



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Yitro

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

January 21, 2011

Yitro

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

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Shemot > Yitro > Vision: What Do We Stand For?

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ABSTRACT

Do we as Jews have a vision for life? Does Judaism offer us such a vision, as well as a vision for the world? Or more bluntly put: Is Judaism parochial or global?

This week, as we read about the great Sinai revelation, let us explore what Sinai – and Judaism overall – came contribute to the human race, and to each of us as individuals.

Living comfortably, for all its benefits, often leads us to living complacently. So what do we passionately care about?

With all the gifts we were blessed with – our freedoms, our prosperity, our high standard of living – we may lack the most important ingredient of all. With all our successes and opportunities, the question, both individually and collectively, lingers:

What vision are we committed to?

Having a vision is vital to our existence both as individuals and as a nation. What do we stand for? What is the vision that drives us?

I humbly submit that for us Jews that vision is clearly spelled out in the Torah which was given to us at Mount Sinai some 3,300 years ago. And this vision is not just limited to us. For the Torah offers the entire universe a vision – a vision of how life can and should be lived to its fullest.

1. A Story of Giving

Dr. Rick Hodes,¹ medical director of the “Joint” who is well known for his charitable work in Africa, was part of an emergency medical team that went into Rwanda during the cholera epidemic there. People were dying by the tens of thousands, but despite the horror and suffering, Dr. Hodes did his work with professional detachment. And then a little boy was brought to him for care. Dr. Hodes worked particularly hard to save this child, but the little boy died nevertheless. When that little boy died, Dr. Hodes broke down emotionally and thought he could not go on.

Why did that one death move him more than the innumerable deaths he had already witnessed? Because he had invested in that child. Because he lowered the walls of his professional detachment for that child. Because he passionately cared about that one little life. He *gave of himself* to that little boy, and that little boy became precious to him.

I am telling you this story in order to raise a question for us all: What do we passionately care about? What do we give of ourselves to?

Yes, our families of course, but what more? What cause defines our lives?

2. Three Kinds of Jews

When we look around the Jewish world today, we see that, as a people, we can be divided into three categories when it comes to caring:

- There are Jews who are fundamentalists, driven primarily by religious observance. If you ask them about the secular world, many would answer: “We don’t care about the world. Our task is to build strong, religious families and communities.” These

¹ Dr. Rick Hodes is the medical director of the “Joint” (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee). He was the subject of HBO documentary, *Making the Crooked Straight* and of the book, *This Is a Soul: The Mission of Rick Hodes* by Marilyn Berger. This story is related in *The Bible for the Clueless and Curious* by Nachum Braverman, pp. 131-132.

Jews certainly have a cause that they care about, but in most cases their vision is localized, even provincial.

- Then there are Jews who are social activists. They are driven by humanitarian causes and other noble ventures with global scope, but often these Jews ignore the problems in their own backyard.
- These two groups are a minority, however. The vast majority of Jews are driven by neither fundamentalism nor social activism. In fact, they don't even have an idea what it means to be Jewish ... except in the negative sense, as victims of anti-Semitism.

So where do we fit in? And if most of us fall into the third category, how can we put passion and vision into our lives? We can certainly fight for various good causes. But does that have anything to do with our Jewishness? How can we inspire our children to be proud of their Jewish heritage if it lacks a driving vision, a compelling sense of urgency?

Imagine a fly walking across a man's head as the man strolls down the aisle of a speeding train, as the earth revolves on its axis and circles round the sun in a rapidly expanding universe. How fast is the fly travelling and in which direction? How about the man?

I'll let you ponder that for a moment. But my point is that the world is rapidly spinning and, if we have no clear vision where we are going, we have no greater sense of purpose than that fly.

We may have retirement plans, financial goals, places we would like to visit, experiences we look forward to - but do we have a bigger vision for tomorrow? Do we know where we are headed in a year from now, let alone ten years?

These questions are not meant to be negative and critical, but rather act as catalysts to make us all think about our lives and our objectives. Indeed, that is what Sinai challenges us to do.

3. What's Missing Today

A comfortable life, for all its benefits, often leads to a complacent life. With all the gifts we were blessed with – our freedoms, our prosperity, our high standard of living – we may lack the most important ingredient of all: a vision for the future. With all our successes and opportunities, the question, both individually and collectively, lingers: Where are we headed?

Can we answer this question today?

This is what true leadership is all about: the ability to present a visionary approach to life. But we seem to be lacking such leaders today, leaders who would offer us hope, direction and focus.

Why is it that war is the most efficient operation of all, more efficient than any large corporation? Because in war we have a tangible, clearly defined enemy. That clarity creates powerful focus and goals, more than any business plan could ever proffer. War also creates a compelling sense of urgency. The stakes are stark and high – life and death.

Peacetime does not offer us the same clarity. When there is no defined enemy that we are fighting against, what drives us?

And of this is where we Jews find ourselves today.

Embedded in the psyche of many of us is a profound paranoia. Centuries of persecution have defined the driving engine of our people. We always had an enemy that defined our identity. But what identity emerges today when we have no real enemy here in the United States where we live? We always knew what we had to do when we were under attack, but what guides us now that we are free?

We know what to do in times of crisis. We have strong organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and other “anti” entities, but what do we stand for when we have no enemy or crisis?

4. The Israel Issue (Optional)

You might argue here that half the Jews in the world don't live in the United States. Half the Jews live in Israel, where the enemy is very clearly identifiable.

Yet, Israel – even with a clearly identifiable enemy – seems to also to be lacking vision and sense of direction. The leadership in Israel operates in firefighter-mode, extinguishing blaze after blaze. But beyond immediate damage control, what vision does it offer? No country can afford not to have vision and direction, especially one under attack.

As sad as it is, Muslims often sound more persuasive about their right to Jerusalem than do our Israeli brothers and sisters. They are passionate about their cause. They are ready to die for it. As twisted as their argument may be, they speak with a passionate and compelling voice. What compelling vision do we offer in return?

Zionism once offered a powerful cause. After years of persecution in Eastern Europe, after the Holocaust, Zionism beckoned: “Come join us as we rebuild our homeland. Come plant vineyards, plow the land, turn the desert into a metropolis and a Jewish home.” This message spoke to the hearts of thousands. It elicited the pioneering spirit of the early settlers of the land and joined them in a common struggle.

Such is the power of a great cause. All revolutions – the American, the French, the Russian – were driven by a common struggle. And when people were mobilized around it, they turned into a force for powerful change (some achieving better results than others). The definition of revolution is a strong or radical change in an existing system, the overthrow of a previous regime or paradigm. But is revolution possible when there is no defined adversary?

This is the presenting challenge of our times.

5. What To Stand For?

Just before the end of the year, I was asked by a congregant for advice; he wanted to know where he should be giving his charitable donations. He said he did not know where to put his money so that it really would make a difference.

He is not alone. In a recent interview, financier Michael Steinhardt, who has poured tens of millions of dollars into efforts to preserve Judaism for the next generations, stated his disappointment. He feels that the \$40 million he has so far given for Jewish survival has not accomplished its goals. Makor, Birthright and other programs he helped finance have all achieved good things – but they have not seriously impacted the secular young Jews as he intended. He feels that they have not changed anything in a fundamental way.

Many Jewish philanthropists are plagued by this problem. They want to have a serious plan to address Jewish continuity, or the so-called Jewish Renaissance. Some are terrified of the “religious” solution – either because of its narrow/fundamentalist agenda, or because they have a basic ambivalence concerning God and faith.

So, instead, they opt for a secular solution, which suffers from an equally compelling problem. It is often diluted at its core. It may have good intentions and even produce positive results. But its universal qualities end up diluting spiritual passion and drive and its distinctly Jewish dimension.

Truly, neither offers vision – a clear spiritual, Jewish vision for the future.

6. The Third Option

But there is, I humbly submit, a third option – which is the true nature of Torah and Judaism as given to us at Mount Sinai some 3,300 years ago. Indeed, this is the subject of this week’s Torah reading.

Torah is not “religious” in the fundamentalist, stereotypical sense of the word. It is not just for a certain group of Jews, and it is not merely a technical system of do’s and don’ts. More than anything else, it offers the entire universe a vision – a vision of how life can and should be lived to its fullest.

At Sinai, God gave the universe a Torah, which is not just a book for religious Jews. The Torah is a universal owner’s manual for all aspects of life. Indeed, the Midrash calls Torah a “blueprint” for existence, which God, the Cosmic Architect, used to create the universe. He then gave it to us to help us know how best to live our lives.

God, who is neither Jewish nor non-Jewish, gave all His creatures His divine mandate how to live the most meaningful life possible. The Torah’s universal vision is a life blueprint for all people, of all backgrounds, Jews and non-Jews, believer or not.

And what is this vision?

7. The Torah’s Vision

Briefly, the Torah tells us:

The quintessential personality of every human being is divine. We were all created in the Divine Image,² and our mission is to allow our soul to express itself through our body – to spiritualize our material corner of the universe, and make a home for the Divine.³

Each of us is charged with certain obligations and connections – mitzvahs – that allow us to refine our lives and our surroundings. We are charged with a divine mission to use all our skills to make use of every opportunity to elevate the material world toward higher, spiritual ends.

In every one of our encounters, interactions and experiences we have

²Genesis 1:26-27.

³Midrash Tanchuma Nasso 16. *Tanya* chapter 36.

⁴ See Deuteronomy 30:15-19.

two choices – we can either use this moment for personal, selfish gain, or we can use it for a higher cause that benefits others.⁴

This is a vision for all times, whether we face enemies or not.

8. The Torah Vision in History

This Torah vision has transformed the civilized world. Some are well aware of this, but not enough are. It's critical that we all be reminded of Torah's unprecedented visionary and transformative impact on the world.

Many history books – most of them written by non-Jews – document this fact. Among them: *Gifts of the Jews* by Thomas Cahill, *The Jewish Mystique* by Ernest Van den Haag, and *The History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson.

These books explain that before Sinai, the ideas of reverence for all life, equal justice, universal peace, social responsibility for the poor and downtrodden were unknown! For the very first time, the Torah taught: "Love your neighbor as yourself ... love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt ... protect the widow and the orphan ... render equal justice to the rich and the poor ... set slaves free every seven years ...

Just *one* chapter – chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus – has more groundbreaking laws for kindness and love between people than anything heard of before. And that's just *one* chapter of the Torah.

These laws were absolutely revolutionary and absolutely visionary.

The Torah gave the world a new vision of men and women with unique destinies. The Torah taught the world that life has purpose and progresses forward toward a destination. History has a beginning and is guided by Divine Providence for a purpose. Everything in creation is suffused with reason.

⁴ See Deuteronomy 30:15-19.

That Torah vision inspired our American Declaration of Independence and its hopeful belief that tomorrow can be better than today.

Because of the Torah's unique message – which our ancestors adopted and modeled for the world – John Adams, the second president of the United States, was moved to write:

The Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation ... They are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited the earth ... They have given religion to three-quarters of the globe and have influenced the affairs of mankind more, and more happily than any other nation, ancient or modern ... [even if I were an atheist] I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty Sovereign of the Universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization.⁵

9. What would Adams Say Today?

So what would Adams say to the Jews of today?

I suspect he would say to us: “Embrace the vision that your Torah has given to us all. If you lack vision it may be because you have forgotten its message. So look into your own Torah and you will find your answer.”

Freedom and prosperity – despite their potential for causing apathy – actually create a fertile stage where the divine vision of life can finally be realized. The Torah tells us that the vision of the future is a world that will be filled with “divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.”⁶ A world where material activities will simply be a means to spiritual gains.

Today we invest our time, energy and resources to primarily achieve personal gain and profit. But the days are coming when that same in-

⁵ John Adams in a letter to F.A. Van der Kemp, 1806.

⁶ Isaiah 11:9. See Maimonides end of his *Yad*.

vestment will be driven by spiritual goals that unite the planet and all its inhabitants.

There are hopeful signs already – such as the “Giving Pledge” taken by 57 world’s billionaires (many of them Jews) to give away at least half their wealth to charity.

In generations past, the Torah vision of life created a new standard for civilization. But that vision has yet to be fully implemented. Today, living in freedom as we do, we can finally complete our mission – we can bring revolution to the world.

10. A Day is Coming

A day is coming, when each one of us on this earth will recognize that we are unique and indispensable in the divine plan. Each of us is a necessary musical note in the large cosmic composition. We need each other to play the music together.

Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Agnostic, Atheist – every one of us, regardless of background and label, has this mission, and we must live up to it and help each other reach that place.

The unprecedented prosperity of our times – the freedoms and opportunities – has in some ways eliminated the common enemy, the enemy from without. But these blessings have also exposed a new enemy, the enemy from within. This enemy is called complacency and it causes us to take our freedoms for granted and, in the process, lose focus. Complacency causes us to abandon a passionate vision for the future.

Our challenge is to recognize how our freedoms have set the stage for a world where we can use these gifts as tools to achieve spiritual transformation. Instead of draining most of our resources to fight wars, we now can use them to find new opportunities – to boldly go where no man has gone before ... to create a spiritual revolution that will transform our universe into a divine garden.

A day is coming when we will see our present prosperity and accelerating technology as a divine gift to change the world in which we live.

That day can be today.

Some 3,300 years ago God gave us a vision for life. Are we ready to embrace it?

Can we afford not to? Amen.



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What does “kiki” look like? What does “bouba” look like? Not your Bubbe, but the nonsense word “bouba.” With what shape would you associate it?

It may sound funny, but this is a real question that psychologists ask, and believe it or not, in 95-98% of cases, research shows that “kiki” is imagined as a sharp pointy object and “bouba” as round soft one. And this “bouba/kiki effect” – I kid you not, this is what it is called – indicates that, in our minds, sounds have a visual component.

Such research is part of a larger field of study into multi-sensory integration and into the phenomenon of synesthesia. This is a neurological condition in which stimulation of one sense leads to an automatic reaction in another. For those people who have it, sounds may evoke colors, touch may trigger smells, images may translate into sounds.

I have not come across any statistical proof that Jews are more prone to synesthesia than other people, but I have anecdotal evidence that we might be. Jewish rituals tend to combine so many of the senses, and in this regard we are highly unusual. Many other belief systems insist that, to communicate with the Divine, we must detach ourselves from our senses.

The reason that we Jews don’t embrace that point of view comes from this week’s Torah reading, which describes the encounter between God and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. And as we read, we discover that this experience involved ... mass synesthesia!

At Mount Sinai, when the Jewish people *saw the sounds* and learned how to connect heaven and earth, the transcendent and the sensory.

This sermon describes the power of the senses [and sensuality], and why they are so important to bringing spirituality into our lives.

1. The Phenomenon of Synesthesia

What does “kiki” look like? What does “bouba” look like? Not your Bubbe, but the nonsense word “bouba.” With what shape would you associate it?

You laugh, but this is a real question that psychologists ask, and believe it or not, in 95-98% of cases, research shows that “kiki” is imagined as a sharp pointy object and “bouba” as round soft one.¹ And this “bouba/kiki effect” – I kid you not, this is what it is called – indicates that, in our minds, sounds have a visual component.

Such research is part of a larger field of study into multi-sensory integration and into the phenomenon of synesthesia. This is a neurological condition in which stimulation of one sense leads to an automatic reaction in another. For those people who have it, sounds may evoke colors, touch may trigger smells, images may translate into sounds. The composers Franz Liszt and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, both gifted with synesthesia, famously argued about the colors of musical notes. The Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky experienced four senses simultaneously: color, hearing, touch and smell. And physicist Richard Feynman saw his equations in colors.

¹ As per experiments by Wolfgang Köhler (1887-1967), the German-American psychologist and phenomenologist who contributed to the creation of Gestalt psychology.

I have not come across any statistical proof that we Jews are more prone to synesthesia than other people, but I have anecdotal evidence that we might be.

Our rituals tend to combine so many of the senses – on Rosh Hashana, for example, we hear the shofar, savor a tasty meal, and feast our eyes on specially adorned ritual objects in our synagogues and homes. When we teach our children the Hebrew alphabet, we sometimes smear the letters with honey, so that children learn to associate physical sweetness with spiritual sweetness.² And let us not forget the many special songs we sing at our holiday and Shabbat tables, while imbibing vintage wines and other delicacies.

In this regard Judaism is somewhat unusual.

2. Detaching from the Senses

Many other belief systems insist that, to communicate with the Divine, we must detach ourselves from our senses. They say – and there is a good point to this argument – that when we are over-stimulated by the things we see, hear, taste, touch and smell, we become distracted from our inner voice.

There is proof in everyday life that this is true. Witness how our level of focus is diminished when we are distracted by ringing cell-phones and buzzing Blackberries. Have'nt we all been in meetings where some people are constantly peeking at their gadgets? Besides the disrespect to the others, how can any of them truly apply the necessary attention to the issues being discussed? And how would they feel if a surgeon operating on their loved one was answering his cell-phone at the same time? Am I exaggerating the problem? Well, witness all the car accidents – some resulting in deaths – caused by texting drivers.

So there is truth to the argument that, in order to properly concentrate and allow our souls to speak, we need to subdue our senses.

² We still do this in every *cheder* in Israel.

Some belief systems even go a step further, asserting that our senses actually distort true reality – the inner truth within. Sight, sound, smell, taste and touch are superficial tools that can only relate to superficial, external experiences, they say. Intimacy requires intimate tools. Sublime experiences require sublime tools.

If our sensory tools are limited in perceiving the inner nature of the physical universe – from quantum mechanics to the human unconscious, from subatomic particles to microscopic DNA – how much more so are they inadequate in perceiving the metaphysical.

This seems to be the opinion of some Jewish mystics as well. They hold that, to reach deeper states of consciousness, we need to learn to get beyond our limited senses – which process experiences in linear fashion – and even beyond our natural logic. The Divine is experienced not through the senses but through silence. When the Prophet Elijah had his encounter with God, he found that God was not in the wind, earthquake, or fire but in the still, small voice.³

All this establishes a very strong case against the senses helping us reach the inner world of spirituality. The senses are simply too inadequate and limited. Their attachment to the tangible, sensory world distorts the true nature of matter (on the microscopic level) and spirit (on the metaphysical level), thus hampering our ability to achieve a higher state of consciousness.

Aah, but there is another side to the story.

3. Another Side to the Story

Yes, the senses can be a distraction. But these same senses very often *allow us* to experience the sublime. To admire the glory of a golden sunset, to hear the sound of exquisite music, to smell the subtle fragrance of budding blossoms, to taste the juice of freshly picked fruit, to touch the soft skin of our newborn child. All these sensations open us up to

³ First Book of Kings 19:11-12.

the sublime world we call sensuality, a very close sister to spirituality.

Yes, indeed, certain sensual stimuli can evoke transcendental feelings and passions, accessing intimate levels of our emotions and soul.

And why is that?

Consider what it takes to access and express the most desirable and holy of intangibles of our lives – love. Is it not through the senses? I mean, how do we communicate love?

Love – like every experience that stirs the heart and soul – is actually a bridge between the sensory and the transcendent. A loving look or caress can stimulate a sense, as well as express it. And then, like a sliding skate on ice or a strumming string on a fiddle, the stimulated sense opens a door to a place that is far beyond any tangible and describable experience. The more subtle, the more powerful.

In short, sensuality is where the senses meet that which is beyond the senses. A loving caress is both tangible and intangible. It glances the surface, but ignites an eruption of feelings.

Yet, sensuality has a complex history. For all its allure, it is not always associated with purity and innocence. Some even see it as antithetical to the spiritual.

So the question remains:

Which is true – do our senses support or weaken our spiritual experiences?

4. Encounter at Sinai

This week's Torah reading provides us with a revolutionary answer as it describes [the birth of sensuality in] the Jewish encounter with God at Mount Sinai:

The third day arrived. There was thunder and lightning in the morning, with a heavy cloud on the mountain, and an extremely loud blast of a ram's horn. The people in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp toward the Divine Presence. They stood transfixed at the foot of the mountain.

Mount Sinai was all in smoke because of the Divine Presence that had come down on it. God was in the fire, and its smoke went up like the smoke of a lime kiln. The entire mountain trembled violently. There was the sound of a ram's horn, increasing in volume to a great degree. Moses spoke, and God replied with a voice...⁴

This was, obviously, a profoundly mystical experience, but also an intensely sensual one with the thunder, lightning, blaring shofar, and the trembling, smoking mountain.

And then what happened?

Mass synesthesia!

Listen to this:

All the people *saw the sounds*, the flames, the blast of the ram's horn, and the mountain smoking. And the people trembled...⁵

The Midrash confirms it: "They saw what is ordinarily heard, and they heard what is ordinarily seen."⁶

5. The Ultimate Divine Experience

What do we learn from this?

That the ultimate divine experience is not to escape our sensory earth and travel to heaven but to integrate both – the transcendent and the sensory.

⁴ Exodus 19:16-19.

⁵ Exodus 20:15.

⁶ *Mechilta* on Exodus 20:15.

You don't want to escape this sensory earth too early, do you? None of us do. Heaven can wait, right? Or as Mark Twain said, "some of us would like heaven for the climate ... but hell for the company."

And while we are on the subject of hell, here's another one for you. This is from General Philip Henry Sheridan as he was returning from the Mexican War in 1866: "If I owned hell and Texas, I would rent out Texas and live in the other place."

The reason for integration – [of heaven and earth, not heaven and Texas] – is fundamental. The cardinal principle of the Judaism is divine unity (*Shema Israel, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One"). This means that there is only one seamless reality that permeates *all* of existence, and this includes the innermost recesses of the soul as well as the outermost layers of matter.

Thus, we cannot say that truth can be experienced exclusively by transcending or ignoring our senses. To do so questions the divine unity connecting all dimensions of experience.

Reality is reality. It is real through and through, from the depths to the shallows.⁷ If reality can be experienced only by denying the sensory world, divine unity is fundamentally compromised.

It is true that, if we depend on our senses alone, they can distract us from our inner lives. The sensory over-stimulation we experience every-day is a constant reminder of the formidable forces consuming our lives which we must contend with.

There is definitely a negative nature to the sensory universe and how it clutches us in its hold. On our own, we tend to gravitate to the easier option of superficial experiences. Without exerted effort, sensory stimuli can seduce us to the point of completely overwhelming our beings. Witness the hypnotic power of television and film, the manipulative mechanics of packaging, and how images, sounds and tastes are used to sell us products and services. If these senses carry superficial messages, their potent power can be used against us – assaulting our psyches, violating

⁷See Deuteronomy 4:39.

our inner space and distorting our perception of reality. Our senses can even become instruments of self destruction, leading to escapism, desensitization and addiction, as our sensory immune system is lowered due to hyper-stimulation.

The material senses can then “go off on their own,” divorced of their sublime connections. The soul of our senses, so to speak, can remain not only obscured, but completely hijacked.

Instead of a given sense being a catalyst that releases enormous power, it becomes a “candy” or “drug” that holds us tight in its tentacles of instant gratification – a “quick fix,” that always needs another one to follow. In place of our senses serving our intimate needs and opening up our spirits, selfish interests convert these same senses – like a sledge hammer being used to crack an egg – into tools of aggression. (Imagine a mother forcefully yanking her child’s arm instead of delicately reaching for it. Instead of a gentle touch, the same gesture becomes a jolt or a punch.)

And so, to counter that, we do need moments of silence and solitude to access our soul. Too many extracurricular noises will drown out our ability to hear the subtle hum within.

But within sensual stimuli lie reminders – sparks – of divine glory. Via our sensory experiences we can access profound heights of spirit.

6. The Ultimate Goal

The ultimate goal is to bridge both worlds – heaven and earth. This means to express the inexpressible, to see the unseen, to hear the silence, to touch the untouchable.

Sinai showed us that it can be done. Sinai fused heaven and earth – the higher and the lower. As the Midrash explains: “[At Sinai] that which was above could now descend below, that which was below could now ascend above.”⁸

⁸Midrash *Shemot Rabba* 12:3. Tanchuma Exodus 15.

Sinai gave us the power to fuse our senses with that which is beyond all senses. To experience transcendence while we are immersed in the minutia of sights and sounds.

7. Achieving Synthesis in Our Lives

How do we achieve this synthesis in our own lives?

By spiritualizing our material investments and sublimating our sensory experiences. This means we have to see our external lives as a means, as a stepping stone to achieving a higher sense of awareness and growth.

In every life experience we have two choices: 1) to indulge in the experience and move on, or 2) to see it as a tool, a vehicle for an act of virtue or a deeper insight.

When we see a beautiful sight, for instance, we can either just take it in, be stimulated and walk away. Or we can learn a lesson from the beauty that can help us understand the symmetry of life, the grand divine design of it all, and our responsibility to bring beauty and balance into our lives and surroundings.

The same with our other senses – sound, taste, touch and smell. They are not merely instruments for our entertainment, but vehicles to take us on an inner journey where our senses meet that which is beyond the senses.

Each of the mitzvahs enumerated in the Torah tackles another aspect of our material and sensory lives, with the objective of refining each respective segment of our material world. What does it take to love your neighbor as yourself, to honor your parents, to observe Shabbat ... if not your senses.

Take the simple example of the *havdalah* ceremony which separates the holy world of Shabbat from the mundane work-day week. We bless the light the candle and watch the flames, we

bless and smell the spices, we bless and taste the wine, we hear the words of blessing. This is the mitzvah which aims to take a little of the spirituality of Shabbat into the material world that is the rest of the week.

Furthermore, we are instructed to “beautify” all our mitzvot⁹ – that is, not just to do a mitzvah but to do it in a beautiful way.

We are charged with living beautiful lives, ones that exude pleasant and refined sights, sounds, tastes, touches and smells. As the Mishnah says: “Which path should a person choose? The one that is beautiful for him and for others.”¹⁰ And thus Judaism behooves us to integrate outer and inner beauty.

Ultimately, every mitzvah creates fusion – a seamless integration of the transcendent and the sensory.

Consider: Some 3,300 years ago, the powerful sights and sounds of Sinai changed the world forever. Quite awesome.

Consider: Today we have the ability to bridge the most tangible senses with the most intangible sublime. Quite a gift.

Consider: How you and I act today affects us all. Now and forever. Quite a responsibility.

Let us make sure we live up to it. Amen.

⁹Talmud *Shabbat* 133b. See Maimonides *Yad*, end of *Hilchot Issurei Mizbayach*.

¹⁰ *Avot* 2:1. See also Talmud *Berochet* 57b: Three things expand the mind, a beautiful home...

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