

"Man Can Hear God and Live"
דרשה (sermon) for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5769
October 1, 2008

One of the main sections of the Musaf service on Rosh Hashanah is "Shofarot," a section that makes many references to the Shofar, and in particular how the shofar was sounded as Israel stood at Mount Sinai and received revelations from God. The Machzor describes how, as God broke into the course of human events, the people trembled with fear at the presence of God. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses recounts to the people how they were so afraid to hear God speak, that they asked that God speak to Moses, and that Moses relay the message.

And you said: Now, the Lord our God has shown us His glory and his greatness, and we heard His voice from within the fire; today we have seen that God can speak with man and [that man] can live. הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה רָאִינוּ כִּי יְדַבֵּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם וְחַי. Now, why should we die when this great fire consumes us; if we continue to hear the voice of the LORD our God we will die! For who of flesh has heard the voice of the Living God speaking from within the fire like we have and lived?¹

Not surprisingly, viewing and hearing God's greatest revelation in the history of mankind can be awesome and scary. As the clouds formed on the mountain, and the they saw the thunder and lightning and the blasts of the shofar, the people began to pull away from the mountain. But even though the people were greatly afraid, and asked God to talk directly to Moses, they did so only after learning something that they did not know before - הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה רָאִינוּ כִּי יְדַבֵּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת - הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה רָאִינוּ כִּי יְדַבֵּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם וְחַי *today we have seen that God can speak with man and [that man] can live.*

On the surface, the observation that the Israelites made is a theological one - that a human being is capable of surviving divine revelation. But I think this lesson can be taken on another level as well. Because to hear God's words, also means to let those words enter into the heart. Thus, when the Israelites tell us that man can live after hearing God speak, they tell us that true "living" can be found through hearing God's message.

There are many people in this world who shy away from religion because they believe that it is too constricting. They fear that were they to hear God's voice in their daily lives, it would operate to the exclusion of everything else - there would be no "life" left to live. The words of the Israelites at Sinai give us an entirely different message: *God can speak with man and [that man] can live.*

¹ Deuteronomy. 5:20-22. וַתֹּאמְרוּ הֵן הִרְאָנוּ ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ אֶת כְּבֹדוֹ וְאֶת גְּדֻלוֹ וְאֶת קְלוֹ שְׁמַעְנוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה רָאִינוּ כִּי יְדַבֵּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם וְחַי. וְעַתָּה לָמָּה נָמוּת כִּי תֹאכְלֵנוּ הָאֵשׁ הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת אִם יִסְפִּים אֲנַחְנוּ לְשָׁמֵעַ אֶת קוֹל ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ עוֹד וּמָתָנוּ. כִּי מִי כָל בָּשָׂר אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַע קוֹל אֱ-לֹהִים חַיִּים מִדְּבַר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ כָּמֵנוּ וַיְחִי:

Yes, "life" demands a lot of us. There is so much out there. Jobs to do, children to raise, games to play, cars to buy and houses to finance. Can I really take time out of my so called life to pray, or to rest on the Sabbath? Can I bother looking around the grocery store for kosher food or choosing a kosher restaurant. Do you really think I can take that many days off from work in one month? Spend that much time in synagogue? Spend good time and money building a sukkah at home? Who has time to clean for Passover or to listen to them read "the whole Megillah" on Purim?

But if you stop to think about it, what are we really doing if we leave Judaism aside in order to embrace our jobs, or if we prefer a whole day at the beach to a morning in the synagogue? Perhaps we can go through life without the trappings of Judaism. But is that truly living, or is it merely existing? In the end, what is our life worth if we live it merely in order to cash a pay check or to see a bunch of movies or do a lot of shopping? What is the purpose of mere survival occasioned with temporary enjoyment when there is no sense of spirituality or purpose?

Judaism answers these questions by asking us to let God's voice come into our lives. In doing so we do not forfeit our lives to God, but we invest each moment of our lives with the sense of meaning that can make our lives genuinely worth living. The truth is, it is not just that *God can speak with man and [that man] can live*, but that through hearing God's words we can truly begin living!

In his famed book, Halakhic Man, Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik speaks about how Judaism speaks to a those who exist in the physical world:

From the perspective of the halakhic man, it is not the spirit that is charged with carrying out the religious process but the physical-biological individual, the individual who is led astray by the promptings of his yetzer (inclinations) and attracted to bodily pleasures.²

Judaism does not ask us to hear God's word and therefore cease to live our human lives. Instead, it asks us to inject holiness and purpose into our human lives. God does not ask us to ascend to the heavens and live as angels. Instead, the believing and practicing Jew asks God to come into his or her life on this Earth. As Rabbi Soleveitchik puts it:

² Halakhic Man, Jewish Publication Society 1983, p. 44. A more complete quote is as follows:

If you desire an exoteric [] religiosity, get thee unto the empirical, earthly life, the life of the body with all its two hundred forty-eight organs and three hundred sixty-five sinews. Do not turn your attention to an exalted, spiritual life rooted in abstract words. From the perspective of the halakhic man, it is not the spirit that is charged with carrying out the religious process but the physical-biological individual, the conative (=impulsive) individual who is led astray by the promptings of his yetzer (inclinations) and attracted to bodily pleasures.

When halakhic man pines for God, he does not venture to rise up to Him, but rather strives to bring down His divine presence into the midst of our concrete world. . . . When [halakhic man]'s soul yearns for God, he immerses himself in reality, plunges with his entire being, into the very midst of concrete existence, and petitions God to descend . . . and to dwell within our reality with all its laws and principles.³

Living a Jewish life does not mean that we close our eyes to our human existence. It merely asks that we adjust the focus a little bit. Judaism does not ask that we no longer go to ball games, no longer watch movies or go to the beach. Instead, Judaism asks us to invest each of those moments with purpose and perspective. Thus, enjoying a beautiful view or eating a meal is a cause not only for physical pleasure, but a reason to say blessings which recognize God's role in that moment. Judaism asks us to pray on a daily basis not in order to take us away from our daily chores, but in order to remind us that each day is holy, and that whatever we do that day should be carried out with a sense of sanctity. Judaism bids us to take control of the "daily grind" by resting on Shabbat, and taking that opportunity to recharge our spiritual batteries. Judaism tells us that each physical aspect of life, ranging from eating food to engaging in physical intimacy must be guided not merely by our physical needs but also by the divine spark of our souls.

With the observance of each mitzvah, the individual gains control of his or her life, and thus truly begins the transformation from merely surviving to actually living. No longer is life predetermined by our physical needs. Instead, we guide our lives by sense of self and our sense of righteousness. No longer is life a vicious cycle of the same mundane actions. Instead, it is a constant opportunity to experience the holy in every moment. Our careers become not merely our method of drawing a paycheck, but an opportunity to be a productive member of society who earns a wage through good and honest means. We search for the *chesed*, the kindness, that we can interject into every moment of our lives. Our retirement years become not only time of relaxation, but an era of our lives where we have more time to devote to volunteer work and social action.

Now, sometimes it seems that this sense of spirituality and purpose is too hard to achieve. It feels like any change we make in our lives might be too radical, or might not be enough to matter. Our great teacher Moses tells us otherwise:

For all these *mitzvot* (commandments) which I command you today are not so baffling to you, nor so distant. לא בשמים הוא לאמר מי יעלה לנו השמימה ויחקה לנו . . . *It is not in the heavens so that you should say "Who shall ascend to the heavens and take it for us and teach it to us that we may do it."* . . . Rather these words are very close to you on your lips and in your hearts to fulfill them.⁴

³ Halakhic Man p. 45.

⁴ Deuteronomy 30:11-12, 14. כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלאה ולא רחקה . . . כי קרוב אליך הדבר הוא. לא בשמים הוא לאמר מי יעלה לנו השמימה ויחקה לנו וישמענו אתה ונעשנה. . . . מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו :

Yes, the commandments of the Torah are close to you, not too far away. They are in your hearts always waiting to emerge. Yesterday, we talked about having faith in ourselves. We remembered our צלם א-להים (*tzelem E-lohim*), our divine image that is the foundation of our ability to be righteous and holy people. Moses tells us that that divine image is close to our hearts and always stands ready to become more and more apparent. Observing the Torah requires not a radical change that uproots everything, but an opportunity to realize the grandeur of our own potential. Our ancestors tell us that *God can speak with man and [that man] can live* - that allowing the voice of God to be heard in our lives is not a life ending experience, but a life elevating experience. It takes our already existing lives and enhances them by adding more meaning.

Finding true spirituality in our lives is not as far off a thought as you might think. It is close at hand, as long as you take a step toward it. And so, I would ask each of you to start taking those steps. Invest your lives with stronger meaning, by gaining the perspective that comes through religious commitment. Identify some part of your life that you can begin to change today. Maybe it'll be a shabbat dinner with family. Perhaps reciting the shema as you go to sleep, or choosing the kosher restaurant for your next meal out. Think of that step not as bringing restriction into your life, but as bringing meaning and control into your life. Start to hear God's voice in your life a little bit more, and in so doing, begin to live a little bit more, and a little bit better.

During the Musaf service, we will read the words וּשְׁפָר גְדוֹל יִתְקַע, וְקוֹל דְּמַמָּה דְּקָה יִשְׁמַע *While a great shofar is sounded, an ever small voice is heard.* For us, the mundane, the every day . . . that is the great sound around us. And yet for each of us, there is the קוֹל דְּמַמָּה דְּקָה (*kol demamah dakah*, the ever small voice) calling on us to listen. That is the voice of God, calling us to a life that goes beyond the ordinary. Reminding us that יְדַבֵּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם וְחַי - that it is through hearing God's message that we can begin to truly live.

May this year be a year where we listen a little bit more intently to that soft inner voice, the voice of our creator who gave us the Torah because of His love for us. May we be fortunate to live this year with an ever increasing commitment to our spirituality. May we live to bare out the words of our ancestors, יְדַבֵּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם וְחַי *that God can speak with man and [that man] can live.* May the year 5769 be a year where God's message speaks to us, and that by hearing God's voice we begin to better appreciate the holiness that is present in every moment of our lives.