



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Vayikra

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

March 11, 2011

Vayikra

The Youth Revolution



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

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ABSTRACT

One of the biggest stories – and surprises – behind the world-changing events in the Middle East is the role of youth who represent 60% of the region’s population (or about 150 million people under 30). This massive “youth bulge” has exploded on the scene like a powder keg and is proceeding to transform the entire landscape with its relentless energy.

Armed with their iPhones, laptops and Facebooks, the young are taking over the Middle East. And they are willing to give their lives for the cause.

What is it about the young that makes them so idealistic and so fearless? And what can we learn from them, especially from their ability to forever alter mountains of power that just a few weeks ago seemed unmovable?

The Midrash tells that when Mordechai (the hero of the Purim story) learned that a plot had been hatched to exterminate the Jews of Persia, he sought guidance from the young. In this extreme period of crisis, the eyes of every Jew of the region focused on their wise leader Mordechai, wondering what his response would be. Remarkably, upon becoming aware of this grave threat, Mordechai’s first act was to query three young Jewish students (who had a fraction of his vast Torah knowledge) as they were returning home from school. Their simple and pure advice infused Mordechai with hope and joy, and changed the entire course of events.

The secret power of youth is captured in this week’s Torah reading – the beginning of book three, the Book of Leviticus. As the Midrash teaches, “Why do the young commence [the study of Torah] with the Book of Leviticus? Surely, it is because the

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young are pure, and the *korbanot* (“sacrifices”) are pure. So let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure.” Indeed, the *Sefer Chasidim* describes the custom of placing the Book of Leviticus in the crib near a baby’s head when he is named at his circumcision.

This sermon examines how the purity of youth – unadulterated by the cynicism of material life – has the power to change worlds.

THE YOUTH REVOLUTION

1. Introduction

One of the biggest stories – and surprises – behind the world-changing events in the Middle East is the role of youth who represent 60% of the region’s population (or about 150 million people under 30). This massive “youth bulge” has exploded on the scene like a powder keg.

Armed with their iPhones, laptops and Facebooks, the young are taking over the Middle East and are proceeding to transform the entire landscape with their relentless energy.

Recently, Mansour Abu Shenaf, a writer living in Tripoli, reported that: “The state has disappeared from the streets, and the people, *the youth*, have practically taken over.”¹

The revolt now shaking Libya is but one in the rebellions spreading across the Arab world that seemed unthinkable just two months ago. As Qaddafi shows his true colors by brutally massacring his own people everyone is asking the question: Will Qaddafi fall or will he crush his youthful opponents? And what impact will this youth-driven revolution have in the coming months and years on the entire region?

It appears that the world – or at least the Middle East – belongs to the young.

¹ *New York Times* Feb. 21, 2011.

2. The World Belongs to the Young

In 1963, just as the hippie generation was waking up in America, Shabtai Zusha Zimmerman, aka Bob Dylan, recorded the classic *The Times They are A-Changin'*.

This song became the hymn of the young demonstrators who preached love and peace and challenged the military establishment, demanding a voice in the future of their country.

These two verses of this song resonate especially strong today as we watch the young people of the Middle East making a similar demand:

Come mothers and fathers throughout the land
And don't criticize what you can't understand
For your children are beyond your command.
Your old road is rapidly aging.
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come senators and congressmen, please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway, don't block up the hall
For he who is lost, is he who has stalled.
There is a battle outside and it's raging.
It will soon shake your windows and rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin'.²

The current battle is rattling a lot of walls, that's for sure. Unfortunately, some of the rattling is having catastrophic results. (In Libya alone, more than 1000 had been killed to date, possibly much more.)³

As the dictators in the Middle East fall, and others crack down on protestors, killing many, I am reminded of an editorial following the death of the Spanish dictator Generalissimo Francisco Franco. The editorial was brief. It read: "They say the good die young. Today Francisco Franco died at age 83."⁴

² *The Times They are A-Changin'* by Bob Dylan, 1963.

³ *New York Times* Feb. 24, 2011.

⁴ *Philadelphia Daily News*, November 20, 1975.

All too often, the good, the idealistic do die young, their idealism driving them to give their life for a cause they feel is greater than they. And this is a phenomenon that we are seeing on our television screens these days.

What is it about the young that makes them so idealistic and so fearless? From where do they derive their vigor and intensity?

The Torah's answer – they are more innocent than us adults who have been soured by life experiences. Because they have less to lose and protect (materially speaking), their hearts can be totally devoted to their principles. Thus, they exhibit a more pure and unadulterated faith. (Note that word *un-adult-erated!*) They truly believe that justice will prevail over injustice, that good will win over evil.

3. Story from the Midrash

The Midrash⁵ tells that when Mordechai (the hero of the Purim story) learned that a plot had been hatched to exterminate the Jews of Persia, he sought guidance from the young. In this extreme period of crisis, the eyes of every Jew in the region focused on their wise leader Mordechai, wondering what his response would be. Remarkably, upon becoming aware of this grave threat, Mordechai's first act was to query three young Jewish students (who had a fraction of his vast Torah knowledge) as they were returning home from school. He asked them simply: "What did you learn today?"

The first student quoted the Book of Proverbs: "Do not fear sudden terror or the holocaust of the evil when it comes."⁶

The second student quoted the Book of Isaiah: "Plan a conspiracy, and it will be annulled. Speak your piece, but it shall not stand, for God is with us."⁷

⁵ Midrash Esther Rabba 7:17.

⁶ Proverbs 3:25.

⁷ Isaiah 8:10.

The third one quoted God's promise (also from the Book of Isaiah) "Even until your old age, I remain unchanged. Even until you turn gray, I shall endure. I created you, and I shall carry you. I shall endure and rescue you."⁸

"Upon hearing these words," the Midrash concludes, "Mordechai smiled and ecstatically rejoiced." When Haman, who was observing this interaction, asked him "Why are you so happy?" Mordechai replied: "I rejoice in the good news the young have brought us, that we should not fear the evil plot you have conspired against us."

This so infuriated Haman that he immediately vowed: "I will strike the young first!" Haman recognized the power of the youth⁹... but to no avail. The young would bring him down. And that was why Mordechai was so elated.

Mordechai saw that their pure hearts were full of faith and confidence that God will protect them and abolish any evil plot.

Their comments revealed their reliance upon God in dealing with three kinds of struggles, which encompass every type of challenge. The first one spoke of faith and fearlessness in its simplest form, when faced with

⁸ Isaiah 46:4. (These three verses, incidentally, conclude traditional morning prayers in Jewish liturgy.)

⁹ Compare this to the evil King Achaz – whose cruel times the Midrash equates with the times of Purim (Midrash Esther Rabba, *Pesichta* 11) – who said: "If there are no kids, there will be no goats; if there are no goats, there will be no sheep; if there are no sheep, there will be no shepherd; if there is no shepherd the world cannot exist. So, too, Achaz felt that if there are no children, there will be no adults; if there are no adults, there will be no scholars; if there are no scholars, there will be no sages; if there are no sages, there will be no elders; if there are no elders, there will be no Torah; if there is no Torah, there will be no synagogues and houses of study. And if there are no synagogues and houses of study, the Holy One, blessed be He, will not cause His presence to rest in the world. What did he do? He locked all the synagogues and houses of study so that the Torah would not be studied ... However, as the Midrash continues, the prophet Isaiah challenged King Achaz, saying (Isaiah 8:17-18): "I have waited on God, Who hides His face from the House of Yaakov, and I have hoped for Him. 'What success will you have?' Behold, I and the children whom God has given me as signs and wonders in Israel." I.e.: What will you achieve by locking up synagogues and houses of study? Your intent is that the Torah will be forgotten by the Jewish people, who will thus be separated from God. However, your endeavors will bear no fruit, because "I and the children" (my students) will prevent that from happening.

devastation and destruction. When “the destruction of the evil comes” and all hope seems lost, do not fear for God is with us.

The second one had faith that “the plots of our enemies will not materialize.” He expressed the belief that God is at all times working for our protection, even where we are unmindful of impending danger and even when someone has initiated a plot against us.

The third one showed faith in the face of the seemingly sealed decree, as well as our seemingly inescapable vulnerabilities and frailties, including those accompanying “old age.” Even as nature takes its course, even when we may appear weak and vulnerable, we trust that the “unchangeable” God is “with us” to help “sustain and deliver us.”

As Mordechai saw the unblemished faith held by these young people, he knew that the heart of the nation was in the right place and that the evil decree would be annulled. In the event that the elders would falter, the young could be counted on to fan the flames of faith and march forward to victory.

4. The Calling

This week we begin reading book three of the Five Books of Moses, which in English is called Leviticus (referring to the offerings brought in the Sanctuary by the Kohanim, a priestly class of the tribe of Levi). In Hebrew is called *Vayikra* (from the first phrase of the book “And He called”) which could be loosely translated as “the Calling.”

What is *Vayikra* calling us to do? To come close - *l'karev* - to God, the root of the word *korban* or “offering,” which is the main vehicle described for achieving this.¹⁰

As esoteric or complicated the Book of Leviticus and its laws of offerings might sound to us, the Talmudic sages considered this book basic

¹⁰ As the verse continues: *Adam ki yakriv me'kem korban l'Hashem*, “When you, Man, will come close and offer yourself to God...”

education, and indeed, they followed an established custom¹¹ of using it as the beginning a child's Torah study. They are quoted as saying:

"Why do the young commence [the study of Torah] with the Book of Leviticus? Surely, it is because the young are pure, and the *korbanot* ("offerings") are pure. So let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure."¹²

Rashi writes¹³ that by the time students entered the Torah Academy (an equivalent of high school), they were already well versed in the Book of Leviticus. And the *Sefer Chasidim*¹⁴ describes the custom of placing the Book of Leviticus in the crib near a baby's head when he is named at his circumcision.

The underlying message in all this is the purity of our young, and the importance of cultivating that purity.

5. What is Purity?

What is purity?

Often, the best way to understand a concept is by examining its converse.

Ask yourself: How sacred does your life feel? How pure are your activities? How indispensable do you think you are?

We live in a world in which we are being taught that people are essentially selfish creatures, driven by self-interest.

Since the Darwinian-Freudian model of life pervades every aspect of our lives, our psyches are being continuously drilled with the message

¹¹ Some find evidence of this practice in Rabbi Judah's permission to prepare scrolls, for use by children, in which the first five chapters of Genesis and the first eight chapters of Leviticus were written. See *Gittin* 60a, *Mesechta Soferim* 5:9. In addition, the first piece of Torah that Rabbi Akiva studied after he had mastered the *alef-bet* was from Leviticus. See *Abot d'Rabbi Nathan* 6:2.

¹² *Leviticus Rabba* 7:3. *Tanchuma Tzav* 14. Cited in *Kol Bo* 74. *Shach Yoreh Deah* 245:8.

¹³ *Chulin* 66A.

¹⁴ *Sefer Chasidim* sec. 1140.

that we are narcissistic beasts at heart. When the driving ethos of all creatures is “survival of the fittest,” then natural selection basically renders every human virtue, every noble act, everything we hold dear, as a method for billion-year-old bacteria to adapt and survive.

Purity – that’s for the naïve child, the foolish youthful idealists unaware of man’s egocentricity, cruelty and the harshness of existence. The real world is one in which “dog eats dog,” and if you don’t protect yourself, the predators lurking everywhere will get you.

Is there such a thing as a good man? A pure spirit?

The so-called “realists” cynically argue that goodness and purity are for the fools or the dreamers. They claim that noble illusions of grandeur are for the desperate or the fanatics.

Now compare this with the statement: “Let the pure come and engage in the pure.”

We cannot help but marvel at the stark contrast of this gentle description of our young (as the pure engaged in the pure) with the message (often emanating from the hallowed halls of science) that is inundating our homes, schools and media – that our lives lack intrinsic value, and that all the things we hold precious are simply crafty tools of survival.

6. The Media Trail (Optional)

Just follow the media trail, and you will have a sample of the devaluation and depersonalization of life. Here is a collection assembled by a colleague of mine of just one week in the *New York Times*.¹⁵

First: the assault on faith.

In a cover magazine story, “Darwin’s God: Why Do We Believe?” Robin Marantz Henig documents how scientists are dissecting the DNA of faith. Basically, she writes that *all* scientists agree that “religious belief is an outgrowth of brain architecture that evolved during early human

¹⁵ One week in March 2007.

history. What they disagree about is why a tendency to believe evolved, whether it was because belief itself was adaptive or because it was just an evolutionary byproduct, a mere consequence of some other adaptation in the evolution of the human brain.”¹⁶

Of the scientists she cites, to the farthest extreme we have Richard Dawkins, who writes in his best-selling book *The God Delusion*: “Religious behavior may be a misfiring, an unfortunate byproduct of an underlying psychological propensity which in other circumstances is, or once was, useful.”

In other words, the message being conveyed here is that there is no validity to faith unless it helps creatures adapt for purposes of survival.

Next: the assault on humor.

“Laughter, a topic that stymied philosophers for 2,000 years, is finally yielding to science,” writes John Tierney in the science section.¹⁷ Occasionally we’re surprised into laughing at something funny, but most laughter has little to do with humor. It’s an instinctual survival tool for social animals, not an intellectual response to wit. It’s not about getting the joke. It’s about getting along.”

Even our laughter – a tool that has soothed many a pained soul and relieved many a pedestrian life – is being dehumanized into another adaptive survival device. We laugh not because it’s funny; our “sense of humor” is not due to us being privy to the human comedy, but rather a method to keep us dancing to the same tune. Tell that to stand-up comics and social satirists – we are laughing at your jokes not because you are witty or insightful, but because you are a ringleader in helping us bond.

Finally: the assault on morality.

Again, an article in the science section, which is where the editors clearly believe morality belongs.¹⁸ In this article, Nicholas Wade reports on how scientists are seeing morality as simply another evolutionary force that aids survival. Wade cites Dr. de Waal, director of the Living Links Cen-

¹⁶ *New York Times Magazine*, March 4, 2007.

¹⁷ *New York Times Science Section*, March 13, 2007.

¹⁸ *New York Times Science Section*, March 20, 2007.

ter at Emory University, who argues that “all social animals have had to constrain or alter their behavior in various ways for group living to be worthwhile. These constraints, evident in monkeys and even more so in chimpanzees, are part of human inheritance, too, and in his view from the set of behaviors from which human morality has been shaped.”

As Dr. de Waal sees it, “human morality may be severely limited by having evolved as a way of banding together against adversaries, with moral restraints being observed only toward the in group, not toward outsiders. The profound irony is that our noblest achievement – morality – has evolutionary ties to our basest behavior – warfare,” he writes. “The sense of community required by the former was provided by the latter.”

So there goes morality, piled up in a heap together with humor, faith, hope, love, sincerity and all our noblest virtues – everything pure in our lives diminished into basic survival instincts of billion-year-old bacteria as they compete and evolve into beings that create stronger social bonds so that we can hunt, survive the elements and avoid extinction.

My colleague who conducted this sampling of *New York Times* writing, concluded: “Call me simple or old-fashioned. Call me emotional and non-scientific. But I prefer the description of my children as pure souls, who are unconditionally pure, not in order to elicit in us compassion so that we better feed them to ensure their survival. They are essentially pure – a step closer than the rest of us perhaps, to the Divine.”

7. The Side-Effect

All these scientific theories may or may not have some basis. But one side-effect is certain (and not theoretical): They do not leave us empowered. Indeed, they leave us feeling weak, malleable, manipulated, controlled by forces outside of our choices, fearful, vulnerable and competing for survival with our own neighbors and friends. In one word: insignificant.

They trivialize our choices and render our noblest features as essentially selfish efforts to survive at all costs.

Does any of that resonate with you?

I hope not.

What truly resonates with me is the very opposite – the sense that somewhere deep inside all of us (even in the most hardened, jaded, darkened and distorted psyches) lies something pure and untouched, and if ever it has a chance to be ignited, it has the power to change the world.

8. What is Purity? (continued)

Which brings us to the question we have yet to answer: What is purity?

Purity means an essential state of being, before it assumes any superimposed features. Purity is a state that is unpolluted by human devices and man-made institutions. It's hard to describe purity with our conventional language which itself is far from pure – for language reflects, and is an outgrowth of, the reality around us. To appreciate purity we need to access a place that is beyond conventional experiences.

The face of a newborn child, the simple flower, the teardrop – any force in life that is untouched by humans – expresses purity.

Raw material existence, divorced of spirit, is not pure, nor is it real. Naked materialism is but a surface layer of existence, shrouding the life force within.

Purity is thus the soul – as we say in traditional morning prayers: “The soul that You have given me is pure.” In its essential form, every soul is pure. Then the soul begins a journey (as the prayer continues): “You have created it, You have shaped it, You have breathed it into me, and You protect it within me.” (Note that the prayer speaks of protection, because once the pure soul enters an impure world it needs all the protection it can get.)

Children/the young are pure – they express the purest state of being, like freshly fallen snow, untouched, pristine, innocent.

We look at them, and we see purity. We see our own quintessence – how we are at our best and our purest, unadulterated and unvarnished. And we must respect it – for in the purity of our youth lies our salvation.

9. Conclusion (version one)

In the running of a nation, the youth comprise the engine. If we teach our youth to connect with God, then they will in turn inspire us to truly connect with the very values we preach. In the merit of the pure faith of our youth, our people will forever stand secure as the world around us is trembling and changing:

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fading.
And the first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changin’.

10. Conclusion (version two)

The Midrash¹⁹ that speaks of the custom to begin a child's study with the book of Leviticus, “let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure,” continues with the following fascinating statement by God:

“Therefore [when the children study] I consider it as if they are bringing the offerings before Me. Though the Temple was destroyed and offerings are not brought [on the altar], were it not for the children reciting these sacrificial laws the world would not stand.”

¹⁹Tanchuma *Tzav* 14.

Now we can appreciate why Mordechai approached the young students and asked them “What did you learn today?” And why he was so elated when he heard the verses they cited. He knew that the secret to abolish any evil decree and the secret to redemption lies in the mouths of youth. As we read in the Book of Psalms:

Out of the mouths of babes and infants
You have established Your might –
To answer those who deny You,
To silence the enemy and the vengeful.²⁰

As the Midrash relates,²¹ that Haman’s decree was abolished in merit of the 22,000 children who Mordechai gathered to study Torah and cry out to God.

And just in the days of Purim our enemies were silenced and the evil decree was annulled in the merit of the sacred and pure words of the young, so too is it in every generation. In the purity of our youth lies our salvation.

11. Call to Action (optional)

The political revolution in the Middle East led by the youth is a wake-up call to us all to inspire a spiritual revolution among our young.

As we begin reading the Book of Leviticus, let us call out to our pure and innocent ones: “Let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure!”

And as we approach Purim, let us follow the example of Mordechai – let us listen to our youth recite to us holy words of faith and trust in the One Above ... let them give us hope and confidence in the future.

Let us all speak with our children. Let us elicit from them their purity and their innocence.

²⁰ Psalms 8:3.

²¹ Esther Rabba 9:4.

When you come home from work, or before putting your children to sleep, or upon awakening – any time you can find – ask your children: “What did you learn today?” You may be surprised to hear what they say...

As well, let us all resolve to reach out and speak with the youth in our community. Let us ask them “What did you learn today?” And let us allow them to speak words of truth.

And finally, let us all seek to educate our children with passion and vivacity in the timeless values of Judaism. So that they can use their purity to lead the way. Amen.