

SEALING THE HEART AND THE TRUTH

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A “seal on your heart”—does it promise romance or heartbreak? In fact, it’s mainly about fidelity, which nowadays is rarely a part of our romantic experience. It comes from *Shir Hashirim* (שיר שהשירים—Song of Songs), which our *mesorah* (מסורה—tradition) teaches we can best understand as symbolizing the *loving* relationship between God and Israel.

Most contemporary Jews in a loving relationship with God? This reads like parody, at least if we believe that authentic Jewish relationships include mutual obligations. But let’s see where this seemingly far-fetched idea of our loving relationship with God leads us.

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

שימני כחותם על־לבך כחותם על־זרועך כִּי־עזה כמות אהבה קשה כשואל
קנאה רשפיה רשפי אש שלהבתיה.

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 a time and place in which most Jews have rejected any reciprocal relationship with the Jewish God of the Torah, the Talmud, and the other sacred literature of Judaism. But maybe, while still skeptical or cynical about Judaism, it’s nonetheless worthwhile to plow on here, to see if the wisdom of the *mesorah* can help us overcome the pressures, afflictions, and hopelessness of modern life.

One place we can begin to find help 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)

How can we put a seal on God’s heart?

The Zohar verses tell 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. In effect, we ask God to remember us, *Am Yisrael*

(עם ישראל—the People of Israel), because our devotion to God is as strong as death—that is, our love of God is stronger than our fear of death.

Why should you trade your life for the privilege of praying occasionally or receiving some blessing, which you hardly think is from God? But ask yourself: How far would I go in violating God's law to save my own life? Would I take the life of an innocent child? Would I refuse to help defend my family or community if they were violently attacked? Would I denounce the Torah and its *mitzvot* (מצוות—commandments) to my children, thereby placing a *hechsher* (הכשר—certifying approval) on murdering innocents, idolizing materialism and sensuality, stealing from others, and violating marriage vows? These are moral boundaries that many secular Jews hesitate to cross, possibly because even skeptics and cynics perceive these *mitzvot* as the indispensable infrastructure of desirable social life—an idea we will return to momentarily.

The fiery devotion Jews have had to God, the “flashes of fire”—affirmed by the historical commitment of the Jewish people to the Torah over millennia, despite suffering and death—has burned with the strength of Divine fire. We are witnesses both to the limitless firing-up or energizing of God's Creation, which is unlike virtually all finite human energy sources; and to the unending and unrivaled energized commitment of Jews in every generation to their *mesorah*.

So, withal, 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 telling 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 you will mastermind your Creation to still favor our survival and success, even though we're living far less than fully moral and ethical lives.”

The spiritual infrastructure, the moral and ethical underpinnings of social life, what we Jews have inherited as *mitzvot*, we degrade and ignore. This results, most fatefully, from the cultural contagion of idolizing our amoral personal autonomy.

Knowing We Are Nothing

If our amoral personal 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 is morally and ethically most rewarding 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 is to know that in matters of moral-spirituality, we are “nothing.” The Chozeh (seer) of Lublin¹ teaches us that when we know we are nothing, we are “attached to the truth.” “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’.”² 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 *hashgacha peratit* (השגחה פרטית—special providence), reveals to us the universal moral-spiritual guides to our own fulfillment. And unlike all human-authored guides, God's guides 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—Mastermind of Creation) is how God masterminds the lawfulness of both the material and non-material worlds: the material world of physics and cosmology; and the non-material world of the “*spirit*,” humankind’s “animating or vital principle . . . which gives life to the physical organism.”³ Both worlds have unavoidable requirements to achieve survival, balance, and vitality. Ignorance of or indifference to those requirements leads to the rigidity and chaos of dysregulation, which are the educative consequences of amoral autonomy. We understand this truth to be 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 escapes.

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 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 of us when, through our own moral foibles and 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 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 morally 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, and expected as the benefits of acting amorally, whether spurred on by moral ignorance or heedlessness, the actual consequences were very different—and hopefully educative. This is true whether our wrongdoing was a matter of infidelity, theft, violence, idolatry, etc. For example, as Khulda teaches, idolizing “little green pieces of paper” has destroyed millions of lives, literally.

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 a devastating sendoff into eternity. Then, too, one may simply be an incidental victim of that individual, a testament to the scale of his or her wrongdoing.

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 moral-spiritual purpose and fulfillment. And, of course, one may be an incidental beneficiary of the goodness radiating from another's life well-lived.

God “seals,” in effect remembers, our actions by masterminding the 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 eventually shattered by its discordance with God's 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 is unsustainable because it is internally and externally contradictory, and which eventually is brought 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* (בני מצווה) preparation, rarely get beyond rejecting *kashrut* (כשרות—dietary laws) and *Shabbat* (שבת—Sabbath) requirements, which we regard as far 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 its consumers, only that we recognize, pay for, and utilize its benefits.⁴

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 may despair what our veneration 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 eminently practical reasons, the *mesorah* teaches us not to idolize money and sex; and we are not to make life-decisions on the basis of superstitions, like believing that anything other than *mitzvot*—the most absurd are astrology, Tarot cards, and crystals—rules our lives, “. . . because all of these are false, little more than a pack of lies.”⁵

Mesorah Meets Neurobiology

Do we have any compelling scientific basis for integrating the *mesorah* into 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 Lustig⁶ demonstrates with solid scientific evidence 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*.”⁷

Dr. Lustig contrasts the characteristics of pleasure and happiness:

Pleasure

Short lived
Visceral
Taking
Experienced alone
Achievable with substances
Extremes lead to addiction
Dopamine [neurotransmitter]

Happiness

Long lived
Ethereal
Giving
Experienced with others
Not achievable with substances
Can't be addicted to happiness
Serotonin [neurotransmitter]

The fascinating aspect of this contrast is how closely it tracks the inverse relationship between some of the worst symptoms of American social sickness 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"⁸—which is precisely why the *mesorah* puts boundaries around pleasure-seeking, not outlawing pleasure but defining excess.

What's the take-away?

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

The wisdom 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 fulfilling our human potential. Our following that *derech yashar* (דרך ישר—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 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* [ברא אלהים לעשות] ('God created to do')⁹—spell *emet* [אמת—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."¹⁰

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

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

³ From *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. II (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 617.

⁴ 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 appropriated from various religious traditions, which the scientific enterprise, in its criticism of non-scientific wisdom and knowledge, typically fails to acknowledge.

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

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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>].

⁸ 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."

⁹ Bereshit/Genesis 2:3

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