



OPENINGS

A Word from the Wise: It's Often Not Sufficient

If there is something that keeps us from using our tradition—Judaism and Torah—to find meaning and fulfillment in our lives, what is it?

Can it be that we believe the tradition contains nothing useful for us? While few of us would agree with this, many of us might say that the tradition is outdated.

Ironically, many of us come to this view because we are so highly educated, not in Torah but in secular subjects, like the natural sciences.

And so we feel confident, based on secular information and knowledge, rejecting or even ridiculing a tradition that mostly doesn't emphasize information and knowledge.

Judaism and Torah constitute a *wisdom* tradition. Wisdom may be defined as what is true and right and lasting, which therefore is worthy to guide the overall course of our lives as well as our day-to-day behavior.

It's also ironic that the scientific method parallels the traditional Jewish method of

building knowledge: both rely on asking questions. But for those of us who have moved away from the research orientation of science, we sometimes fall out of the habit of questioning to learn. Instead we rely on ourselves as authorities, founts of knowledge.

In parsha Bo, which we read this month, we are reminded of the Passover seder, the Haggadah, and the telling of our exodus from Egypt.

Consider the questions from the four children—the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the one unable to ask a question.

The wise child asks: "What are the testimonies, statutes, and laws that Adonai our God has commanded?" The wicked child asks: "What does this service mean to *you*?—thus excluding himself from the community and thereby denying the foundation of our tradition. According to our commentators, this wicked son is making a statement, not ask-

ing a question. The simple child asks: "What does this mean?"

As we can see, not all questions are equally useful or, for that matter, sincere. If "wisdom" is that which is "true and right and lasting," it is so in the sense of "moral discernment." If we are wise we learn to ask questions that illuminate the moral dimensions of life's circumstances and how to make moral choices, the consequences of which will be uplifting rather than degrading, fulfilling rather than enervating, wholesome rather than debased.



In the scientific world our answers to questions often evolve into dogma, only to be

(Continued on page 3.)

Save the Dates: January 4 & 18— Shabbat Evening Services & Dinners

Kehillat Kharakim will offer Friday evening egalitarian services and Shabbat dinners on January 4 and 18 at the home of Rabbi Moshe and Khulda.

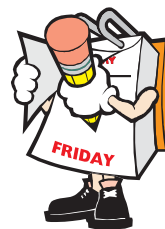
Services begin at 6:00 p.m. and include English and Hebrew prayers and singing.

After services there is a blessing of the children and a

sit-down dinner.

Dinner is followed by a readers' theatre Torah-drama, and zemirot (table songs).

Everyone who



comes is invited to bring a contribution to the tisch (table) in the form of a short story, a song, or a brief reading that's related to Shabbat generally or the Torah parsha (portion) for the week.

Call Rabbi Moshe & Khulda at (323) 934-2925 for more information, location, and to hold a place.

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Otzar—Treasure

Rabbi Oshaia said: Why are the words of the Torah likened to these three liquids: water, wine, and milk—as it is written: "Ho, everyone who is thirsty, come you for water. . . ." This is to teach you, just as these three liquids can only be preserved in the most inferior of vessels, so too the words of the Torah endure only with one who is humble.

—Talmud, Taanit 7a

Torah Shmooze: Miracle-Makers R' Us

And Adonai said to Moses: *Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the children of Israel and they will go forward* [into the Reed Sea]. (Exodus 14:15)

According to Rashi, “Moses was standing and praying.” God said to him: “Now is not the time to prolong in prayer, when Israel is placed in distress.”

God rebuked Moses for remaining immobilized, waiting passively for God’s intervention, while the children of Israel were pursued and threatened by the Egyptians.

“According to the plain meaning of these words, *אלי* [in *מה תצעק אלי*—Why do you cry out to Me?] means that the matter does not depend on God at all but on Israel. . . . God hinted that as soon as the Israelites would move forward, the sea would part for them to let them through. They only needed to demonstrate a little faith by moving forward. . . . They were to call on their reserves of faith and elevate themselves to the level of Adonai.” (Rabbeinu Bachya)



R’ Meir said: “When the Israelites stood by the Reed Sea, the tribes strove with one another, each wishing to descend into the sea first.” (Sotah 36b) But R’ Judah said to R’ Meir: “That is not what happened; but [instead] each tribe was unwilling to be the first to enter the sea.” (Sotah 37a)

It was because the people were unwilling to enter the sea that Moses was “engaged for a long while in prayer.” (Sotah 37a) The Midrash says that even after the sea was divided for them, the people still “rebelled” and refused to enter. (Shemot Rabbah)

“Who else was Moses supposed to cry out to if not to God? . . . If God meant that Moses indulged in *too much prayer*, that would seem unjustified criticism as long as Moses’ prayer had not yet been an-

swered. . . . Where were they supposed to move to? The Egyptians were behind them and the sea was in front! . . . While it was true that the attribute of Mercy was anxious to perform a life-saving miracle on behalf of the Israelites, they had not yet qualified for such a miracle by their deeds. . . . When God said to Moses: ‘Why do you cry out to Me?’ He meant: the matter is altogether not in My hands.” (Or Hachayim)

Moses did not cry out from fear of Pharaoh, but because “he thought . . . the (people) would not listen to him to enter the sea. Therefore God says to him, ‘Why did you cry out to Me?’ regarding this matter, for indeed you are distrustful of worthy ones. . . . They will not disobey you.” (Sforno)

In short, God is saying to Moses: Your lack of confidence in the courage of the people and their leaders is misguided; they are only waiting for you to give the order to go into the sea—and they must act before I will act to save them.

“Said R. Jose to him [Rabbi Hiya]: ‘Is it really so? Did not God divide the Red Sea for the Israelites so that they could pass on dry land, while the same waters swept round on the Egyptians and drowned them, so that here you have a miraculous deliverance and a divine punishment at one and the same point?’ R. Hiya replied: ‘This was precisely why the miracle of the Red Sea presented such difficulties to the Almighty. For when God does punish and miraculously deliver at the same time, it is usually not in the same place or the same house. If that does happen it constitutes a heavy task for Him.’” (Zohar, Bereshith 1:113b)

Rebbe Yehuda Tzvi of Stretin said, “A man must believe in miracles which happen בדרך הטבע not contrary to the laws of nature, and for everyone who believes that these miracles that happen in a natural way are truly miracles, the Holy-One-Blessed-be-He will perform supernatural miracles; for to the Holy-One-Blessed-be-He there is no difference between natural and supernatural miracles.” (R’ Menahem Hacohen)

“Belief in miracles is *only sensible* once there is the conviction that He who occasionally employs the supernatural, is in fact Master of the natural, its guiding force. . . . Even a Moses had erred . . . , as long as he had assumed that logic and reason would dictate success in his dealings with Pharaoh.” (Akeidat Yitzchak)

Regarding logic and reason, consider an e-mail we had some time ago:

“I wanted to share with you an extraordinary event I was fortunate enough to witness yesterday. On Monday night, the same

storm that delivered the snow to New England made itself felt here on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Throughout the night there was a strong East wind. It blew throughout the night. When I awoke, the Chesapeake Bay had receded at least 30 feet, laying bare the dry land. The wind held back the wall of water as I watched my neighbor climb down a ladder walk around the docks that just hours ago had hovered over the water. The dry land extended as far north and south as the eye can see, and it remained that way all day. Parts of it were so dry that the wind kicked up dust storms from what is usually thick black mud. The water that separates this island from the mainland a little further north was also blown back and one could truly walk across the channel to the next town. It truly was a wonder and I’m grateful to have been privileged to have this gift—especially so close to Pesach. I wish each of you could have been here to share it with me.” (Posted Wednesday, 2 April 1997, 07:27:51-0500 (EST) on the Pnai Or/Aleph/Renewal Rabbinic List by Naomi Hyman.)

“Said R. Judah: ‘I am surprised at you, R. Jose.’ He replied: ‘We have learnt that a man should not rely on a miracle, for God does not perform miracles at all times.’ He answered: ‘That applies only when a man is by himself. But we are three, and words of Torah pass between us and the Shekinah is with us; therefore we have no need to fear.’” (Zohar, Bereshith 230b)

Nehama Leibowitz concludes that



“miracles do not, necessarily, change human nature and cannot by themselves make man fear and love God.”

- *What is your definition of a “miracle”?*
- *Have you ever experienced a miracle?*
- *Do miracles become any more plausible when they are understood as supernatural rather than supernatural?*
- *What does it mean to “qualify for a miracle” by our deeds?*
- *Are miracles more likely when “we are three” rather than when we are alone?*

Word from the Wise: Often Not Sufficient (con't.)

overthrown when methods of observation are dramatically improved. Judaism, to its credit, is largely free of dogma: it presents to us absolute standards of behavior but little in the way of absolute requirements of belief. Jewish wisdom is regarded as true not because Jewish authorities proclaim it as such but because it has withstood the test of time in the experience of the Jewish people.

All this is brought to mind this week by a conversation Rabbi Moshe once had with a former congregant on the subject of mikveh. This person was, to put it generously, somewhat skeptical about the need to meet traditional requirements for a kosher mikveh or ritual bath. From his perspective, a swimming pool should serve the purpose as well—and the traditional requirements made no sense.

“What’s the difference,” he asked, “why a traditional mikveh or collection of water that’s fed by fresh rain water, which of course we know is not free of chemicals, rather than a swimming pool that also has chemicals?”

Six of one, half a dozen of the other—right?

This point of view puts Judaism and Torah in competition with science, which they are not. Science and technology have, of course, mostly transformed human life for the better—reducing disease, increasing

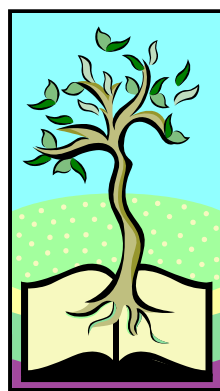
food supplies, improving transportation, enhancing communications.

But science and technology are not the means to transform human life in the image of God—to increase truth, justice, freedom, peace, and kindness.

To understand the value of our wisdom tradition, it’s necessary to ask questions. But as with the four children, not all questions are equally useful. Questions that are gauged to ridicule Judaism because it doesn’t correspond to the scientific paradigm are very easy to ask, but of course they reflect a statement that is only posing as a question. The typical statement?—“This tradition is nonsense.”

What kind of questions must we ask to become genuine students and beneficiaries of our wisdom tradition?

In the case of a particular Jewish practice, such as a ritual bath before a wedding or conversion, one might ask: What is the intended purpose? The question is important because the answer might be far from obvious to the uninitiated. The ritual bath,



for instance, does not have as its purpose the usual hygienic function of bathing. In fact, one is to be completely clean *before* entering the mikveh. Its purpose is the purification of the spirit, so the conditions of its application do not follow scientific reasoning or standards.

Along with asking the right questions, equally important is our expectation about answers. Most of us who have had the benefits of a higher education in the secular world know the time and effort it takes to acquire an education. We need to acknowledge that if we are to similarly enjoy the benefits of a higher education in the wisdom of our tradition, that goal cannot be achieved in a minute or two of casual conversation.

To understand the point, imagine yourself to be completely ignorant of the scientific method and scientific knowledge and technology generated during the 20th century. You meet someone who says it’s possible for a person to travel to the moon and you want them to convincingly explain in a minute or two how it’s possible—and, remember, you know nothing of science or technology.

Of course, it’s equally unrealistic to expect anyone to explain in a minute or two of casual conversation how our learning from the Jewish wisdom tradition can transform the world in the image of God.

For Young People: Sheepish or Wolfish

Can you guess how many Hebrew names for sheep there are in Tanakh (Bible)? One to three, four to six, or seven to nine? There are nine!

The names most familiar to us are *seh* (שֶׁה), which refers both to a sheep or goat, *keves* (כֶּבֶשׂ) for a lamb, *kesev* (כֶּשֶׂב), also for a lamb, and *tzon* (צֹאן), which refers not only to sheep but any flock of small animals, such as goats.

There are many things that most of us like about sheep. They’re gentle, their wool makes beautiful clothes, and their meat is very good to eat.

But there are some things about sheep that we don’t like so much. Worst of all, they’re very passive—which means what? They can be led anywhere, even to their own destruction.

Now what do you imagine that sheep had to do with God picking Moses as a leader of the Jewish people?

He was a shepherd and once he led his flock to the end of the wilderness. One of his sheep strayed far away from the flock to

a brook for water. Moses told the sheep, “Had I known you were thirsty, I would have carried you to the water.”



God rewarded Moses for his kindness by making him the leader of the Jewish people. Why do you think that God would want a leader of the people especially to be kind?

Sheep were, of course, one of the animals sacrificed in ancient Israel. Do you know when it is that many Jews nowadays offer a lamb as a kind of sacrifice?

Incidentally, are sheep kosher? Yes—but why? They have a split hoof and chew their cud.

It’s time for the sheep quiz! 1. How many things can you name that we get from sheep? 2. How much do the largest rams and ewes, male and female sheep, weigh? 3. How long do sheep live? 4. How many

varieties of sheep are there in the world? 5. What are the worst enemies of sheep?

The Talmud, which contains the teachings of our earliest and greatest rabbis, says: “This is the way of the world: wolves kill sheep.” (Baba Batra 16) There is also a proverb, which is a very old and wise saying, about sheep and wolves. The proverb says: “Whoever behaves as a sheep is devoured by the wolf.” (Mincha Chadasha 4:2) What do you think that means?

Maybe it means that although we don’t want to act like wolves, hurting people who are gentle and innocent, we also don’t want to be so “sheepish” ourselves—acting like sheep and allowing ourselves to be led anywhere by anyone—that those who act like wolves would hurt us.

(Answers to the quiz: 1. Wool, leather, meat, and milk; and dogs.)
2. About 350 and 225 pounds. 3. About seven to 13 years. 4. Cagnot [for racquets and musical instruments]. 2. About and to make tallow, soap, fertilizer, cosmetics, and leather dressings, soap, etc.]. 5. Sweet fat used in cooking and byproducts include: ghee, tallow [fat used to make

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על קהלת חרקים—ABOUT KEHILLAT KHARAKIM

- Kehillat Kharakim—a community of *openings*—meets twice-monthly for Shabbat services.
 - Kehillat Kharakim Friday-evening services regularly include a devar Torah (“sermon”) in the form of a readers’ theatre Torah-drama.
 - Kehillat Kharakim’s formation is being sponsored by Gather the People (GTP), a nonprofit organization founded by a Sponsor Committee of rabbis from virtually all the major branches and movements of Judaism.
 - Kehillat Kharakim’s rabbinic leadership is provided by Rabbi Moshe ben Asher and Khulda bat Sarah, formerly the “Rabbi Team” for Congregation Beth Israel of Chico, California.
 - The Kehillat Kharakim vision is to create a community of *openings*, or “kharakim,” through which family members of all ages can draw upon Judaism and congregational life to increase meaning and fulfillment in their own lives.
- The goal is a community that, regardless of where one begins or ends in Jewish knowledge or commitment, encourages greater exploration, acquisition, and expression of Judaism—and regardless of where one fits religiously, treats each person with kindness and respect.
 - The Kehillat Kharakim vision is that, apart from our capacity as individuals, we also have a role as a kehillah, a *community*. Following the example of Nehemiah, who gathered the people to rebuild the wall and gates of Jerusalem, we assume that we too can reduce the pressures and realize the hopes that will uplift our families. By doing mitzvot *collectively*, we can bring about change for the good in our day to day lives.
 - Kehillat Kharakim is independent, not affiliated with any of the movements or branches of Judaism.
 - Kehillat Kharakim has the following kashrut policy: all food must be dairy or parve, unless special arrangements have been made, and must be prepared according to kosher guidelines; packaged goods must be certified as kosher; fresh baked goods must be purchased from kosher bakeries; and home-baked goods must contain only vegetable shortening. Non-kosher food shall not be served.

Kehillat Kharakim is a project of
Gather the People
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for Congregational Community Development
<http://www.gatherthepeople.org>

PASTORAL COUNSELING AVAILABLE

Rabbi Moshe offers pastoral counseling without charge to any Kehillat Kharakim individual, couple, or family. Pastoral counseling addresses religious and spiritual as well as psychological and emotional needs. Moshe has a Ph.D. in Social Work, was a staff member of the Adirondack Samaritan Counseling Center of Glens Falls, NY, and was trained at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. Call (323) 934-2925 for more information or an appointment.

TAX DEDUCTIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUPPORT KEHILLAT KHARAKIM SHOULD BE MADE TO “GATHER THE PEOPLE”

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