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## SEALING THE HEART AND THE TRUTH: REPLACING EMPTINESS AND HOPELESSNESS WITH MEANING AND FULFILLMENT

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In *Shir Hashirim* (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים—Song of Songs), we read: “a seal on your heart.” If that text is unfamiliar, you might wonder whether it promises an exciting love-life or romantic heartbreak. Actually, our *masorah* (מסורה—religious tradition) teaches that we can best understand this seal as confirming the faithful loving relationship of God and the Jewish people.

But the idea that nowadays most Jews are in a faithful relationship with God is hard to swallow. To be more than spiritual posturing, such relationships would have to include mutually binding obligations that we fulfill. Yet such obligations are mostly antithetical to the current dominant liberal forms of Jewish religious belief and practice, which value personal autonomy above all else. We live in a time and place in which most Jews have rejected the demands of a give-and-take relationship with the Jewish God of Tanach (Hebrew Bible) and Talmud.

Yet, maybe, even if we are skeptical or cynical about Judaism, it’s still worthwhile to see if the wisdom of the *masorah* can help us overcome some of modernity’s dispiriting and demoralizing pressures, afflictions, and hopelessness. If only for the sake of keeping an open mind, let’s see where this traditional idea of Jewry’s loving relationship with God might lead us.

### *Our Seal on God’s Heart*

Near the end of the Song of Songs, verse 8:6 reads:

שִׁימְנֵי כַחוֹתָם עַל-לִבְךָ כַחוֹתָם עַל-זְרוֹעֶךָ  
כִּי-עֲזָה כַמּוֹת אֶהְבֶּה קֶשֶׁה כַשְּׂאוּל קִנְיָא  
רְשָׁפִיָּה רְשָׁפִי אֵשׁ שְׁלֵהֲבִתִּיהָ:

Set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm, for strong as death is devotion; jealousy is as strong as

the grave; its flashes are flashes of fire, the flame of God.

What are we to make of this enigmatic verse now, thousands of years after its composition? One place we can begin to find understanding is the Zohar, which is a source for the deeper meaning of “Set me like a seal on your heart.” The Zohar teaches:

Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Abba once turned aside into a cave at Lydda to escape the heat of the sun. Said Rabbi Abba: “Let us now encompass this cave with words of the Torah.” Rabbi Eleazar thereupon commenced with the verse: ‘Place me like a seal upon thy heart, like a seal upon thine arm . . . its coals are coals of fire, a very flame of the Lord.’ “This verse,” he said, “has been much discussed. One night I was attending on my father, and I heard him say that the true devotion and yearning of the Community of Israel for God is only brought about by the souls of the righteous, who cause the flow of the lower waters towards the upper; and then there is perfect friendship and desire for mutual embrace to bring forth fruit. When they cleave to one another, in the fullness of her affection she says: ‘Set me as a seal upon thine heart.’ For, as the impress of a seal remains even after the seal is removed, so, says the Community of Israel, I shall cleave to thee, even though I am re-

moved from thee and go into captivity. Hence, 'Set me as a seal upon thy heart' in order that my likeness may remain upon thee like the impress of a seal." (Soncino Zohar, Bereshit 1:244b-245a)

The Zohar tells us that we, the "Community of Israel," ask God to allow us to be a sign or seal on God's heart and arm. We understand the references to God's body parts as metaphors; they represent aspects of God's incorporeality as it affects us, primarily compassion and justice. So, in effect, we may ask God to remember and protect us, *Am Yisrael* (אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל—*the Jewish people*), because our devotion to God's will is as strong as death—that is, our love of God is stronger than our fear of death.

Of course, you may be thinking: Why would I risk death for the privilege of "loving God"—say, praying occasionally or receiving some blessing, which I doubt comes from God anyway?

If risking death for some amorphous spiritual reward seems like a bad bargain, try asking yourself instead whether possibly you're prepared to risk death in some situations that may seem far-fetched because they demand more than you ordinarily experience in your day-to-day life. For instance, how far would you go in violating God's law, as given to us in the Torah and Talmud, to save your own life?

- Would you take the life of a child to save yourself?
- Would you refuse to help defend your family or community if they were violently attacked?
- Would you openly and explicitly denounce the Torah's *mitzvot* (מִצְוֹת—*commandments*) to your children, thereby placing a *hechsher* (הֶכְשֵׁר—*certification of approval and sanctity*) on idolizing materialism and sensuality, lying, stealing, violating marriage vows, etc.?

These are moral boundaries that many secular Jews hesitate to cross, possibly because even skeptics and cynics see these *mitzvot* and their observance as the indispensable moral-spiritual infrastructure of desirable social life—an idea to which we will return.

The fiery devotion that Jews historically have had to God, the "flashes of fire"—evidenced by the commitment of the Jewish people to the Torah over millennia, despite suffering and death—has burned with strength comparable to Divine fire. The commitment of the Jewish people can be compared to the limitless firing-up or energizing of God's Creation, which seemingly is unlike all finite human energy sources; because, following the offspring of Avraham and Sarah, in every generation we see at least a remnant of Jews with an unending and historically unrivaled, fired-up commitment to their *masorah*.

Withal, what are the contemporary circumstances in which God "remembers" the Jewish people because of our devotion, our seal on God's heart? What are our

expectations and how does God protect us?

Our current relationship with God resembles our pitch to the CHP cop who stops us when we're doing 85 in a 65-mile-an-hour zone: "I try to obey the traffic laws and I rarely go over the speed limit," we plead, "so I hope you'll keep that in mind and not give me a ticket, which I really can't afford." Of course, the officer may respond: "I'm going to give you a break this time, only writing you up for going five miles an hour over the limit, which should cause a jump in your insurance and points on your license. You're a danger to yourself and to others, so be more careful to observe the law. The next time you may lose your driver's license or even your life." In a similar plea, we're saying to God: "We try to follow your commandments to fix the moral decay of our social life, so we hope you will still favor our survival and success, even though we're living spiritually empty lives—with little righteousness, truth or justice, freedom, peace or kindness—because we crave sensuality and material things." God might reply: "I'm going to give you a break this time, so the only immediate results of your unrestrained appetites will be that your marriage and family life, possibly even your communities, will be shattered. You're a danger to yourself and others, so be more observant of my laws. If you continue to ignore the Torah's boundaries, you may lose your freedom entirely or even your life."

Much more often than not, we degrade and ignore the model of moral-spiritual infrastructure given to us in Judaism's sacred books, which describe the essential moral laws of successful social life, what we Jews have inherited as the *mitzvot* of the Torah and the *halachah* (הֲלָכָה—*rabbinic law*).

Our disparagement of Jewish religious law almost certainly reflects the absence of higher religious education among Jews and the cultural contagion of idolizing amoral personal autonomy, with the latter often driving the former. Contemporary Jewry, for the most part, like much of American society, spiritually poisons itself with the idolatry of unrestrained self-worshipping autonomy, seemingly unconscious of its devastating effects on the self and on marriage, family, community, peoplehood, and nation.

### ***Knowing We Are Nothing***

But what if we personally feel a *spiritual need* that seeks a higher meaning and purpose, not simply the endless feedback loop of our own limited imagination and appetites and their satiation? What if we can see that our personal autonomy is *not* of ultimate practical value? What if it does not produce individual or social uplift, fulfillment and happiness, does not relieve our frequent feelings of emptiness, fragmentation and futility; if we as individuals don't always know or live up to what is morally most rewarding for ourselves and our loved ones, our community, our commerce, and our people; and if we are not the best authors of the moral

standards that should guide our lives and make them meaningful and satisfying—then what? Do we continue to ignore the wreckage all around us, rationalizing our way through the ever-widening wasteland of moral-spiritual death? Or do we admit that we have been acting foolishly, like immature know-it-alls, who own and control everything but possess little or nothing of true and lasting value?

The antidote is to know that in matters of moral-spirituality, we are “nothing.” The Chozeh (seer) of Lublin<sup>1</sup> teaches that when we know we are nothing, we are “attached to the truth” (which is hard for us to comprehend). “In its ultimate form . . . *emeth* [אמת—truth] is a trait that is unique to the Almighty, for it refers to the characteristic of permanence and perpetuity. God is the only being whose existence is eternal, as He describes Himself, ‘I am the first, I am the last, I exist always’.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, only God’s Providence, the Divine plan for the unfolding of the Creation and ourselves in it, our *hashgacha peratit* (השגחה פרטית—special providence), reveals to us the effects of the Torah’s moral-spiritual guides on our own fulfillment. We directly experience God’s special providence by following or failing to follow the *mitzvot*, which are the guideposts for our survival and success as well as our downfall and demise. Thankfully, unlike all human-authored guides, God’s guidelines, however demanding, are never exploitative or self-serving.

Knowing we are nothing means we know what we don’t know. We know that the *mysterium tremendum* of the *Gaon Hakol* (גאון הכל—the Mastermind of Creation) obscures how God created and masterminds the lawfulness of both the material and non-material worlds: the material worlds of biology, physics, and cosmology; and the non-material, spiritual worlds of righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness. In regard to these worlds, the *masorah* teaches two fundamental lessons: First, God “consulted the Torah and [then] created the world . . .” (Bereshit Rabbah 1:1); that is, God had a plan, the Torah, a design for the Creation, which existed before the Creation was launched. And second, the Torah is not mainly concerned with the cosmology and physics of the creative process, although it credits God’s role in bringing the material world into existence, but instead focuses throughout on the commandments and consequences of the Creation’s *moral-spiritual* dynamics.

How can it make sense to us that the Torah existed before the Creation? First, keep in mind that the Creation is material and finite, while God is incorporeal and infinite. Second, by way of analogy, imagine that our receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai is roughly like space travelers landing near the city of Brasilia, the capitol of Brazil, and after wandering around lost, discover the architectural plans to the city, thus making it possible to locate every place in the metropolis. Obviously, finding the plans would have confirmed the ar-

chitect’s vision before the construction of the city began. Since the Torah is our roadmap to the moral-spiritual dynamics of life, telling us how to navigate our way to all that’s worthwhile in life, the *masorah* teaches us that it must have existed in some incorporeal form as the visionary plan of the Divine Architect before the Creation existed.

The moral-spiritual dimension of the Creation is humankind’s “animating or vital principle . . . which gives life to the physical organism.”<sup>3</sup> If we subtract moral-spirituality from human life—try to imagine that we are left with *nothing* of righteousness, truth or justice, and *nothing* of freedom, peace or kindness—what remains cannot meaningfully be called *human*. Both worlds, the physical and the spiritual, have built-in demands to achieve survival, balance, and vitality. Ignorance of or indifference to those demands leads to the rigidity and chaos of dysregulation which, in regard to moral-spirituality, we know as the educative consequences of amoral autonomy. We experience this truth as the “seal of God.”

### *God’s Seal of Truth*

The truth of God’s seal exists insofar as God *commands* the educative consequences of action for all of the Creation—no one and nothing escapes.

The Talmud (Yoma 69b) teaches that the sin of idolatry—treating all manner of sensual and material experience as the means to fulfillment in life—resulted in the destruction of the Temple, the death of the righteous, and the Exile. So the people beseeched God to remove their evil inclination to idolatry. Then in reply:

A note fell down from heaven (נפל ליהו פיתקא מרקיעא) on which was written: ‘Truth’ (דהנה ברה אמת). Rav Chanina said (אמר רב חנינא): Learn from this [the nightmare that had befallen them] (שמע מינה) that the seal of the Holy One, Blessed be God, is ‘Truth’ (ברוך הוא חותמו של הקדוש) אמת).

The effect on humankind of truth being the seal of God is that the Divine Intelligence—the active Masterminding Source of the material and non-material worlds—permanently impresses itself upon each one us when, through our own moral and ethical failures, we come to know what we don’t know, what we must leave to God. Practically, this truth is engraved upon us when we admit to ourselves that, although we have free will to choose to do as we please, we do *not* choose the consequences of living as if we are morally autonomous, at liberty to adopt any “lifestyle” that we find pleasurable, especially those that make limitless, self-serving, free-wheeling materialism and sensuality the be-all and end-all of our lives.

When we do that, our commonplace experience is that, whatever at the outset we imagined, planned, and

expected as the benefits of acting amorally, disregarding morality, whether spurred on by moral ignorance, casual indifference, or purposeful wickedness, the ultimate consequences turn out to be very different, although still potentially educative. This is true whether our wrongdoing was a matter of gossip, infidelity, theft, violence, cruelty, idolatry, etc. For example, as Khulda Bat Sarah teaches, even idolizing “little green pieces of paper” has destroyed millions of lives, literally.

The final seal of God’s truth in this respect may mark the end of a presumptuous life, one that has been lived scorning the moral-spiritual laws. At its end, the banality of that life is imprinted on the heart and soul of the individual who has lived it—sealed as a devastating sendoff into eternity. Then, too, one may simply be an innocent and incidental victim of that individual, which tragically confirms the reach and scale of that person’s wrongdoing, which is the primary measure of evil.

In its opposite incarnation, the final seal of God’s truth may mark a life dedicated to the Jewish ideals of moral-spirituality. Then the seal of God’s truth is also imprinted on the heart and soul of the individual, but as an uplifting, comforting, ever-inspiring vision and path for a life of moral-spiritual purpose, fulfillment, and contentment. And, of course, one may be an incidental beneficiary of the goodness radiating from another’s life well-lived, even when generations removed from that life, as we are from the inspiring life of Rabbi Aki-va.

God “seals,” in effect remembers, our actions by masterminding the ultimate irrepressibility of Divine Truth. The *Gaon Hakol* has structured the incorporeal world of the spirit so that behavior which conflicts with moral-spiritual law is thwarted eventually by its discordance with God’s material Creation. Our earliest experience of this verity comes when we discover that one lie leads to another lie, which inevitably creates an edifice of deceit, which in turn becomes unsustainable because it contradicts material reality. Eventually it is brought down by irrepressible truth. It’s a lesson most of us learn in childhood.<sup>4</sup>

### *Moral-Spiritual Ignorance Is Not Bliss*

But those of us who are Jewishly uneducated, caught up in the pleasure-bubble of materialism and sensuality, most with no more Jewish education than preparation to become *b’nei mitzvah* (בְּנֵי מִצְוָה—children of commandment), rarely get beyond rejecting *kashrut* (כַּשְׁרוּת—dietary laws) and *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת—Sabbath) requirements, which they regard as far too onerous in the absence of any supposed benefits. Mostly, then, they have traded Judaism for the “religion” of the god Sci-Tech, which in its own name makes no inconvenient or uncomfortable moral demands on its devotees, only that they recognize, pay for, and utilize its benefits.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, we are grateful for the miracles of mod-

ern science and technology, especially in medicine and public health, computers and communications, transportation and energy generation. But unless we have adopted the habits of the three monkeys—neither seeing, hearing, nor speaking evil—we may despair of what our veneration of science has *not* achieved. We live in an era and society in which ethics and morality are regarded dubiously at best, when regarded at all. Instead of shared moral and ethical standards in family, community, commerce, and national life, we have shirked our responsibilities by handing them over first to clergy, social workers, and therapists, and then to police, courts, and other criminal justice institutions, the former becoming burned out, prematurely abandoning their careers of service, and the latter, overloaded and overwhelmed, often morphing into official lawlessness and injustice.

So, for eminently practical reasons, the *masorah* teaches us not to idolize unbridled materialism and sensuality. We are not to make life-decisions on the basis of superstitions, like believing that anything other than *mitzvot* determine the outcomes of all our worthwhile endeavors. The most absurd are astrology, Tarot cards, crystals, and of course, the promise of “hot sex” and little green pieces of paper—“. . . because all of these are false, little more than a pack of lies.”<sup>6</sup>

### *Masorah Meets Neurobiology*

Do we have any compelling *scientific* basis for integrating the *masorah* into our day-to-day, mostly secular, amoral, self-indulgent lives, both individually and as members of the Jewish people? An affirmative answer, surprising to many, has emerged from the burgeoning field of neurobiology.

Dr. Robert Lustig<sup>7</sup> demonstrates with solid scientific evidence and reasoning that four major crises of American well-being—the healthcare crisis, the Social Security crisis, the opioid crisis, and the depression crisis—are one crisis (which, of course, also affects American Jews): “The systemic confusion and conflation of *pleasure* with *happiness*.”<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Lustig contrasts the characteristics of pleasure and happiness:

<u><i>Pleasure</i></u>	<u><i>Happiness</i></u>
Short lived	Long lived
Visceral	Ethereal
Taking	Giving
Experienced alone	Experienced with others
Achievable with substances	Not achievable with substances
Extremes lead to addiction	Can’t be addicted to happiness
Dopamine [neurotransmitter]	Serotonin [neurotransmitter]

The fascinating aspect of this comparison is how closely it tracks the inverse relationship between some of the worst symptoms of American social and physical maladies and the teachings of traditional Judaism.

Virtually all the *pleasure*-producing activities, focused as they are on sensuality and materialism, commonly lead to addictions that are self-destructive and damaging to others in one's marriage, family, community, commerce, and nation (the last, given the economic and national security consequences of metabolic syndrome diseases).

Dr. Lustig's teaching is a reminder, based on extensive peer-reviewed neurobiological research, that the seal of God's truth is inescapable: "The more pleasure you seek, the more unhappy you get"<sup>9</sup>—which helps us to understand why the *masorah* puts boundaries around pleasure-seeking, not outlawing pleasure but defining self-destructive excess.

### *The Take-Away*

What can we learn from the intersection of *masorah* and neurobiological science?

Both the *masorah* of Judaism and the most up-to-

date research findings of neurobiological science tell us that we should stop treating sensuality and materialism as idols with the power to bring true happiness. Instead, as the *masorah* teaches, we should dedicate ourselves to promoting God's Torah of righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness, which define the shortest path to happiness, to the fulfillment of our uniquely human potential. Our walking that *derech yashar* (יֶשֶׁר יְיָ—righteous path) in daily life activates our seal on the heart of God and God's seal of truth on us.

So, ultimately, sealing the heart and the truth is not about what we think or feel, but what we *do*. "The final letters of the three words that conclude the account of God's authoring the Creation—*bara Elokim la'asot* [בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת] ('God created to do')<sup>10</sup>—spell *emet* [אֱמֶת—truth]. God created reality 'to do,' which as interpreted by the sages means that it is incumbent upon us, God's creatures, to complete the 'doing' (i.e., 'rectification') of God's creation."<sup>11</sup> We do this when we bring the moral-spiritual infrastructure to life by our own observance of God's *mitzvot*.

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Jacob Isaac Horowitz, 1745-1815, known as the Seer of Lublin (החוזר מלובלין), Poland, was a Chasidic rebbe.

<sup>2</sup> See Rabbi Daniel Travis, "Signs of Truth I," torah.org (2001) [https://torah.org/learning/integrity-truth1/].

<sup>3</sup> From the *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. II (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 2967 (617).

<sup>4</sup> Rav Michael Hattin, "The Teshuvah of Ya'acov," Yeshivat Har Etzion, Israel Koschitzky Beit Midrash (n.d.)

[https://www.etzion.org.il/en/teshuva-yaacov], notes that the lesson, the "... painful process of self-realization ... is triggered by harsh external factors of the most sudden and inexplicable kind" when we encounter the implacable character of material reality.

<sup>5</sup> While it's obviously true that from one another, scientists expect righteousness, truth, and justice, the foundations of moral and ethical integrity, these principles and their day-to-day implementation are not the product of scientific theories and research. They have been borrowed from various religious traditions, which the scientific enterprise, in its criticism of non-scientific wisdom and knowledge, typically fails to acknowledge.

<sup>6</sup> See Rabbi Berel Wein, "Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog—Vayeira," rabbiwein.com [https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-1937.html].

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Lustig (b. 1957) is a professor of pediatric endocrinology at the University of California, San Francisco, and an attorney, a graduate of the University of California, Hastings College of Law. He has authored more than one hundred peer-reviewed research studies and papers on the development of metabolic syndrome and neuroendocrinology.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert Lustig, "A Hacking of the American Mind," YouTube (March 15, 2018), presentation made at a meeting of the Silicon Valley Health Institute [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhh19cQukfg].

<sup>9</sup> See Robert Lustig, "The pursuit of pleasure is a modern-day addiction," *The Guardian* (September 9, 2017)

[https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/09/pursuit-of-pleasure-modern-day-addiction], in which he observes: "Too much dopamine and not enough serotonin, the neurotransmitters of the brain's 'pleasure' and 'happiness' pathways, respectively. Despite what the telly and social media say, pleasure and happiness are not the same thing. Dopamine is the 'reward' neurotransmitter that tells our brains: 'This feels good, I want more.' Yet too much dopamine leads to addiction. Serotonin is the 'contentment' neurotransmitter that tells our brains: 'This feels good. I have enough. I don't want or need any more.' Yet too little serotonin leads to depression. Ideally, both should be in optimal supply. But dopamine drives down serotonin. And chronic stress drives down both."

<sup>10</sup> Bereshit/Genesis 2:3

<sup>11</sup> From "Basics in Kabbalah: Emet—The Powers of the Soul to Experience God," Gal Einai (n.d.) [www.inner.org/powers/powemet.htm].

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