

A108

"WHAT IS TORAH?"

1. A great Hassidic Rabbi once explained why Shevuos is known as ZMAN MATAN TORASEINU, the time of the GIVING of the Torah, and not as ZMAN KABALAS TORASEINU, the time of the RECEIVING of the Torah. He said that the reason was that G-d gave the Torah to all Jews equally. There was one MATAN, one giving. But it is up to each Jew to receive the Torah, and each one receives a different amount and on a different level of understanding. There are thus as many "receivings" of Torah as ^{there are} Jews. Hence, Shevuoth is the ZMAN MATAN and not ZMAN KABALAS HA'TORAH. For every Jew must today, as an individual and in a sacred and inviolable personal act, receive the Torah.

2. So that we are now prepared, each one of us, to receive the gift of G-d, the Torah. We must therefore know what Torah is. What, in short, does Torah mean? What does it mean to us? What does it mean to each & every individual here? Allow me to give a number of impressions as to what Torah is, so that perhaps some one person here will see it in a new light, and receive the Torah anew.

I. TORAH IS AN INHERITANCE. תורה נהן מן הוריה, מוריה קדוה וצדק

*It is a legacy left to us by parents, grandparents and forbears since the beginning of time.

*In it are recorded the annals of Man's greatness as well as his depravity. Towering saints like Moses move through its sacred script even as petty scoundrels like Bilam worm their way into this all-encompassing picture of Man on Earth.

When our Rabbis said that it was written 974 generations before creation, they meant that Torah is independent of Time - and yet that Torah is the dynamo which generates it.

*It is the chain of Tradition which links us with all the giants of History whose blood pulsates through our own veins this very moment. It links us to primitive Adam as he was formed out of the bowels of the Earth. It unites us with Abraham as he stands before G-d debating with the Almighty for the rescue of evil Sodom. It puts aside the Patriarch Jacob as he wrangles with his angelic opponent before the break of dawn upon the distant plains of Mesopotamia. It makes us feel part of the Israelites who cross the Red Sea and then enter Canaan.

*In short, as our inheritance of ages gone by, it spans the abyss of Time unto the dim Past, makes us sure of the distant Future, and unites all Time in the moment we receive it, the Torah of the Eternal.

II. TORAH IS TRUTH. אלהי נאמן וטוב הנהיג את ישראל

*It is not a high-sounding document written to impress others. It is the declaration of Divine Truth.

*It is the antithesis of the propagandist, and the nemesis of the demagogue. For it teaches that Truth must reign above all, and that none - not even the greatest, not even a Moses - is free from the searching, critical beam of Truth.

*It is the comfort of those who fear the searing comments of the cynics. For it teaches that Truth can be attained in this world. Hassidim commented that G-d began the Creation of the World with Truth. And they proved it by taking the last 3 letters of the first 3 words of the Bible, the words describing the first creation - BRESHIS BARA ELOHIM, In the beginning G-d created. The letters are Alef, Men, Saf - EMESS, or Truth. So that Truth is the beginning and end of the world. And it therefore can be attained.

III. TORAH IS PEACE. שבת שלום, שבת שלום, שבת שלום

*It teaches that Peace - SHALOM - is so important that the very word becomes a name of G-d.

*It gives us the Sabbath - the embodiment of true Peace the world over, and the insurance of SHALOM BAYIS, domestic peace. For what is the lighting of the Sabbath candles if not an invitation to husband and wife to live in peace & harmon

- *It outlaws murder. It prohibits wanton destruction. It forbids SINAS CHINAM, hatred. It commands neighborly love. A Torah of this sort, if followed, can prevent hot wars and cold wars, atom wars and hydrogen wars, germ wars and any kind of war.
- *It has raised, in its sphere of influence, a people known as Jews, whose first greeting and whose parting message, at all times and places, is one and the same - SHALOM, Peace.
- *It is therefore the only hope of a world tottering on the brink of disaster, and frantically rushing towards mass suicide in better and bigger wars.

IV. TORAH IS THE EQUALITY OF ALL MEN BEFORE G-D.

- *There is no oligarchy or aristocracy in the Torah. The rich man is not a privileged character. He is equal with his impoverished fellow man before the G-d who created both from the same lowly origin, and endowed both with the same lofty soul.
- *The Torah does not discriminate in favor of the poorer class or the labor and proletariat class. Equality is a two-way equation. VE'DAL LO SEHEDAR BE'RIVO.
- *It teaches that Man was created One, so that none of his descendants may lay claim to greater "yichus", lineage, than any others.
- *It frowns upon slavery, for the man who voluntarily enters into servitude demeans the Divine Image in which he was created, and makes himself inferior to one whom G-d deemed his equal. And yet the Torah still maintains his equality with his master. So that if a master has only one pillow in the house, it is the slave who sleeps on it, for the slave must be treated no worse than the master.

V. TORAH IS KNOWLEDGE.

- *It is the greatest work of Law of all Time. Its ethical and moral precepts are embodied not only in its sweeping universal aspects, but in every small detail of which it speaks.
- *It contains all knowledge in it, one way or another. HAFACH BAH VE'HAFACH BAH VE'KULAH BAH. The Torah described Creation on an evolutionary pattern three hundred centuries before Darwin. It described hygienic precautions before Pasteur's France was inhabited by human beings. It warned against and described the sort of destruction that can be achieved only with hydrogen bombs before man even began to suspect that such great forces existed in Nature.
- *Its laws have occupied legions of scholars, from the Sanhedrin of King David, through the House of Hillel, through the Academies of Babylon, to the Yeshivos of Poland and Lithuania, and the contemporary Talmudic schools of America and Israel.
- *And through all this, its greatest knowledge that it has to offer, is the greatest knowledge Man can aspire to. And that is: the knowledge of G-d. For how did the Rabbi of Gur put it? - commenting on the verse VE'YADATA HA'YOM VE'HASHEIVOSSA EL LEVAVECHA, KI ADONAY HU HA'ELOHIM BA'SHAMAYIM MI'MAAL V'AL HA'ARETZ MI'TACHAS, EIN ODE - And you shall know this day, and enshrine it in your heart, that the Lord is G-d of Heaven and Earth, EIN ODE, there is no other, meaning, there is no other god. But the Gerrer Rebbe says: VE'YADATA HA'YOM... EIN ODE, And ye shall know that the Lord is G-d, there is no other knowledge. No, there is no other knowledge. For without this there is nothing for Man to know. And when he knows this, he knows all there is worth knowing. EIN ODE.

VI. TORAH IS UNFATHOMABLE PERFECTION.

- *How can man hope to fully comprehend that which was written by G-d Almighty? For the Torah is Perfect, and Man is of necessity imperfect.
- *It is so holy, so lofty, so beyond us, that Man can never hope to fully grasp it. It was the immortal Baal Shem who said: we so often think that we have delved into the core and heart of Torah. And yet, TORAS HA'SHEM T'MIMAH, it is perfect, that is, even its surface hasn't been scratched yet...

VII. TORAH IS LIFE ITSELF.

אל תפסוהו (אין פנים) נ"י

- *Without it, Life is one meaningless drudgery, an endless and eternal wandering in a circle, never reaching any real goal for there has never been one. With it Life takes on new meaning, gains purpose and is elevated to Holiness.
- *Without it, Life is only a flash in the pan, a passing shadow, a cloud blown by, a leaf driven deep into nowhere. For it is soon over and done with. With it there is CHAYEI NETZACH, immortality, eternal life, for the Torah is the cement which binds Man with G-d, and thus awards him endlessness.
- *But there is always this condition attached to the life-giving quality of Torah: LA'MACHAZIKIM BAH, to those who grasp it. We must hold tight, take it into our homes, our hearts, and clutch it to our souls.
- *When Torah is received, man is reborn, he gets a brand new life. For did not our Rabbis tell us that at the foot of Mt. Sinai, when G-d gave Israel its greatest treasure, the Torah, the angels stopped their singing, the winds stopped blowing, the seas froze in their places, animals ceased their noises, the heavens stopped in its path, and PARCHA NISHMASSAN SHEI YISROEL, the souls of all Israel left them. Aye, their souls left them, their old souls passed away, and instead they received new, more precious souls - they were reborn by Torah.
- *We too, then, at this moment that we are M'KABEL TORAH, can achieve rebirth, attain meaning in Life, assure ourselves of Immortality...but only LA'MACHAZIKIM BAH...if we grasp and hold hard...

VIII. And finally, after mentioning all these, such lofty things that Torah is, such as Truth and Peace and Inheritance of the Ages, Equality before G-d, Knowledge, Unfathomable Perfection and Life Itself, we might imagine that Torah is something too high, too beholden, too beyond us and above us for us to receive even if we should raise our hands and attempt to grasp.

Yet this just what Torah is not. LO LE'MALACHEI HA'SHAREIS NITNAH, say our Rabbis, it was not given to angels, but to humans. It is precisely this we must keep in mind if we are to receive the Torah properly.

It is **our** inheritance and **our** truth; it is the peace of the world and equality for **all** men; it is **our** knowledge of G-d, and though unfathomable perfection, it is a perfection towards which **we** must strive; it is Life, not for angels or Divine spirits, but Life for you, for me, for our families, for all Israel, for every man, woman and child on the face of earth.

IX. LO NIFLEIS HI MIMCHA, VE'LO RECHOKAH HI, LO BA'SHAMAYIM HI, VE'LO ME'EVER LA'YAM, KI KAROV ELECHA HA'DAVAR ME'OD BE'FICHA U'VI'LVAVCHA LA'ASSOSSO.

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It is not too hard for thee, nor too far from thee. It is not in heaven, nor is it beyond the seas. But it is very near unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

For that, friends, is Torah. Near unto thee; in thy mouth; in thy heart; and, especially, that thou mayest do it.