



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHAVUOT > One

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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May 15, 2013  
Shavuot - One

**Torah Vision: What Do We  
Stand For?**



# Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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## ABSTRACT

How would you sum up the importance of Shavuot today? Why is Sinai vital to our modern lives? What do we tell our children when asked why they should care about this holiday?

When we look around the Jewish world today, we see that, as a people, we can be divided into three categories: 1) Jews who are fundamentalists, driven primarily by religious observance; 2) Jews who are social activists, driven by humanitarian causes, and 3) Jews who are neither and care about little but their careers and material comforts.

While we tend to condemn the third category, each is missing something – and that something is an overall integrated vision of life. So we are driven to ask: Does Judaism offer us Jews such a vision?

Today, as we celebrate the great Sinai revelation, let us explore what Sinai – and Judaism overall – can contribute to each of us as individuals and to the human race. Because, more than anything else, we need to connect with its vision.

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. It defines what we stand for, and it fuels what drives us.

This sermon suggests that our vision is clearly spelled out in the Torah which was given to us at Mount Sinai some 3,300 years ago – a vision that is relevant today more than ever. And this vision is neither fundamentalist nor secular, and it is not limited to just Jews.

For the Torah offers *the entire universe a vision* – a vision of how life can and should be lived to its fullest.

And this vision is the most critical message we can share with our children; one that has the power to pre-empt so many problems.

## TORAH VISION: WHAT DO WE STAND FOR?

Let me begin with the most obvious question: How would you sum up the importance of Shavuot today? Why is Sinai vital to our modern lives? What do we tell our children or friends when asked why they should care about this holiday?

### 1. A Story of Giving

Dr. Rick Hodes,<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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, Jews 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 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 from now?

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.

### 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 – also seems 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, the Palestinians 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).

But what is our common struggle today?

## 5. What To Stand For?

Recently I was asked by a friend 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. 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 serious 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 a third option – which is the true nature of Torah and Judaism as given to us at Mount Sinai some 3,300 years ago.

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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:26-27.

<sup>3</sup> Midrash Tanchuma Nasso 16. Tanya chapter 36.



Each of us is charged with certain obligations and connections – mitzvahs, if you will – 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 two choices: 1) we can either use this moment for personal, selfish gain, or 2) we can use it for a higher cause that benefits others.<sup>4</sup>

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.

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<sup>4</sup> See Deuteronomy 30:15-19.

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.

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.<sup>5</sup>

## 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.”

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<sup>5</sup> John Adams in a letter to F.A. Van der Kemp, 1806.

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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 profit. But the days are coming when that same investment 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 105 of the world’s billionaires (many of them Jews) to give away at least half their wealth to charity.<sup>7</sup>

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.

And this vision is the most critical message we can and must share with our children; one that has the power to pre-empt so many problems. Imagine what our children would become if every morning and every evening they would hear from us – and see us show a passionate example – how they have an indispensable calling to change the world each in their own unique way. What type of adults would they become armed with a vision and a sense of urgency to realize the Sinai revolution their lives?

Just imagine... And then realize that this is not a mere fantasy. We have the power to make it a reality. We control destiny by making this vision a viable and vibrant force in the lives of our children and all those we come in contact with.

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 11:9. See Maimonides end of his Yad.

<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Giving\\_Pledge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Giving_Pledge)

## 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.

Gut Yom Tov.

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