

CONCEALING TORAH FROM YOURSELF

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We read in *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) Nitzavim: “For this commandment which I command you this day is not concealed from you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, ‘Who shall go up for us to heaven and bring it to us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say: ‘Who shall go over for us to the other side of the sea, and bring it to us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?’ But the word is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

Our commentators have said that the phrase “for this commandment” refers to all the *mitzvot*, or to the laws and ordinances in Devarim (the Book of Deuteronomy), or even more specifically to the requirements of *teshuvah*.

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) presents us with a rather grandiose teaching on this verse: That fulfilling the Torah is the “permanent sole basis of our destiny at any time, and of all our hopes for the future . . . And ultimately we will return to it with all our heart and soul.”

Why should Rabbi Hirsch be so confident that our destiny and our future lie with the Torah?

The reason for his confidence is not only that the Torah is full of wisdom, but also that it’s accessible and understandable to the people—which to some may seem like a bad joke when probably less than five percent of American Jews have read the entire Torah in Hebrew. We’ll return to this point in a moment. What’s meant here is that, “it contains no secret metaphysical references to anything beyond the grasp of [the] ordinary human mind.” Since the Torah’s teachings are not supernatural, they require no divine revelation. So our tradition teaches that all of us have all the mental capacity required to understand the Torah.

The Torah’s accessibility explains why it has remained with the Jewish people, and why we have always been able to come back to it after losing our way.

So we need no supernatural enlightenment or divine intermediaries to live a life that is fulfilled to its greatest potential. Although it’s true, of course, that neither Torah nor any other teaching can guarantee non-stop happiness or fulfillment. But it can help us to realize our potential as beings created in the image of God. The Torah is telling us that such understanding is within our reach and that, through

it, we can attain a heart of wisdom and our life can be remembered as a blessing.

Why is it then that most congregationally *affiliated* American Jews venerate the Torah more in principle than in practice?

One explanation is that we have imprisoned the Torah in a place that we visit only occasionally, so it’s no longer considered relevant to our day-to-day lives. But to find the meaning and relevance of Torah for us, for our lives in this time and place, we have to measure our day-to-day lives with Torah as the yardstick.

You may be saying to yourself: I’ve read it and it’s not what you say it is. A lot of it is boring, irrelevant, or, worse yet, misogynist and barbaric.

But before we dismiss it out of hand, as many do, we should recall as a testimonial to its value, that countless generations of Jews lived and died to bequeath to us.

So let us challenge your conclusion that you’ve read it and that you know its contents.

There are two doors we must open to read and understand the Torah vision and path for our lives. The first door is Hebrew, without which we discern only a pale imitation of the Biblical society and culture and what they hold out for us. The fact is, all translations of the Torah are inadequate, typically mistaken and misleading.

Take the Hebrew word *korban*, for example. It is usually translated as “sacrifice,” which in English has pagan associations. It’s commonly understood to mean giving up something to appease or manipulate God, with the objective of making God serve one’s purposes. In Hebrew, however, the word *korban* means to bring near, and its meaning describes one who brings an offering to bring him- or herself near to God, that is, to be changed so as to be more in the image of God, living according to God’s will as revealed in the Torah.

The second door we must open to understand the meaning and relevance of Torah is the work of rabbinic scholars. Torah is read on four levels: (a) *peshat*—the surface meaning; (b) *remez*—what we understand by analyzing and comparing passages; (c) *drash*—the *aggadic* or storied meanings; and (d) *sod*—the mystical meanings. It’s very difficult to understand even the surface meaning, given the age and social antiquity of the Scripture’s origins, without the help of rabbinic scholars, and the deeper meanings are almost entirely obscure to us without the aid of their commentaries.

The verses that we're considering here tell us that we have no excuse for not knowing and keeping the *mitzvot* in our daily life and, by example, teaching them to our children.

The tradition says Torah is available and accessible. But for those of us who weren't given a Jewish education as children—we count ourselves in that number—Torah seems anything but available and accessible! It looks more like a mountain, with walls that are nearly vertical and totally intimidating.

How imposing is that mountain?

Hundreds of thousands of Jews, seeking God, many of whom join congregations and attend services on a more or less regular basis, choose to sing prayers they don't understand, which are literally meaningless to them. They choose to sit through Torah readings that might as well be chanted in Chinese or Swahili. And they choose these alternatives year after year rather than climb what they perceive as the mountain of mastering Torah and Hebrew.

Is there a less painful and frustrating alternative? And, if so, how are we to understand it and achieve it?

First, Hebrew and Torah are not a mountain to be climbed in some narrow window of time, the contemplation of which creates incredible pressure on one as a prospective student—but a path to be walked comfortably for a lifetime. As we move down the path, there is not only a sense of accomplishment with each new learning, but joy in the beauty and wisdom of the *etz chayim*, the tree of life—with all its branches, leaves, and blossoms—that lines the path.

What's important, then, to take a simple example, is not that we understand at any given moment every single detail about lighting Shabbat candles, but that we allow ourselves to be fully engaged and uplifted by what we do understand. In effect, the tradition is not fully known as we come to live it, but best fully lived as we come to know it.

What's really possible in terms of learning Hebrew and Torah if one is leading a busy and demanding life?

It's possible, in our experience of teaching Hebrew and Torah, for virtually anyone to learn to read with comprehension virtually all of the service, or to learn to read Torah with comprehension, in a year or two. That does not mean, of course, that one can master all of the vocabulary or grammar in that time, but that one can achieve a basic ability to read with comprehension.

Where does one begin?

The beginning is to decide that one really wants to begin. The old saying, if we do what we've always done, we'll get what we've always got, certainly applies here. So the first step is to decide that one is going to make Hebrew and Torah a greater priority, therefore making something else in one's life a lesser priority.

A commitment to that change of priorities is marked by the setting aside of *some* time, virtually every day, for that purpose. Any other beginning is actually an ending. So if you've decided not to conceal Torah from yourself, set aside some time every day for study, and find a teacher—and you can dramatically change the quality of your religious and spiritual life.

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