

A CALL FOR A RENEWED HAVURAH

RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

This teaching is based on notes made in preparation for a talk by the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn. Believing these notes to be of particular significance, Reb Zalman translated and published them as "Notes for a Lecture by the Late Lubavitcher Rebbe" (see Appendices).¹ Here, Arthur Green, one of the world's foremost interpreters of Hasidism and a longtime friend and colleague of Reb Zalman, re-presents the Rebbe's message in contemporary terms.

— N.M-Y., editor

MY FRIENDS AND STUDENTS:

We are engaged in a great and awesome struggle for the soul of Torah.

Torah, meaning 'instruction' or 'direction' has existed within the Jewish people for several thousand years, passed on faithfully from one generation to the next. As it was passed on, each generation added to it of its own spirit, reshaping it in accord with the needs of the hour and the inner voices it heard to guide it. The process begins with Moshe, as the talmudic tractate 'Principles' (Avot) says in its opening line, "Moshe received Torah from Sinai and passed it [lit. 'her'] to Yehoshua." Note that it does not say, "Moshe received the Torah from Sinai," but "Torah." Torah is not merely a text or a fixed body of teachings,

¹ Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, "Notes for a Lecture by the Late Lubavitcher Rebbe," *Four Worlds Journal* (Vol. 3, No. 2: Fall, 1986/5747), 11-17.

something to which the definite article could be applied. Torah is the process of instruction, the moment of communication between master and disciple, student and fellow-learner. That communication involves the opening of heart and mind, those of both the 'giver' and the 'receiver' in a moment of teaching. The receiver will then become a giver in the next moment as the teaching is carried farther, enriched and subtly transformed by the voice and soul of its latest bearer. Torah is that entire process, from Moshe and Yehoshua to the very moment in which I write and you read these words, and far, far beyond.

Our struggle begins with an awareness of this process. So many of those who think they love Torah most, who are seen by themselves and the world as Torah's most faithful servants (of whom it is said, "Look how religious they are, since they follow the commandments so strictly"), understand little if anything of what the transmission process is all about. Their mission is to keep Torah just as it was back in Volozhyn, or Satmar, or Lubavitch for that matter, unchanged in any way. Even if they dress in fine Hasidic garb, they are *mitnagedim* at heart, because they fail to understand the great liberating message of the holy Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples. Torah should not be a heavy burden, they taught, weighing you down with obsessive-ness and guilt ("Did I do it right? Did I fulfill my obligation?"). Rather, it should make you lighter, more able to leap upward, to reach toward heaven. That is what the Rabbis meant when they said about the Holy Ark: *Ha-aron nose' et nose'av*: "The ark carries those who carry it!" Being a bearer of Torah should fill you with lightness and joy, as though you are being carried on the wings of cherubim.

To keep Torah light in this way, it has to be reinterpreted by and for each generation. "Torah is eternal," the Hasidic commentaries repeat week after week, "so what does this verse have to say to us?" How can we open it up (as in "*Rabbi Shim'on patah*") so that it can take us, our very unique generation of questioners and seekers, into it, making us a part of the process? Only when that happens, when Torah becomes open to us, can we turn to our own disciples and urge them—"Open your hearts to Torah." This was the secret of the Hasidic masters: they reshaped Torah

to make room for their generations of Jews, and they reshaped those Jews to make room in their hearts for this ever-expanding, ever-renewing Torah.

Hasidism did this predominately through multi-leveled truth. The Rabbis' notion that "Torah has seventy faces" was their way of saying that you can keep going on, endlessly, re-reading the same verse, word or letter, as the new soul-energy of unique human minds and hearts are applied to it. When the Midrash offers multiple readings of a text, introducing each one with "*davar aher* [another matter; another reading]," it reminds us that all these readings, and many more, are equally valid, equally true, each of them refracting the soul-prisms of the one who spoke it.

In the later tradition, these infinitely varied readings mostly take on the name of *nistar*, 'hidden' meanings, using the interpretive tools of *kabbalah* to expand and deepen the meanings to be found within the text and within the person. As the Zohar so powerfully teaches, the surface meaning of the Torah text is only the apparent meaning of Torah, not its deep truth. 'Apparent' as is 'apparel'—the outer meaning is the garment of Torah. Our task is to undress the bride (or groom, for that matter), to go on first to the body, then to the soul, and ultimately to the still unknowable soul of soul' within Torah. We embark on this journey with tools given us by tradition: good Hebrew, knowledge of past interpretations, and fluency with kabbalistic symbols are all a great help. But we also cannot embark without the opening of heart and mind.

The struggle for the soul of Torah is against those who would deny this ongoing process of rebirth and transformation in the very midst of affirming Torah. Some of those are the literalists, those who seek to read Torah as a true historical record of events as they 'really' happened, of actual persons, places, and times. They don't want us to go 'into' the text, but rather to stay on its surface, professing our loyalty to the fact that there really was a man named Lavan, that he really had two daughters, that he really cheated our ancestor Ya'akov, and all the rest. They have forsaken the richness of the Rabbis' free and poly-vocal reading

of Torah, bringing a new and alien fundamentalism into Jewish life. Although borne by bearers of black hats and *sheytelekh*, carried into the classrooms of day schools throughout the Jewish world, this doggedly literalist reading (sometimes including RaSHI as well as the text!) lacks the richness, lightness, and sense of humor required to give it a real *Yidishn tam*, an authentic Jewish flavor.

A second group of deniers, who would be surprised, even shocked to be grouped alongside the first, are the critical scholars. These too insist that *peshat* is the only Torah, that the text is uni-dimensional and can only be understood properly in the Ancient Near Eastern context, its most strange and inviting words to be interpreted exclusively through the Ugaritic cognates. All the rest, as far as they are concerned, is nonsense. "Mere homiletics," they insist, "not scholarship." But the point, of course, is homiletics, if you need to call it that. "Our rebbe," says the Lubavitcher Hasid, "teaches Torah that carries you to the highest heavens!" "Our Rebbe," replies the Kotzker, "says Torah that hits you right here in the gut." How do they do this? Homiletics, of course; keeping Torah alive and powerful for each generation. Based in the text, reading the sources, but bringing them yet again to real life. That's what it's all about.

But the greatest battle, sometimes including and sometimes reaching beyond both of the above, has to do with narrowness of mind. "Small-mindedness," said my Rebbe, Abraham Joshua Heschel, "causes exile of the *Shekhinah* [the divine presence]." Small-mindedness, in our case, means commitment to *the* Torah, the identification of 'Torah' with 'Judaism' and the smug self-assurance that it exists only among Jews. In its most extreme forms, this manifests in a belief in Jewish spiritual superiority and exclusiveness in religious truth-claims. It says that God chose the Jews not to be "a kingdom of priests," ministering to all of humanity (for what is a priest without a congregation?), but rather to be the unique bearers of truth through history, closed off to the world, required to give nothing to others, until God sends our very Jewish Messiah.

The Rabbis were deeply aware of this danger; they saw it growing in their own midst. They therefore offered teachings to subtly undermine such claims, but those teachings need to be understood properly. Judaism was for centuries the tradition of an oppressed minority, who were told loudly and repeatedly that ours was a vanquished and useless heritage. Therefore, the Rabbis had to couch their universalist teachings in carefully guarded phrases, so as not to undermine the need a weakened Jewish body politic had for defenses against attack. When the Rabbis taught that Avraham our Father fulfilled the entire Torah before it was given, they were opening the doorway for us. Avraham's children of course include Christians and Muslims, not just Jews. Torah, in the fullest sense, is thus potentially accessible to all his heirs. Avraham himself is the great seeker-figure in our traditions: he contemplates the heavens, he sees the world on fire, he looks within himself. In doing these, he discovers the entire Torah. All of Torah can be found within the seeker's soul, as the Hasidic commentaries on Avraham make quite clear. Sometimes all the commandments, the Hasidic masters say, can be found within a single act.

Avraham journeying back and forth to the Negev; opening his tent-flaps to welcome, teach, and learn from all sorts of travelers; silently climbing Mount Moriah, went on a journey to *enlightenment*. In the symbolic language of *kabbalah*, Avraham is the dawn; it is he who established dawn as a moment of worship. He is the light of morning, the first ray of love, the right or compassionate side of both the divine and the human personality. To be enlightened is naturally and graciously to be compassionate. As we open our prayers, we lean toward the Avraham-side of ourselves, seeking to bind ourselves to his all-embracing vision of light and compassion. With Avraham, the light begins to shine. He is not told, "You will be blessed" as he sets out on the great journey, but rather "be a blessing"—cause your light to shine on others.

But Avraham is not the beginning of the light. One of the most ancient Jewish esoteric traditions is that of *Or ha-Ganuz*, 'the hidden light.' The light of the first day of Creation, it is taught,

was so bright that by it you could see from one end of the world to the other (even around the curves!). Realizing we mortals were not ready to live with so much light, God hid it, allowing us to discover it bit-by-bit, as much as each of us could handle. Where is the light hidden? In Torah, of course, which therefore is called *Oraita* ('light-teaching') in Aramaic. But it is also hidden within our souls. The study of Torah has to be a meeting between those two great sources of light. We speak of this in our Torah-blessing when we say, "Thank you Lord for giving us Torah of Truth, and for implanting eternal life within us." When those two lights meet, to mix a metaphor, we can make great music.

The light within our souls was all there in a super-concentrated form in the soul of Adam/Eve, the single as yet undivided being we think of as our first ancestor. All souls were there within that single soul. (You and I were there too, as Reb Zusha reminded the Rebbe Reb Melekh.) In the necessary, yet tragic act of separation between those two halves of a single self, so that they could be turned around to face one another, thus beginning the generations of human love and the propagation of the race, the light was greatly diminished. It was hidden behind countless veils of lust, jealousy, domination, and other evils too awful to mention. Indeed some souls saw it coming and refused to join in the great divide—these are the "gay" souls that still insist that the "other" sex is to be found within the self, not in a partner of the other kind. It was not the sin of Hava or Adam that caused the lights to dim; it was the fact of their separation that caused them to sin.

Still, the light was there. Kayin, the son of Adam's exile, was unable to see it. He looked for that shining of light when he made his offering, but he could see nothing. And so he killed. But, by the next generation, the light began to shine; humanity could not have emerged without it. Enosh (the name means 'human') began to call upon God's name; he began to seek the light. The quest for enlightenment goes back to the very beginning. Therefore, by definition, it is found throughout the human race, in all the traditions of Enosh's descendants. We, offspring of Avraham, are one major branch of that generational light-tree (*menorah*)

that extends throughout humanity, but we recognize our fellow branches as well. Sometimes, in fact, as in our age, we give light to one another, lighting up *ner mi-ner*, one candle from another.

What then is our Torah, that which Moshe received and had passed from one generation to the next? It is a language with which we can give words to the hidden Torah, the one that has been there since before Creation. That Torah, manifest in the hidden light, present within each soul, is both so intimate and so powerful that it cannot be spoken. Moshe's Torah offers it the gift of words, that which tongue-tied Moshe struggled so hard to attain. But our language includes more than words: melodies, rhythms, forms of practice, means of expression, by which the hidden Torah, the deep divine wisdom within our souls, can come forth and shape our lives to make us into the best and most fulfilled humans we can become. Our inner Torah is locked away behind a doorway; our ancestral traditions are a key, allowing us to open that inner part of ourselves and thus to shape a path of wise and gentle living. That is the life of service, *avodah*, which is the way of Israel.

We are a covenanted community, 'standing under oath since Sinai,' sworn to serve as channels through which wisdom and blessing may pass into the world. Our devotion to that covenant is the real work that each of us has to do. It needs to be manifest throughout our lives: in our family relations, in our choices of profession, in our forms of rest, in the generosity (of both pocket and spirit) with which we give to others. Understanding that to be a Jew means to live in that covenant, to 'work on oneself' constantly to bring in more light and help it to shine forth, is what we have to teach. Some will do the work in a more contemplative form, some in passionate worship, still others is selfless devotion to others. All are needed, each one *ke-fum ovanta de-libba*, according to the call of his/her own heart. The community will draw them all together, have them nurture one another as we prepare to go forward and take the work to others.

We need, now more urgently than ever, to create communities devoted to that work.

ONE GOD,
MANY WORLDS

Teachings of a Renewed Hasidism

A Festschrift in Honor of
Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, z"l

Edited by
Netanel Miles-Yépez

Foreword by
Nehemia Polen

Albion
Andalus
Boulder, Colorado
2015