



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

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

Devarim > Ki Tavo > King and Farmer

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ABSTRACT

Can God be found in the workplace, on a regular workday, or is the spiritual experience reserved for special locations, on special days of the year? Do we need to separate ourselves from our mundane daily routines to access God?

One of the most beautiful and revolutionary contributions of Judaism is that the Divine can and must be experienced in our material existence – not in meditative seclusion on a mountaintop, not through asceticism or self-depravation, but in our very physical lives and activities.

This is the lesson of this week’s Torah reading and of the current Hebrew month of Elul – the month which holds the secret of how to access heaven on earth, the month that teaches: yes, you can hold infinity in the palm of your material hand and eternity in the mundane hours of your routine life; yes, you can experience the extraordinary in the ordinary, and yes, you can touch the sky even as your feet are firmly planted on ground and your hands toiling in the earth.

It is a common metaphor in Jewish literature to describe God as the king, and humanity as the farmer toiling in the field. Perhaps if the sages were writing today, they would use the metaphor of the Prime Minister and the banker, or the CEO and the junior executive, but somehow it would not have the same ring. Certainly not when we are speaking about the month of preparation for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, when it is said that God is at His most accessible, when “the King is in the field.” The king has left the palace and is now communing with the farmer in the field.

In modern workingman’s or workingwoman’s terms the field is the office or the home. What if the king – the chairman of the board – came calling. We’d offer him a cup of tea or a gin-and-tonic, and then what? He has the potential to grant us whatever we want. But do we know what that is? How can we make the most of this encounter?

Devarim

Ki Tavo

King and Farmer

1. Introduction

Can God be found in the workplace, on a regular workday, or is the spiritual experience reserved for special locations, on special days of the year? Do we need to separate ourselves from our mundane daily routines to access God?

One of the most beautiful and revolutionary contributions of Judaism is that the Divine can and must be experienced in our material existence – not in meditative seclusion on a mountaintop, not through asceticism or self-depravation, but in our very physical lives and activities.

This week's Torah reading teaches us exactly that. Yes, must sanctify our lives, but we do so *not* by escaping and separating ourselves, but by immersion.

In this week's reading, the Torah obligates a farmer in the Land of Israel to collect the first fruits to ripen in his field and bring them in a basket to the Temple. The farmer brings the first fruit, but then all the other fruit remains his and will be consumed by the farmer and his family – but in a way that is infused with the spirit of the first fruit offering.

So, it is fitting that we should speak today about the farmer and the king.

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Certainly not when we are speaking about the month of Elul, the Hebrew month which precedes the High Holidays, when it is said that “the King is in the Field.”

2. The Analogy of the King and Farmer

The 18th century Hassidic Master, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi – also known as the Alter Rebbe – explains what this means.

First the Rebbe asks why the days in the month of Elul are all weekdays, and not holidays? After all, what makes a certain day a special holy-day is the unique Divine energy that manifest on that day. Since Elul is the month of compassion – when the Thirteen Divine Traits of Compassion shine – should it not be a month of holidays? And yet it has none. The Rebbe then tells the story of the “king in the field”:

The king’s usual place is in the capital city, in the royal palace. Those wishing to approach the king must go through the appropriate channels in the palace bureaucracy and gain the approval of a succession of royal secretaries and ministers. They must journey to the capital and pass through the many gates, corridors and antechambers that lead to the throne room. Their presentation must be meticulously prepared, and they must adhere to an exacting protocol – in dress, speech and mannerism – when granted an audience with His Royal Highness.

However, there are times when the king comes out into the fields that surround the city. At such times, anyone can approach him. The king receives them all with a smiling face. The farmer behind his plow has closer access to the king than the highest ranking minister in the royal court.

And the month of Elul – which is to say *now* – is the time when the king is in the field.

This explains why Elul is not a month of holidays: The special uniqueness of this month is precisely in that we can find God in our mundane lives!¹

¹ Likkutei Torah, Re’eh 32b.

In Elul we are involved in our regular schedules. Indeed, the beginning of the work year marked by Labor Day always begins in Elul. Yet, at the same time, Elul provides us with the resources to discover the “King” in the field of our endeavors.

3. A Time of Preparation

Elul is also the time to audit our spiritual accounts and assess the year gone by. It is a time to prepare for the “Days of Awe” of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur by examining the failings of the past and making resolutions for the future. It is a time to immerse ourselves in prayer and charitable activities, for the famous prayer of the High Holidays states:

On Rosh Hashana the judgment is written down, and on Yom Kippur the verdict is sealed ... who will live, who will die ... who by fire, who by water ... but *teshuva* (repentance), *tefillah* (prayer) and *tzedakah* (charity) cancel the evil decree.

Elul is the opportune time to do all this because it is a month when God relates to us in a more open and compassionate manner than He does during the other eleven months of the year.

For the other eleven months of the year, our lives alternate between the field and the palace – that is, between the stressful, material endeavors of life and the peaceful moments of rest or joyous celebration which are Shabbat and the holidays. That is when we abandon the process of earning our daily bread to enter into the royal presence. In the month of Elul, however, the king leaves the palace and comes out into the field.

4. What Happens Now?

What happens when the king comes out into the field? The field is not transformed into a palace, yet neither is the king any less a king when he greets the farmer in his soiled overalls. Back in the throne room, it is very different of course. Back in the throne room, there is an aura of

sanctity that surrounds the king, and the sweat and mundane toil of the field seem a million miles away. So what happens now?

To answer this question is to understand the essence of Elul. But to do that, we must first examine the relationship between the palace and the field, between the very concepts of “holy” and “mundane.” Are they really as distant from each other as their very different faces suggest? Or is there some deeper connection between them, some common bond that unites them?

The world is constructed so that we must work to put food on the table. A glance at the calendar reveals that the “mundane” days of the year far outnumber the “holy.” Of course, it would be extremely difficult to earn a living if the week consisted of a single workday followed by six days of rest. Indeed, in creating us, God burdened us with a host of material needs and placed us in a world that requires a great deal of time in the field to satisfy these needs.

5. Toiling in the Field

There was a time when most everyone literally worked on the land, when most everyone plowed, sowed and harvested the crops for the table. Of course, today, family farms have been swallowed up by the agro-food complex, and the small farmer of yore is hard to find or has to make a living off the land in a more creative fashion.

That reminds me of the couple who were driving down a country lane on their way to visit some friends. They came to a muddy hole in the road, and their car got stuck, wheels spinning, mud flying. They were very upset, but not for long ... because a few minutes later, there appeared a farmer driving a team of horses before him. He stopped and offered to pull them out of the mud for \$50. Their readily agreed, and minutes later the car was free. As they paid the farmer, he mentioned, “You know, you’re the tenth car I’ve helped out of the mud today.” They were amazed, “Really? When do you have time to plough your land? At night?” “Oh, no,” said the farmer, “At night I put water in the hole.”

So even though only a small percentage of people work the land and are actual farmers, we all labor for our bread in some way.

Well, most of us anyway. A fellow applying for a job was asked by the interviewer, “So what are you presently doing?” He replied: “I work for my brother.” “And what does your brother do?” “He’s looking for a job” ... But most everyone does work.

We all work in the field – be it the wheat-field or cornfield, or the field of banking, steelmaking, medicine or politics. “The field” represents the entire spectrum of our workday endeavors.

Indeed, the field is the primary prototype employed by Torah law to distinguish between the “holy” and “mundane” days of the calendar. The passage in the Talmud that lists the types of work forbidden on Shabbat reads: “The categories of work are ... sowing, plowing, reaping, gathering sheaves, threshing, winnowing, picking the chaff from the grain, milling, sifting, kneading, baking...”²

Of course, each of these activities represents an entire spectrum which includes many different types of work, but the metaphor of the field and the elements of bread-making cannot be lost on us.

6. Building Home for God

Furthermore, on two occasions, the Torah bids us to rest on Shabbat and juxtaposes that command with instructions how to build a Sanctuary for God, a palace for the King.³ The elements in building this spiritual edifice all involve manual labor. Indeed, they involve all the categories of work forbidden on Shabbat and holidays.

Furthermore, fifteen raw materials – including gold, silver, copper, wood, flax, wool and animal skins – are named from which was to be

² Talmud, Shabbat 73a and 74b.

³ Exodus ch. 31 and ch. 35.

fashioned a dwelling for God in the physical world.⁴ As God told Moses, “They shall make for Me a Sanctuary and I will dwell among them.”⁵

The physical construction of this spiritual edifice mirrors our purpose on earth. For we are a spiritual soul in a physical body, and we accomplish our spiritual purpose when we imbue our material involvements with integrity and sanctity. In this way, our workday life – our work in the field – becomes a home for God, a palace where His goodness dwells.

Indeed, the Talmud⁶ tells us that when a soul ascends to heaven upon completing its earthly life, the very first question it must answer is: “Have you dealt honestly in business?” *This* question comes before any other having to do with prayer or Torah study or any other spiritual pursuit. So, it is clear that in no other area of life is our spiritual purpose in this world fulfilled *more* than in our day-to-day *material* dealings.⁷

In other words, the work that occupies the “mundane” days of our lives, and from which we are to rest on Shabbat and the other “holy” days of the year, is actually “holy” work. It is the work of constructing the Sanctuary for God out of the materials of physical life. The mundane is mundane in appearance only – an illusion that is the result of the opaque veneer of physicality that conceals its holy reality.

7. The Purpose of Holy Days

But if the mundane days are actually holy, what then are the so-called “holy” days of our lives? If the “holy” days are days in which the construction of the Sanctuary is to be halted, what relation – if any – do they have to the purpose of our souls’ descent into the material world? Are Shabbat and the holidays mini-vacations from life?

⁴Exodus 25:3-7.

⁵Exodus 25:8.

⁶Midrash Tanchuma, Nasso 16; also see The Tanya, ch. 36.

⁷Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

Shabbat and the holidays are elevations in the terrain of time, lookout points for a transcendent view upon its plains and valleys. Without these periodic glimpses from a higher, more detached, perspective, our involvement in the material may well become a trap. Instead of elevating the mundane, we may find ourselves being brought down by it.

Beyond its mundane surface, the material world hides a deeper truth – its potential to house the goodness of its Creator. The purpose of our workday lives is to reveal this potential, to develop the material world as a home for God’s goodness. But on the workdays of our life, this potential is all but invisible to us. It is obscured by its very nature. Our very involvement with the material prevents us from experiencing its spiritual essence. To do so, we must rise above it. A “holy” day is a point in time in which we pierce the surface of our workday lives to behold the true face of our world.

8. The King Comes to the Field

And that brings us around to Elul. For all the other eleven months of the year, our lives alternate between the holy and the mundane – between the material labor of life and the spiritual vision of that labor’s objective. For eleven months of the year, we must regularly take a rest from our physical labors in the field in order to rise above it and glimpse its true purpose.

But in the month of Elul, the king comes to the field.

The king is the heart and soul of the nation, the embodiment of its goals and aspirations. During the rest of the year the king is sequestered behind the palace walls. He is only be glimpsed – if at all – through a veil of opulence and majesty. But, even when he dwells in the palace, the king is a very real part of the farmer’s field. He is the reason for the farmer’s plowing and sowing; he is the object of his harvest. No farmer labors for the sake of labor. He labors to transcend the dust of which he and his field are formed – to make more of what is. He labors for his dreams. He labors for his king.

So is the king in the field an apparition out of its element? Hardly. We may not be used to seeing him here, but is not the royal heart, too, sustained by bread? His bread may be baked in the palace, but its raw ingredients are discreetly delivered through the service entrance. The golden tray on which the king's bread is served may not evoke the dirt from which the wheat grew, but the bread on the golden tray is the product of the field all the same.

The king in the field is making contact with the source of his sustenance, with the underpinnings of his sovereignty.

As for the farmer – when he sees the king in his field, does he keep on plowing? Does he behave as if this were just another day in the field? Of course not.

9. A Time Like No Other

Elul is not a month of ordinary workdays. Elul is a month of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary workdays. It is a time charged with holiness. We might still be in the field, but the field has become a holier place due to the presence of the king among us.

Still, when the farmer sees the king in his field, does he run home to wash and change? No. For the king has come to the field, to commune with the processors of his bread in *their* environment and on *their* terms.

In the month of Elul, the essence and objective of life becomes that much more accessible. No longer do the material trappings of life conceal and distort its true purpose, for the king is paying a visit. But unlike the holidays of the year, when we are lifted out of and above our workday lives, the encounter of Elul takes place in our material environment, on our workingman's terms.

Elul reveals the secret of how to access heaven on earth. And it is this:

Yes, you can hold infinity in the palm of your material hand and eternity

in the mundane hours of your routine life. Yes, you can experience the extraordinary in the ordinary. And yes, you can touch the sky even as your feet are firmly planted on ground and your hands toil in the earth, in the field.

10. A Call to Action

In modern workingman's or workingwoman's terms the field is the office or the home. So imagine that the king – the chairman of the board – comes calling. You offer him a cup of tea or a gin-and-tonic, and then what? He has the potential to grant you whatever you want. But do you know what you want?

Imagine the king's visit and imagine yourself asking for your heart's desire. Perhaps you should prepare in advance. Perhaps you should write out your speech to the king. Perhaps you should rehearse it.

In preparation for the above, consider making "holy" one of the "mundane" activities of your workday. What would that look like? How something so ordinary can be made special to earn the notice and approval of the king?

As you are doing this, be aware that the High Holidays – when the judgments are handed down and verdicts sealed – are just around the corner. Look towards the New Year. Imagine what it will be like, what you want to happen in the next twelve months. Ask the king and it will be yours. God willing. Amen.

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