



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHAVUOT > Two

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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June 5, 2014  
Shavuot - Day Two

**The Lie Detector Test**



# Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart

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Enter the Heart”

SHAVUOT > Day Two > The Lie Detector Test

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## ABSTRACT

How do we know that Judaism is true? How do we know that the Torah is true?

Yes, we believe it, but how do we know? Indeed, how do we recognize truth and how do we know if an experience, a lifestyle, a faith, a belief is true? What sign do we look for?

This is an apt question for Shavuot – when we re-experience receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai.

The Jews’ reaction to receiving the Torah was seemingly very impulsive and irrational. Right after they received it, they declared, *Naaseh v’Nishma*, we will do and we will understand. We will do first and only understand later.

This does not sound very Jewish. Jews question, analyze, debate, dissect, study everything – why would the receiving of the Torah be any different? Would you sign a contract without first reading and understanding it?

Here is a clue: Do we only breathe after we have analyzed, questioned, debated, dissected and studied breath?

When something is essential, it is true to us. The only question is: Is Judaism essential?

Shavuot

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## WHAT IS TRUTH?

### THE LIE DETECTOR TEST

#### 1. Wait For The Laugh (Joke)

Harry went for a job interview. It seemed to go well because before he left, he was told, “We would like you to work for us. We’ll give you ten bucks an hour starting today and in three months time we’ll increase it to fifteen an hour. So when would you like to start?”

Harry replied, “In about three months from now.”

Which reminds me of the time my friend Isaac was sitting at a table in his favorite restaurant when he called over his waiter.

“Yes?” asked the busy waiter.

“Are you sure you’re the waiter I ordered from?” asked Isaac.

“Why do you ask?” replied the waiter.

“Because I was expecting a much older man by now.”

#### 2. Jewish DNA

Today is the second day of Shavuot. On this profound holiday, we celebrate the giving of the Torah at Sinai and its anchoring existence in our present-day lives. The Torah is the constitution of the world in general and of the Jewish people in particular. In this book, in this Torah, are contained the laws and philosophies, the ideas and concepts, the meaning and relevance of all of Judaism.

But even more than that: The Torah is the blueprint and “operator’s manual” of the universe and of the Jew. In it the Cosmic Engineer who created us all documented the makeup of every person.

The Torah is the Jew's fabric and DNA. If you want to know how to make the perfect cheesecake, you look in a cookbook. If you want to study the history of the United States, you look in a history book. If you want to know Bob Dylan's real name, you look in Wikipedia (by the way, it's Shabtai Zvi Zimmerman). And if you want to know what Judaism is all about, what it means to be a Jew, you look in the Torah. There is only one place qualified to describe and define Judaism – and that place is the Torah.

No man, no woman, no scholar, no layperson, no *person* can define Judaism, for no person created Judaism. What a person can do is look in the divine Torah and learn how God defines Judaism, what it aspires to, and what it inspires us to be.

Shavuot then, the festival of the giving of the Torah, is the most opportune time to look into the manifesto of Judaism – the Torah – to address our most pressing questions with regard to our religion.

### 3. Is Judaism True?

The question I would like to address this Shavuot, the question that I think encompasses all Jewish questions, is: How do we know that Judaism is true? How do we know that the Torah is true?

This question obviously follows the axiomatic belief that Judaism and the Torah are true – I mean, why else would we be here praying in synagogue on a beautiful Thursday afternoon if it weren't?

So, we believe they are true, but how do we *know*? Indeed, how do we recognize truth and how do we know if an experience, a lifestyle, a faith, a belief is true? What sign do we look for?

### 4. Is Faith Blind?

And since we are already posing such heavy questions, let us pose another: Is faith blind?

Do we fulfill the mitzvahs of the Torah out of a deep understanding or just because? Is there blind compliance to dogma and perhaps a dose of superstition in our observance?

The general stereotype is that religious people are blind followers going wherever they are led. Faith is seen as an absence of reason, even a crutch. Believers don't think but just do whatever they are told. Indeed, some would say that it is completely irreligious – maybe even blasphemous – to pose the question we posed, "How do we know Judaism is true?" They would say that as religious people we should just believe it and not question it.

But, since the Torah is our constitution, let's see what the Torah has to say on this subject of blind faith.

When we open the Torah to the Book of Exodus, we find our answer.

*And he [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it within the hearing of the people, and they said ... "Naaseh v'Nishma we will do and we will hear."*

Yikes! The Jewish reaction to God's giving of the Torah seems, at first flush, to reinforce the stereotype of a bunch of bleating sheep blindly following their shepherd. *We will do and we will hear* – means we will first do and only after we will understand what we do.

Doing before hearing, acting prior to analyzing and understanding seems exactly like the type of thing no enlightened person would do.

And this also does not sound like the Jewish way. Jews analyze and challenge everything. Jews can be skeptical and even cynical. Jews are downright suspicious of all things. Would any Jew sign a contract without first reading and understanding it? Why – when they received the Torah – were they so eager to act without first listening, questioning and understanding?

It doesn't make any sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 24:7.

## 5. The Talmudic Take

The Talmud discusses this episode of the Jews' unconditional commitment to the Word of God and provides an interesting, if cryptic, analogy:

Why is Israel compared to an apple tree? To tell us: just as an apple tree's fruit precede its leaves, so too Israel put "doing" before "understanding."<sup>2</sup>

Then the Talmud continues, describing how a Tzeduki (one of the heretical Sadducees) questioned this idea of *Naaseh v'Nishma*, of doing before understanding:

There was once a Tzeduki who saw [the great Torah scholar] Rava so engrossed in his study that his hand fingers were, unwittingly, pressed beneath his feet and being rubbed till they bled, and exclaimed, "Oh what an impetuous people you are, who put your mouth before your ears. You still are impetuous! First you should have listened; then, if you found it satisfactory, you should have accepted, and if not, you should not have accepted!"

To which Rava replied: "We, who walk in complete [faith], of us it is written, *The innocence [perfect faith] of the upright leads them*.<sup>3</sup> But those people who walk in perverseness, of them it is written, *The distortion of the faithless robs them*.<sup>4</sup>

Now, you might be wondering how this excerpt from the Talmud answers our question. Indeed, if anything the Talmud raises more questions than answers. I mean:

- How does comparing Jews to an apple tree, whose fruit precedes its leaves, enlighten us as to why the Jews acted before understanding?

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<sup>2</sup> Shabbat 88a-b.

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 11:3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

- Rava's answer seems to reinforce the Tzeduki's very logical question. Instead of giving him a rational answer, Rava merely restates that we are indeed complete and innocent. Is this an answer?
- What does "walking complete" have to do with doing before understanding? How does this explain anything?<sup>5</sup>

## 6. Fundamental Teaching of the Baal Shem Tov

Exactly 254 years ago to the day, on the holiday Shavuot, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, returned his soul to his Maker. One of the brilliant Chassidic leaders who (stems from a dynasty tracing its way back to the Baal Shem Tov and who) perpetuated the Baal Shem Tov's teachings was the second Rebbe of Gur, known as the Sfas Emes,<sup>6</sup> after the mystical commentary he authored on the Torah.

The Sfas Emes addresses the subject of preceding doing before understanding, by quoting a fundamental teaching of the Baal Shem Tov – that whatever item we use in this world to fulfill a mitzvah, we elevate to God, *and* whenever we fulfill a mitzvah, in that very moment, we act for the sake of Heaven.<sup>7</sup>

Often times we understand mitzvahs, or good deeds, as being a means to something else. For instance we eat kosher food so that we can have energy to serve the Creator, or we give charity to support the needy. These mitzvahs are a way of making this world a better place. That is a way of elevating the object – the food, the money – to God.

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<sup>5</sup> Rashi explains Rava's words as saying "we trusted God as one would out of love. We relied on Him not to burden us with something we could not uphold." But this itself needs explanation: Why indeed did the Jews trust God to this extent?

<sup>6</sup> R' Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905).

<sup>7</sup> See Keter Shem Tov #113b (Kehot p. 66).

But the Baal Shem Tov says that in addition to all of the above, which is certainly positive, there is also an intrinsic goodness in each thing and by performing the mitzvah we are immediately affecting goodness in that object. For example: Giving charity isn't only a means to helping another person – though that is wonderful – giving charity is actually revealing the Godly energy and divine truth in money *itself*. Making a blessing on and eating kosher food isn't merely a form of energizing and sustaining ourselves – though that is important too – but it reveals and frees the divine spark within the food *itself*.

Put another way: One way of looking at a mitzvah is as a *prelude* to something else, an *introduction* or *preparation* for a *coming* reality. But another way of looking at a mitzvah is as an act in and of *itself*, as an *immediate* transformation in the object used for the mitzvah.

This alone is a transcendent message: Every act we do maximizes, optimizes and actualizes the potential in the very object or subject we are dealing with. Every moment isn't merely prep for something else in the future, but an actual realization of a potential right now.

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that instead of seeing the world merely as a series of events with one leading to and influencing another, we should see each event in that moment as being the most important and essential event in the history of the world. Because by performing that act, by fulfilling that mitzvah, we are freeing the divine spark in whatever object we are using.

## 7. Sfas Emes Continued

Building upon this principle, the Sfas Emes continues to address the profound statement of *Naaseh v'Nishma* and the Talmud's explanation of it via the apple tree metaphor.

Why do trees have leaves? he asks. The tree is meant to produce fruits, which are delicious to eat and whose seeds will produce more trees. Who needs leaves? (Did you ever think about that?) Well, the tree needs leaves to protect its blossoms and its fruit, and that is why leaves appear first – in *preparation* for the fruit.



We can understand this idea with a simple example from our own lives. We all went to school – hopefully. As children we went to kindergarten, then elementary school, then high school. If you made your nice Jewish mother proud, you went to an Ivy League University and became a world-famous neurosurgeon.

All of your years of education, from playgroup through medical school, prepared you for being a neurosurgeon. Without first learning to interact with other children, without first learning the alphabet, basic math and chemistry, you would never have been able to get into medical school and become a neurosurgeon.

This same principle applies to a business: If you want to start a business, there are many prerequisites you have to fulfill before you can do so – you have to have a business plan, raise the necessary capital, acquire a business license, etc.

The same is true with a sermon, especially one as good as this one: I don't just get up here and open my mouth, hoping something will come out. I spend time preparing meaningful content so as not to waste anyone's time.

With all things, preparation is a must. And this is symbolized by a tree and the preparation that is involved in producing fruit – from tilling the earth, planting the seed, and watering it, to nurturing the sapling until the leaves sprout, blossoms appear and are pollinated by bees, and to finally harvesting the fruit that is ripening. That's a lot of time and effort. But that's the way the world works.

That, says the Sfas Emes, *is the way the world works*, yes, but it is not the way the Source of all things, God, works. At the source of everything, when God creates anything, every single *thing* is essential in of itself, and it is not defined as being preparatory to something else. At the source (in the "source code" so to speak), a tree from seed to fruit, and everything in between, is all there at the moment of inception.

This, says the Sfas Emes, is the profundity of *Naaseh v'Nishma*, as captured in the metaphor of the apple tree:

Because we humans are bound to time and space in this world, many steps are required before we achieve our end goal. But by God, who by stark contrast is not bound by anything, leaf and fruit can be simultaneous.

## 8. Getting Practical

Now let's get practical.

Why did God design the world in this way? Why is all this preparation necessary? Why must we study something before we know it? Why does an aspiring biology student have to go to medical school before becoming a doctor? Why is it that in order to bake a silky-yet-dense cheesecake one must learn a recipe? Why is it that we must do our research, appraisals, and title searches before buying a house? Why is so much due-diligence necessary before achieving a merger of two companies, or a merger of two people (what we call marriage)?

The possible reasons why all this preparation is necessary are three: 1) we don't know the subject/issue/matter/person and have to learn about it, or 2) we don't know if it is right for us, or 3) we don't trust it and have to appraise its value.

Simply put, we are separate entities from the thing we are learning, acquiring or merging with; it is something *outside* of us, *missing* from us, so we have to take many steps to find and acquire it.

Judaism and the Jews' relationship with God is not like that at all. Our connection with God is intrinsic. It isn't something we have to learn, appraise, or analyze. It is not outside, but inside.

A doctor has to *become* a doctor, and to become something many preparatory steps and requirements are necessary. But a Jew does not have to *become* a Jew – a Jew *is* a Jew. A Jew is God's child, and God is our "parent" – bound together as one. Parent and child need no preparatory education and training to connect with each other.

This is why, at Sinai, the Jewish people could put doing ahead of understanding. Normally, with things *external* to ourselves, we first have to learn, study, and understand before we can act. But with things *internal* to ourselves, which are part of who we are, we just do them. We don't have to understand before we breathe, we just breathe. And only after we breathe do we analyze the respiratory system and understand why it is we breathe, or learn to breathe in better ways.

At Sinai, with the giving of the Torah, the Jews were in a state of absolute truth and reality; their quintessential connection with God was revealed – a state of utter love and seamless and wholesome integrity. They walked with completeness with perfect faith, trust and love. The conventional preludes and preparations were therefore not necessary because they were already the natural state of the Jew and his complete trust in God.

When we step “away” from Sinai, especially in our fast-paced times, with all of the distractions around us, we can forget that the natural and intrinsic state of the Jew is Judaism and his connection with God, and the natural state of Judaism is the Torah. On Shavuot, when the energy of the original Sinai is recreated, we are reminded of our core personalities.

This is what the Baal Shem Tov is teaching us: each and every action in and of itself (in addition to being a means to and preparation for something else) a service of God, not only because it will *prepare* and *energize* us for spiritual ends but because the object *immediately* realizes its spiritual end.

## 9. The Whole Truth (Optional)

There is a well-known Talmudic statement, *Ayn mukdam u'm'uchar ba'Torah*, “There is no before or after in the Torah.”<sup>8</sup> This statement is usually quoted in discussions revolving around whether or not the Torah is composed in a strict chronological order.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Pesachim 6b. Mechilta, Beshalach 7. Sifri Bamidbar 64. Kohelet Rabbah 1:31.

But the Sfas Emes applies it another way. He says that transient things have a before and after – before you are young, after you are old. But with the Torah there is no before and after. Every letter of the Torah is complete and whole – and timeless.

When this eternal Torah, whole and complete, was given at Sinai, it engulfed the Jews in a new reality so that they too reached a level of wholeness and completion. And that is why they said *Naaseh v'Nishma*, “we will do and we will understand.” That statement came naturally to them because true completion and wholeness is when the fruit, the action, is as natural as the idea and ideal.

## 10. Back to the Original Question

Now, at last, we can answer our original question: How to know if Judaism is true? And we will answer it by going back to the Talmudic comparison of the Jews with an apple tree.

The Talmud bases its comparison on a verse in the Song of Songs: *As an apple tree among the trees of the forest...*<sup>9</sup> which is actually speaking about God.

God, on some metaphorical level, is compared to an apple tree, for an apple tree represents the wholeness and completion of things, for its end result, fruit, does not come as a result of preparation (i.e. the leaves). At Sinai, the Jews were also filled with the divine energy of wholeness and completion – the seamless truth of reality (where there is no hierarchy of past and present preparation and action) resonated in their souls. And therefore they too were analogous to an apple tree, as they were emulating this divine ideal – naturally doing (fruit) before understanding (leaves), like one naturally breathes even if does not yet understand.

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<sup>9</sup> Song of Songs 2:3.

And thus Rava told the Tzeduki – because we are whole and complete, because our reality and resonating truth is the source of all things, action and understanding are one and the same thing, doing is understanding and understanding is doing. *Ayn mukdam u'm'uchar ba'Torah*, there is no before or after, only eternity where all is whole and complete.

And this offers us an important and far-reaching lesson for our lives: At a certain essential level, all of our dreams and potentials are actually already realized, as a tree's fruit is realized at the source. All we have to do is reach a state of *Naaseh v'Nishma* – coming from our love and intrinsic connection with the divine.

And what better time to do that than the holiday of Shavuot?

## 11. A Few Words on *Yizkor*

In just a few moments, we will begin the most sacred of services – the memorial service of *Yizkor*, where we remember, pray for, and connect with our loved ones whose souls have traveled upward.

Today is a holy and joyous holiday, and according to Jewish law one may not mourn on a festive holiday. *Yizkor*, then, though it is a heartfelt moment, is not a sad one. Though it is a moment that may bring tears, it is not a moment that brings hopelessness. Though it is a time to remember our loved ones who have passed on to a different dimension, it is also a time to remember that our loved ones have not left us. And never will.

The very reason for this is the profound message of *Naaseh v'Nishma*.

Jews have always knows this essential truth: Our souls are eternal. At our core, we are one with God and God is Eternal. For God, doing and understanding are one and the same thing, because for God there is no difference between a potential something and an actual something. For God, a soul is perfectly eternal before it is born into this physical dimension and remains perfectly eternal after it leaves and returns to its natural spiritual state.

The material world is subject to a schism between action and understanding, between what we may know and what we may do, a dissonance between our essential state and how we express it. This schism often creates blindness. We do not always see what is real in every stage of existence. We may be lucky enough to experience it for a time, but then our eyes are once again shut to the deeper truth and higher reality.

And so we pray at *Yizkor*, we pray to remember our loved ones. But even more: We pray to always remember and never forget that we dream and work for a *physical* world of the future, when both action and understanding, both body and soul, both leaves and fruits, both physical form and spiritual life will be revealed as one – whole and complete for all eternity.

## 12. Conclusion:

Past, Present, and Future walk into a bar.

The bartender says: “Is it me, or did it just get tense in here?”

Truth is defined by being as electric in the present as it was in the past or will be in the future; just as vibrant in the past as it is in the present or future; just as alive in the future as it is in the present or was in the past.

By this standard, God, the Torah, and the Jewish people are true through and through. The Torah is as real and meaningful today as it was at Sinai, and it will be so for all eternity. We know Judaism is true because it resonates within our core essence of being. We don’t have to analyze a mitzvah for it to become a part of us, for the mitzvah already is a part of us. We just have to do it.

As with breathing – we don’t breathe because we are alive; we are alive because we breathe. We aren’t Jewish because we do Jewish deeds; we do Jewish deeds because we are Jewish. We are one with God not because we understand unity; we understand unity because we are one with God.

Of course, being the intellectual and analytical creatures that we are – and no people in the history of the world were ever more intellectual and analytical than the Jews – we must scrutinize and analyze and dissect every nuance of this divine gift called the Torah. We must do so precisely because every detail is truthful and eternal, and it is incumbent upon us to break it down to its molecular level and become intimately familiar with all its components. This is why we Jews place such a strong emphasis on education and knowledge.

However, our study and understanding does not *create* our reality – that is, God and His Torah – but it helps us understand it.

So we begin with doing (*naaseh*) – a commitment based on our intrinsic and pure connection with the divine will. But then we study, understand and integrate (*nishma*) that connection.

Faith isn't blind, anymore than breathing is blind. Just because we breathe without first writing a thesis on it doesn't make breathing wrong. Faith is but connecting with our resonating core.

We, today, stand witnesses to the fact that the Torah and the Judaism which is based on it are as vibrant today as they were yesterday and will be just as vibrant tomorrow as they are today.

May it be that our actions and our understanding lead to a spontaneous and simultaneous combustion – not one as a prelude to the other, but both as a complement of one another.

Today, Shavuot, as we read from and connect with the Book of the Covenant, the whole and truth-filled book, let us all proclaim: *Naaseh v'Nishma* – “we will do and we will understand!”

And may it be so.

Chag Sameach!