

Talmud Torah and the "Situation"

חשון, תשס"ג

The discussion today is about learning Torah in the midst of what we call the "situation" in Israel over the last few years. So we're talking about three elements, Torah, learning Torah, and the situation. I'll start with Torah. Torah is the Word of God to Israel.

The Word of God in general is what God has to say to human beings - and that is, the meaning and purpose of human life. This Word is addressed to all human beings, and there's much that is common to all people: the Word of God always addresses things like love, justice, spirit and so forth.

But we can never access the Word of God in its purely universal form, just as we can never access God's essence, but only manifestations of God. In Kabbalistic terms, the Written Torah is the whiteness behind the letters of the Torah scroll - the letters, already in Hebrew, in the language of Israel, are Oral Torah. There is no access to the Written Torah except through Oral Torah. The universal Word of God is Written Torah without Oral Torah in this Kabbalistic sense. The Written Torah as revealed through the prism of the Oral Torah is the Word of God to Israel (other peoples have their own unique manifestations of the universal Word of God).

This means that the Torah, that is, the Written revealed through the Oral, contains within it all that is beautiful and powerful and true and good as revealed in the particular way of Israel. Each and every detail, from which arm we wear tefillin on to how the cohen beheads a bird for sacrifice, manifests some aspect of the universal Word of God. The deeper we delve into the particulars of the system, the more the universal is revealed. The great variety of Torah disciplines, like Mikra and Talmud,

Halacha and Agada, reflect the complexity of the human being. Ultimately, the full realization of Torah is the full realization of the purpose and meaning of our lives.

The realization of Torah depends upon the degree to which we internalize it and act upon. Someone who is not inside the system, who does not "speak the language of Torah", as it were, will never experience how Torah manifests God's Word. Just as, lehavdil, someone who can't read, can't experience the power of great literature. I say lehavdil - because literature is only one aspect of life, whereas Torah is the meaning of life itself.

The internalization of Torah is called Talmud Torah.

Now, I think its clear to anyone who seriously studies Torah that its basic building blocks are Jewish Peoplehood in the land of Israel. These are fundamental, necessary elements for the full expression of Torah. Anything less is churban (destruction) and galut (exile). Its not of course enough to be here in Israel, Torah must be realized, and this necessitates Talmud Torah, the internalization of Torah. And therefore nothing makes more sense than Talmud Torah in the Jewish State in Eretz Yisrael - during this "situation", and at any other time.

And to conclude with a word about the "Situation": I think its over-rated. If you look back at what Jews have faced in order to be Jews, there's no question that we have it really good. We do face some real threats right now, both external and internal, and there is no guarantee that things will work out. But, then again, there never is.

By Shaiya Rothberg