

# SEALING THE HEART AND THE TRUTH

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

A “seal on your heart”—does it promise romance or heartbreak? In fact, it’s mainly about fidelity, which nowadays we don’t much associate with ideas of romance. It comes from *Shir Hashirim* (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים), the Song of Songs, which our *mesorah* (tradition) teaches is best understood as an allegory of the *loving* relationship between God and Israel.

“Say what?! Most Jews in a loving relationship with God?”— maybe you’re thinking. This must be parody, right?—at least if we believe that relationships include mutual obligations. But let’s see where this seemingly far-fetched idea of loving relationship leads us.

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

שִׁמְנֵי כַחוֹתָם עַל־לִבְךָ כַחוֹתָם עַל־זְרוּעֶךָ כִּי־עֵזָה בְּמִוֹת אֶהְיֶה קֶשֶׁה כְּשֶׁאוֹל  
. קִנְיָה רֶשֶׁתָּהּ רֶשֶׁתָּהּ אֶשׁ שְׁלֵה־בְתִיָּהּ. 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 verse now, after three millennia of our history as the Jewish people? We live in an era in which most Jews have rejected any meaningful relationship with the Jewish God of the Torah, the Talmud, and the other sacred literature of Judaism. But nonetheless, maybe it’s worthwhile to plow on here, to discover—especially if one is skeptical or cynical about religion—whether the *mesorah*, our wisdom tradition, can help us navigate the endless pressures, diseases, and disappointed hopes of modern life.

One place to find answers to these questions is the Zohar, a source for deeper meanings of the expression, “Set me like a seal on your heart.” In the Zohar we read:

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 removed 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)

### ***We put a seal on God's heart?***

Possibly our first surprise reading the Zohar verses is that we, the “Community of Israel,” are asking God to allow us to be a sign or seal on God’s heart and arm, body parts which we understand to represent metaphorically aspects of God’s incorporeality or non-materiality. In effect, we are asking God to remember us, as a people, because our devotion to God is as strong as death—that is, our love of God is stronger than our fear of death.

Maybe you’re saying to yourself, “Wait a minute, here! I’m not trading my life for the privilege of praying occasionally or receiving some blessing, which I hardly regard as from God.” Another way to understand this teaching, however, is to ask ourselves: How far would I go in violation of God’s law to save my own skin? Would I take the life of an innocent child to save my own life? Would I refuse to help defend my family or community if they were under violent attack? Would I denounce the Torah and its commandments (*mitzvot*) to my children—endorsing murder, the killing of innocents; endorsing idolatry, the worship of materialism and sensuality at the expense of marriage, family, community, and nation; endorsing theft, the unjust taking of the rights, resources, time, and spirit of others; and endorsing adultery, the violation of one’s marriage vows and encouragement of others to do the same? These are moral boundaries that even secular Jews hesitate to cross, possibly because on some level even skeptics and cynics perceive the *mitzvot* as the indispensable infrastructure of social life—an idea we will return to momentarily.

The “flashes of fire,” the fiery devotion Jews have had to God—witnessed by the historical commitment of the Jewish people to the Torah over millennia, despite the costs in suffering and death—have the strength of Godly fire. We are witnesses to the infinite energizing of God’s Creation, which is unlike all human creations; and, seemingly, the survival power and energized commitment to the *mesorah* of at least a remnant of the Jewish people in every generation, no matter the cost, is also infinite.

So how are we to understand the traditional teaching that God “remembers” the Jewish people because of our devotion, our seal on God’s heart? It’s roughly like saying to the CHP officer who stops us: “I almost always obey the traffic laws, so I hope you’ll keep that in mind and not give me a ticket, which I don’t deserve because I was only going a couple of miles over the speed limit.” Only here we’re saying to God: “We recognize and mostly observe your *mitzvot* that make up the moral-spiritual infrastructure of human social life, so we hope your masterminding of the Creation will still favor our survival and success, even though we’re living far less than perfectly moral and ethical lives.”

The spiritual infrastructure, the moral and ethical underpinnings of social life, what we Jews have inherited as *mitzvot*, can and do become degraded and dysfunctional. These outcomes typically result from ignorance, manipulation by self-serving commercial interests,<sup>1</sup> and, most fateful of all, free-willed rejection based on the cultural contagion of *idolizing* personal amoral autonomy.

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

If our personal amoral autonomy is *not* of ultimate value practically—that is, it does not produce individual or social uplift, fulfillment, and happiness; if we as individuals don’t always know or live up to what’s morally and ethically best for ourselves; and if we are not the best authors of the moral-spirituality that should guide our lives—then what? Do we admit that we have been

acting foolishly, like immature know-it-alls? The antidote to that dysfunctionality is to know that in matters of moral-spirituality, we are “nothing.”

The Chozeh (seer) of Lublin<sup>2</sup> teaches us that when we know we are nothing, we are “attached to the truth.” “In its ultimate form . . . *emeth* [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>3</sup> In other words, the tradition is teaching us that only God’s Divine Providence, God’s plan for the unfolding of the Creation and ourselves in it, our special providence (השגחה פרטית), reveals to us the universal moral-spiritual guides to our own fulfillment. And unlike all human-authored guides, God’s guides are not self-serving.

Knowing we are nothing means we know what we don’t know. We know that the *mysterium tremendum* of the Mastermind of Creation, the *Gaon Hakol*, has created and masterminds the lawfulness of both the material and non-material worlds—the world of physics and the world of incorporeality, both of which have unavoidable requirements to achieve stability, sustainability, and well-being. Ignorance of or indifference to those requirements leads to rigidity and chaos, the inevitable consequences of living autonomously and becoming dysregulated. This truth is, in a manner of speaking, the “seal of God.”

### **God’s Seal of Truth**

In the Talmud we read:

דאמר רבי חנינא חותמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא אמת—As Rabbi Chanina said: The signet [seal] of the Holy One, Blessed is He, is “Truth.” אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני—Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said: אלו בני אדם שקיימו את התורה כולה מאלף ועד תיו—These are people who observed the entire Torah, from *alef* to *tav*. (Shabbat 55a)

The effect of truth being the seal of God on us is that the Divine Intelligence—the active masterminding of the physical and incorporeal worlds—permanently impresses itself upon us when we come, through our own foibles and failures, to know what we don’t know, what we must leave to God. Practically, this truth is engraved upon us when we acknowledge 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 autonomous, free to adopt any “lifestyle” that we find pleasurable, particularly those that make free-wheeling materialism and sensuality the be-all and end-all of our lives.

Our commonplace experience is that, whatever at the outset we imagined, planned on, expected, and hoped-for as the outcome of our amorality, our moral ignorance or indifference, the actual consequences were a far cry from those fantasies. This is true whether our wrongdoing was a matter of infidelity, theft, violence, or even idolatry.

The seal of God’s truth, in this respect, may mark the end of a presumptuous life, one that has been lived scorning righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness. At its conclusion, the banality and meaninglessness of such a life is imprinted on the heart and soul of

the individual who has lived it—sealed, as it were, a devastating sendoff into eternity.

Or the seal of God’s truth, in its opposite incarnation, may mark the beginning of a life dedicated to the Jewish ideals of moral-spirituality. Here the seal of God’s truth is also imprinted on the heart and soul of the individual, but now as an uplifting, comforting, ever-inspiring vision and path for a life of meaning and purpose.

God “seals,” remembers, our actions by masterminding the irrepressibility of divine truth. The *Gaon Hakol* has structured the incorporeal world of the spirit so that what conflicts with moral-spiritual law is ultimately shattered by its discordance with God’s Creation. Our simplest experience of this phenomenon is that one lie leads to another lie, which inevitably creates an edifice of deceit, one which is unsustainable because of its internal and external contradictions, and eventually is taken down by irrepressible truth. It’s a lesson most of us learn in childhood.

### ***Moral Ignorance Is Not Bliss***

But of course, those of us who are Jewishly uneducated, caught up in the pleasure-bubble of materialism and sensuality, most with no more Jewish education than *b’nei mitzvah* preparation, rarely get beyond rejection of kashrut and Shabbat requirements, which they regard as too onerous in the absence of any supposed benefits. Mostly, then, we have traded Judaism for the “religion” of science, which in its own name makes no inconvenient or uncomfortable moral or ethical demands on us—only that we recognize and utilize its benefits.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, we are grateful for the miracles of modern 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—seeing no evil, hearing no evil, and speaking no evil—we should be much less sanguine about what our reverence of science has *not* achieved: We live in an age 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, commercial, and national life, we have shirked our responsibility by handing it over to law enforcement and criminal justice institutions, which have become overloaded and overwhelmed, themselves often morphing into official lawlessness and injustice.

So, for good and eminently practical reasons, as our *mesorah* teaches, we are not to “idolize” money and sex; and we are not to make life-decisions on the basis of superstitions, like believing that other than *mitzvot*, like the movement of the heavenly bodies, determines the course of our lives—“. . . because all of these are false, little more than a pack of lies.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Mesorah Meets Neurobiology***

In the final analysis, does the *mesorah* connect in any compelling way to our day-to-day, mostly secular lives—both individually and as the Jewish people? An affirmative answer, surprising to many, has emerged from the burgeoning field of neurobiology.

Dr. Robert Lustig<sup>6</sup> demonstrates compellingly 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 also affects American Jews): “The systemic confusion and conflation of *pleasure* with *happiness*.”<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Lustig contrasts the characteristics of pleasure and happiness:

<u>PLEASURE</u>	<u>HAPPINESS</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 feature of this insightful contrast is how aptly it describes the symptoms of American social sickness and how closely it tracks with 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>8</sup>—which is precisely why the *mesorah* puts boundaries around pleasure-seeking, not forbidding pleasure but defining excess.

### ***What's the take-away?***

What can we learn from understanding this aspect of the Jewish *mesorah* and its intersection with contemporary neurobiological science?

The central teachings of Judaism—not to idolize sensuality and materialism but instead to promote God's righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness—are the shortest path to fulfillment of our human potential. Our following that *derech yashar* (righteous path) activates our seal on the heart of God and God's seal of truth on us.

So, sealing the heart and the truth is not finally about what we think or feel—but what we *do*. "The final letters of the three words that conclude the account of Creation—*bara Elokim la'asot* [בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת] ('God created to do')<sup>9</sup>—spell *emet* [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>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert H. Lustig, *The Hacking of the American Mind: The Science Behind the Corporate Takeover of Our Bodies and Brains* (New York, NY: Avery Publishing Group, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Jacob Isaac Horowitz, 1745-1815, known as the Seer of Lublin (החזו"ה מלובלין), was a Chasidic rebbe in Poland.

<sup>3</sup> See Rabbi Daniel Travis, "Signs of Truth I," torah.org (2001) [<https://torah.org/learning/integrity-truth1/>].

<sup>4</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 all non-scientific knowledge, ungratefully fails to acknowledge.

<sup>5</sup> See Rabbi Berel Wein, "Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog—Vayeira," rabbiwein.com [<https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-1937.html>].

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<sup>6</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>7</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>8</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>9</sup> Bereshit/Genesis 2:3

<sup>10</sup> From “Basics in Kabbalah: Emet—The Powers of the Soul to Experience God,” Gal Einai (n.d.) [[www.inner.org/powers/powemet.htm](http://www.inner.org/powers/powemet.htm)].