



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHAVUOT > Day Two

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

June 13, 2016
Shavuot - Day Two

Lessons from Waze and Ways



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

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ABSTRACT

Like everything we see and hear, Waze can teach us much about the ways we travel in this world.

Waze has over 50 million users. This is why Google (founded by two Jews) purchased Waze for more than \$1 billion from its Jewish inventors!

And since Jews are the “light unto the nations,” forever enlightening the world, what are we teaching the world with this Israeli smartphone navigation app? And what can it teach us about G-d, ourselves, and the holiday of Shavuot?

[Two students in Israel’s vaunted Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, one, providentially, with the surname Bar-Sinai, hacked the incredibly popular Waze GPS map, simulating a fake traffic jam.]

In search of the answer, this sermon uses the Haftorah from the Prophet Habakkuk to define Shavuot. And it uses a majestic Midrashic analogy as well as a wordplay from the Talmud to reveal the essence of the Jews’ encounter with G-d at Mount Sinai and the secret of attaining both this and the next world, the World to Come.

It all has to do with *Halachah*, the Path, the Way, or ... the Waze!

Waze is crowd-sourced information distilled into real-time optimal road navigation.

Halachah is G-d-sourced information distilled into real-time optimal life navigation.

Plug in and drive.

LESSONS FROM WAZE AND WAYS?

1. Misdirection (Joke)

A senior citizen was driving down the freeway when his wife called his cell phone.

“Herman, I just heard on the news that there’s a car going the wrong way on Route 280. Please be careful!”

“It’s not just one car,” said Herman, “It’s hundreds of them!”

(Clearly, Herman was not using Waze!)

2. Where There’s a Will, There’s a Waze (Optional)

Under the headline, ISRAELI STUDENTS SPOOF WAZE APP WITH FAKE TRAFFIC JAM, *Popular Science* magazine reports the following:

What happens when an app becomes so popular it’s basically a public utility? For a school project, Shir Yadid and Meital Ben-Sinai, fourth-year students at Technion, Israel’s Institute of Technology, hacked the incredibly popular Waze GPS map, an Israeli-made Smartphone App that provides directions and alerts drivers to traffic and accidents. The students created a virtual traffic jam to show how malicious hackers might create a real one.

One of the ways that Waze learns about traffic problems is through reports from users. At its best, the app crowd-sources road conditions from drivers, thus making everyone’s commute shorter. Waze was so popular that last summer Google bought it for \$1 billion.

Here’s how the student attack worked. Yadid and Ben-Sinai created and registered thousands of fake Waze users, using a program that impersonated Smartphones. Then those fake accounts used an application that gave false GPS coordinates to the app. This army of false users then submitted reports claiming to be stuck in traffic at the false coordinates.

What's especially novel about this hack is that it didn't alter infrastructure in any way. There was no wreckage added to the road, no interfering with traffic lights. Instead, it took an app so popular that people treat it like infrastructure and fooled it into thinking there was a problem.

After re-routing traffic with the fake jam, the students' advisors informed Waze of the attack and how it was done, in hopes that Waze can prevent such attacks from happening again.

Interesting to note that one of the engineering students in this experiment has the surname of Bar-Sinai – this being Shavuot, I think this is more than a coincidence.

3. What Is Waze?

In case you are one of the few people on the planet who doesn't have it, Waze is a navigation app invented in Israel that works off of crowd-sourcing technology. It works so well and is so popular that it has over 50 million users worldwide and was recently purchased by Google for \$1.1 billion!

In a nutshell, Waze takes a plethora of crowd-source information updated in real time and distills it into the best possible path for getting to your destination. It factors in traffic, construction, accidents, police, weather, cheap gas stations, etc., all based on anonymously streamed information from its millions of users. It computes routes, speeds, directions, and other information from the Smartphones of its users, and then distills all the intel for all to see.

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that everything we see and hear provides us with lessons in our lives, in our serving G-d. This is certainly true about every type of technology, especially a popular one like Waze.

¹ Popular Science, March 31, 2014.

What can Waze teach us about life? How does Waze inform us about being good Jews, the nature of Torah, and the holiday of Shavuot? Mostly, how does it inspire our lives today and help us navigate the roads in real time, as Waze is wont to do?

4. Haftarah from Habakkuk

Today is the second day of Shavuot, the holiday of the giving and receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. And today's Haftarah comes from the Book of Habakkuk.

Ostensibly, after reading the words of this prophet, it is hard to see any connection to Shavuot. So why do we read it? Surely, in the vast annals of the prophets, we could find something more pertinent – something that better demonstrates the awesomeness of the encounter at Mount Sinai and the historical significance of the Torah. Why this?

The Sages were very precise and deliberate. So it must be that the words of this specific prophet convey a message about the Torah that could not be found elsewhere. Let us read a few verses from it, and see what we discover:

G-d came from Teman. Yea, the Holy One [came] from Mount Paran, with everlasting might. His glory covered the heavens and His splendor filled the earth.²

What does this mean? G-d came from Teman and Paran? Where is Teman? Where is Paran? What does it mean that, *His glory covered the heavens and His splendor filled the earth*?

Rashi on this verse explains that Teman is a reference to Esau (the other son of Isaac) – the ancestor of the Christian/Western World, and Paran is a reference to Ishmael³ (the other son of Abraham) –

² Habakkuk 3:3.

³ Genesis 21:21.

forefather of the Muslim/Arab world. While, *His glory covered the heavens*, is a reference to Mount Sinai, when G-d's glory covered the heavens.⁴

5. Midrashic Analogy

The Midrash explains this by way of a beautiful and intriguing analogy, linking the verse from the Book of Habakkuk to the giving of the Torah at Sinai:

This is analogous to a king who betrothed his daughter to someone from a foreign country. The citizens of his country said to the king: "Our master, it would be more praiseworthy and appropriate that your daughter should stay near you within the realm of the kingdom." The king replied to them: "What does it matter to you?" They answered: "Perhaps you will go to visit her and go to live near her in the other kingdom because of your love for her." The king said to them; "I will marry my daughter to someone from another kingdom, but I promise you that I will continue to dwell among you in this kingdom." So, too, when G-d decided to give the Torah to Israel, the ministering angels said to Him: "Master of the Universe ... is it not a joy, is it not glorious, is it not praiseworthy that the Torah stay near to You in heaven?" G-d asked them: "What does it matter to you?" They responded: "Perhaps tomorrow You will cause Your Divine Presence, the Shechinah, to dwell in the world." God said to them:

⁴The connection of this to the giving of the Torah at Sinai is clearly stated in another verse in Deuteronomy 33:2: The Lord came from Sinai and shone forth from Seir to them; He appeared from Mount Paran and came with some of the holy myriads; from His right hand was a fiery Law for them. As Rashi on that verse explains (from Avodah Zarah 2b): [Why did He come from Seir?] Because God first offered the children of Esau [who dwelled in Seir] that they accept the Torah, but they did not want [to accept it]. [Why did God then come from Paran?] Because He went there and offered the children of Ishmael [who dwelled in Paran] to accept the Torah, but they [also] did not want [to accept it]. Only Israel accepted the Torah and the tablets.

“I intend to give My Torah to those who dwell in the world, but I shall continue to dwell in the heavens. I intend to give my daughter ... to someone in another country so that she will be honored together with her husband for her beauty and for her loveliness, for she is the king’s daughter ... but I will continue to dwell with you in the heavens.”

“Who explained this?” asks the Midrash at the end of this story. “The Prophet Habakkuk, [when he said]: *His glory covered the heavens, but His splendor filled the earth.*”⁵

The angels questioned G-d’s marrying off His daughter, the Torah, to a foreign groom, the Children of Israel, far away on earth, because they were worried that G-d will take His Holy Presence (the Shechinah) down to earth where His daughter is and leave the angels stranded. To which G-d responded: “Don’t worry angels, My glory, My presence will always remain with you, while simultaneously My splendor, My Torah, fills the earth.”

6. Haftarah Continued

To better understand this beautiful analogy, and what it means practically, let us read more from our Haftarah:

*He [G-d] stood and measured out the earth; He saw and dispersed nations. Everlasting mountains were shattered; eternal hills were laid low, for the ways of the world are His.*⁶

⁵ Song of Songs Rabba 8:11.

⁶ Habakkuk 3:6.

The Talmud explains:

Whoever studies *halachot* [Jewish law] every day is guaranteed to be a denizen of the World to Come, for it is written [in the above verse in Habakkuk]: *The ways of the world are His*. But do not read *halichot* (meaning “ways”) but rather *halachot* (meaning “laws”).⁷

In other words, whoever studies Jewish law,⁸ is guaranteed to become a denizen of the World to Come!

But what does this Haftarah and its message have to do with Shavuot? And what lessons does it contain for our lives today?

7. Halachot: Laws or Ways?

We have a rule that when the Talmud says “do not read...but rather...” it is not excluding the initial reading, but rather adding to it an additional interpretation.⁹

This means that the Talmud’s statement is teaching us a revolutionary and far-reaching idea: “*The ways of the world are His* – do not read *halichot* (“ways”) but rather *halachot* (“laws”) means, that in addition to the obvious pronunciation of *halichot* as G-d’s ways, it also means “laws.” In other words, *halachot* (laws) are not instead of, but an extension of *halichot* (“ways”).

This changes our entire view of Torah law:

At first glance, many of us would think that laws are rigid, unwavering rules, some may even call them dogma, which is not subject to movement. These laws dictate how we must behave and we need to simply subject ourselves to their authority.

⁷ Conclusion of Nidah. Megillah 28b.

⁸ Rashi ad loc: “Mishnah, and Beraita, the Halachah given to Moses from Sinai.”

⁹ Halichos Aylie ch. 3. See Encyclopedia Talmudit entry on “al tikri.”

In truth, however, this Talmud teaches us that *halachot* (laws) are from the word “ways” (*halichot*). *Halachot* are actually an extension of “ways” – the laws create movement in this world, they take a static, material universe and transform it into a dynamic universe, drawing down divine energy into the physical world, and elevating the physical to the spiritual.¹⁰

Halachot – Torah laws – teach us how to take matter and turn it into spirit. Take your money and through charity turn it into a “fiery coin.” Take your physical being and activities and turn them into a passionate forces for changing the world and making it a better place.

Thus, “whoever studies *halachot* every day is guaranteed to be a citizen of the World to Come, for... the ways of the world are His” – by studying these laws you have become transformed from a “bystander” to a “traveler,” you have infused your life with the divine will, and thus have been turned from a physical human being into a spiritual one, all ready to absorb the spiritual light of the World to Come.

The Maharal of Prague,¹¹ the 16th century mystic, explains the power and importance of Jewish law stating that this is how one acquires the world – this and next.

The study of *halachot*, the ways of Jewish law, even as it deals with mundane matters in minutest detail, is the process of refining and distilling Torah thought into a clear and defined methodology. This in turn serves as a guide and mechanism for the refinement of man, allowing him or her to master G-d’s ways in this world (*the ways of the world are His*), and preparing and attuning him or her become a natural denizen of the next world as well.

Studying, memorizing and analyzing the law brings us to the greatest heights and opens pathways into the physical reality of the earth. This is how we touch the highest of the high.

¹⁰ See Torah Ohr Mishpatim 75c. Likkutei Torah Bechukotai 48d. Shir Hashirim 29d. Ohr Hatorah on the verse in Habakkuk, Neviim Uchtuvim vol. 1, pp. 499-500.

¹¹ Tiferet Yisrael, ch. 13. See also conclusion of ch. 14.

And this is what G-d is telling the angels: “If the people of the earth study the *halachot*, they will attain this world and the next world, and they will ensure that My Presence, the Shechinah, permeates and dwells everywhere. Dear angels, you need not worry that by giving My daughter (the Torah) to a people of the earth (the Children of Israel) I will forsake you here in heaven and go live exclusively with my daughter. Nay, when the Children of Israel study the Torah, specifically the *halachot* which are My laws and My ways, they will attain all of the world, bridging the highs of angelic heaven and the mundane planes of biological existence. My glory will remain in the heavens, but My splendor will fill the earth.”

And this is why the beginning for the verse depicts G-d as standing, whereas at the conclusion G-d is moving along His path, so to speak:

He [G-d] stood and measured out the earth ... – when it comes to the material earth G-d is judging and evaluating it, but not traveling and going from one level to another. But once the human comes into play, walking and living in accordance with *Halachah*, the path of Jewish law, *the ways of the world are His*. Then G-d Himself doesn't stand and judge but moves, bridging heaven and earth, bridging the highs of divine wisdom with physical reality down below.

This profundity – the ability to move heaven and earth – was gifted to us at Mount Sinai on Shavuot, and this is why we read the Haftarah of Habakkuk on this day which expresses this themes:

8. Waze Answers Life's Maze (Personal Lesson)

To bring it all home, let us return back to Waze.

Long before Waze we were taught the...“ways” – namely, the ways of the world are His. Yet, for many us we may need a modern-day app to remind us of these divine ways, teaching us how to truly navigate the complex roads of our lives.

And to avoid the pitfalls that dark paths may pose. Including, even the manipulation of Waze by Bar-Sinai and another student, who hacked Waze, created a false traffic jam for their experiment at Technion.

Waze, if we take some poetic license, is analogous to *Halachah*, the Ways of Jewish law. Waze distills all of the various sources of information out there into the perfect navigation from where you are to where you need to be, factoring as much intel as possible.

Because Waze is manmade and driven by humanity, it isn't perfect and can be hacked. But, because it does distill crowd-sourced information, it very often does reveal an incredible path updated in real time.

Halachah is that and more: It is divine wisdom, as culled from the Written Torah, conveyed through the Jewish Oral Tradition, purified and concentrated and extracted and distilled into a perfect path for navigating life in real time.

While Waze is crowd-sourced, *Halachah* is G-d-sourced. And when anything is G-d-sourced, it does not make wrong turns, get stuck in traffic, or get lost.

At Sinai on Shavuot, we were gifted not only the Torah – the intel – but also the *Halachah*, the app is how we can apply this information in real time.

All we have to do is learn and then the worlds – this and next – are ours!

9. Yizkor (Conclusion)

Just like Jews have been doing for time immemorial, we are about to begin the *Yizkor* prayer service in order to remember and honor our loved ones who have passed from this world into the World to Come.

As the Talmud teaches, whoever studies the *halachot*, the distilled ways and paths of divine living, is guaranteed to be a denizen of the World to Come.

We all know that when we study Torah and perform mitzvot here on earth in the name of our loved ones, it is as if our loved ones are studying Torah and performing mitzvot here on earth. And our actions below on their behalf, enrich their spiritual experience above.

We are the fruit and the continuation and realization of their efforts. Our loved ones who no longer have a mortal body live through the righteous acts that we perform here on earth. And when we study *halachot* and follow their immortal and eternal ways, we are guaranteed to join our loved ones in the World to Come after 120 years.

But we pray for more. We pray that by immersing ourselves in G-d's ways, we bring heaven down to earth, as this world will be fused with the World to Come in the Final Redemption immediately, when all of our loved ones will arise from the earth, souls clothed in mortal bodies once again, and we will be reunited forever.

As the Prophet Habakkuk concludes in our Haftarah:

*G-d the L-rd is my strength. He made my feet as the rams', and he guides me in high places. To the conductor, with my melodies!*¹²

This last phrase, Rashi explains, refers to the Levites who will conduct the music in the third and eternal Temple. May they do so speedily in our days, Amen!

Chag Sameach!

¹² Habakkuk 3:19.