

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## Nitzavim-Vayelech

Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30

Torah Reading for Week of September 14-20, 2003

This week's Torah reading consists of two portions, bearing the contrasting names of *Nitzavim* ("standing upright") and *Vayelech* ("and he went"). Both consist — as does the whole of the book of Deuteronomy — of Moses' parting words to the Children of Israel on the eve of their entry into the Promised Land:

You stand upright this day, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d: Your heads, your tribes, your

elders, and your officers, and all the men of Israel; your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water —

To have you enter into the covenant of the L-rd your G-d, and into His oath, which the L-rd your G-d makes with you this day. In order that He may establish you today for a people to Himself, and that He may be a G-d to you, as He has spoken to you, and as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath; but with those who stand here with us this day before the L-rd our G-d, and also with those who are not here with us this day.

Moses also warns of the consequences of Israel's failure to remain faithful to their covenant with G-d: the devastation of the land and the people's banishment from it into

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YOU STAND UPRIGHT THIS DAY, ALL OF YOU, BEFORE THE L-RD YOUR G-D: YOUR HEADS, YOUR TRIBES, YOUR ELDERS, AND YOUR OFFICERS, AND ALL THE MEN OF ISRAEL; YOUR LITTLE ONES, YOUR WIVES, AND YOUR STRANGER THAT IS IN YOUR CAMP, FROM THE HEWER OF YOUR WOOD TO THE DRAWER OF YOUR WATER (DEUTERONOMY 29:9-10)

The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) tells the story of Rav Yosef the son of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who fell ill and was at the brink of death when his father's prayers brought him back to life. When he came to, his father asked him: "My son, what did you see (in heaven)?" Rav Yosef replied: "I saw an upside-down world. Those who are on top here, are on the bottom there; and those who are here regarded as lowly, are exalted in heaven."

That the leader or the sage is superior to the wood-hewer or the water carrier is only from our earth-bound perspective, which sees a "hierarchy" of roles. But when "you all stand before G-d" there is no higher and lower — what seems "low" here is no less lofty and significant in G-d's eyes.

(Alshich)

Like the various organs and limbs of a body, each of which complements, serves and fulfills all the others, so, too, the Jewish people: the simple "wood-hewer" or "water-carrier" contributes something to each and every one of his fellow Jews, including the most exalted "head."

(Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi)

Our sages have said: "All Israel are guarantors for each other" (Talmud, Shevuot 39a). But a person cannot serve as a guarantor unless he is more resourceful in some way than the one he is guaranteeing. For example, a poor man obviously would not be accepted as a guarantor for a rich man's loan. So if the Talmud says that all Jews serve as guarantors to each other, this means that in every Jew there is a quality in which he or she is superior to all others.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

YOU STAND UPRIGHT THIS DAY, ALL OF YOU, BEFORE THE L-RD YOUR G-D (29:9)

"This day" is a reference to Rosh Hashanah, the day on which we all stand in judgment before G-d (the Torah reading of Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah).

(Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov)

G-D ROOTED THEM OUT OF THEIR LAND IN ANGER, AND IN WRATH, AND IN GREAT RAGE (29:27)

It is written (Psalms 79:1): "A song to Asaf: Alien nations have entered Your estate, they have defiled Your Holy Temple, they have laid Jerusalem in ruins..."

Should not the verse have said "A weeping to Asaf," "A wail to Asaf," "A lament to Asaf"? Why does it say "A song to Asaf"?

But this is analogous to a king who built a nuptial home for his son, and had it beautifully plastered, inlaid and decorated. Then this son strayed off to an evil life. So the king came to the nuptial canopy, tore down the tapestries and broke the rails. Upon which the prince's tutor took a flute and began to play. Those who saw him, asked: "The king is overturning the nuptial canopy of his son, and you sit and sing?" Said he to them: "I am singing because the king overturned his son's nuptial canopy, and did not vent his wrath upon his son."

So, too, was asked of Asaf: "G-d destroyed the Temple and Sanctuary, and you sit and sing?" Replied he: "I am singing because G-d vent His wrath upon wood and stone, and did not vent his wrath upon Israel."

(Midrash Rabbah on Lamentations 4:15)

AND IT SHALL COME TO PASS... (30:1-10)

The Melech HaMoshiach ("anointed king") is destined to arise and restore the kingdom of David to its glory of old, to its original sovereignty. He will build the Holy Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel. In his times, all laws (of the Torah) will be reinstated as before; the sacrifices will be offered, the Sabbatical

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galut (exile).

The Future Redemption

But together with the dire warning, comes the promise:

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you; and you will take them to heart, among all the nations, into which G-d your G-d has driven you.

You will return to G-d your G-d, and obey His voice, according to all that I command you this day; you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul.

The L-rd your G-d will return your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations, amongst whom the L-rd your G-d has scattered you.

If your outcasts be at the utmost parts of heaven, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you, and from there will He fetch you.

The L-rd your G-d will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will do you good, and multiply you more than your fathers.

And the L-rd your G-d will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, to love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live...

## Practicality and Choice

Two more fundamental principles of Judaism are stated in the parshah of *Nitzavim*: The practicality and accessibility of Torah —

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year and the Jubilee year instituted as outlined in the Torah.

Whoever does not believe in him or does not anticipate his coming, denies not only the other prophets but also the Torah and Moses. For the Torah testifies about him: "G-d shall return your captivity and have compassion upon you. And He will return and gather you from all the nations amongst whom the L-rd your G-d has scattered you... If your outcasts shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there will the L-rd your G-d gather you, from there He will take you... G-d will bring you..." These explicit words of the Torah encapsulate all that has been said [regarding Moshiach] by the prophets...

(Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11:1)

## AND IT SHALL COME TO PASS... (30:1-10)

The events prophesied in this chapter are still destined to be fulfilled, as they had yet been realized, not in the days of the the First Temple, nor in the days of the Second Temple; it is the sum of our comfort and our hope, and the cure for all our troubles.

(Abarbanel)

## G-D WILL RETURN YOUR CAPTIVITY... (30:3)

The Hebrew word used here for "he will return" is not *veheishiv* — which means "he will bring back" — but *veshav*, which literally means "he will come back." Our sages learned from this that the Divine presence resides among Israel, as it were, in all the misery of their exile, and when the Jews are redeemed, G-d speaks of it as His own redemption — He Himself returns along with Israel's exiles.

Another interpretation: The day on which Israel's exiles will be gathered is

so monumental and difficult, that it is as though G-d Himself must literally take each individual Jew with His very hands out of his place. Thus the verse says "And you will be gathered up, one by one, O children of Israel" (Isaiah 27:12). We find this also regarding the exiles from the other nations, as the verse says, "And I shall return the exiles of Egypt" (Ezekiel 29:14).

(Rashi)

## ...FROM AMONGST ALL THE NATIONS, WHERE G-D HAS SCATTERED YOU (30:3)

It is a kindness that G-d did to Israel, that He scattered them amongst the nations... Does a person then sow a measure of grain, if not to harvest many measures? So, too, the people of Israel were exiled amongst the nations only so that converts be added to them...

(Talmud, Pesachim 87b)

The "converts" of which the Talmud speaks refer not only to the non-Jews who joined the community of Israel in the course of their exile, but also to the "sparks of holiness" contained within the physical creation which are redeemed and elevated when a Jew utilizes the resources he or she comes in contact with in every part of the world towards a good and G-dly purpose.

(The Chassidic Masters)

## AND G-D SHALL CIRCUMCISE YOUR HEART... (30:6)

From the time of the creation of the universe, man had the choice to be righteous or wicked. So it was for the entire duration of the Torah, in order that there be merit for us in choosing good and punishment for desiring evil. But in the days of Moshiach, the choosing good will be in our nature, and the heart will not lust for that which is not proper for it and have no desire for it at all. This is the "circumcision" spoken of here, as lust is a "foreskin"

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For this mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not hidden from you, neither is it far off.

It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?"

Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who shall cross the sea for us, and bring it to

us, that we may hear it, and do it?"

Rather, the thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.

and the principle of free choice —

See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil...

I call heaven and earth to witness this day: Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. And you shall choose life, so that you live, you and your seed.

To love the L-rd your G-d, to obey His voice, and to cleave to Him, for He is your life...

Moses Went

The section of Vayelech (and the next two parshiot of

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blocking the heart, and the "circumcision of the heart" is the removal of lust. In those times man will return to what he was before Adam's sin, when he naturally did what is proper to do and there were no conflicts and contradictions in his will...

This is the meaning of what our Sages said, interpreting the verse (Ecclesiastes 12:1), "There shall come days of which you shall say: I have no desire in them" — "These are the days of Moshiach, in which there is neither merit nor guilt" (Talmud Shabbat 151b). For in the days of Moshiach there will be no desire [of evil], and thus no merit or guilt — since merit and guilt are both the product of a free will.

(Nachmanides)

**THIS MITZVAH WHICH I COMMAND YOU TODAY... IT IS NOT IN HEAVEN... (30:11-12)**

If it were in heaven, you would be required to climb up there and learn it.

(Talmud, Eruvin 55a)

**IT IS NOT IN HEAVEN... (30:12)**

[An oven] that was cut into parts and sand was placed between the parts, Rabbi Eliezer maintained that it is pure (i.e., not susceptible to ritual impurity). The other sages said that it is susceptible to ritual impurity...

On that day, Rabbi Eliezer brought them all sorts of proofs, but they were rejected. Said he to them: "If the law is as I say, may the carob tree prove it." The carob tree was uprooted from its place a distance of 100 cubits. Others say, 400 cubits. Said they to him: "One cannot prove anything from a carob tree."

Said [Rabbi Eliezer] to them: "If the law is as I say, the may the aqueduct prove it." The water in the aqueduct began to flow backwards. Said they to him: "One cannot prove anything from an aqueduct."

Said he to them: "If the law is as I say, the may the aqueduct prove it." The water in the aqueduct began to flow backwards. Said they to him: "One cannot prove anything from an aqueduct."

Said he to them: "If the law is as I say, the may walls of the house of study prove it." The walls of the house of study began to fall in. Rabbi Joshua rebuked them, "If Torah scholars are debating a point of Jewish law, what are qualifications to intervene?" The walls did not fall, in deference to Rabbi Joshua, nor did they straighten up, in deference to Rabbi Eliezer. They still stand there at a slant.

Said he said to them: "If the law is as I say, may it be proven from heaven!" There then issued a heavenly voice which proclaimed: "What do you want of Rabbi Eliezer — the law is as he says..."

Rabbi Joshua stood on his feet and said: "The Torah is not in heaven!" ... We take no notice of heavenly voices, since You, G-d, have already, at Sinai, written in the Torah (Exodus 23:2) to "follow the majority."

Rabbi Nathan subsequently met Elijah the Prophet and asked him: "What did G-d do at that moment?" [Elijah] replied: "He smiled and said: 'My children have triumphed over Me, My children have triumphed over Me.'"

(Talmud, Bava Metzia 59a-b)

**LIFE AN DEATH I SET BEFORE YOU, THE BLESSING AND THE COURSE. AN YOU SHALL CHOOSE LIFE (30:10)**

Freedom of choice has been granted to every man: if he desires to turn toward a good path and be righteous, the ability to do so is in his hands; and if he desires to turn toward an evil path and be wicked, the ability to do so is in his hands...

This concept is a fundamental principle and a pillar of the Torah and its commandments. As it is written [Deuteronomy 30:15]: "See, I have set before you life [and good, and death and evil]" and "See, I set before you today [a blessing and a curse]"... For were G-d to decree that a person be

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Haazinu and VeZot HaBrachah) describes the events and words spoken on the last day of Moses' life:

And Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. And he said to them: "I am a hundred and twenty years old this day, I can no longer go out and come in; and G-d has said to me: You shall not cross this Jordan...

Moses entrusts the leadership of Israel to Joshua. He puts the Torah into writing, and commands them the mitzvah of Hak'hel ("gathering"): every seven years, on the Sukkot festival following the *shemittah* year, "Gather the people together, men, and women, and the babies, and your stranger that is within your gates"; the king shall then read from the Torah to them, "that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the L-rd your G-d, and observe to do all the words of this Torah."

Moses again warns of the hiding of the divine face which shall occur when the people abandon the Torah; indeed, G-d Himself predicts that this will be the case. "This song" must therefore serve as an everlasting testimony to ensure Israel's eventual return and rapprochement with their G-d

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righteous or wicked, of if there were to exist something in the very essence of a person's nature which would compel him toward a specific path, a specific conviction, a specific character trait or a specific deed...how could G-d command us through the prophets "do this" and "do not do this,"...? What place would the entire Torah have? And by what measure of justice would G-d punish the wicked and reward the righteous...?

*(Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 5:1-3)*

## TO LOVE THE L-RD YOUR G-D... FOR HE IS YOUR LIFE (30:20)

How is it fitting to love G-d?

A person should love G-d with such great and powerful intensity that his soul is bound in this love and is constantly pursuing it as one, for example, who is smitten with lovesickness — as one who is so obsessed with a carnal love that his mind is never free of desire for that woman... Even more so is the love of G-d in the hearts of those who love him...

This is what King Solomon meant when he said by way of metaphor, "For I am sick with love." Indeed, the entire Song of Songs is a metaphor for this concept...

*(Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 10:3)*

## TO LOVE THE L-RD YOUR G-D... FOR HE IS YOUR LIFE (30:20)

It was a hot July day during the summer of 1866. The children of Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch, five-year-old Sholom DovBer and his brother Zalman Aaron, had just come home from cheder and were playing in the garden which adjoined their home.

In the garden stood a trellis overgrown with vines and greenery which offered protection from the heat of the sun. It was set up as a study, with a place for books etc., and the Rebbe would sit there on the hot summer days. The children were debating the difference between a Jew and a non-Jew. Zalman Aharon, the elder by a year and four months, argued that the Jews are a "wise and understanding people" (Deuteronomy 4:6) who could, and do, study lots of Torah, both its revealed part and its mystical secrets, and

pray with devotion and d'vaikut ("attachment" to G-d).

Said the young Sholom DovBer: But this is true only of those Jews who learn and pray. What of Jews who are unable to study and who do not pray with d'vaikut? What is their specialness over a non-Jew?

Zalman Aharon did not know what to reply.

The children's sister, Devorah Leah, ran to tell their father of their argument. Rabbi Shmuel called them to the trellis, and sent the young Sholom DovBer to summon Bentzion, a servant in the Rebbe's home.

Bentzion was a simple Jew who read Hebrew with many mispronunciations and barely understood the easy words of the prayers. Every day he would recite the entire book of Psalms, pray with the congregation, and make sure to be present in the synagogue when Ein Yaakov was studied.

When the servant arrived, the Rebbe asked him: "Bentzion, did you eat?"

Bentzion: "Yes."

The Rebbe: "Did you eat well?"

Bentzion: "What's well? Thank G-d, I was sated."

The Rebbe: "And why do you eat?"

Bentzion: "So that I may live"

The Rebbe: "But why live?"

Bentzion: "To be a Jew and do what G-d wants." The servant sighed.

The Rebbe: "You may go. Send me Ivan the coachman."

Ivan was a gentile who had grown up among Jews from early childhood and spoke a perfect Yiddish.

When the coachman arrived, the Rebbe asked him: "Did you eat today?"

"Yes."

"Did you eat well?"

"Yes"

"And why do you eat?"

"So that I may live"

"But why live?"

"To take a swig of vodka and have a bite to eat," replied the coachman.

"You may go," said the Rebbe.

*(From the writings of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn)*

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## AND MOSES WENT... TO ALL OF ISRAEL (31:1)

But the Torah doesn't tell us where Moses went on this last day of his earthly life. The Chassidic masters say: Moses entered into the core of every Jew of every generation, so that every Jewish soul possesses a spark of the soul of Moses.

*(Maayanah Shel Torah)*

## I AM ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY YEARS OLD TODAY (31:2)

Today my days and years were fulfilled; on this day I was born, and on this day I shall die... This is to teach us that G-d fulfills the years of the righteous to the day and to the month, as it is written (Exodus 23:26): "I shall fulfill the number of your days."

*(Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 11a)*

## I CAN NO LONGER GO OUT AND COME IN... (31:2)

G-d said to Moses: "Such is the way of the world: Each generation has its teachers. Until now was your portion to serve Me; now has come the portion of Joshua your disciple."

Said Moses to G-d: "Master of the Universe! If it is because of Joshua that I must die, let me become his disciple."

Said G-d to him: "If that is your wish, you may do so."

So Moses arose early in the morning to Joshua's door, and Joshua was sitting and teaching. And Moses bent his frame and covered his mouth, and Joshua did not see him... And all of Israel came to Moses' door, but found him at Joshua's door, and Joshua was sitting and Moses was standing. And the people said to Joshua: "Joshua! What has happened to you, that Moses our master is standing and you are sitting?" As soon as Joshua lifted his eyes and saw this, he immediately tore his garments and cried and wept: "Master! Master! Father, my father and lord!"

Said the people to him: "Moses our teacher! Teach us Torah."

Said he to them: "I have not license."

Said they to him: "We shall not leave you!"

Then a voice came forth from heaven and said to them: "Learn from Joshua!" and they accepted it.

Joshua sat at their head, Moses to his right and the sons of Aaron to his left; he sat and taught, and Moses did not understand his teaching.

After they stood up, the people of Israel said to Moses: "Moses our teacher, explain the teaching to us."

Said he to them: "I know it not" and Moses was stumbling and failing.

At that moment, he said to G-d: "Master of the Universe! Until now, I asked for life. Now, my soul is placed in Your hand."

*(Midrash Tanchuma)*

GATHER THE PEOPLE TOGETHER, MEN, AND WOMEN, AND THE BABIES... THAT THEY MAY HEAR, AND THAT THEY MAY LEARN (31:12)

Rabbi Dosan ben Horkinas saw Rabbi Joshua [ben Chananya] and proclaimed: "Whom to teach knowledge? ... those weaned of milk' (Isaiah 28:9). I remember his mother bringing round his cradle to the study hall, so that his ears should pick up words of Torah."

*(Jerusalem Talmud, Yevamot 1:6)*

## AND I, HIDE SHALL I HIDE MY FACE FROM THEM (31:18)

There are times when G-d hides His face. But then there are times when G-d hides His face and we don't even realize that His face is hidden; we dwell in darkness, and think it is light. This is a double galut, a concealment within a concealment.

*(The Chassidic Masters)*

## SO THAT THIS SONG MAY BE A WITNESS FOR ME... AND THIS SONG SHALL TESTIFY AS A WITNESS FOR THEM (31:19)

Thus the prediction that the people of Israel will abandon the Torah and will be punished for their sins, serves as a "witness" both for the people and for G-d. For the people, that they have been forewarned of the consequences of their deeds. And for G-d, that He should not be too harsh on them, since He Himself foresaw it all and said, "For I know their inclination, and what they do, even now, before I have brought them into the land of which I promised..."

*(Malbim)*

## AND MOSES COMMANDED THE LEVITES... TAKE THIS BOOK OF THE TORAH, AND PLACE IT TO THE SIDE OF THE ARK OF THE COVENANT OF G-D, THAT IT MAY BE THERE FOR A WITNESS UNTO YOU (31:25-26)

Our sages debated in [the talmudic tractate] Bava Batra concerning this Torah scroll. There are those who say that a shelf extended from the outside of the Ark, and on it the Torah scroll was placed. And there are those who say that it was placed to the side of the Two Tablets [inscribed with the Ten Commandments] within the Ark.

*(Rashi)*

## FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

## THE LONGER SHORTER WAY

Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah: "Once a child got the better of me."

"I was traveling, and I met with a child at a crossroads. I asked him, 'which way to the city?' and he answered: 'This way is short and long, and this way is long and short.'

"I took the 'short and long' way. I soon reached the city but found my approach obstructed by gardens and orchards. So I retraced my steps and said to the child: 'My son, did you not tell me that this is the short way?' Answered the child: 'Did I not tell you that it is also long?'"

(Talmud, Eruvin 53b)

Also in life there is a "short but long" way and a "long but short" way.

In his *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi sets down the fundamentals of the Chabad-Chassidic approach to life. On the cover page of this "Bible of Chassidism" he defines his work as follows:

"[This book is] based on the verse (Deuteronomy 30:14), 'For [the Torah and its precepts] is something that is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it— to explain, with the help of G-d, how it is indeed exceedingly close, in a long and short way.'"

The Torah and its commandments (mitzvot) are the Creator's blueprint for creation, detailing the exact manner in which He meant life to be lived and His purpose in creation to be fulfilled. But is a life that is ordered by Torah indeed feasible? Can the ordinary "everyman" be realistically expected to conduct his every act, word and thought in accordance with the Torah's most demanding directives?

The Torah itself is quite clear on the matter: "*For the mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not beyond you nor is it remote from you. It is not in heaven... nor is it across the sea... Rather, it is something that is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it.*" Torah is not an abstract ideal, a point of reference to strive toward, but a

practical and attainable goal to achieve.

But how? In the *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman develops the Chabad approach — a holistic approach to life in which the mind and intellect play the leading and pivotal role. First, a person must study, comprehend and meditate upon the quintessential truths of existence: the all-transcendent, all-embracing, all-pervading reality of G-d; the root and essence of the soul and its intrinsic bond with its Creator; man's mission in life, and the resources and challenges that are extended to him to fulfill it. Since these concepts are extremely subtle and abstract, one must toil "a toil of the soul and a toil of the flesh" to grasp them and relate to them.

The next step of this approach is to translate this knowledge and comprehension into emotional feelings. Because of an innate superiority of the mind over heart that the Creator has imbued in human nature, the understanding, assimilation and meditation upon these G-dly concepts will compel the development of the appropriate emotions in the heart: the love and awe of G-d. "Love of G-d" is defined by Rabbi Schneur Zalman as the unquenchable desire to cleave to Him and be unified with His essence; "awe of G-d" is the utter abhorrence towards anything which erects barriers between Him and man.

Finally, when a person has so oriented his mind and so transformed his heart, his observance of the Torah's precepts becomes not only possible, but a compelling need. He craves the fulfillment of the mitzvot with every fiber of his being since they are the bridge between him and G-d, the means — and the only means — by which he can connect to his Creator. And any transgression of G-d's will, no matter how attractive to his material nature, is literally revolting to him, since it disrupts his relationship with G-d and runs contrary to his own true self.

But a person may argue: Why spend a lifetime pursuing this demanding regimen of mind and heart? Why must I toil to understand and feel? Why not take the direct approach — open the books and follow instructions? I'm a simple Jew, this person may maintain, and the attainment of such lofty spiritual states as "comprehension of the Divine", "love of G-d", and "awe of G-d" are way beyond my depth. I know the truth, I know what G-d wants of me — the

## FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

Torah spells out the do's and don'ts of life quite clearly. I have a material and egocentric nature? An inborn inclination towards evil and self-destructive desires? I'll control them. My faith, determination, and willpower will do the job.

This, however, is the short but long way. As the most direct and simple line between two points, it is misleadingly the surest way to town; but in truth, the direct approach is a dead end. As with the route which Rabbi Yehoshua first chose, it seems to lead straight to the city — only somehow it never quite makes it. For it is a path of never-ending struggle, the scene of perpetual duel between the self-oriented animal soul of man and his upward-reaching G-dly soul. True, man has been given free choice and furnished with the necessary fortitude and spiritual staying power to meet his every moral challenge; but the possibility of failure, G-d forbid, also exists. No matter how many times he will triumph, tomorrow will bring yet another test. On the short and long road one may win battle after battle, but there is never a decisive victory in the war of life.

On the other hand, the long but short way is winding, steep, tedious, and long as life itself. It is full of ups and downs, setbacks and frustrations. It demands every ounce of intellectual and emotional stamina the human being can muster. But it is a road that leads, steadily and surely, to the aspired-to destination. When one does finally acquire an aptitude and intellectual taste for the G-dly, when one does develop a desire for good and abhorrence for evil, the war has been won. The person has transformed himself into someone whose every thought, deed and act is naturally attuned to his quintessential self and purpose in life.

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com*

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### TRANSLATING TRUTH

Eight hundred years ago, Maimonides wrote to his translator, Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tibbon: "One who wishes to translate from one language to another by rendering each word literally and adhering to the

original order of words and sentences... will end up with a translation that is difficult and confusing. Instead, the translator should first try to grasp the sense of the subject and then explain the theme, according to his understanding, in the other language..."

This is elementary to any translation attempt. The question, however, that the translator faces is: How far to go? For every translator grapples with two conflicting aims: the aim of faithfully conveying the content of the original, and the aim of making it not only understood to his intended audience but also as attractive and as "natural" as possible in its foreign enclotment.

This dilemma is doubly acute when it comes to conveying the teachings of Torah to an audience whose primary point of reference is Western Secularism. Here the translator or "adapter" is attempting to bridge two worlds which differ in far more than language and idiom; two worlds which differ in their very conception of intellectual discourse and articulation.

One example of many: The modern Western mind recognizes no sacred ideas or inviolable axioms. In communicating a thought, there is no greater sin than "taking yourself too seriously," being "dogmatic" and failing to offer a "balanced view." Above all, one mustn't be so *sure*: keep it light, with a periodic wink at the audience that says, "Hey, guys, I may be teaching you something, but don't think that I'm this pompous know-it-all. We're just throwing some ideas around."

Torah, on the other hand, unabashedly goes about the business of informing and instructing its student. As G-d's blueprint for existence, it is free of self-depreciating humor and moral ambivalence. It presumes that you are taking it seriously and proceeds to tell you the way things are and the way they ought to be. And yes, it regards the truths it conveys with reverence.

So what is the translator/adapter to do? Basically, he has two options. He can limit his tampering with the original text or idea to its rearticulation in the new language, while preserving the Torah's style and approach. If the Western mind will judge it "religious," "archaic" and "close-minded," so be it. Ultimately (once you solve the problem of how to get someone to read it), its eternal content will assert

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itself over the reader's prejudices.

Or, the translator can assume, to a certain extent, the tone of modern writing. He can attempt to truly *translate*—"to grasp the sense of the subject and then explain the theme, according to his understanding, in the other language" not only in the dictionary sense of "language" but in the broader cultural-conceptual sense as well.

But *is* there a choice? Does the Torah allow one to articulate its teachings in such a manner? The Lubavitcher Rebbe addresses this issue by finding its precedent in Torah.

In the 31st chapter of Deuteronomy, the Torah describes how, on the last day of his life, Moses committed the entire *Chumash* (the "Five Books of Moses") to writing. He then commanded the Levites: "Take this Torah scroll, and place it at the side of the Ark of the Covenant of the L-rd your G-d, and it shall be there as witness for you."

Rashi, in his commentary on the verse, writes: "Our sages debated in [the talmudic tractate] *Bava Batra* concerning this Torah scroll. There are those who say that a shelf extended from the outside of the Ark, and on it the Torah scroll was placed. And there are those who say that it was placed to the side of the Two Tablets [inscribed with the Ten Commandments] within the Ark."

Everything in Torah is a lesson in life and carries an eternal and universal relevance. What, asks the Rebbe, is the deeper significance of this debate?

Our sages tell us that the entirety of Torah is encapsulated in the Ten Commandments given to us at Sinai and inscribed by G-d on the Two Tablets of the Covenant. Over the next 38 years, as the people of Israel wandered through the desert, Moses taught them the particulars of Torah, which he also wrote, by Divine dictation, in the *Chumash*.

In other words, the *Chumash* is the first "translation" of Torah, its first rearticulation into terms comprehensible by its intended audience. Moses saw the entirety of G-d's communication to humanity embodied in the Ten Commandments; but the Jewish people needed a more detailed and explicit version. Hence, G-d's re-communication of His word and law through Moses' mind and quill with the *Chumash*.

Thus, explains the Rebbe, the debate between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Judah (voicers of the two opinions cited in Rashi) is a debate as how one is to communicate Torah. According to Rabbi Meir, the Torah scroll must be kept within the Ark which holds the Tablets of the Covenant. While the "translation" may detail what was generalized and express what was implied, it is not to depart from the context of the original. It must confine itself to the area enclosed by the "walls" that define the original articulation.

Rabbi Judah disagrees. The Torah is placed on a shelf outside of the Ark's walls. True, it must adhere to the content and spirit of the original—the shelf, remember, is firmly attached to Ark's exterior—but it must extend into the space occupied by those who are still outside of the original's parameters.

This sheds light on another thing that the Talmud says about Rabbi Meir. A rule of thumb in the Talmud is that whenever Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Judah disagree on a matter of Torah law, we follow the opinion of Rabbi Judah. Why is this so? The Talmud quotes Rabbi Acha bar Chanina as having said: "It is revealed and known before He who spoke the world into being that there was no one equal to Rabbi Meir in his generation. So why was the law not established in accordance with his views? Because his colleagues could not fully comprehend his reasonings." The fact that Rabbi Meir insisted on keeping his expositions on Torah completely within the context of the pure idea meant that those of a lesser comprehension of Torah than himself could not fully relate to what he was saying.

Perhaps, concludes the Rebbe, this is why Rashi cites Rabbi Judah's view before Rabbi Meir's, reversing the order in which they are quoted in the Talmud. Rashi is telling us that, in most cases, Rabbi Judah approach is the desirable one, while Rabbi Meir's is preferable only in regard to a minority of audiences and circumstances.

The Rebbe often told the following story:

Among the disciples of Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch (the second leader of the Chassidic movement), there were differing opinions regarding the dissemination of the esoteric teachings revealed by their master. There were those who argued that the sanctity of this most intimate aspect of Torah must be safeguarded and shared only with a select worthy few. Others, chief amongst them Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (who was later to found the Chabad branch of Chassidism), were of the opinion that they must be circulated as



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widely as possible; they transcribed Rabbi DovBer's teachings, made many copies and actively distributed them to the wider Jewish community.

One day, one of these transcriptions was discovered languishing in a mound of garbage. The sight of this caused great pain to all Rabbi DovBer's disciples, and renewed the critique of those who "cheapened" their master's holy words with their indiscriminate distribution. Rabbi Schneur Zalman responded with a metaphor:

"The king's son had fallen ill," he began his tale, "and the royal doctors could offer but a single cure: a potion that would be prepared from the powder of a certain gem. This gem, however, served as the centerpiece of the royal crown. Furthermore, even if the crown—the most precious possession of the throne—were to be dismantled, only a slim hope existed to save the prince's life, who had deteriorated to the point that his ability to swallow the potion was in doubt.

"But the king decreed: 'Grind, pour and squander my most precious of treasures. Perhaps a single drop will enter the lips of my son and his life will be saved...'"

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com*

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