



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHAVUOT > Two

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

May 16, 2013

Shavuot - Two

**Can We Perceive God With
Our Human Senses?**



Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart

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ABSTRACT

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.

There is no statistical proof that Jews are more prone to synesthesia than other people, but anecdotal evidence suggests 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, people must detach ourselves from our senses. We don’t.

The reason that we Jews don’t embrace that point of view is that when we encountered God at Mount Sinai, we had an experience of ... mass synesthesia! At Mount Sinai, 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.

It also explains how the simple *Yizkor* ceremony stimulates a synesthesia of a kind, as we listen to the holy words, taste the pain of our loss, and see in our minds eye our loved ones even though they are physically no longer with us. And we become poignantly aware that – although we can no longer touch them in this world – we feel that we are connected with them nevertheless.

CAN WE PERCEIVE GOD WITH OUR HUMAN SENSES?

Mass Synesthesia: What Happened At Sinai?

1. The Bouba/Kiki Effect

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

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

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.

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 or twanging emails. Haven't 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?

² We still do this in every cheder in Israel and around the world.

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.

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 First Book of Kings 19:11-12.

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 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

Today, as we celebrate the holiday of Shavuot, we are reminded of the Torah's 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

⁴ Exodus 19:16-19.

⁵ Exodus 20:15.

⁶ *Mechilta* on Exodus 20:15.

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.

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 everyday is a constant reminder of the formidable forces consuming our lives which we must contend with.

⁷ See Deuteronomy 4:39.

6. Negative Nature (Optional)

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 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.)

7. The Ultimate Goal

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.

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

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.

8. 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.

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

9. Yizkor: Beyond the Senses

Take the example of the *Yizkor* ceremony. As we listen to the words of the blessings, a kind of synesthesia takes place – we taste the pain of our loss and see in our minds eye our loved ones even though they are no longer with us. And we become poignantly aware that – although we can no longer touch them in this world – we feel that we are connected with them nevertheless.

What is a true touch? What is a real kiss?

It is where heaven meets earth ... where the sublime meets the secular ... where our senses meet our spirits ... where our bodies meet our souls.

And where we are reunited with our loved ones and with our ancestors.

Sinai gave us a way to reopen, renew and feel again that connection. And we can strengthen it by doing mitzvahs in their memory. Whenever we search out a Torah class which focuses on the Torah's relevance to our personal, emotional and spiritual lives, we learn how to make use the tools of this world – our senses and physical gifts – and reach out to touch what is beyond the senses.

10. Living Beautiful Lives

The Torah charges us 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." 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.

Gut Yom Tov.