

IT'S ALREADY IN YOUR MOUTH

by Rabbi Label Lam

Because these mitzvos that I command you today are not too wondrous for you neither are they so distant from you. It is not in heaven that it should be said; "Who will ascend the heavens for us and will take it for us and we will listen to it and do it!" And neither is it on the other side of the sea that it should be said; "Who will cross the ocean for us and will take it for us and we will listen to it and do it!" Rather, the matter is close to you very much so, in your mouth and in your heart to do it. See I place before you today the life and the good and the death and the bad. (Devarim 30: 11-15)

Occasionally someone looking for his pencil finds it perched above his ear. It's comical to watch as the frustrated fellow turns every object on the desk over and looks suspiciously at each person till the dawn of reality. It's often the same one who can't find his or her glasses searching furiously till passing a mirror it becomes clear that they have been parked on top all along. How foolish we feel when it's us!

Similarly, I recall two wonderful learning sessions I had with Mike, on the top floor of Jerusalem II in Manhattan. Mike had agreed to try learning Torah under the pretense that he had seen the movie but had not yet read the book. Mike had read most of western literature and much of it in its original vernacular. However, his own Torah had remained covered with the dust of recent history. He agreed to review with me as one would study another ancient text or source document critically combing through the words to determine their hidden meanings.

We were there in the pizza shop with hippety hop music on volume 8, not quite the perfect environment for task, but it work fine for us. Within a short period of time we were transported to another time and place. The first hour passed and soon Mike looked with a panic at his watch realizing that a second hour had passed and he was well over due to get back to work.

The next week it was the same time and place and Mike with his deeply skeptical nature and critical mind was there with me the books and some pizza for round two. Now, somewhere in the middle of the session Mike opened his mouth and said one of the most remarkable innocent testimonies that I have ever heard. From nowhere he simply declared, "I feel like I have learned all this somewhere before!" He paused, absorbed in the reverie of the de ja vu experience. I didn't offer the explanation that exploded to the front of my mind at the time. I gazed back with equal contemplation and said, "MMMM, that's interesting!"

I didn't think Mike was ready to hear it. It was our last session together before work got too busy for

him, shame, but his words still echo in my ears. I don't believe he was ready to accept that the Talmud in Tractate Niddah tells that a fetus in its mother's womb can see from one end of the world to another and an angel learns the entire Torah with the child. Now, right before the actual birth, the child is made to forget all the learning. Our modern psychologists tell us the nothing is really forgotten, but rather it is stored somewhere deep in the psyche. The person seeks to rediscover Torah not merely to learn it anew. It's a dusting off process; a visit to an old prenatal memory.

With Mike's words I better understood the meaning of the verse mentioned above, "The matter is close to you very much so. It is not too wondrous for you or too far off. It is in your heart and mouth to do it!" We look for it all over the world and in Jerusalem II and there it is parked on top of our head between our ears. The language is not so foreign nor the expectations so outrageous. It is at least as tasty as a slice of pie and it's already in your mouth.

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