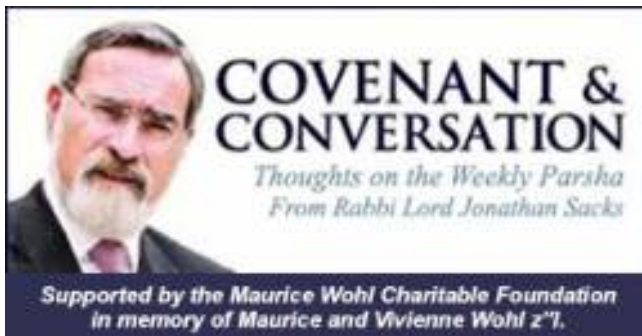


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To 120: Growing Old, Staying Young

On 27 March 2012, to celebrate the diamond jubilee of the Queen, an ancient ceremony took place at Buckingham Palace. A number of institutions presented Loyal Addresses to the queen, thanking her for her service to the nation. Among them was the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Its then president, Vivian Wineman, included in his speech the traditional Jewish blessing on such occasions. He wished her well "until a hundred and twenty."

The Queen was amused and looked quizzically at Prince Philip. Neither of them had heard the expression before. Later the Prince asked what it meant, and we explained. A hundred and twenty is stated as the outer limit of a normal human lifetime in Genesis 6:3. The number is especially associated with Moses, about whom the Torah says, "Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his strength undiminished" (Deut. 34:7). Together with Abraham, a man of very different personality and circumstance, Moses is a model of how to age well. With the growth of human longevity, this has become a significant and challenging issue for many of us. How do you grow old yet stay young?

The most sustained research into this topic is the Grant Study, begun in 1938, which has tracked the lives of 268 Harvard students for almost eighty years, seeking to understand what characteristics - from personality type to intelligence to health, habits and relationships - contribute to human flourishing. For more than thirty years, the project was directed by George Vaillant, whose books *Aging Well* and *Triumphs of Experience* have explored this fascinating territory.¹

Among the many dimensions of successful aging, Vaillant identifies two that are particularly relevant in the case of Moses. The first is what he calls *generativity*,² namely taking care of the next generation. He quotes John Kotre who defines it as "to invest one's substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self." In middle or later life, when we have established a career, a

reputation, and a set of relationships, we can either stagnate or decide to give back to others: to community, society and the next generation. Generativity is often marked by undertaking new projects, often voluntary ones, or by learning new skills. Its marks are openness and care.

The other relevant dimension is what Vaillant calls *keeper of the meaning*. By this he means the wisdom that comes with age, something that is often more valued by traditional societies than modern or postmodern ones. The "elders" mentioned in Tanakh are people valued for their experience. "Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you," says the Torah (Deut. 32:7). "Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?" says the book of Job (12:12).

Being a keeper of the meaning means handing on the values of the past to the future. Age brings the reflection and detachment that allows us to stand back and not be swept along by the mood of the moment or passing fashion or the madness of the crowd. We need that wisdom, especially in an age as fast-paced as ours where huge success can come to people still quite young. Examine the careers of recent iconic figures like Bill Gates, Larry Page, Sergey Brin and Mark Zuckerberg, and you will discover that at a certain point they turned to older mentors who helped steer them through the white-water rapids of their success. *Asei lekha rav*, "Acquire for yourself a teacher", remains essential advice.³

What is striking about the book of Devarim, set entirely in the last month of Moses' life, is how it shows the aged but still passionate and driven

leader, turning to the twin tasks of generativity and keeper of the meaning.

It would have been easy for him to retire into an inner world of reminiscence, recalling the achievements of an extraordinary life, chosen by God to be the person who led an entire people from slavery to freedom and to the brink of the Promised Land. Alternatively he could have brooded on his failures, above all the fact that he would never physically enter the land to which he had spent forty years leading the nation. There are people - we have all surely met them - who are haunted by the sense that they have not won the recognition they deserved or achieved the success of which they dreamed when they were young.

Moses did neither of those things. Instead in his last days he turned his attention to the next generation and embarked on a new role. No longer Moses the liberator and lawgiver, he took on the task for which he has become known to tradition: *Moshe Rabbenu*, "Moses our teacher." It was, in some ways, his greatest achievement.

He told the young Israelites who they were, where they had come from and what their destiny was. He gave them laws, and did so in a new way. No longer was the emphasis on the Divine encounter, as it had been in Vayikra, or on sacrifices as it was in Bamidbar, but rather on the laws in their social context. He spoke about justice, and care for the poor, and consideration for employees, and love for the stranger. He set out the fundamentals of Jewish faith in a more systematic way than in any other book of Tanakh. He told them of God's love for their ancestors, and urged them to reciprocate that love with all their heart, soul and might. He

renewed the covenant, reminding the people of the blessings they would enjoy if they kept faith with God, and the curses that would befall them if they did not. He taught them the great song in *Ha'azinu*, and gave the tribes his death-bed blessing.

He showed them the meaning of *generativity*, leaving behind a legacy that would outlive him, and what it is to be a *keeper of meaning*, summoning all his wisdom to reflect on past and future, giving the young the gift of his long experience. By way of personal example, he showed them what it is to grow old while staying young.

At the very end of the book, we read that at the age of 120, Moses' "eye was undimmed and his natural energy was unabated" (Deut. 34:7). I used to think that these were simply two descriptions until I realised that the first was the explanation of the second. Moses' energy was unabated *because* his eye was undimmed, meaning that he never lost the idealism of his youth, his passion for justice and for the responsibilities of freedom.

It is all too easy to abandon your ideals when you see how hard it is to change even the smallest part of the world, but when you do you become cynical, disillusioned, disheartened. That is a kind of spiritual death. The people who don't, who never give up, who "do not go gentle into that dark night,"⁴ who still see a world of possibilities around them and encourage and empower those who come after them, keep their spiritual energy intact.

There are people who do their best work young. Felix Mendelssohn wrote the *Octet* at the age of

16, and the *Incidental Music to a Midsummer Night's Dream* a year later, the greatest pieces of music ever written by one so young. Orson Welles had already achieved greatness in theatre and radio when he made *Citizen Kane*, one of the most transformative films in the history of cinema, at the age of 26.

But there were many others who kept getting better the older they became. Mozart and Beethoven were both child prodigies, yet they wrote their greatest music in the last years of their life. Claude Monet painted his shimmering landscapes of water lilies in his garden in Giverny in his eighties. Verdi wrote *Falstaff* at the age of 85. Benjamin Franklin invented the bifocal lens at age 78. The architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Guggenheim Museum at 92. Michelangelo, Titian, Matisse and Picasso all remained creative into their ninth decade. Judith Kerr who came to Britain when Hitler came to power in 1933 and wrote the children's classic *The Tiger who came to Tea*, recently won her first literary award at the age of 93. David Galenson in his *Old Masters and Young Geniuses* argues that those who are conceptual innovators do their best work young, while experimental innovators, who learn by trial and error, get better with age.⁵

There is something moving about seeing Moses, at almost 120, looking forward as well as back, sharing his wisdom with the young, teaching us that while the body may age, the spirit can stay young *ad meah ve-esrim*, until a hundred and twenty, if we keep our ideals, give back to the community, and share our wisdom with those who will come after us, inspiring them to continue what we could not complete.

To engage further with Rabbi Sacks's teachings, or to sign up to his mailing list, please visit www.rabbisacks.org.

1. George Vaillant, *Aging Well*, Little, Brown, 2003; *Triumphs of Experience*, Harvard University Press, 2012.
2. The concept of generativity is drawn from the work of Erik Erikson, who saw it - and its opposite, stagnation - as one of one of the eight developmental stages of life.
3. Avot 1:6, 16.
4. The first line of Dylan Thomas' poem of that title.
5. David Galenson, *Old Masters and Young Geniuses*, Princeton University Press, 2007.



Tisha B'Av and Maintaining Your Connection With God

The Rabbis teach that any generation in which the Temple is not rebuilt is viewed as if it were destroyed in that very generation.¹ Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory, explained that this means that had the Temple been extant in that generation, it also would have been destroyed as a result of people's actions. Accordingly, the actions that caused the initial destructions are still very relevant to the present generation.

The Talmud offers one explanation as to why the first Temple was destroyed. It tells us that after the destruction of the first Temple and the exile that followed, the sages and prophets did not

know what had caused such a terrible punishment, until God Himself told them that it was because "they left My Torah."² Rav explains that this does not mean they were not learning Torah. Rather, they did not say the blessing on the Torah before learning.³

The commentaries find a number of difficulties with this.⁴ Why were the people punished so severely for the relatively minor sin of not saying the blessing on the Torah? Moreover, this piece of Talmud seems to contradict another part of the Talmud which states that the first Temple was destroyed because of murder, idol worship, and immorality.⁵

The Maharal addresses these problems.⁶ He writes that it is impossible to understand the Talmud literally, that they were not saying the blessing on the Torah. Rather, they did not say the blessing with the proper intentions. When a person says the blessing on the Torah, he should focus on his great love and gratitude toward God for giving him the tremendous gift of the Torah. The sages of the generation did say the blessing. Moreover, they did not say it merely by rote. However, they did not focus sufficiently on their love of God when saying it.

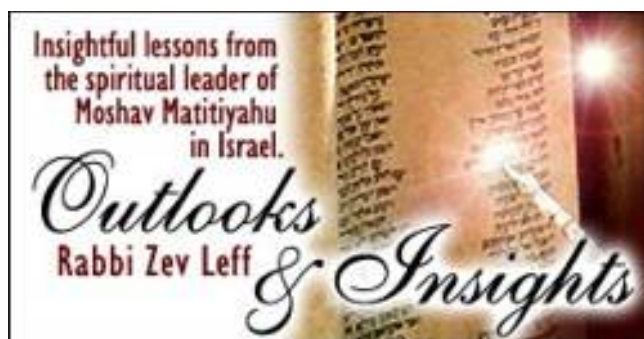
The Maharal proceeds to explain how this subtle failing was the root of the terrible sins that led to the destruction of the Temple. If a person focuses sufficiently on God in his learning, he merits tremendous Divine Help in avoiding sin, and even if he does falter, it enables him to repent without great difficulty. Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner writes that this is what the Rabbis mean when they say that

“the light of Torah returns a person to goodness.” However, if one does not connect to God through his learning, he loses that Divine help, and if he falters, he is far more likely to become trapped in a downward spiral of sin.⁷

Based on this explanation, we can resolve the contradiction between the two parts of the Talmud. The Temple was destroyed because of the terrible sins of murder, worshiping idols and immorality. However, the failure to say the blessing on the Torah with the proper attitude was the root of the deterioration of the Jewish people to the point where people were sinning so greatly. Because they didn’t connect to God properly, they lost their Divine help and consequently fell prey to the powerful temptations of the evil inclination.

The Three Weeks is a time to reflect on the various causes of the destruction of the Temple. A key area to work on is maintaining a constant awareness of God during one’s Torah study and fulfilment of other mitzvot. By doing so, Maharal teaches, each of us will have great Divine help in avoiding the other sins that caused the destruction. May we all be privileged to see the rebuilding of the Temple speedily in our days.

1. Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:1.
2. Jeremiah 9:12.
3. Nedarim 81a.
4. See Orach Chaim 47 with Bach and Taz; Maharal, introduction to Tiferet Yisrael.
5. Yoma 9b.
6. Maharal, introduction to Tiferet Yisrael.
7. Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, Pachad Yitzchak, Shavuot, essay 7.



Torah as the Totality of God's Will

"Who is the wise man that may understand this, and who is he to whom the mouth of the Lord has spoken that he may declare it? Why has the land perished, burnt up like a wilderness that none pass through? And God said, 'Because they have forsaken my Torah, which I set before them, and have not obeyed My Voice, nor walked therein.' "(Jeremiah 9:11-12)

The question of why the Holy Temple was destroyed and the land left desolate was posed to the Sages and the prophets (Talmud - Nedarim 81a). None could explain until God Himself revealed that it was a result of having forsaken the Torah. The Talmud continues that the failure to listen to God's voice and walk in the Torah's ways refers to their failure to recite the blessings over the Torah.

Rabbeinu Yonah asks how this seemingly obvious fact - that the Torah was forsaken - could have eluded the Sages and prophets? To his question we can add others. The Talmud in Yoma says that the first Temple was destroyed because of

immorality, murder and idolatry. Why, then, did Jeremiah mention only the failure to make a blessing over Torah study? Moreover, where did the Sages see in the verse itself that it refers to the failure to make a blessing rather than total abandonment of the Torah?

Rabbeinu Yonah answers that in fact the generation learned Torah constantly and fulfilled the mitzvot. That is why the Sages did not recognize that they had forsaken the Torah. But if so, how did they fall to such a level that they committed the three cardinal sins? Why didn't their Torah learning protect them? To this God replied: their Torah learning was lacking, as seen from their neglect of the blessing over their learning.

613 WINDOWS

Let us try to understand what dimension the blessing adds to Torah learning and how this deficiency is hinted to in the verse itself. Isaiah (Isaiah 28:10) castigated the Jewish people for serving God, "*Command by command, line by line, a little here, and a little there.*" His rebuke was based on their failure to integrate the observance of all the mitzvot into a unified service of God. Just as God is One, so, too, is His will one. He has one all-encompassing request of man. As the verse says:

"What does the Lord your God ask of you other than that you fear Him?"
 (Deut. 10:12)

What God demands from us is a constant awareness of His presence and of our obligation to emulate Him and act according to His will. All

the 613 mitzvot are in fact expressions of faith in God (see Maharsha to Makkos 23b).

Since we are human beings in a physical world, we cannot relate to God's will without it being broken down into segments that we can deal with individually. Imagine a globe of the world encased in a larger globe. In the outer globe, 613 small windows are cut, each window exposing a small portion of the surface of the enclosed globe. A composite picture from all the windows would yield a view of the globe within. So, too, the individual mitzvot are merely partial manifestations of God's one, all-inclusive will. Each mitzvah is a window through which we glimpse a portion of that will.

Thus there is more to leading a Torah life than merely observing 613 rules. The ultimate goal is to understand the implications of each mitzvah in the context of the overall Divine will that must shape our personality, outlook, and actions. In addition to listening to God's voice and obeying His commands, one must also have listening *into* God's voice, an understanding of the implications and meaning of those mitzvot in their broader context. Observance of the Torah "rule by rule," without sensitivity to the aspects of Divine will revealed in each mitzvah, is inadequate.

Jacob told Esau, "I lived with Lavan and kept all 613 mitzvot, and didn't learn from his evil deeds." Keeping the 613 mitzvot and not learning from Laban's evil ways are two separate things. Only if one seeks God's will within the mitzvot, can he create a Torah outlook, a character and lifestyle that precludes being influenced by Laban's evil ways.

That was the deficiency of the generation of the Temple's destruction. They kept the mitzvot and learned Torah, but did so perfunctorily.

"...Within their mouths and lips do they honor Me, but their hearts are far from Me, and their fear of Me is as a commandment of men learned by rote." (Isaiah 29:13)

OBSERVANT IDOLATRY

Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz was once invited to be the guest of a certain individual for the Friday night meal. Arriving home with his host, it was immediately obvious that the hostess had fallen asleep from an exhausting Erev Shabbos and had failed to awaken on time to put the finishing touches to the table. Her embarrassed husband berated her for her failure to cover the challahs.

Rabbi Shraga Feivel thought to himself how absurd it was for the man to humiliate his wife for not having covered the challahs - a custom designed to keep the challahs from being "embarrassed" during Kiddush and to teach us how sensitive we must be to another's honor. The host, in his concern for the custom, had completely ignored its implications.

Failure to see the mitzvot as an expression of the totality of God's will, and not as just disjointed commands, leads to the distortion of mitzvot themselves. One year I received an urgent call just before Yom Kippur from a woman in my congregation. Her husband had been told by his doctor that he was suffering from a condition which could prove life-threatening if he fasted.

Nevertheless he was determined to fast. I spoke to his doctor and consulted another observant doctor to confirm the diagnosis. There was no doubt that fasting would endanger his life.

I called in the man and explained to him that he must eat on Yom Kippur. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Rabbi, you're a young man and I'm about three times your age, well into my 70s. Since my bar mitzvah I have not eaten on Yom Kippur, and I do not intend to start now." I replied that I could not force him to eat on Yom Kippur, but that as soon as he left my office, I would instruct the gabbai never to give him another honor in our shul. When he asked why he deserved such treatment for being strict with respect to Yom Kippur, I told him that we are prohibited from honoring idol worshipers.

"What idol worship am I guilty of?" he demanded to know. I explained, "The God of Israel has decreed that you must eat on Yom Kippur. If some other god has commanded you to fast, it is irrelevant to me if you call it Zeus, Kemosh or Yom Kippur - all idols are the same."

HEAR MY VOICE

The Talmud (Yoma 23a) describes how the kohanim used to race up the ramp of the altar to determine who would perform the sacrificial service that day. Once, two kohanim were neck-to-neck, at which point one drew a knife and thrust it into his adversary's heart. Distorting the mitzvot by losing sight of their context transformed the sacrifices into a cult, which led in turn to murder.

God's answer to Jeremiah revealed how people who studied and observed Torah could fall to the depths of immorality, murder and idolatry. "*They forsook My Torah*" - not the Torah, but *My Torah*. They failed to hear God's will expressed in the Torah; they failed to hear *into My voice*. And therefore they failed to walk in the ways of the Torah - they failed to make the Torah an all-encompassing guide.

All of this is symbolized by the failure to make a blessing prior to learning. The blessing begins, "*asher kidishanu b'mitzvosav*" - the purpose of the mitzvot is to sanctify us and to inspire us to holiness.

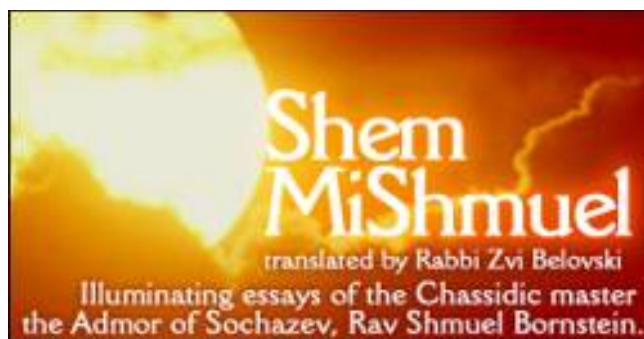
The second blessing emphasizes that the purpose of Torah is to make us "*yodei shemecha*" - those who know and emulate God's character traits in order to develop a complete Torah personality.

And the third blessing emphasizes that God has chosen us from the nations of the world and given us the responsibility to become a nation of Kohanim and a holy people. The blessing enjoins us not to merely hear the words, but to consider their implications.

For this reason we refer to a religious Jew as "observant of Torah and mitzvot." At first glance, the reference to both Torah and mitzvot seems redundant. The intention is to emphasize that in addition to mitzvot, this person observes the Torah, the complete expression of God's will.

The purpose of the Land of Israel is to provide the most conducive, holy environment in which to observe the mitzvot so that we can create a total Torah life for the Jewish people as a whole. But

when the Jewish people observe mitzvot perfunctorily, without the intention to live a complete Torah life, then the need for the land is negated, and its physical destruction follows. That is the lesson God revealed to Jeremiah.



A Unique Work

These are the words [things] which Moshe spoke to all of Yisrael...
(Devarim 1:1)

My holy father suggested an idea that helps us to understand the very nature of the Book of Deuteronomy, which the above verse introduces. This book is qualitatively different from the other four. Our Sages tell us that the curses in the Book of Deuteronomy were said by Moshe himself. We may assume from this that the material in Devarim, while of course presented by God to Moshe, contains more human input, however slight, than the previous four books. Perhaps it can be considered an in-between stage, bridging the gap between the main Written Torah (*Torah SheBichsav*) and the Oral Torah (*Torah SheBa'al Peh*). Devarim contains elements of both - it is the written word of God, like the *Torah SheBichsav*, but with an element of human content, like the

Torah SheBa'al Peh. We may apply this idea by examining the following statement from our Sages:

Rabbi Ada ben Rabbi Chanina said, "Had Yisrael not sinned, they would have been given only the Five Books of the Torah and the Book of Yehoshua, which contains the boundary details of Eretz Yisrael." (Nedarim 22b)

It is not possible that this statement means that had *klal Yisrael* not sinned in the desert they would have been given *only* the *Torah SheBichsav* and not the *Torah SheBa'al Peh*. The oral law constitutes the hidden depth and internal life of the Torah, and as such, it is indispensable. Also, as certain groups have discovered to their detriment, the Written Torah is totally unworkable without the traditions of the oral law. How would we know how to make tefillin or tzitzis, for example? Every aspect of Jewish life is dependent upon the details provided by the *Torah SheBa'al Peh*. What, then, do the Sages intend with this sweeping statement? An answer may be provided by yet another midrash, which discusses the giving of the Torah:

The Rabbis said that the statement itself [referring to each of the Ten Commandments] went around to each member of *klal Yisrael* and said to him, "Do you accept me upon you? I contain so many mitzvos, so many laws, so many punishments, so many decrees, so many commandments, so many a fortiori inferences, so many

rewards..." And they said, "Yes, yes." (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:13)

Underlying this is the concept that at some level the *Aseres HaDibros* (Ten Commandments) contain all of the 613 commandments of the Torah. The acceptance of the entire Torah system was dependent upon the members of *klal Yisrael* accepting the basic Ten Commandments. This is very difficult for us to understand - it would be practically impossible for us to generate the 613 commandments from the list of ten. But at the time of Divine revelation at Sinai, *klal Yisrael* had tremendous clarity of vision and spiritual power; they were able to detect the nuances and implications of every word spoken to them by God. No explanation was necessary, for as God spoke to them they were able to appreciate the entire Torah system which the *Aseres HaDibros* encapsulate. Had they retained that spiritual level, they would have been able to appreciate every nuance of the Torah forevermore. It is true that after the first two commandments had been spoken by God, *klal Yisrael* asked Moshe to speak to them, as they found direct communion with God too overpowering; but they nevertheless remained extremely spiritually sensitive. Had they not damaged themselves with the sin of the golden calf, they would have remained able to detect the details of each mitzvah and its explanation directly from the text.

For example, the Torah's short presentation of the mitzvah of tefillin would, to the highly developed mind, imply all of the laws which lie in this practice. Every nuance and detail of the boxes, straps, and scrolls which constitute tefillin would

have been manifest to them, without the need for any further explanation.

We may assume that this would have been true, not just for the halachic material within the Torah, but also for every ethical concept, fundamental of faith, and homiletical device. All of these, in all of their rich minutiae, would have been apparent to *klal Yisrael* from analysis of the Torah text alone. This idea is actually mentioned in the Talmud:

Is there anything written in the prophetic writings which is not hinted at by the Torah itself? (Ta'anis 9a)

But, as we have mentioned, the sin of the Golden Calf prevented this situation from continuing. They lowered themselves with their error, limiting their understanding and depth of perception of the Torah. This necessitated the transmission of the *Torah SheBa'al Peh* to explain the Torah text and invest it with meaning.

This has remained the situation to this day. The inherent connection between the two types of Torah must never be lost; indeed, Talmudic scholars throughout the ages have striven to harmonize the two, exerting great mental energy to trace laws in the oral tradition to their roots in the written law. This is not merely an intellectual exercise, for it attempts to return to the sinless state of mind which existed in *klal Yisrael*, in which the text of the *Torah SheBichsav* revealed the laws of the *Torah SheBa'al Peh*. This resolution by great Torah scholars is the path through which the sin of the calf and its ramifications may be rectified.

The particular value of the Book of Deuteronomy should now be apparent. As we have said, this book is a sort of go-between, bridging the gap from written to oral law. Moshe himself said the content of the Book of Deuteronomy. This meant that it was not as difficult for *klal Yisrael* to relate to it as to the other four books, as it had some human content, albeit minimal. As such, Devarim is particularly replete with easy-to-spot laws and derivations, more readily detectable than those in the earlier books. It is easier for the student to extract textual hints and concealed laws from this book and to see the root of oral traditions within it. The ethical messages of Devarim are much more explicit than those of the other four books; they are more direct and more easily appreciated. All of this follows from its split nature as a book halfway between oral and written law.

This will give us an insight into the feeling engendered by Moshe's great speech to the nation before his death. These words, as we have seen, were in many ways more transparent than anything which preceded them. As such, they awakened a feeling of power and spirituality which had not been experienced since *klal Yisrael* had stood at Mount Sinai to accept the Torah. At that stage, as now, they felt able to penetrate the text to understand the will of God in all its glory.

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