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## Do Not Despair

Immediately after enumerating the long litany of 98 curses they would face if they disobeyed Hashem, Moshe called together the Jewish people and said, "You are all standing here today." What is the significance of this sequence of events?

The Midrash, quoted by Rashi, explains that when the Jewish people heard the curses they turned green. "Who can withstand all these curses?" they moaned despondently. "What will become of us?"

Therefore, Moshe called them together to calm them down. "Don't be so worried," he said. "You are all standing here today. After forty turbulent years in the desert, after angering Hashem so many times – with the Golden Calf, the Spies, the complainers – you are still here today.

Hashem has not destroyed you. So you see, you do not need to despair."

The commentators are puzzled. Moshe seems to be taking the wind out of his own sails. First, he read off all the horrible curses to scare the Jewish people into obedience, to put "the fear of the Lord" into them. The threat of the curses accomplished their purpose. The people were terrified. Then all of sudden, he relented and told them that it's not so bad. They don't have to be so terrified. Wasn't he defeating his whole purpose by taking the sting out of the Rebuke?

The answer is that there is a vast difference between healthy fear and hopelessness. It is a good thing to be realistically apprehensive about the future. It is unhealthy to live in a fool's paradise, believing you can do as you please without suffering any consequences. But hopelessness is destructive. It demoralizes, debilitates and reduces a person to a bowl of quaking jelly.

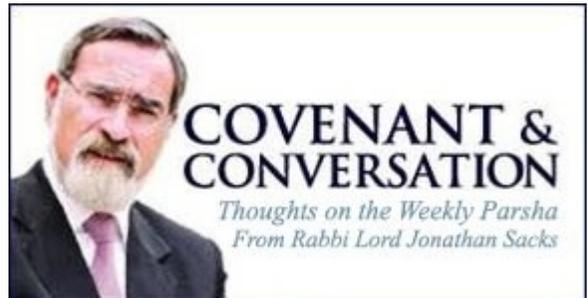
Moshe saw that the Jewish people had gone beyond fear when they heard the curses. They lost hope and threw in the towel. Therefore, he had to calm them down until they recovered their hope and all they felt was a healthy fear.

Our Sages tell us (*Bava Metzia* 59a) that after the destruction of the Temple "all the gates of prayer were closed, except for the Gates of Tears." The Gates of Tears are the channel of last resort for prayers, and they are never closed.

But if they are never closed, asks the Kotzker Rebbe, why is there a need for gates at all? Why not remove the gates and leave the entranceway wide open?

There are some tears that do not get through, says the Kotzker Rebbe. The gates screen out tears of desperation and hopelessness. Despair is not considered a prayer to the Almighty. If a person is in a state of helplessness and desperation, if he feels backed into a corner so that Hashem is his only hope of salvation, if he calls forth his innermost feelings and thoughts, if he wrings out the perspiration of his heart and soul and sends his hope-laden tears heavenward, there are no barriers in Heaven to a prayer of this sort. It travels directly to the Heavenly Throne.

The Izhbitzer Rebbe connects this concept with the very essence of Jewish identity. The name Jew is derived from the tribe of Judah, as is the Hebrew name Yehudi. Why are all Jews known by the name of one tribe? Because when the brothers stood accused of theft before Yosef in Egypt, the Torah tells us (*Bereishis* 44:18) that Yehudah “stepped up” to argue in their defense. When all seemed to be lost, when faced with the overwhelming weight of evidence against them, Yehudah never gave up hope. That is the definition of a Jew, a person who knows that the Almighty will never abandon him. A person who never gives up hope.



### How to Renew a Nation

The Talmud gives an ingenious reading to the line, “Moses commanded us a Torah, as a heritage of the congregation of Israel.” Noting that there are 613 commands, and that the numerical value of the word Torah is 611, it says that in fact Moses gave us 611 commands, while the other two – “I am the Lord your God,” and, “You shall have no other gods beside Me,” (the first 2 of the 10 commandments) – the Israelites received not from Moses but directly from God Himself.<sup>1</sup>

There is a different distinction the Sages might have made. Moses gave us 611 commands, and at the very end, in Vayelech, he gave us two *meta*-commands, commands *about* the commands. They are Hakhel, the command to assemble the people once every seven years for a public reading of (key parts of) the Torah, and “Now write for yourselves this song” (Deut. 31:19), interpreted by tradition as the command to write, or take part in writing, our own Sefer Torah.

These two commands are set apart from all the others. They were given after all the recapitulation of the Torah in the book of Devarim, the blessings and curses and the covenant renewal ceremony. They are embedded in the narrative in which Moses

hands on leadership to his successor Joshua. The connection is that both the laws and the narrative are about *continuity*. The laws are intended to ensure that the Torah will never grow old, will be written afresh in every generation, will never be forgotten by the people and will never cease to be its active constitution as a nation. The nation will never abandon its founding principles, its history and identity, its guardianship of the past and its responsibility to the future.

Note the beautiful complementarity of the two commands. Hakhel, the national assembly, is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed at individuals. This is the essence of covenantal politics. We have individual responsibility and we have collective responsibility. In Hillel's words, "If I am not for myself, who will be, but if I am only for myself, what am I?" In Judaism, the state is not all, as it is in authoritarian regimes. Nor is the individual all, as it is in the radically individualist liberal democracies of today. A covenantal society is made by each accepting responsibility for all, by individuals committing themselves to the common good. Hence the Sefer Torah – our written constitution as a nation – must be renewed in the life of the individual (command 613) and of the nation (command 612).

This is how the Torah describes the mitzvah of *Hakhel*:

"At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah

before them in their hearing. Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the strangers in your towns – so they can listen and learn to revere the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this Torah. Their children, who do not know, shall hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess." (Deut 31:10-13).

Note the inclusivity of the event. It would be anachronistic to say that the Torah was egalitarian in the contemporary sense. After all, in 1776, the framers of the American Declaration of Independence could say, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," while slavery still existed, and no woman had a vote. Yet the Torah regarded it as essential that women, children and strangers should be included in the ceremony of citizenship in the republic of faith.

Who performed the reading? The Torah does not specify, but tradition ascribed the role to the King. That was extremely important. To be sure, the Torah separates religion and politics. The King was not High Priest, and the High Priest was not King.<sup>2</sup> This was revolutionary. In almost every other ancient society, the head of state was the head of the religion; this was not accidental but essential to the pagan vision of religion as power. But the King was bound by the Torah. He was commanded to have a special Torah scroll written for him; he was to keep it with him when he sat on the throne and read it "all the days of his life" (Deut. 17:18-20). Here too, by reading the Torah to the assembled people every seven years, he was showing that

the nation as a political entity existed under the sacred canopy of the Divine word. We are a people, the King was implicitly saying, formed by covenant. If we keep it, we will flourish; if not, we will fail.

This is how Maimonides describes the actual ceremony:

Trumpets were blown throughout Jerusalem to assemble the people; and a high platform, made of wood, was brought and set up in the centre of the Court of Women. The King went up and sat there so that his reading might be heard ... The *chazzan* of the synagogue would take a *Sefer Torah* and hand it to the head of the synagogue, and the head of the synagogue would hand it to the deputy high priest, and the deputy high priest to the High Priest, and the High Priest to the King, to honour him by the service of many persons ... The King would read the sections we have mentioned until he would come to the end. Then he would roll up the *Sefer Torah* and recite a blessing after the reading, the way it is recited in the synagogue ... Proselytes who did not know Hebrew were required to direct their hearts and listen with utmost awe and reverence, as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Even great scholars who knew the entire Torah were required to listen with utmost attention ... Each had to regard himself as if he had been charged with the Torah now for the first time, and as though he had heard it from the mouth of God, for the King was an ambassador proclaiming the words of God.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from giving us a sense of the grandeur of the occasion, Maimonides is making a radical suggestion: that Hakhel is a re-enactment of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai – “as on the day the Torah was given,” “as though he had heard it from the mouth of God” – and thus a covenant renewal ceremony. How did he arrive at such an idea? Almost certainly it was because of Moses’ description of the Giving of the Torah in Va’etchanan:

The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, “*Assemble [hakhel] the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children.*” (Deut. 4:10).

The italicised words are all echoed in the Hakhel command, especially the word Hakhel itself, which only appears in one other place in the Torah. Thus was Sinai recreated in the Temple in Jerusalem every seven years, and thus was the nation, men, women, children and strangers, renewed in its commitment to its founding principles.

Tanach gives us vivid descriptions of actual covenant renewal ceremonies, in the days of Joshua (Josh. 24), Josiah (2 Kings 23), Asa (2 Chron. 15) and Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 8-10). These were historic moments when the nation consciously rededicated itself after a long period of religious relapse. Because of Hakhel and covenant renewal, Israel was eternally capable of becoming young again, recovering what Jeremiah called “the devotion of your youth” (Jer. 2:2).

What happened to Hakhel during the almost 2000 years in which Israel had no king, no country, no Temple and no Jerusalem? Some scholars have made the intriguing suggestion that the *minhag Eretz Yisrael*, the custom of Jews in and from Israel, which lasted until about the thirteenth century, of reading the Torah not once every year but every three or three-and-a-half years, was intended to create a seven year cycle, so that the second reading would end at the same time as Hakhel, namely on the Succot following a sabbatical year (a kind of septennial Simchat Torah).<sup>4</sup>

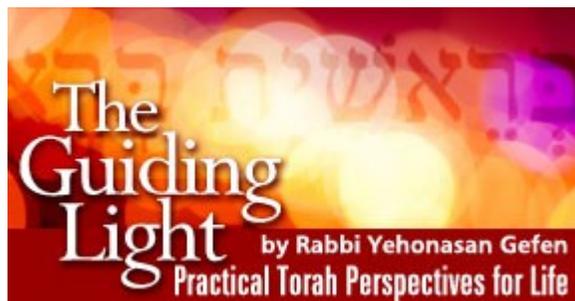
I would suggest a quite different answer. The institution of the reading of the Torah on Shabbat morning, which goes back to antiquity, acquitted new significance at times of exile and dispersion. There are customs that remind us of Hakhel. The Torah is read, as it was by the King on Hakhel and Ezra at his assembly, standing on a *bimah*, a raised wooden platform. The Torah reader never stands alone: there are usually three people on the *bimah*, the *segan*, the reader and the person called to the Torah, representing respectively God, Moses, and the Israelites.<sup>5</sup> According to most halachists, the *reading* of the Torah is *hovat tzibbur*, an obligation of the community, as opposed to the *study* of Torah which is *hovat yahid*, an obligation of the individual.<sup>6</sup> So, I believe, *keriat ha-Torah* should be translated not as “the *Reading* of the Torah” but as “the *Proclaiming* of Torah.” It is our equivalent of Hakhel, transposed from the seventh year to the seventh day.

It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. I believe the best way to stay young is never to forget “the devotion of our youth,” the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place. Hakhel was Moses’ parting gift to us, showing us how it might be done.

Shabbat Shalom

**NOTES**

1. Makkot 23b-24a.
2. This rule was broken by some of the Hasmonean Kings, with disastrous long-term consequences.
3. Mishneh Torah Haggigah 3:4-6.
4. See R. Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parshot ha-Shevua*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 2009, vol. 2, 442-461.
5. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayim 141:4, and commentary of Levush ad loc.
6. This is the view, regarded by most as normative, of Ramban. See e.g. Yalkut Yosef, Hilchot Keriat ha-Torah.



**The Torah Is Very Near to Us**

“For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in the heavens, [for you] to say, ‘Who can ascend to the heavens for us and take it for us and let us hear it, so that we can perform it?’ Nor is it across the sea, [for you] to say, ‘Who can cross to the other side of the sea

for us and take it for us, and let us hear it, so that we can perform it?' **Because the matter is very near to you**, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it."<sup>1</sup>

After a lengthy admonition regarding the consequences of not following the Torah, Moses assures the people that despite the seeming difficulty in learning and keeping the Torah, it is actually easily attainable. Rashi explains that these verses are referring to the whole Torah as opposed to any specific Mitzva.<sup>2</sup> The Tana Debei Eliyahu<sup>3</sup> cites part of Moshe Rabbeinu's words in reference to a fascinating story involving the Prophet, Eliyahu:

Eliyahu met a hunter who complained to Eliyahu that he was not given from Heaven the ability to learn and understand Torah, therefore he felt that he was exempt from trying to learn it. In response, Eliyahu pointed out to him the many skills and areas of knowledge that were required to be a trained hunter – sowing nets out of raw material, trapping fish and bird, these are very difficult tasks. Eliyahu noted that if they gave the hunter the ability to learn and understand these skills, then surely from the Heavens he was given the ability to learn and understand Torah, of which it says, "the matter is very close to you".

The Ohel Torah explains the meaning of this Midrash. Eliyahu was pointing out to the hunter that he did not know how to hunt from birth, rather, out of necessity to have a livelihood, he had to learn the skills required to hunt animals. Accordingly, if he would recognize the vital importance of knowing Torah, then he could surely also develop the ability to learn and know Torah, because if a person would be willing to

put in the effort, then the Torah would not be far from him.

Yet it is apparent that success in learning Torah seems to allude a significant number of people. One possible reason for this is that, like the hunter, a person needs to develop an appreciation of the importance of learning Torah in order to develop a relationship with God and to be able to properly observe the Mitzvot. One can quite easily appreciate the importance of earning a livelihood because of the need to support oneself. Consequently, a person will be willing to spend several years studying with *mesirat nefesh* (self-sacrifice) in order to achieve this goal, and only if he can recognize that ultimately, learning Torah is of ultimate importance, will he be willing to put in the effort required.

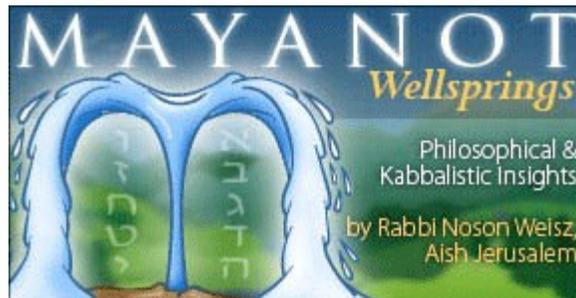
A second possible hindrance to a person developing a deep relationship with Torah learning is that the learning he may have done may not have been enjoyable for him, thereby permanently adversely affecting his attitude to Torah learning. The reason for this problem is that the Talmud states that a person only learns what his heart desires<sup>4</sup>, thus, if a person was only exposed to one form of learning, he may have never been exposed to the type of learning that he truly relates to. The solution here is to try various types of learning, such as *Gemara b'iyun* (learning in depth), *Gemara bekiut* (learning at a faster pace), learning Gemara through to the practical law, and also learning other parts of Torah such as the Prophets, Mishnayot, Jewish thought and Mussar. The following idea demonstrates this point:

Three Torah leaders (Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, Rabbi Nissim Karelitz, and Rabbi Gershon Edelstein) were asked what is the correct way to learn Torah. They all gave the same answer – one should learn what his heart desires. Rav Edelstein proved this with a personal story: When he was a teacher in Yeshiva, they were learning a Gemara about the laws of damages - one of the students approached him and said that he was not deriving any enjoyment from this style of learning. Rabbi Edelstein asked him, what type of learning he did enjoy. He answered that he liked learning Mishnah Berurah<sup>5</sup>. Rav Edelstein then suggested that he learn the same areas of damages but with the Shulchan Aruch<sup>6</sup>, and the commentary of the Sma, which is the most similar equivalent to the Mishnah Berurah in that area of Torah. The student adopted this approach and thoroughly enjoyed it, developing a deep understanding of the topic, albeit in a different way from most of his peers. He continued to become an accomplished Torah scholar.

If a person can develop the appreciation of the importance of Torah and find the area which he most enjoys, he can also find his own portion in learning.

**NOTES**

1. Devarim, 30: 11-14.
2. The Ramban argues with Rashi. He writes that these verses are referring specifically to the Mitzva of teshuva (repentance). See Kli Yakar who discusses both approaches.
3. Quoted in Mayana Shel Torah, Devarim, p.132 in the name of the Ohel Torah.
4. Avoda Zara, 19a.
5. The famous work of Jewish law written by the Chofetz Chaim.
6. The seminal work of Jewish law.



**The Importance of Being Earnest**

Some of the most powerful verses in the entire Five Books of Moses are in this week's Torah portion. The way the Jewish calendar is set up, we always read this Parsha right before Rosh Hashana. Consequently, we go into Rosh Hashana and face the Day of Judgment with these inspiring words still ringing in our ears.

*"For this commandment that I command you today - it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, to say, 'Who can ascend to heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Nor is it across the sea, to say, 'Who can cross to the other side of the sea and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Rather the matter is very near to you - in your mouth and in your heart to perform it." (Deut. 30, 11-14)*

According to Nachmanides the commandment referred to in the passage is the commandment to do *teshuva*, "return to God" or "repent"; this is the commandment that is stated immediately prior to this passage "*when you shall return to YHVH your God, with all your heart and all your soul*" (Ibid., 10)

It would seem that the Torah is informing us that *teshuva* is very near and accessible. But is it

really? If so, why haven't we all done it? Why are we facing Rosh Hashana desperately attempting to make ourselves feel the urgency of doing *teshuva*? Is there something the matter with us?

God goes on to explain:

*"See - I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil, that which I command you today, to love the Lord, your God, to walk in His ways, to observe His commandments, His decrees, and His ordinances ... But if your heart will stray and you will not listen, and you prostrate yourself to strange gods and serve them ..."* (Deut. 30:15-20)

In other words, the reason that *teshuva* is so near is that observance is tantamount to "life and the good," whereas non-observance is equal to "death and evil." Surely, anyone faced with having to choose between such clear alternatives as life and death, or good and evil will be able to make his selection without experiencing much inner torment. If we felt the equation between "life and the good" and "death and the evil" and repentance, then repentance would indeed be very near and accessible.

If it is not, that is because the correlation between observance and life is not so obvious and clear to us. We are not existentially sensitive to such an equation. But if we cannot feel the equation, is there at least a way we can relate to it intellectually? Why is Torah observance equivalent to life and good, and how is a life of non-observance congruent with evil and death? Perhaps an intellectual appreciation could serve as a first step towards the

integration of this correlation presented by God into our emotional consciousness.

But it will not suffice to unearth the correlation between life and Torah observance if we have to arrive at it by referring to obscure and esoteric Torah passages. In order to take advantage of the inspiration offered by God's words, as He clearly intended us to do, we must demonstrate that these correlations that He draws in His message to us are *glaringly obvious*; all human beings can plainly appreciate them, even if they refer to the information that is already in their possession. After all, if we paraphrase God's statement in this passage according to Nachmanides' interpretation, He is saying in effect: "You yourself know the correlation between Torah observance and life, and therefore it should be obvious to you that you should choose life!"

## THE OBVIOUS TRUTH

When we look around our world we are faced with a startling phenomenon that should give us all pause. What would happen to our world if only the people whose old car broke down went out and purchased a new one? If no person with a good suit in his closet would feel the compulsion to buy a new one even if the fashions have changed? What if people would choose to live in houses that only contained the amount of rooms that they actually needed to use? In short, what if we would only purchase items that were true necessities?

We all know the answer. If people started to behave this way the inevitable result would be instant world-wide economic deflation. The world as we know it would collapse entirely.

Companies would have to cut their production and downsize, throwing millions out of work. The people who lost their jobs could no longer keep up their mortgage payments and would lose their homes. Everyone would be forced to withdraw his or her savings, causing the immediate collapse of the world banking system.

The snowball effect would reach into all areas of the economy in ways that are totally obvious to anyone who ever took an elementary economics course, and even farther. The lack of extra money would mean that we could no longer afford to subsidize education or invest any money in scholarship and research. The advances in science and technology that stretch the frontiers of human knowledge and allow us to constantly increase productivity would also come to a halt.

Indeed, our world has actually experienced precisely such a catastrophe. When the Roman Empire collapsed the world actually did come to a stop. It took 500 years for mankind to work itself out of what are known today as the Dark Ages. So why aren't we worried about history repeating itself? How can we be so confident that people will continue to lead the lives of conspicuous consumption that drives our demand-driven economy and makes our civilization possible?

### **LOOKING WITHIN OURSELVES**

The answer is simple: we all know that the life of consumption will continue by studying ourselves. We know that people will keep consuming because they have the same drives as we do. And we know that we ourselves will continue

spending money, because if we don't spend our money what will we have to live for?

Why else do we live? To work? Surely not! Work is something we must do to survive, not something we want to do. Of course there is the odd person who lives for his work, or is driven by great idealistic zeal, but judging by the numbers of such people that we encounter we can safely conclude that there aren't enough of them around to be able to upset the economy. So if not work, what do we live for?

The answer: we live to fill our lives with pleasure and sensation, to experience the thrill of being alive. The thrill of feeling alive comes in many forms and they all involve spending money: the thrill of a new car, a new house, a trip to an exotic place, the thrill of shopping. Engagement in these activities also solves the problem of staving off boredom for long periods of time; they all require intensive research, preparation and planning to make sure you get the best deal. After all it is important to make sure that you get the most for your money.

### **TRANSIENT THRILLS**

It isn't that we fool ourselves about the size of the return these activities afford us in exchange for our hard earned money. We are all perfectly aware how transitory the thrill that is produced by these activities really is. We know how quickly it evaporates and how rapidly the problem of contending with boredom sets in again. But, we have nothing else to substitute that is worth living for. And the thrills are not illusory; they are really there while they last.

What about significance? Do we think any of these activities are important? Do we think that

any of them make a difference in the long run? Not really. Indeed, do we think our lives themselves are important except to ourselves? Not really. We are born to die, just as all those before us have died and just as all those after us will die. As we only live for such a short time, our only option is to keep ourselves stimulated with new experiences and adventures, to experience the thrill of being alive while it lasts. This is the human condition.

The real quest of our lives is avoidance. We are busy avoiding starvation, failure, boredom, and most of all, the awareness of approaching death. We are fully cognizant of lack of significance and importance of our pleasures and our thrills, but it is only through immersing ourselves in them that we can avoid all the negatives that constantly threaten to engulf us in their embrace.

That is why God can safely make the claim that what He is offering is near and accessible. God is saying, "I am offering you something better than a life that is dedicated to avoiding the unpleasant by engaging in the insignificant. Your life can be important! Don't settle for a negative life. If the activities of your life are meaningful only in so far as they help you to avoid boredom and to escape the feeling that you are dying, you are really dedicating your life to death. Why not live positively? Why not live to be alive instead of living to avoid death?"

### **THE PURPOSE OF OBSERVANCY**

Let us look at the purpose of observing the commandments. They offer no thrills. Some of them are quite boring. Even as one is busily engaged in them, one is often fighting off boredom and distraction. They are not in

themselves absorbing; it takes a great deal of work to become absorbed in them. They are clearly not designed to deliver thrills.

On the other hand, they aren't exactly like work either. Work is obviously necessary for physical survival: if you don't work, you don't eat; the observance of the commandments is not. There is no obvious connection between their performance and one's state of well-being in the natural world. But if they aren't necessities of survival and they offer no thrills, the only possible reason to perform them must be because they are important.

But why are they important?

### **LIVING AS A SOUL**

Suppose you woke up one morning and decided that you would like to conduct your day as a soul instead of just a body. You would like to get out of thinking of yourself as a transitory being stretching its wings for a brief period like some glorified monarch butterfly before disappearing for good. You want to live forever.

What would you do as a soul? How would you live? What would you do with your time?

Some things are fairly obvious. You would dedicate yourself to being helpful to your fellow man; you would attempt to bring cheer and happiness to the world. But how would you buy your suits as a soul? What kind of car would you drive? What kind of house would you live in, and what kind of vacation, if any, would you plan? How would you eat and drink as a soul, how would you educate your children or fill your empty hours? You would have no answer to any

of these questions. Neither you nor anyone else has any self-knowledge as a soul.

This is why we need the Torah's commandments. We need a body of knowledge to teach us how to conduct our lives as souls. There is nothing surprising in this. Even to live successfully as bodies we need much education. We need to go to school to learn how to read, to high school and even to university to truly open all of life's possibilities, even if we plan to live only as bodies. It is certainly no less complicated to exist as a soul; a successful soul-life should require at least as many information inputs as a successful body-life.

This is the information that God offers us in the Torah. If we learn to observe the commandments, we learn to conduct ourselves as souls just as though we were self conscious as souls and really knew how to behave as souls. In fact, the Torah offers even more. Through learning it and living it we really **do** become self conscious as souls. We learn to think, speak, and behave as souls. We learn to conduct all of life's activities in a spiritual way. We replicate all the experiences we have that teach us to be fully self aware as bodies!

### **THE ENDLESS LIFE OF A SOUL**

Souls live forever. Forever is a long time. Imagine that we were offered the opportunity to live forever as we are. Do any of us seriously think that we could keep ourselves stimulated through eternity by living lives that are based on the pursuit of thrills? If we have such a difficult time keeping ourselves stimulated and feeling alive during the brief span of years that we spend here on earth, how much more difficult

would this become if we lived longer, much less forever.

A life without Torah is only suitable for someone who is planning to die in the not too distant future. If life isn't too long, we are creative enough to just barely fill it with enough interesting experiences to maintain our appreciation of it. But if you stretched this sort of life much further it would surely run out of steam.

### **THE URGENCY**

But why is all this important now, today? Why can't we put off worrying about this problem until after we die? Just as we are taught to live as bodies only after we are born, surely we could wait to be taught to live as souls after we die. Why can't each life take care of itself?

At last we can appreciate the immediacy of God's message. No one has two lives. There is only one life. You live the life you teach yourself to live. You can either learn how to live forever now or you can plan to die. To know how to live forever we need to learn how to live as souls **today** - and this education is only available through the observance of the commandments of the Torah. The life we learn to live without the commandments is only suitable for someone who plans to live for only a relatively short time and then die, and if this is all we learn this is all we get. This is what God is telling us exactly.

The message is neither obscure nor esoteric. None of the the ideas contained in this essay are profound. They are obvious and clear to all human beings of average intelligence without exception. We all know them. There is nothing profound or hidden here. As God promised, the

message is truly *'not up in the heavens or over the oceans.'*

But there is a sharp, painful jab to the heart contained in the message. God tells us that He has placed all this before us "today." We cannot wait until we are born again as souls. We are souls already. We have to make this choice now, today. Whatever we choose is final. We can fit into the life of souls right here by living like people who plan to live forever, or we can choose to live our lives in a fashion that is only sustainable for people who will die after their brief moment of glory in the sun and then we will duly die.

### **WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT**

So why is this such a difficult choice for most of us?

The natural life of the body is brief but chock full of sensation. It may not be very important but it is quite stimulating while it lasts. The other life, that of the soul, is important but boring. We are told that it will become exciting when we leave the body but that doesn't help us to feel the thrill of such a life in the here and now.

Right now such a life is based on giving up sensation. It requires a person to live according to the dictates of pure reason and often suppress and ignore his feelings and emotions. The contest may be between the important and everlasting, and the insignificant and transitory, but it is also between sensation and stimulation and discipline and thought.

In our day and age, this is even more complicated. When these words were first spoken to the Jewish people by our teacher

Moses, they were addressed to those who had experienced both lifestyles as insiders. The people to whom Moses was speaking had stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. In all of human history, there were never again people who had such a clear taste of living life as souls as the people of Moses' original audience.

All of us are born non-observant. The first taste of life in our mouths is always the taste of the life of sensation. Most Jews who are alive today have never had any other taste. They never had the opportunity to taste Torah life from the inside. When such Jews look at a life of observance they can only see what they would be giving up; they have no clear idea of what they would be gaining.

The solution to this dilemma is provided by the need to face judgment.

### **ROSH HASHANA**

The reason this Torah portion is read immediately before Rosh Hashana is that the solution to the dilemma of what life is about is the easiest to resolve when it comes up for renewal. At such a time we are to look at it from the outside with some objectivity. For the moment life does not yet belong to us; it must be renewed by God for another year in order for us to get it back. We do not have to let it go, it is gone from us anyway until it is returned. We can therefore weigh it and judge it.

The Torah was given to all Jews - observant and non-observant alike. God promised to place this choice between life and death and good and evil in front of all of us, no matter the level of our observance, and He promised to do it "today" when we are still alive to be able to make the

choice. The day of Rosh Hashana is the "today" of the passage. God designed the day to make us aware of the choice and what is at stake. Any Jew can take advantage of it.

If you wish to taste the choice of "life and death" and "good and evil," the day is there for you no matter what level of observance you are presently on. You only have to join the service to experience its nearness and accessibility.

*"Rather, the matter is very near to you - in your mouth and in your heart to perform it."* The Torah is eternal and its message speaks to all of us. Rosh Hashana really works if you let it. Alternative ways of facing judgment are bound to be more painful.

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