

THE 'LIVING' TORAH

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"Moshe and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, 'Observe the entire commandment that I command you today. And it will be, on the day that you cross the Jordan into the land that Hashem your G-d gives you, you shall set up great stones and you shall cover them with plaster. On them you will inscribe all the words of this Torah, when you cross over, in order that you may enter the Land that Hashem your G-d gives you... It shall be when you cross the Jordan, you shall erect these stones, about which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and cover them with plaster... You shall inscribe on the stones all the words of this Torah, clearly.'" (27:1-9)

On entering Eretz Yisrael, the nation was to inscribe the entire Torah on twelve huge stones—translated into seventy languages! 'Clearly,' says the Gemara (Sotah 35a), means that the Torah must be inscribed on the stones in such a manner that it would be clear to anyone who wished to read it. Tradition teaches that there are seventy primary languages (besides Lashon Ha-kodesh, the Holy Tongue), corresponding to the seventy primary nations of the earth. In order for the Torah to be clear to anyone who wished to study it, it was necessary to transcribe it into all the world's diverse languages. This was clearly a miraculous feat.

The Gemara (ibid.) asks: Why bother translating the Torah into so many languages? "So that the Nations of the World will have no grievances, saying, 'We didn't have the ability to study the Torah!'" The Gemara makes a shocking statement: "Because of this, they will be held responsible for their abominations and will be punished; they could have studied the Torah, and chose not to."

The Land of Canaan at the time was inhabited by, well, Canaanites. *"For the inhabitants of the Land who came before you committed all these abominations, and the Land became contaminated... Let not the Land expel you for having contaminated it, as it disgorged the nation that came before you."*

(Vayikra/Leviticus 18:27-28) The heathens of the time were neither cultured nor civilized. Nor was there much about their predicament that might have endeared them to the "Torah of Israel." We had the audacity to march into 'their land' (notwithstanding Hashem's promises to Avraham Yitzchok and Yaakov), unannounced and uninvited, and unceremoniously take it from them. Their compensation? Their lives—if they were smart enough to run away. "Oh, and by the way, on your way out, stop and read the stones. They contain G-d's word (our G-d—the One who gave us this Land and took it from you). We made things convenient; it's been translated." [Mayan Ha-shavua]

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 19b) says that R' Alecsandri used to call out, "Who wants life? Who wants life?" When people would gather around, perhaps expecting him to sell some magic potion (or the

latest 'segula'?), he would open up a Tehillim (Psalms [34:13]) and show them what it said. *"Who is the man who desires life, loves days, to see good? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking falsehood!"* And perhaps you think, the Gemara says, that's good enough; just keep quiet, and life will be good. The chapter continues, *"Turn away from bad, and do good"* — good means the Torah, as it is written, *"For I have given you a good teaching, My Torah, do not forsake it."* (Mishlei/Proverbs 4:2)"

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabba 16:2) tells almost the same story, except that it was a peddler who gathered people around and opened up the Psalms, and R' Yannai was among them. When he finished, R' Yanai said, "I have read these verses so many times, yet I never fully understood them until this peddler revealed their true meaning!" What was about the peddler's lesson that so shook the great R' Yannai? All it seems he did was open up a Tehillim and read what it said, with some dramatics for effect.

It is told that a young R' Itzele Petterburger zt"l, who would later become one of the great leaders of the mussar movement, once got into a protracted debate with a maskil, one of the 'enlightened' youth of his days who had abandoned the ways of his fathers and the Torah. Each of them made his arguments with flair and passion. At some point, in the heat of their debate, the maskil looked at his watch, started, and began putting on his coat. "What are you doing? Where are you going?" asked R' Itzele.

"I have to catch the train," he said. "If I don't go now, I will miss it, and I have already paid for my ticket."

"So what?" said a shocked R' Itzele. "We're in the middle of a monumentous discussion."

"Yes, but I'll lose my ticket."

"So lose it!" said R' Itzele. "Have you no respect for the matter we discuss? The 'meaning of life,' such as our frail minds might presume to understand it, is at stake, and you're worried about losing your train ticket?! I tell you now in no uncertain terms that if, G-d forbid, you were to convince me that you are right in your heretical 'beliefs,' I am prepared, as we stand here, to remove my yarmulke and tzitzis. And you worry about missing some train?!"

His words fell on deaf ears; the maskil cut the debate short, and caught his train.

If you were to hear, not through some dubious grapevine, but from trustworthy sources you respected and trusted implicitly, that it was possible to make vast amounts of money by exploiting some yet-undiscovered inefficiency in the stock market, would you take the time to check things out? Would you listen intently to what they had to say? Or would you dismiss it off-cuff as 'just another get-rich-quick scheme?'

The verse that the peddler read to R' Yannai was not new to him; he himself said he had read and studied that pasuk countless times before. R' Yannai was taken by the sense of urgency the peddler had managed to instil in his audience, himself included. They gathered with the thirst of those who

think they are about hear the very secret of life and happiness. He didn't say, "Who wants to hear a good derasha (sermon)?" — "Who wants life? Who wants happiness?"

Perhaps some of his audience felt cheated by his 'ruse.' Certainly they were not expecting to hear a verse, much less one that they all knew already. That was exactly what appealed to R' Yannai. It was no ruse. It wasn't just a cute 'derasha' to be told over at the Shabbos table, smiled at, and soon forgotten. If David Hamelech asks, "Who is the man who desires life, who loves days, and wants to see good?" he meant it.

Being tossed from their land was no doubt a bitter pill for the Canaanites to swallow. Nor were they necessarily the types to be predisposed to philosophy and theology. But there were the stones, upon which G-d's word was inscribed. You can avoid them. You can sulk and say it isn't fair and invent a thousand justifications why, "I want no part of a G-d that says this... does that..." But His word is still there, etched in stone, for you to study, should you so care to take the initiative. And care you should. The very meaning of life lies in the balance. All the excuses in the world won't do if you hear the voice call, "Who wants life?" and you don't even take the time to hear what its got to say.

The lesson, of course, is both theirs and ours. It's for those who have not-yet-embraced a life of Torah, relying instead on ill-conceived justifications that may have made sense in elementary school, but hold little water now, if they would only choose to examine them. And it's for those who already live a life of adherence to the Torah, yet know that they fall short in so many ways, and aren't doing nearly enough to change it. The Torah, says the Gemara (Kiddushin 66a), sits in a dark corner— whoever pleases may come and study it. How foolish we are if we just let it gather dust.

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