

"HOW TO READ THE TORAH"

I

These comments on "How to Read the Torah," are not meant to be a demonstration of cantillations or a means of training formal Torah readers. Rather, they are an attempt to set some guidelines as we begin again the cycle of portions of the Torah. They are intended as well as an introduction to our various adult classes, as all Jews begin their annual renewal of the study of Torah.

At one point in today's Sidra, we read זה ספר תולדות האדם,  
"This is the book of the generations of man." Most commentators take that to mean not "book" in the formal sense of a volume, but as a listing of the generations that derived from Adam. Ramban, however, takes the word ספר literally, and tells us that ספר תולדות האדם -- it refers to the entire Torah, which is the "book of the generations of man." Torah is the story of mankind. The Book is apposite to Man.

The Kabbalah affirmed this idea in many ways. For instance, the Holy Ari maintained that, by mystical permutations, the number of souls of Israel present at Sinai is equal to the number of letters in the Torah. Again, we find the equivalence between Book and Man.

Hence, the approach to know the Book is akin to that of knowing Man. You learn how to understand אדם from how you understand ספר. Books may teach us much about people; but people can tell us more about books. And this is so especially concerning the Book of Books, the Torah.

זה ספר תולדות האדם

## II

The first thing that we must learn is: respect. In order genuinely to know a man, you must consider him worthy of your study and friendship and concern. If he is not worthy, then your knowledge of him is superficial and unimportant. And what is true of man, is true of text, of Torah. At the very least, respect means not to ignore it. To sit in the presence of Torah and not consider it, is like staying in the presence of another human being and acting as if he does not exist -- and few insults are more humiliating than that. To read Torah, you must be serious, and that means -- high minded, truly religious. A real student of Torah may never be flippant. You may be puzzled by a pasuk, or be put off by a parashah, but you must always approach Torah with humility.

The founder of the HaBaD movement, in his חידושי חזונו, gives us an interesting derivation of the custom of Jews to walk with their heads covered. The reason is: אֲבוֹנָה, modesty. Clothing is worn for one of two reasons: warmth or modesty. The head covering is too small to serve for purposes of warmth; it is there for reasons of אֲבוֹנָה. It is our way of expressing before God the limitations of our intellectual self-sufficiency. We cover our heads to indicate that we have a degree of bashfulness about our intellectual inadequacy in the face of God. This is how we approach the study of Torah -- with respect and humility. This does not mean that what is demanded of us is intellectual capitulation and submission; merely -- modesty and reverence.

Respect for Torah means also that we must not assume too much about Torah in advance. Do not approach the sacred text with ready-made conclusions. I know people who read a portion of the Torah with a "nothing-but" attitude: the Torah is "nothing but" a collection of

Mid-Eastern myths; "nothing but" a record of early religious superstitions; "nothing but" primitive science; "nothing but" the fear of the unknown expressed magically. With such a presumptuous attitude you emerge from your encounter with Torah knowing nothing more than the smug prejudices with which you began.

In a sense, I would say that respect means: not to get too close to Torah. Despite the fact that Torah is closer to us than anything else -- *כי קרוב אלינו* -- you must not get too close to it, you must avoid excessive intimacy, the familiarity which breeds contempt -- a fact true both of men and of books. When we are too much "at home" with Torah, when we are "pals" with the text, and we lose the distance which makes both for reverence and perspective, we allow ourselves the liberty of making snap judgments which are unworthy. That is why when we read the Torah we use the silver pointer. The Halakhah forbids us to touch the inner part of the Torah scroll. Should we contact the parchment, our hands become unclean -- *אם יגעו בכתב* -- and the reason is, primarily, to keep us respectful by forbidding us to handle the sacred scroll directly. We must not lay hands on the Torah; thus we learn to respect it.

### III

The second guideline in how to read the Torah is -- the awareness of its depth. *כי רב עומקו*. Just as you do not "read" a man, because he is too complex and deep and requires studying and investigation, analysis and pondering, so it is with Torah. When you say of a man, "I can read him like a book," you diminish his humanity, you reduce him to a manageable and manipulable automaton, one whose Pavlovian reactions are all predictable, and hence one who has been de-personalized into

a mere mechanism. So if we ask, How do you read the Torah? -- the answer is: don't read it! Go much deeper than reading. Reading of the Torah in the synagogue, in its formal sense, with all its carefully prepared melodies and exact text, is only the challenge to what we ought to do, each of us, privately: go deep, ever deeper. It is not enough to read, one must study; it is not enough to  $\int \delta'' \int$  the Torah, one must  $\int \gamma \delta \int$ ; it is inadequate to have  $\int \gamma \delta \int$ , one must have  $\int \gamma \delta \int$  of the Torah. For both Man and Torah are living things, organic beings, and merely reading the Torah is like describing a man's physical qualities: in neither case have I captured the soul, the essence.

That is why our tradition recommends at least four methods of interpretation, the famous  $\int \gamma \delta \int$ . It is because we know that there is depth upon depth, layer upon layer, that the various forms of interpretation are valid.

Several years ago, someone wrote a book in which he tried to trace the origins of Freud's seminal idea of depth-psychology, that the human consciousness consists upon layer upon layer of awareness, and that we can dig ever deeper until we come to the root of a man's psychic life. This writer (Bakan) maintained that Freud derived his notions, despite the paucity of his formal Jewish education, from the Jewish ideas which were vaguely, but pervasively, present in his environment. One of these great ideas was that of the Kabbalah and its teaching that the Torah must never be understood only on one level, but that it is a mine or reservoir of infinite layers of meaning, and that when you have plumbed one, you must still mine the next, and when you have done the next, you must prepare to dig even deeper to a newer and more

profound level of meaning. I do not know if that writer is right or not; I believe he exaggerates. But certainly today we must reverse the direction of the equation. Today we know a great deal about depth-psychology, about the layers of meaning in a man's life. We must now conclude the same about Torah -- for this is "the book of the generations of man." What is true of Man is true of Torah: depth upon depth, layer upon layer, level beneath level.

#### IV

The third thing that we must learn in approaching Torah is that, with all our scholarly techniques and analysis to probe depth, above all learning must remain an existential encounter. When you truly know another human being, you know more than the sum of his various parts, his physical description and psychic condition and his clothing and the state of his liver and bile and cardiogram. There is more to man than merely that. There is a sense of mystery. The encounter with him is a genuine experience. Meeting him is what Buber calls an I-Thou relationship. You see him as an equal Gestalt, not as a mere "it." And so it is with the text of Torah. You must look upon it not as merely an ancient document, not merely as a problem in legal philosophy, not merely as a record of ancient history, but as something living, something dynamic, as an encounter with a "thou," one which preserves and realizes the eternal Thou.

In Hebrew, daat (דָּאָת) means more than just intellectual cognition. "Knowledge" in the Biblical scheme, means total knowledge, which includes the physical and the spiritual, the material and the psychological and the intellectual. When Adam "knew" his wife Eve, the





you to the novelty and surprise that are latent within Torah, to the unpredictably delightful ideas waiting to be conjured up by love and intelligence.

A year or two ago, there appeared a book edited by Marshall and Hample, which was a collection of children's letters to God. One of them, most appropriate <sup>to</sup> this Sabbath, when we recommence the cycle of the Torah, reads as follows:

Dear God:

Maybe you can write some more stories because we've already read everything You have written more than once.

Thanks in advance.

Some people take that childish attitude with regard to the study of the Torah as we commence Bereshit once again: the same stories, the same laws, not a single change. Indeed, should the Torah reader decide to make a single change, we pounce upon him and correct him. The conclusion -- it is repetitive and boring. But that is a childish attitude. If our attitude is mature, if we approach Torah with respect, with awareness of its depth, and with love, then the new cycle of sidrot means for us the anticipation of new discoveries, novel insights, great idea we have not yet been introduced to.

## V

Fourth, and finally, the right attitude for the study of Torah means that we must read it critically and persistently, using every tool of intelligence and research. To approach Torah with respect and with love does not mean that we can get away with "frumkeit," with piety alone. A student of Torah must be pious, but piety itself is no guarantee or substitute for scholarship. If you acknowledge that

Torah has depth, and you approach Torah with respect and love, you will also want to be deserving of Torah's love and respect in return. As with a human being, if you relate to him or her uncritically, without discrimination and taste, guillibly and simply -- you may not find your affections reciprocated. Torah, too, is not satisfied with unsophisticated naivete. It demands far more from us -- a critical attitude, a willingness to meet Torah's problems head on, acumen, and discriminating intelligence.

The Zohar, in a remarkable passage that sounds as if it were taken out of the courtly tradition of love, compares the Torah to a damsel locked in a castle. The student of Torah, enamored of the princess, marches to and fro waiting for a glimpse of his beloved. No one recognizes what he is doing there, and what goes on in his heart. The damsel occasionally comes to the balcony, shows herself, and quickly returns. He is tempted to look for her and come to the castle. The princess then hides behind the curtain, only letting him occasionally hear her voice. As he pursues his search, she rewards him with an occasional glimpse of her face, challenging her lover to seek her, to discover her. But if the lover (or student of Torah) is discouraged too quickly, if he is impatient, if he ceases his search because he is frustrated, she is annoyed at him and calls out, 'אִם, fool!

אִם לֹא יִשְׁכַּח 'אִם, "a fool believes anything," he is uncritical, he can be bluffed!

Torah does not want fools. It does not even want innocent and pious fools. It demands persistence, criticism, determination and



intelligence. It wants the brightness that God gave us to be applied to it and its problems, to searching it out, to finding it out.

What real student of Torah does not know of the delight of this flirtatious game played by Torah as part of the romance of the study of the Torah? If you are impatient, if you have no verve, no ambition -- then you do not even know that there is a princess in the palace! If you do know it, then by all means follow the lead, search her out, never stop in your persistent search for Torah and for truth, using every ounce, every fiber of criticism and intelligence. You must follow through the tantalizing leads, the ideas waiting to be exposed, the insights teasingly concealed but anxious to be found out. Torah hides only because she wants you to find her.

## VI

These are the four elements in how to read the Torah.

זהו סודו של תורה, they are equivalent to the knowledge of man. In both, genuine knowledge requires respect; awareness of depth; love; and a persistence and critical attitude. These must be employed as we proceed upon another year of the study of Torah, both in the synagogue during services and especially in the various classes in which all of us are called upon to attend.

## VII

The rewards are beyond description. At the very least they will give us a pride, a sense of identity, a sense of sufficiency of the spirit. A learning Jew is not a frightened Jew. Only an *חילוני*, an ignoramus, is always afraid and apprehensive. A learning Jew can

take any anti-Semitism in stride; an *Shket* is always seized with panic and hysteria, usually out of proportion to the threat.

Some time ago I discussed with an uncle the problem of anti-Semitism. I know how American Jews react to it, but I was curious as to the psychology of the Jew who lived all his life in the shtetl. This uncle, who has shared in both cultures and both worlds, told me of how when he was a child he was walking with his grandfather, my great-grandfather -- the man after whom I am named, and who was known reverently and affectionately in the family by the name of the town where he served as Rav, the *דברי חיים* -- when they were accosted by a young Polish peasant who hurled at them every foul-mouthed anti-Semitic insult which has become a venerable tradition among both Polish peasants and intellectuals. My uncle, having been exposed to the modern world, was shaken. Yet he noticed that my great-grandfather simply continued, as if nothing at all had ever happened: impassive, unruffled, unconcerned. Said my uncle to my great grandfather: how come? How can you just continue? Aren't you bothered by all this? The *דברי חיים* replied: What are you talking about? How can I possibly be concerned by the likes of him? Don't you understand? -- *וואס ליב פאר א שטעל!* I am a man who has<sup>a</sup> Torah! A man who has Torah is never concerned by the rantings and the ravings of some semi-ignorant lunatic. The slings and arrows of that kind of fortune can never hurt him.

So let us begin this year with the pride of having the Torah. Let us be people of Torah. Let us never be satisfied with merely hearing the Torah being read on Shabbat. Let us proceed to study it during the week as well. If we are Orthodox Jews, if we are proud Jews, we must be

studying Jews.

וְאֵלֶּיךָ יָשׁוּב וְלֵב יִשְׂרָאֵל יָשׁוּב -- because that is what life,

certainly Jewish life, is all about.