swords into ploughshares – has not yet come.

Aah, but it is in the making.

#### 4. Promise to Abraham

Just how all that is playing out today as part of the Messianic process leading to world peace is illuminated by the prophecy given Abraham concerning his descendants.

As we know, Abraham – the Hebrew – was the “father of many nations.” His immediate descendants included: Ishmael (the progenitor Arab/Muslim people), Esau (also known as Edom, the progenitor of the Western/Christian world), and Jacob (also known as Israel, the progenitor of the Jews).

Before any of them were born, God made a covenant with Abraham, which the Torah calls “the covenant between the pieces.”<sup>4</sup> In the accompanying ceremony, Abraham was directed to split in half the carcass of a heifer, a goat and a ram and arrange the halves on a U-shaped altar. Then a fire passed between the pieces sealing the covenant.

As this was happening, Abraham (then still called Abram) was overcome by a terrible foreboding. This is how the Torah tells this dramatic story:

As the sun was setting, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep dark dread fell upon him. And [God] said to Abram: “Know for sure that your descendants will strangers in a land that is not theirs for 400 years. They will be enslaved and oppressed. But I will finally bring judgment against the nation that enslaves them, and they will then leave with great wealth...”

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<sup>4</sup>Genesis, chapter 15.

The sun set, and it became very dark. A smoking furnace and a flaming torch passed between the halves of the animals. On that day God made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates."<sup>5</sup>

What was the "deep dark dread" that fell upon Abraham? The Midrash explains that Abraham was shown the future great empires that would flower out of the Egyptian empire and that would control the world, bringing terror to it, each in their own way: the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman empires and also the Ishmaelite empire.<sup>6</sup>

The great 16th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria (known as the Ari) explains that these empires represent the different stages of refinement that we achieve throughout the generations.<sup>7</sup> Everything in our material existence contains divine sparks of spiritual energy, and we are charged with the mission to redeem and elevate these sparks. This is how we refine the material universe and transform it into its true purpose: a vehicle for spiritual expression and a home for the Divine.

Beginning with the enslavement by the Egyptian empire – the archetype and root of all the exiles and empires – each subsequent empire symbolizes another stage of refinement in integrating Godliness into the material world. The process concludes with the refinement of the last two powers, Esau/Edom (i.e. the Western world) and Ishmael (the Arab/Muslim world), which will usher in the Messianic Era. At that time there will be no more destruction and terror, and all children of Abraham will serve the One God in peace and harmony.

## 5. The Message to Us

Why was Abraham shown this vision? In order for him to share its message with his children, so that we, at whatever point in history we may be living, should know that the events in our lives are part of a long historical process.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 15:1-21.

<sup>6</sup> Mechilta Yitro 9. Bereishis Rabba 44:17. Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer, ch. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Likkutei Torah and Sefer HaLikkutim, Parshat *Ki Teitzei*.

Even as “deep dark dread” strikes us, we must always hold onto Abraham’s vision, that all our journeys and challenges are part of a bigger process, and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

And that light is not, as cynics may quip, the light of the oncoming train...

Indeed, the message of light and that very promise is emphasized in Torah’s description of the ritual lighting of the lamps of the menorah.

This vision and promise is what the Jewish people held onto during their long hard years in Egyptian slavery.

By the way, a recent Facebook posting by an Israeli refers to the massive quantity of Egyptian architecture which was built by the hands of Jewish slaves:

*Dear Egyptian rioters,  
Please don't damage the pyramids.  
We will not rebuild.  
Thank you.*

[In the terrible time of Egyptian slavery and] indeed, throughout all the persecutions of history, this vision and promise is what the Jews held onto, and it is this dream that allowed them to prevail and thrive.

This vision continues not only to give us strength and fortitude during difficult times, but also to give us direction how to proceed. Understanding the different dynamics underlying current events empowers us to be proactive. It empowers us to take concrete steps in order to refine that particular dimension of experience.

As we see the Middle East undergoing a major upheaval, as we stand uncertain about what lies ahead if us, now is the time to embrace and connect to Abraham’s vision. Faith is the most powerful resource we can access when we feel threatened – faith to firmly hold onto God’s words that we shall prevail and “emerge with great wealth.”

## 6. The Special Role of Egypt

Egypt, of course, plays a special role in all this, as it is the root and archetype of all the other empires. Indeed, the Midrash states<sup>8</sup> that Egypt and all the empires will, at the end of days, bring “gifts” to the Messiah, symbolizing their transformation from adversaries to allies.

This also explains a strange episode in the life of Jacob, related to the Mishkan.<sup>9</sup> When Jacob and his family went to Egypt during the famine, Jacob planted cedars in Egypt. The Midrash says that he prophetically foresaw that their woods would be needed for the building of the Sanctuary, God’s home among his children. Since there was no such wood in the wilderness where the Israelite slaves would be when commanded to build the Sanctuary, Jacob instructed his sons to take the wood with them when they left Egypt!

Why go to such lengths?

Because the goal of their stay in Egypt was transform it into a force of good – cedars planted in pagan Egypt ended up serving the one true God as components of His Sanctuary!

## 7. The Big Plan

As we witness today the upheavals in Egypt and the other Middle Eastern lands, where battles have been raging since biblical times, we must remember that this is part of the big plan – and that this plan had been shown to and foreseen by our ancestors. For the balance of the universe must be realigned and restored, and the world must make its peace with God and its higher calling.

The end of the story, as understood by Jewish prophets, is that all the empires will be tamed and will discover their true purpose. This happened with Edom (or Rome which is today’s Western world) which for centuries terrorized its neighbors. It is now a bastion of freedom,

<sup>8</sup> *Shemot Rabba* 35:5.

<sup>9</sup> Midrash Tanchuma *Terumah* 9. Cited in Rashi *Terumah* 25:5. 26:15.

championing human rights and adhering to the biblical principles of virtue and justice – the very principles which were pioneered by Abraham and formalized at Sinai.

It has been said that the Ishmaelite/Muslim world has been on vacation from history for the past 50 years, or maybe for the past 500 years. For all their virtues, the religions of the world have to mature and learn to integrate their faith with contemporary life. As long as they don't, the two will clash. As a result, the Middle East is today – as it has been from the beginning of time – the front of the war between passionate faith and secular modernity.

Just as the other children of Abraham have done, the descendants of Ishmael will need to learn how to peacefully integrate their deep faith with modern life, and with tolerance and coexistence. The time to find enlightenment is now. The time to embrace the path of Abraham, “the father of many nations,” is now. Let us hope and pray that everyone sees the current turmoil as a step forward in that direction.

## 8. What Can We Do?

Meanwhile, what can we – each of us – do other than watch events unfold? Can we do anything to expedite the process of global peace and redemption?

Yes, we can craft and build our own Sanctuary for God. We can use our own physical resources – the gold, silver, copper, and reddened skins of our material lives – and thus transform matter into spirit and the mundane into divine. Our Sanctuary, our sacred space, will then radiate outwards and illuminate our surroundings as did the lamp of the menorah once upon a time. The menorah symbolizes the light of the redemption. We can make sure it shines brightly, right now ... right here.

This is what it means to be a “light unto the nations” as the Prophet Isaiah told us we must be.<sup>10</sup>

But to truly be a “light unto the nations,” we must know what it means.

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 49:6.

So, the first thing we can do in these trying times is to truly live with the times by carefully studying the words of the weekly Torah reading and personalizing and integrating its words into our lives. By doing so we can connect to Abraham's strength and God's promise to him.

The second thing that we can do is not be a passive bystanders waiting for something to happen. By recognizing that we are in the final steps of a process – a process that was shown to our forefather Abraham – we must discover what action is required of us in this particular step of the process, and then we must *act*. Being proactive means taking control of the situation rather than allowing it to control us.

The work of earlier generations was more internal. Spiritually they were more evolved and naturally gravitated to God. Their minds and hearts were more attuned to spiritual experience, and they served God with deeply felt emotions.

Today we don't have the same revealed sense of Godliness – our minds don't easily relate to God and our hearts don't naturally feel Godliness – and on top of it all we live in a highly evolved materialistic world. So, our work is to obstinately commit with supra-rational tenacity to fulfill our mission to refine the world.

We may be spiritual midgets compared to Abraham and the giants of history, but when we connect to their vision and climb onto their shoulders, we can see farther than they did – for a midget standing on the shoulders of a giant is higher than he.

After all the refinement accomplished by previous generations, we have the last part to do. Indeed all our ancestors wait and watch in heaven for us to put the last finishing touches to what they began.

And when we do our job, we will bring about the realization of Abraham's vision. For, out of a "deep dark dread," the spark of the Messiah will sprout, ushering in a world of unity, where all of Abraham's children serve one God and serve in the way that Abraham taught them.

May we see the fulfillment of the promise: "As in the days when you left Egypt, I will show you wonders."<sup>11</sup> [Amen.]

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<sup>11</sup> Michah 7:15.

## 9. Specific Suggestions (Optional)

- Make a new commitment to a mitzvah, even if you are not in the mood for it, but you just know it's the right thing to do.
- Instead of being paralyzed, go out there and do something good. Initiate something – like a gathering in your home. Invite friends and do some reading and praying together.
- Find a cause and dedicate yourself to it with absolute passion and commitment.
- Take time each day to shut out all the outside static, and focus on God and the blessings in your life.
- Train your children to do all of the above, for the best way to teach your children is by example.
- And last, but not least, be sure to always light Shabbat and holiday candles. For the Midrash<sup>12</sup> promises that, in the merit of these flames, we will be blessed to kindle the lights of Zion. May it happen speedily in our days, Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Yalkut Shemoni *Parshat Beha'alotecha*.



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Shemot > Tetzaveh > Pursuit of Happiness

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### ABSTRACT

Kin Hubbard, the turn of the century humorist, famously said, “It is pretty hard to tell what does bring happiness – poverty and wealth have both failed.”

But, nevertheless, the pursuit of happiness remains an American obsession. After all, it is inscribed in our very Declaration of Independence: “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.”

Note it says the pursuit of happiness, not the capture thereof. Because happiness is a very elusive customer as the American Founding Fathers well knew.

We have just entered the Hebrew month called Adar, and about it the sages say, “When Adar comes in, joy increases.” But does it? And for whom exactly?

Wouldn't it be nice to cast aside our personal/financial worries, our communal/national worries, and our global worries – with the Arab world undergoing an unprecedented upheaval – and just be happy?

Yeah right, you say. We'd all like to know the secret to happiness.

Well, I'm about to let you in on it!

This sermon examines the newest scientific proofs – which confirm what Jewish mystics always knew – that our attitudes shape our reality. Want to be happy, act happy. Want to change the world, change yourself.

**PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS:  
HOW TO FIND HAPPINESS BY RE-DEFINING YOUR REALITY**

**1. Words of Wisdom from Small Children (Humor)**

- No matter how hard you try, you can't put cats under water.
- When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair.
- If your sister hits you, don't hit her back. They always catch the second person.
- Never ask your 3-year-old brother to hold an egg.
- You can't trust dogs to watch your food.
- Don't sneeze when someone is cutting your hair.
- Puppies still have bad breath even after eating a Tic Tac.
- School lunches stick to the wall.
- You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk.
- The best place to be when you are sad is in Grandma's lap.

You are smiling – that's good. Because I want you in a happy mood to hear what I have to say about ... happiness.

**2. How to be Happy?**

We have just entered the Hebrew month called Adar, and about it the sages say, "When Adar comes in, joy increases." But does it? And for whom exactly?

Wouldn't it be nice to cast aside our personal/financial worries, our communal/national worries, and our global worries (especially our worries for the safety of Israel) – with the Arab world undergoing an unprecedented upheaval – and just focus on being happy?

Yeah right, you say. We'd all like to know the secret to a happy life, especially in this time fraught with challenge and crisis.

### 3. Pursuit of Happiness

As the turn of the (last) century humorist, Kin Hubbard, said, "It is pretty hard to tell what does bring happiness – poverty and wealth have both failed."

But, nevertheless, the pursuit of happiness remains an American obsession. After all, it is inscribed in our very Declaration of Independence: "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."

Note it says the pursuit of happiness, not the capture thereof ... because happiness is a very elusive customer as the American Founding Fathers well knew.

Darrin M. McMahon, professor of history at Florida State University and the author of the *Happiness: A History*, quotes John Stuart Mill as saying:

Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at *something else*, they find happiness by the way.

McMahon suggests that "for our own culture, steeped as it is in the relentless pursuit of personal pleasure and endless cheer," Mill's message is "worth heeding." He points out sociological statistics, that the percentage of those describing themselves as "happy" or "very happy" has remained virtually unchanged in Europe and the United States since such surveys were first conducted in the 1950's. "And yet," he points out, the self-help industry continues to "pour forth books promising to

make us happier than we are today. The very demand for such books is a strong indication that they aren't working." In other words, we are constantly pursuing and never quite catching, hence the constant need for self-help, for self-analysis, for self-introspection.

Others argue that none of these are the key to happiness. Not introspection but action is the key, says University of Virginia psychology professor Timothy D. Wilson. Act happy and you will be happy. In his work, *Strangers to Ourselves*, he quotes Aristotle's famous words:

We become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage.

In other words, if we are dissatisfied with some aspect of our lives, one of the best approaches is to *act* more like the person we want to be, rather than sitting around analyzing ourselves. Or as Alcoholics Anonymous puts it: "Fake it to make it."

Of course, a certain measure of introspection is healthy and necessary, but an obsession that dwells on yourself, forever dissecting the pieces in order to fix each item, is self-defeating. Rather the focus must be not your *ego self* but on your *divine self* – the part that was created in the image of God – that part of you that is already perfect and is imbued with a higher calling.

The question is how to bring that part to the fore.

The answer is – and this appears to be the secret to happiness – by merely wanting to. Because our thoughts can change reality, and our feelings can change our destiny.

#### 4. Re-shaping Reality

The possibility may sound preposterous, but the truth is that science now is embracing precisely this idea – that our reality is shaped by our thoughts. Or as the recent sound-byte goes: "Neurons get wired by the way they are fired."

By repeatedly thinking about something a certain way, our minds actually get wired (or rewired) to follow that thought pattern.

If, for instance, you think negatively about yourself, your neurons get hardwired with a negative self-perception, to the point that the negative self-image becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And then you can no longer distinguish between the initial thought and the reality it has created.

And once the neurons get hardwired into place, through habitual thinking, it becomes increasingly difficult to unwire yourself. Yet, just as we have become wired a certain way, we can also become unwired. Through persistent effort we can alter our neurons and rewire them with new attitudes.

Quantum physics takes this to a further extreme: We have the power to impact not just our neurons and self-perception but also the reality of our existence. Indeed, many scientists argue that there really is no distinction between our thoughts and the reality around us. If, for example, a certain event has never entered the realm of possibility in your consciousness, then you will not be able to see the event even if actually is in your sight of vision!

Our entire concept of reality is actually turned inside out: We always thought that there is an objective reality “out there,” which we then experience and try to comprehend. The truth is that it’s not reality that shapes our perception; our perception – our frame of reference – actually shapes our reality.

A six-year-old boy spotted Albert Einstein walking down the street and decided to try out his favorite joke on him: “Mr. Einstein! Why did the chicken cross the road?” To which the famous physicist replied, “My young burgeoning mind, zee question does not have a definite anzer. Vether zee chicken crossed zee road or zee road crossed zee chicken depends on your frame of reference.”

## 5. The Shape of Water Crystals (Optional)

A Japanese researcher, Dr. Masaru Emoto, has demonstrated that human thought has the power to change the shape and expression of water crystals. Using powerful microscopes he showed that crystals formed in frozen water reveal changes when specific, concentrated thoughts are directed toward them. In his book, *The Hidden Messages in Water*, he describes his findings, that water from clear springs and water that has been exposed to loving words shows brilliant, complex, and colorful snowflake patterns. In contrast, polluted water, or water exposed to negative thoughts, forms incomplete, asymmetrical patterns with dull colors.<sup>1</sup>

In some mysterious way, on a quantum level, sub-atomic particles sense that they are being observed, and they are affected by the observer.

As the physicist John Wheeler explains:

Nothing is more important about the quantum principle than this, that it destroys the concept of the world as “sitting out there,” with the observer safely separated from it by a 20-centimeter slab of plate glass. Even to observe so minuscule an object as an electron, he must shatter the glass. He must reach in. He must install his chosen measuring equipment. It is up to him to decide whether he shall measure position or momentum. To install the equipment to measure the one prevents and excludes his installing the equipment to measure the other. Moreover, the measurement changes the state of the electron. The universe will never afterward be the same. To describe what has happened, one has to cross out that old word “observer” and put in its place the new word “participator.” In some strange sense, the universe is a participatory universe.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This was also the subject of the popular 2004 documentary, “What the Bleep Do we Know?”

<sup>2</sup> J. Mehra, ed., *The Physicist’s Conception of Nature*, p. 244.

## 6. A Mystical Participatory Universe

What's fascinating about this is not the actual concept. Mystics have always understood the universe as a participatory one. Indeed, the opening verses of Genesis make it very clear that the human being created in the Divine Image has the power – and the responsibility – to shape and transform the universe.

The amazing thing is that this so-called mystical idea – which seems so counter-intuitive to linear logic – is being recognized by science as an empirical fact. This only reinforces the mystical teachings (namely of the Zohar, the chief work of Kabbalah) that at the dawn of Messianic Era there will be an explosion of wisdom – both above and below, both divine wisdom and scientific wisdom, a wisdom that will reflect the utter unity between matter and spirit.

So now, are we wired to be happy or to be sad? Or do we control our wiring?

There is no doubt that many people seem to have a despondent predisposition, and others a cheerful one. Add into the equation the hurt and deprivation many have suffered in their childhoods, and it can appear to be almost impossible to overcome the dysfunction wired into our psyches. Any attempt to change things would seem futile.

All that is true, if we are bound to our wiring. And if so, then we are like a computer dependent on its circuitry. However, we are not mere machines. We have the power to rewire ourselves and to reshape even a daunting reality. The fact is – many of our demons are our own self-destructive illusions, but even the ones that have some objective reality are also in our control.

Someone once came to the Hassidic Master known as the Tzemech Tzedek, imploring that he pray on behalf of a person who was seriously ill. The Tzemech Tzedek replied: *Tracht gut vet zayn gut*, “Think good and it will be good.” Positive thinking can actually change the situation for the better.

Once upon a time this could have been taken as a religious statement, driven primarily by faith. Today it is becoming scientific fact that our thoughts define our realities.

People think, “I am so sad because things aren’t working in my life.” The truth is that things aren’t working because they are so sad. People often believe that they are not happy because they have no joy in their lives. The truth is the other way around – by being joyous you become happy.

And if that is true, then no problem that this world faces is insurmountable. Concerned about the violence in the world, work on your anger issues. Concerned about peace in the world, make peace with your own family. As your attitude changes, so will the people around you, and the cumulative effect will ripple out across the globe.

## 7. The Impossible Dream

Is that an impossible dream? With so much despondency working in the opposite direction? Can a few lemmings manage to leap against the flow and then change the course of the river?

It may seem naïve, especially in view of the selfishness around us and (let’s be honest) within us. Some researchers claim that “the average human being is about 95 percent selfish in the narrow sense of the term,” so how can human inclinations ever change? Is there any hope that we will ever see a world filled with virtue and love, with no more injustice and pain, as the Jewish prophets have promised?

Of course, Divine intervention can achieve anything. However, we are told to not depend on miracles. That means that things can change naturally, through our efforts.

In fact, Robert H. Frank writing in the *New York Times* cites research which *proves* that we are influenced by our own theories. Our personal attitudes and beliefs about selfishness and giving directly impact and define our own behavior: “Studies have found that repeated exposure

to the [business] self-interest model makes selfish behavior more likely.” Frank concludes that what is particularly troubling is “the narrow self-interest model, which encourages us to expect the worst in others, [and which] often brings out the worst in us as well.”<sup>3</sup>

We are all affected by the attitudes and expectations of those around us, and ultimately by the expectations we have of ourselves. If we have been inundated with a message that we are lowly creatures, or that we are all not much more than selfish beasts, especially if this was ingrained into us in our formative years, inevitably our life script has been written ... or so it seems.

A colleague of mine remembers his shock when he asked a student what he looked forward to in life, and the student replied, “I would be happy if I just did not get hurt in life. When a day passes and I come out intact, I breathe a sigh of relief and feel accomplishment.” This individual was hurt so many times, that his threshold for normal and his expectation for happiness was just “no new damage.”

## 8. Within the Disease Lies the Cure

But now for the good news: within the “disease” lies the cure.

Our attitudes and beliefs have the power to rewire ourselves and the universe – to higher the standard that we expect of ourselves.

We are not pre-destined nor deterministic. We are not doomed, and we are not static. Each of us has a vibrant spirit, and with will power, persistence and good support, we can unplug, refire and rewire our systems.

We have the power to stop the vicious cycle of watching others watch others watch others watching us – to stop the downward spiral of “the blind leading the blind” spiraling downward.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Theory That Self-Interest Is the Sole Motivator Is Self-Fulfilling,” by Robert H. Frank, New York Times, February 17, 2005.

How often do we hear producers arguing that the low standard of TV broadcasting is due to the demand of the consumers, and the consumers arguing, that “we watch what they show us,” and advertisers salivating either way as long as they get their product planted into our heads.

Yes, we have the power to rewire ourselves – to rewire the very consciousness of existence. We have the power to stop pursuing happiness and to look around and recognize that it is already here. As long as happiness remains a commodity that we pursue (or want to purchase), our efforts to find happiness will inevitably be futile. Happiness eludes all those that make it their focus. Only when we recognize that happiness is a state of being that emerges when we focus on things outside ourselves ... only when we know that it is a feeling shaped by our attitudes ... only then do we find it.

The world will change when we change our attitudes. Expect more of yourself and you will become more. Expect more of others, and they will become more.

All it takes are a few individuals who will stand up to the prevalent status quo. Instead of going with the flow and following the current, they will be truly “independent” and lift the expectations that we have of each other to its deserved place – *that we all live up to the divine image within us!*

All it takes is you and I and a few other individuals. If ten of us can do it, ten thousand can. If ten thousand can, ten million can. After all, the six billion of us are merely six billion individuals like you and me.

As John Lennon sang:

You may say that I’m a dreamer  
But I’m not the only one  
I hope someday you’ll join us  
And the world will live as one<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Imagine* by John Lennon, 1988.

And as the Prophet Isaiah promised:

And the day will come when ... they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.<sup>5</sup>

Hopefully, the current uprisings in the Middle East will bring change in peaceful ways. We pray and hope that the unrest focuses not on anger and agitation, but on building a better, freer and more loving world. Despite the forces of oppression that brought on the present upheavals, true growth will not come by replacing one form of oppression with another form – that will only continue a vicious cycle of autocracy. True growth will come by introducing a new, mature approach of mutual respect, while maintaining diversity.

As it is in the macrocosm, so is it in the microcosm of our own personal lives. Time has come to stop being victims of the past and, instead, to take the initiative for a new and brighter future. It all comes down to the courage to change our attitudes for the better – to dare to think and act differently.

May our individual efforts bring about positive change speedily and in our days, and may be merit to see the fruits of our efforts with our own eyes and rejoice with all our loved ones. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 2:2-4.

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