

# Likutei Divrei Torah

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## Covenant & Conversation: R. Jonathan Sacks, z"l

### The Inheritance that Belongs to Everyone

Commenting on a key verse from today's Parsha, a Midrash tells a pointed story: Once Rabbi Yannai was walking along the way when he met a man who was elegantly dressed. He said to him, "Will the master be my guest?" He replied, "As you please."

Rabbi Yannai then took him home and questioned him on Bible, but he knew nothing; on Talmud, but he knew nothing; on Aggadah, but he knew nothing. Finally, he asked him to say Grace After Meals. The man, however, replied, "Let Yannai say grace in his house."

Rabbi Yannai then said to him, "Can you repeat what I tell you?" The man answered, "Yes." Rabbi Yannai then said: "Say, 'A dog has eaten Yannai's bread.'" The guest then rose up and seized Rabbi Yannai demanding, "Where is my inheritance that you have and are keeping from me?" "What inheritance of yours do I have?" He replied, "The children recite, 'Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob'. It is not written, 'congregation of Yannai,' but 'congregation of Jacob.'"

It's a powerful story. Rabbi Yannai sees an elegantly dressed stranger and assumes that he must be well-educated. He takes him home and discovers the man has had no Jewish education whatsoever. He knows nothing of the rabbinic literature. He can't even say Grace After Meals.

Rabbi Yannai, a Torah scholar, looks down at the guest with contempt. But the stranger, with great dignity, says to him in effect, "The Torah is my inheritance as well as yours. Since you have much, and I have none, share a little of what you have with me. Instead of dismissing me, teach me."

Few ideas in the history of Judaism have greater power than this: the idea that Torah knowledge belongs to everyone; that everyone should have the chance to learn; that education should be universal; that everyone should be, if possible, literate in the laws, the history, and the faith of Judaism; that education is the highest form of dignity, and it should be accessible to all.

This idea goes so far back and so deep in Judaism that we can easily forget how radical it is.

Knowledge – in the famous phrase of Sir Francis Bacon – is power.[1] Those who have it are usually reluctant to share it with others. Most societies have had literate elites who controlled the administration of government. To this day, many professions use a technical vocabulary intelligible only to insiders, so that their knowledge is impenetrable to outsiders.

Judaism was different, profoundly so. I have speculated that this is connected with the fact that the birth of Judaism happened at roughly the same time as the birth of the alphabet[2] – proto-Semitic, appearing in the age of the patriarchs, and whose earliest traces have been discovered in the Sinai desert in areas where slaves worked.

Mesopotamia, from which Abraham came, and Egypt in the days of Moses, had the world's two earliest forms of writing, cuneiform and hieroglyphics respectively. But these systems – pictograms, ideograms and syllabaries in which symbols stood for whole words or syllables – involved too many signs to be taught to everyone. The alphabet, with its mere 22 symbols, for the first time opened up the possibility of a society of universal literacy.

Judaism bears the mark of this throughout. Abraham was chosen to be a teacher, "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord".

Moses repeatedly speaks about education: "Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

The verb l-m-d, "to teach," occurs no less than 17 times in the book of Deuteronomy, making it a motif of the book as a whole.

Above all is the personal example of Moses himself. Devarim is a massive adult education experience, the Master Prophet taking the whole people as his disciples and teaching them both the law – the commands, statutes and judgments – and no less importantly, the history that lies behind it.

This rises to a climax at the end of the book, in the form of the "song" of Ha'azinu, this week's Parsha, which is preceded and followed by these words:

"Moses recited the words of this song from beginning to end in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel"

"This is the blessing that Moses the man of God pronounced on the Israelites before his death . . . Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.

Note the insistence, in the first of these two verses, on the fact that Moses is speaking to everyone, not an elite. The second passage contains the famous line quoted by Rabbi Yannai's guest as proof that Torah belongs to everyone. It is the possession not of the learned, the elect, the specially-gifted; not of a class or caste. It is the inheritance of the entire congregation of Jacob.

Not until relatively modern times did this idea of universal education spread beyond Judaism. It did not exist even in England, then the premier world power, until the Education Act of 1870. It has taken the Internet revolution – Google and the rest – to make it a reality throughout the world. Even today, some 70 million children are still deprived of education, in countries like Somalia, Eritrea, Haiti, Comoros, and Ethiopia.

That education is the key to human dignity and should be equally available to all is one of the most profound ideas in all of history, and it was born in those powerful words, immediately following this week's Parsha: "Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob."

### Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

#### To Renew the Old, to Sanctify the New

"Remember the days of yore, understand the years (shenot) of each generation." Are we commanded to study world history? Certainly, I would say, on the basis of the simple meaning of the verse cited at the head of this commentary in accordance with the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808–1888). A proper study of history will reveal the consistent interplay between Israel and the nations of the world, the intellectual streams which influenced us – and in turn – which we influenced, and the hidden finger of God which guaranteed Jewish survival under the most difficult of conditions. And I would argue that the proper translation of the biblical verse cited above, as one may deduce from the biblical commentary of Rabbi Hirsch, is "understand the differences [shenot, not from 'shana – year,' but rather from 'shinui – difference, change'] of each generation."

It has aptly been said: "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is mystery, today is a gift granted to us by God, and that is why it is called 'present.'" I would add that "today" is all that we really have to utilize, and we must utilize it well, with wisdom and with dispatch. And we cannot treat "today" with proper understanding and circumspection unless we are sensitive to the forces of history which preceded it, especially to the changes in zeitgeist (the temper and spirit of the time), which makes "today" different from "yesterday," and the new opportunities which may enable us to set the stage for a better tomorrow.

The truth is that God revealed Himself to Moses as the God of history. Although in the book of Genesis it is clear that Kel Sha-kkai or Elo-kim is the God of power and creation, when, in the book of Exodus, Moses asks God for His name, the divine response is "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh," literally, "I shall be what I shall be." In effect, God is here introducing Himself first and foremost as the God of future tense, the God of history, the God of becoming, the God of future redemption (literally "He will bring about" redemption). This is very much in keeping with Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi's Kuzari, who sees God as revealing Himself in history, based upon the first of the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord thy God, who took thee out of Egypt, the house of Bondage".

This name Ehyeh is very different from Maimonides' emphasis on the God of creation, Elo-him; indeed, Maimonides interprets Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh as I am that I am, I am the God of being, I am the Ground of Being (Paul Tillich), I am the essence of creation.

And this name is not as definitive as is Elo-kim, the God of creation. The God of creation "worked" (as it were) alone; in contrast, the God of history is dependent first and foremost on Israel (although redemption was in the divine plan almost immediately after the Exodus, the refusal of Israel to conquer the land delayed the process immeasurably) as well as upon the other nations and their actions. There will eventually be redemption, as all our prophets guarantee in God's name, but since redemption requires Israel's intervention, God must leave the "end of days" open-ended.

And so the Bible after presenting the name Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh goes on to say, "So shall you [Moses] say to the children of Israel: 'The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent Me to you; this is My name forever, and this is My remembrance for all generations'". Note an interesting linguistic nuance: In Deuteronomy chapter thirty-two, the text reads "dor vador," understand the differences "of each generation" whereas in Exodus chapter three, we find "dor lador," "this is My remembrance for all generations." There are two names of God expressed in this passage in Exodus: the God of the patriarchs is the God of Jewish tradition from generation to generation, the God of eternal Torah and halakhic continuity, the God of the Shulhan Arukh, if you will; the God of history is the God of each generation, with that generation's specific demands conditioned upon the historical situation of the specific time.

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Hence Rabbi Shimon Schwab records in his memoirs how, as a bar mitzva youth, he went to Raden, anxious to meet with the Chafetz Chayim, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, the gadol hador, the great luminary of the time. The sage asked the youth if he was a Kohen-priest. When young Shimon answered in the negative, the Torah giant commiserated that when the Messiah will come, only he – a Kohen – would be privileged to enter the sacred precincts of the Holy Temple. The reason for the priests' elevated status is that their tribal ancestors answered positively to Moses' call, "Whoever is with God, come to me." Since young Shimon's tribal ancestors did not heed that call, he would be excluded.

The Chafetz Chayim concluded: "And, I do not say these words lightly in order to hurt you. I merely wish to prepare you: in every generation a divine voice calls out the particular summons, challenge, and opportunity of that generation. Do not repeat the mistake of your forebears. Listen for God's voice in your generation, and make sure that you respond to God's call!"

### **Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash**

#### **Harav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l**

#### **You Forgot God Who Formed You**

In the song of Ha'azinu, the Torah describes the process of Am Yisrael's betrayal of God: He made him ride on the high places of the earth, and he ate the produce of the field; He nourished him with honey from the rock and oil from the flint stones; butter of cattle and milk of sheep, with fat of lambs, and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the kidney-fat of wheat; and of the blood of the grape you drank wine. But Yeshurun grew fat, and kicked – you grew fat, and thick, and vulgar – and abandoned the God Who made him, reviling the Rock of his salvation. They aroused His jealousy with strange gods, angering Him with abominations. They sacrificed to demons, non-gods, gods which they had not known, new arrivals of late, which your fathers never feared. You were unmindful of the Rock Who bore you, and forgot God Who created you.

We might understand these verses as describing a single phenomenon: Am Yisrael attains wealth and abundance, and it is specifically in this state that they abandon their faith in God and start believing in other powers. According to this, the words "You were unmindful of the Rock Who bore you, and forgot God Who created you" are a summary of the process of Am Yisrael's betrayal of God.

However, a different way of understanding it is that the verses are describing two separate phenomena: the first is that economic prosperity causes the nation to abandon God; the second is that the practice of idolatry causes them to forget God. According to this understanding, the words, "And forgot God Who created you," come as a result of "They sacrificed to demons, non-gods." I shall focus on this understanding of the verses.

In parashat Ekev, the Torah gives a different description of betrayal: "And it shall be, if you will forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and serve them and prostrate yourself to them..." This description is different from the one in our parasha. Parashat Ekev describes a situation in which a person forgets God and therefore follows and serves other gods. This is certainly unacceptable, but it is understandable: could a person possibly offer sacrifices to "demons, non-gods" if he is aware of who God is? Is it possible that a person would know and recognize God's strength and power, and nevertheless choose to serve idols "which do not see, nor do they hear, nor do they eat, nor do they smell"? The only possible explanation for a person choosing to serve other gods is that it results from his forgetting the true God. In our parasha, however, the process is described in the reverse order:

abandonment of God precedes and causes forgetting Him.

This teaches something about the essence of the betrayal of God as described in Parashat Ekev as opposed to the betrayal in our parasha. Parashat Ekev talks about idolatry in the usual, familiar sense – abandoning God and placing one's trust in idols and superstition. In this scenario, we are speaking of the regular sort of forgetting: a person who does not engage in Torah, but rather knowingly immerses himself in other things, will come to forget God's strength and power, and ultimately stops serving Him, out of complete forgetfulness.

However, Tanakh also provides a different concept of forgetting: "Can a woman forget her suckling child? ... Yes, these may forget, but I will not forget you". Is the verse talking about the regular sort of forgetting? Are we really concerned that a woman might forget that she has a baby? Obviously not. What the Torah means here is not the regular sort of forgetting, but rather existential forgetting – in other words, lack of attention. We do not imagine a woman forgetting her baby and being unaware of his existence; rather, the situation is one of her failure to respond to his needs, leaving him helpless, turning her attention elsewhere.

The forgetfulness described in Parashat Ha'azinu is of this latter sort. A person is aware of God's existence, but he does not follow through with the ramifications of this knowledge; his knowledge of God's existence has no influence on his lifestyle or his day-to-day activities. For this reason, the idolatry here is also not of the usual type: the Torah is not talking about someone who serves idols out of a conscious desire to abandon God; rather, it is talking about someone who is completely immersed in material matters – "And Yeshurun grew fat." This draws his attention away from any sort of spiritual reality – "and he kicked." This person knows that God exists – perhaps he would even profess to believe in Him – but his life is nevertheless considered one of "sacrificing to demons, non-gods." He serves success and prosperity, setting aside no time for developing a spiritual personality.

In a certain sense, modern man is faced with the problem of the forgetfulness of Ha'azinu. A modern person may be aware of God's existence in the general sense, and if prodded indications of His existence he might be able to shake layers of dust off his faith and answer. However, this shallow knowledge has no impact on his life or his behavior. Although he knows that God exists, he does not act accordingly. He ignores the Torah lifestyle and observance that this knowledge is meant to bring with it. This forgetfulness is especially prevalent, as described in the parasha, in the wake of economic achievement and success, which create the sense that one need not subjugate oneself to God.

People today are not stupid; they do not believe, as some once did, that "The Nile is mine; I made it". However, they are still prone to ignore the observance of mitzvot, and to "forget," in the existential sense, God's existence. The problem described in the parasha applies to the reality of our lives today just as it did at the time it was first uttered, to the generation of the desert: "You were unmindful of the Rock Who bore you, and forgot God Who created you."

### **Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah**

#### **God's Strength in Our Hands [Excerpt]**

#### **Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander**

The custom is to read "David's Song" as the haftara for Parshat Haazinu, which itself consists of Moshe's parting song to the people of Israel. The themes of the two songs are different: Moshe's song is a severe message of warning and reprimand; David's song in the haftara is a joyous paean thanking God for His generosity and salvation. However, there are many

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parallels between the songs' authors. A deeper understanding of these songs sheds light on how man and God work together, a concept that is especially crucial for strengthening our resilience in these difficult times for the Jewish people.

The similarity between Moshe Rabbeinu and David Hamelekh is rooted first and foremost in their parallel roles. Both were strong military, political, and religious leaders who ruled over a united Jewish people. The two men shared a background as well, both beginning their career as shepherds and being chosen to lead Israel at least in part based on the qualities that made them excel in that calling. This similarity is pointed out explicitly by the Midrash:

The Holy One blessed be He said to David: "You have been found trustworthy with the flocks, come and herd My flock," as it is stated: "From the suckling ewes He brought him". Likewise, regarding Moshe it says: "He led the flock deep into the wilderness" – to distance them from theft [by grazing them far from fields belonging to others] – and the Holy One blessed be He took him to herd Israel, as it is stated: "You led Your people like a flock in the hand of Moshe and Aharon"...

A notable feature of David's song, as opposed to Moshe's, is that it gives a central role to the agency of David himself. Sometimes, in the poem, his character is viewed as helpless and passive, waiting to be saved by an all-powerful God: "Snares of death confronted me // in my distress I called on the Lord". But at others we are confronted with David's prodigious strength, and shown what can be accomplished when it is aided and enhanced by God's grace: "With You I can rush a ridge / with my God I can leap over a wall". David's approach thus emphasizes seeing and appreciating the hand of God in our own active accomplishments, understanding that the source of our own might and power lies outside and above us.

The ability to understand that our efforts and struggles call for a partnership between us and God is especially relevant today. In our challenging situation of protracted war, which demands the ceaseless active efforts of so many people, both on the battlefield and on the home front, it is easy to look at our successes and achievements as the simple results of our hard work and innate abilities.

David's song provides us with the answer. God's miracles cannot come to fruition without our own reciprocal commitment to take initiative, to strive, and to use the powers He has given us for good. Throughout this war, we have seen God's infinite strength poured into our brothers and sisters, our spouses, our children and grandchildren, allowing them to achieve things that we never imagined possible. The miraculous power of God is thus made manifest every day, in the ingenious designers and deployers of the Iron Dome, in the tireless energy of the mother of six who holds her entire household on her shoulders for months at a time, in the heroic bystander who jumps into the line of fire to save lives during a terrorist attack.

This dynamic of Divine support empowering human action, what we call resilience, is just as vital in the hidden struggles of mental health. Here too, human courage, professional care and robust community support are indispensable, yet every spark of resilience is a gift from the One who "stirs us with power." Our task is to act unhesitatingly, to seek help and to offer support as needed, and to dismantle the stigmas that surround inner struggle, all while trusting the ultimate source of our strength.

All of these modern Davids sing wordlessly, no matter which battlefield they fight on: "You gave me the shield of Your victory; / Your battle cry stirred me with power. / You made my steps broad and firm; / my feet never faltered".