

## **Rosh Hashannah Derasha (Sermon)**

**5767 (2006) Day 1**

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Wrestling With The Angels

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When Moses ascended from Mount Sinai to heaven to receive the Torah, the angels were incensed. "Master of the Universe" they cried out. "What is this one, born of a woman, doing in our midst?"

"He has come to receive the Torah," God explained.

"Do you intend to give your most precious treasure to flesh and blood!" they asked incredulously.

God turned to Moses. Moses was meek and unassuming. He would later be described in the Bible as "more humble than any other person on Earth" (Numbers 12:3). And here he was, among the celestial hosts. "Moses," God said, "you answer them." Moses would have to stake a claim to the Torah, before it could become the property of humanity.

"Master of the Universe," he started, "The Torah that you are giving me, what is written in it?"

"I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt." (Exodus 20:2)

Moses turned to the angels. "Did you descend to Egypt? Where you subjugated to Pharaoh?" Turning back to God, "What else does it say?"

"You shall have no other Gods." (id.)

"Do you dwell among the heathens who worship other powers?" . . .  
"What else is written in the Torah?"

"Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." (Ex. 20:7)

"Do you do any labor, such that you need rest? . . . What else?"

"Do not take God's name in vain." (Ex. 20:6)

"Do you engage in business, such that you might need to take a false oath in order to cheat? What else is in the Torah?"

"Honor your father and mother." (Ex. 20:11)

"Do you have parents? . . . What else?"

"Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal." (Ex. 20:12)

"Do you have jealousy or the evil inclination that would lead you to do such things?"

With these words, the angels immediately conceded. Moses had earned both their respect and admiration, and each of them began to share some advice with the man, Moses, who was to bring the Torah to humanity.

Source: Interpolation of Rabbi Joshua b. Levi in Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88b-89a (the text of the Talmud appears below).

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, we begin to review our lives. And I think we all, in a manner of speaking, begin to question our share in God's most precious treasures: the Torah and our Jewish faith. When we do so, we all begin to wrestle with our own angels. We are all quite a bit less than perfect. We have been tempted to cheat and to lie. Sometimes, we have even succumbed to that temptation. We have failed in our religious commitments to God, and in our personal responsibility to our community and our world. We are no angels. And so, like our forbearer Jacob, and like our teacher, Moses, we begin to wrestle with angels. What's the use, after all? We can never dream of being the most holy, nor the most pure. Our scholarship in Torah may never match that of Rabbi Akiva, and our piety may never match that of the prophets. How are we to claim to have a share in the most holy and pure Torah?

But for those of us who are all too aware of our human frailties - we have a champion. According to the Talmudic story, Moses is our champion. It is he who ascended to heaven to bring the Torah down to Earth where it belonged. Moses understood what the angels did not - that the Torah was not a work of theory to be read by those who had no need nor ability to make choices, but a guidebook to those who face challenges in their everyday life. Angels, who know no temptation, and who lack the freedom of choice to go wrong, have no need for the Torah. The Torah was given to us as humans precisely because we are imperfect, and precisely because bringing God into our lives can have great meaning.

Indeed, we face the challenges of our humanity every day. We are challenged every time we debate between synagogue attendance and a sports team. Our temptation challenges us when we are given too much change at the cash register, or when no one is looking at the entrance to the beach. But all of these challenges do not mean, God forbid, that we are not worthy of being Jewish and having the Torah. Instead, they mean that we are both deserving of, and in need of the Torah. Our privileged possession of the Torah is no gift to angels. It is a necessary tool for humanity.

Moses tells us that the Torah responds to the many challenges that we meet in life. And notice that Moses does not speak of challenges unique to the Ancient Near East, but about the fundamental challenges of humanity - ones with which we continue to grapple. In fact, challenges that, if anything, are more acute today than they ever were.

The Torah tells us, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt." (Exodus 20:2) Moses asks the angels, "Did you descend to Egypt? Where you subjugated to Pharaoh?" Could you, oh Angels ever conceive of the affront to human dignity that slavery is? Could you ever feel the compassion for the downtrodden and destitute, and be inspired to vigorously defend their cause? Our God took us out of Egypt. Our God taught us that the human condition is one worthy of salvation, not subjugation. And so it is we, not the angels, who bear the responsibility to carry the cause of human dignity. It is we, not angels who must take action against poverty, whether it is the American working poor, or those in third world nations. And it is we, not angels, who must fight racism and hatred, whether it be a disparaging remark made quietly amongst friends, or the overt and acute hatred manifesting itself in genocide in Darfur. And so, our Torah teaches us of salvation from slavery and then later tells us *וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ* - *love your neighbor as yourself*. As God acted on our behalf, we, too, must be diligent in insuring the human dignity of others.

The Torah tells us "You shall have no other Gods." And so, Moses asks the angels, "Do you dwell among the heathens who worship other powers?" The challenge of idolatry is one that faces us so much more today than it ever faced our ancestors. For while the sway of those who worship other deities is less, there are plenty around us who worship other powers. There are powers that hold so much sway and influence over us, that we begin to worship them. Who could imagine a more powerful god than the television? And who could conceive a more mighty lord than the almighty dollar.

The television seduces us in more ways that we can realize. Now mind you, I am not one who disavows the television. I watch some of it myself. But we should recognize the television for the great influence that it can have on us and our family, as well as how much time it can drain out of our lives. Television can certainly be entertaining. But what we fail to realize is that it can also be highly influential.

Though it may be too scary to admit, we internalize some of the behaviors we see on TV. And that means that when we, or worse yet, our children, watch self aggrandizing athletes celebrate their personal success over the concerns of their team - it sends us a message. That means that when we watch a sitcom that passes off the mistreatment of others as entertainment - it sends a message. It means that when we watch a reality show in which success is determined primarily on the contestant's abilities to cheat or deceive others - it sends a message. It also means that when the television objectifies the opposite sex and treats others merely as a tool for our own enjoyment - it sends us a message. I fear that these messages influence us more than we care to realize. That is why, for instance, as part of our FREE Hebrew High School program here, we will be using a program called Taking the MTV Challenge, a program that teaches students to recognize the values that are shown in our media, and teaching them how Jewish values may differ. The television may be a worthwhile tool of entertainment, and there is nothing wrong with that, but it is a terribly dangerous teacher.

And what of the Almighty Dollar? If only we spent as much time concerned about our spiritual wellbeing, or about the wellbeing of others as we spent concerned with the wellbeing of our bank account or our luxury car. How much time do we spend accumulating wealth, when we should be accumulating good deeds and sharing our wealth with others?

Society tells us that what people do on TV is special, and that we should judge our self-worth by the type of car we drive. Thus, Moses asks the angels, "Do you dwell among the heathens who worship other powers?" There are a great many things that our society tells us to worship. The Torah tells us to worship only God, so that we may value what God values - a lifestyle of spirituality, justice, and compassion.

The Torah tells us to "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy." Moses understands that humanity can run itself ragged. He asks the angels, "Do you do any labor, such that you need rest?" If you think about it, the need for Shabbat - the need for rest - is much more necessary today than it was 3,000 years ago. After all, 3,000 years ago, people had no light bulbs. And so, they could only be so productive at night. Before the lightbulb was invented, an average person slept 9, maybe 10 hours a night. That, is a thing of the past. We're now so busy that some of us work 12 hour days, and then run around the rest of the time doing errands. We haven't the time to spend with family and friends because we are simply too busy. We live in a world where in truth, there is no rest for the weary. And so, in a physical sense, Shabbat is more necessary now than it ever was. It is a time to enjoy relaxing and partake in delicious meals with family and friends, to take a nap (preferably not during the Rabbi's sermon), or perhaps a leisurely walk. But

Shabbat is also vital in a spiritual sense as well. Shabbat is a time for the religious and spiritual reflection that we may not be able to give attention during the week. It is also a time for us to stand in awe of the God of heaven, who created this world.

And so, for reasons both physical and spiritual, we need the Shabbat. Shabbat nourishes our soul with a sense of respect of the value of time, and a sense of awe of our creator. It feeds our soul, even while it restores our weary body. Our need for Shabbat is not a thing of the past - not at all. We need Shabbat now more than ever.

Moses asks the angels if they engage in business pursuits, so that they might be tempted to take God's name in vain. After all, business is often where we feel our greatest temptation to cheat. We may not see the person with whom we do business as a person, but instead view them as an object - a potential source of money. And so, we may feel less guilty about cheating this person than we would lying to a friend. Of course, the opportunity to cheat in business is alive and well as much, if not more so than in the past. Commerce is now global, and now the average family has both adult members working. It is for us, as much as for our ancestors, that Moses fought for a Torah that speaks of honesty in business.

The Torah tells us "Honor your father and mother." If this law had not been necessary at the time of Moses, it would certainly have had to be there for us today. Unfortunately, this law presents unique and profound challenges in our generation - where our ability to keep a person's body alive often out-paces our ability to keep a person's mind alive. This is certainly not the only challenge involved in honoring one's parents. If my parents weren't here today, I would probably share with you one or two more :-). But, thank God, they are both here. So I'll leave it at this - the Torah which teaches us "Honor your father and mother" is as vibrant today as it ever was.

Finally, Moses speaks of temptation. He points out that our evil inclination and our jealousy make us deserving of a Torah which tells us "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal." (Ex. 20:12) But it is far more than that. After all, how is the simple declaration "Do not Murder" going to stop us? We may know that murder or stealing is wrong. But how is a simple declaration going to get us to avoid these transgressions? In fact, the power of these commandments is dependent on the ritual commandments as well. It is only with a sense of spirituality, it is only with a sense of awe of heaven and respect for humanity, that we can become the people that we want to become, and do the things that we know we are supposed to do.

And so, we return to the beginning. We return to a God who taught us the value of human dignity by taking us out of Egypt. We return to a God who commands us to have no other Gods - be they physical statues or the hero worship of media or money. We return to a God who gave us a Sabbath to restore our body and feed our souls. We realize that Jewish law is not a set of empty rituals. Each ritual - Shabbat, prayer, keeping kosher, and so on - are rituals designed to give us a sense that we are to live our lives in accordance with all of God's commandments.

And so, we begin to battle with our angels. Wrestling the Torah out of the hands of those angels and into our lives where it belongs. We join that battle not out of a desire for ancient ritual or because of a vague feeling of nostalgia. Instead, we join that battle for the good of our own character. We need God in our lives, so that there be no other gods in our life. We recognize that the challenges to our character are as great now as they ever were. And therefore we recognize that now, more than ever, we need to study the Torah and fulfill its precepts. We recognize that we need prayer and other Jewish rituals in our lives in order to inspire our actions. And so we look to add more Judaism into our lives - to study more, to pray more, to celebrate

Shabbat and holidays more. We may not be able to do everything that we should - at least not yet. But when we do more, we know that we are wrestling with our angels for the Judaism that is truly our greatest treasure.

We are not angels. And so, we cannot pray that we'll be perfect in this coming year. Instead, we can and we must pray, that despite our flaws, we are able more and more to embrace the Torah. We must realize that our misdeeds do not make us unworthy of Torah, but instead make our need for the Torah even more profound. May we be privileged to incorporate the Torah into our lives more this year than ever before. May that Torah bring us to value not only the need for ritual in our lives, but also our sacred imperative to live lives of honesty, integrity and compassion for others.

#### Appendix: Talmudic Source Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88b-89a

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח עמוד ב - פט עמוד א  
ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: בשעה שעלה משה למרום אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבונו של עולם, מה לילוד אשה בינינו? אמר להן: לקבל תורה בא. אמרו לפניו: חמודה גנוזה שגנוזה לך תשע מאות ושבעים וארבעה דורות קודם שנברא העולם, אתה מבקש ליתנה לבשר ודם? +תהלים ח+ מה אנוש כי תזכרנו ובן אדם כי תפקדנו ה' אדנינו מה אדיר שמך בכל הארץ אשר תנה הודך על השמים! - אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: החזיר להן תשובה! - אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, מתיירא אני שמא ישרפוני בהבל שבפיהם. - אמר לו: אחוז בכסא כבודי, וחזור להן תשובה, שנאמר +איוב כו+ מאחז פני כסא פרשו עליו ענני. ואמר רבי נחום: מלמד שפירש שדי מזיו שכינתו ועננו עליו. אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, תורה שאתה נותן לי מה כתיב בה - +שמות כו+ אנכי ה' אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים. אמר להן: למצרים ירדתם, לפרעה השתעבדתם, תורה למה תהא לכם? שוב מה כתיב בה - לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים, בין הגויים אתם שרויין שעובדין (פט). עבודה זרה? שוב מה כתיב בה - זכור את יום השבת לקדשו כלום אתם עושים מלאכה שאתם צריכין שבות? שוב מה כתיב בה - לא תשא, משא ומתן יש ביניכם? שוב מה כתיב בה - כבד את אביך ואת אמך אב ואם יש לכם? שוב מה כתיב בה לא תרצח לא תנאף לא תגנב, קנאה יש ביניכם, יצר הרע יש ביניכם? מיד הודו לו להקדוש ברוך הוא, שנאמר +תהלים ח+ ה' אדנינו מה אדיר שמך וגוי ואילו תנה הודך על השמים - לא כתיב. מיד כל אחד ואחד נעשה לו אוהב, ומסר לו דבר, שנאמר +תהלים סח+ עלית למרום שבת שבי לקחת מתנות באדם, בשכר שקראוך אדם לקחת מתנות. אף מלאך המות מסר לו דבר, שנאמר +במדבר יז+ ויתן את הקטרת ויכפר על העם ואומר ויעמד בין המתים ובין החיים וגוי, אי לאו דאמר ליה - מי הוה ידע?

English Translation by Soncino, copied from come-and-hear.com

R. Joshua b. Levi also said: When Moses ascended on high, the ministering angels spake before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Sovereign of the Universe! What business has one born of woman amongst us?' 'He has come to receive the Torah,' answered He to them. Said they to Him, 'That secret treasure, which has been hidden by Thee for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created.<sup>30</sup> Thou desirest to give to flesh and blood! What is man, that thou art mindful of him, And the son of man, that thou visitest him? O Lord our God, How excellent is thy name in all the earth! Who hast set thy glory [the Torah] upon the Heavens!'<sup>31</sup> 'Return them an answer,' bade the Holy One, blessed be He, to Moses. 'Sovereign of the Universe' replied he, 'I fear lest they consume me with the [fiery] breath of their mouths.' 'Hold on to the Throne of Glory,' said He to him, 'and return them an answer,' as it is said, He maketh him to hold on to the face of his throne, And spreadeth [PaRSHeZ] his cloud over him,<sup>32</sup> whereon R. Nahman<sup>33</sup> observed: This teaches that the Almighty [SHaddai] spread [Pirash] the lustre [Ziw] of His Shechinah<sup>34</sup> and cast it as a protection<sup>35</sup> over him. He [then] spake before Him: Sovereign of the Universe! The Torah which Thou givest me, what is written therein? I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the Land of Egypt.<sup>36</sup> Said he to them [the angels], 'Did ye go down to

Egypt; were ye enslaved to Pharaoh: why then should the Torah be yours? Again, What is written therein? Thou shalt have none other gods:<sup>37</sup> do ye dwell among peoples that engage in (89a) idol worship? Again what is written therein? Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy:<sup>1</sup> do ye then perform work, that ye need to rest? Again what is written therein? Thou shalt not take [tissa] [the name ... in vain]:<sup>2</sup> is there any business [massa] dealings among you?<sup>3</sup> Again what is written therein, Honour thy father and thy mother;<sup>4</sup> have ye fathers and mothers? Again what is written therein? Thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou Shall not steal;<sup>5</sup> is there jealousy among you; is the Evil Tempter among you? Straightway they conceded [right] to the Holy One, blessed be He, for it is said, O Lord, our Lord, How excellent is thy name, etc.<sup>6</sup> whereas 'Who has set thy glory upon the heavens' is not written.<sup>7</sup> Immediately each one was moved to love him [Moses] and transmitted something to him, for it is said, Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast taken spoils [the Torah]; Thou hast received gifts on account of man:<sup>8</sup> as a recompense for their calling thee man [adam]<sup>9</sup> thou didst receive gifts. The Angel of Death too confided his secret to him, for it is said, and he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people;<sup>10</sup> and it is said, and he stood between the dead and the living, etc.<sup>11</sup> Had he not told it to him, whence had he known it?

Footnotes on 88b

30 Cf. Weber, *Judische Theologie*, p. 15 for parallels.

31 Ps. VIII, 5, 2.

32 Job XXVI, 9.

33 In Suk. 5a the reading is Tanhum.

34 Thus Parshez is treated as an abbreviation; in Hebrew the words follow the same order as these letters.

35 Lit., 'cloud'.

36 Ex. XX, 2.

37 Ibid. 3.

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Footnotes on 89a

1. Ibid. 8.

2. Ibid. 7.

3. This connects tissa with massa. [Or, to involve you in a false oath.]

4. Ibid. 12.

5. Ibid. 13-15.

6. Ps. VIII, 10.

7. Showing that they no longer demanded that the Torah be kept in Heaven.

8. Ps. LXVIII, 19.

9. I.e.. for their disparaging reference to thee as a mere mortal created from the dust (adamah); cf. Gen. II, 7, where the Hebrew for 'Man' and 'ground' are adam and adamah respectively.

10. Num. XVI, 47.

11. Ibid. 48.