

Torah For Teens

Book Launch at Radlett

At the outset may I thank Mr Nigel Lefton for organising this evening's book launch, and your popular rabbi and the Honorary Officers for kindly agreeing to host it at your community.

You may be wondering what expertise a man of 67 years has to write a book for teens. It's a good question. My answer is that K.N. my wife and I have been blessed with four children and twelve grandchildren. So I have to thank my grandchildren in particular for providing me with the qualifications and context for presuming, at my age, to write a book for young people. Without them I could claim no contact with, or experience of, that age group.

Secondly, a rabbi is, first and foremost, a teacher; and the same pedagogical skill, imagination, humour and psychology that is required to teach and inspire children is also required when teaching adults. A good teacher should be able to understand and get through to any age group.

My third qualification for writing a book for teens is that I have been a Cheder head master at HGS, a Director of Jewish Education in Manchester, looking after the King David Schools which covered nursery, infant, junior and high schools, as well as occupying a similar position in Glasgow, while lecturing at the university and serving as rabbi to a small community. Over the past thirty years, in the two vast communities of Kenton (which in my day boasted a cheder of 800 pupils) and Stanmore, I used to spend at least one entire evening a week having a one-to-one with Bar or Bat Mitzvah pupils when they came over, with their parents, to our home. We would chat about wide-ranging subjects, such as school, sport, their Jewish identity, attitude to Israel, problems of life that they encountered, their interests, hobbies, ambitions, and so on. I was thus able, on their great day, to make my address relevant to them and to tailor it to their specific

experience and interests. It was amazing how much some of those youngsters taught me!

I would agonise over how to link their individual interests and concerns to their particular sidrah. And invariably a link could be created. And from this grew the germ of my book, *Torah for Teens*, wherein I offer what I hope is a fairly novel interpretation of an episode or two from each sidrah, and to use that as a spring board for a message that is of direct relevance to the lives of young people from 12/13 years up until, and including, student age. I do not preach at them. I let the sidrah offer its own moral and ethical insights. All I do is relate those insights to the 21st century, and the values and challenges of the world around them, and the world they are likely to confront in the years ahead.

My fourth qualification for writing a book for that age group is that I actually began my rabbinic career as a youth rabbi at Hampstead Garden Suburb, where, significantly, my wife and I have recently returned to retire. There I used to lead a youth service of over 150 youth and give shiurim and organise leisure activities. Over the past twelve years, since it opened, I have also been Rabbinic adviser to that centre of excellence, Immanuel College. So I have picked up quite a bit of experience with teenagers and students over the years. Speaking of Immanuel, I welcome here the Head Master, Mr Philip Skelker, who graces this evening with his presence, and who has graced my book with a jacket commendation. (I am also delighted to see old friends, Mr Brian and Mrs Yvonne Green who have made a long journey to be here this evening.)

My fifth and final qualification is that I find that teenage and student age-group *the* most challenging, in every way. Their minds are alert and alive; their capacity for creativity, especially when guided by skilled teachers and mentors, is unbounded. They are forever analysing – most of the time sub-consciously - all of life's values, and seeking to determine their own place within, and potential for contribution toward, the social collective. They have a nose for authenticity, and an antipathy for sham. Their curiosity is unquenchable; their questions flow like a perennial stream. They subject their teachers, especially their Religious Studies teachers, to penetrating and critical analysis, and they won't be fobbed off with superficial answers. Even when they appear quiescent in the face of their teacher's prevarication, one may be certain that the latter's battle for their mind, and possibly also their soul, is all but lost. So when people ask me, as they

frequently do, how long it took me to write this book, I reply, 'about 40 years.' It is the fruit of a career's experience.

Speaking of youth, there is much within the value-system of our western society of which they can be highly critical. There is much to confuse them, particularly its permissiveness and abandonment of restraint in pursuit of immediate gratification, in the face of the inordinate pressure that is exerted on them to conform to the latest fad or fashion, as well as in the pursuit of individualism and the 'because I'm worth it!' preoccupation, rather than concern for the good of the collective.

There is also a great deal within Jewish religious life and society that youth may find troubling – notably, its divisiveness, its intolerance, its burgeoning extremism, its frequent obsession with ritual as an end in itself; its right wing promotion of uniformity in dress and life-style, frequently at the expense of true inner piety; its materialism, which, in Israel, is exemplified by the serious decline of the Kibbutz system.

Most youth cannot possibly be expected to understand the ideological and political divide in Israel between right and left, and the inordinate pressure on her, internally by her own left wing and externally by America and the world community, to compromise on territory and security in the hope of pacifying the Palestinians. Youth, that generally sees things as black and white, must be especially mystified as to why Israel is expected to make so many concessions while kidnapping, suicide missions and rockets are still taking their tragic toll.

Who helps the teenage generation to make sense of all this, and to negotiate the moral maze that it represents? Who guides them when it comes to assessing the variant religious ideologies that compete for their souls, and which preach an 'all or nothing' commitment? Sadly, most have to cope without the benefit of sensitive, sympathetic and intelligent guides; sadly few mentors are prepared to affirm the value of that synthesis that we refer to as *Torah im derekh erez*.

If our youth wish to read traditional religious texts there is an abundance of beautifully produced and translated editions, such as the ArtScroll. However, the commentaries are generally not so beautiful, but naïve and fundamentalist, never quoting any parallel in general literature, any articles from biblical or rabbinic

journals, any scholar outside the yeshivah world. There is a plethora of religious books for children, but very few for teens or students.

Modern life requires a modern idiom and a modern approach. Of course I encourage young people to study their traditional sources, but those sources have to be expounded, reinterpreted and applied to the needs, concerns and situation of the modern age. It is important to teach the commentaries of Rashi and the other medieval teachers, but it is also vital to give them the perspectives of modern scholars, writing with the benefit of a few centuries of research into biblical studies and ancient Near Eastern history, archaeology, and philology. It is also vital to demonstrate how the text of the Torah, viewed through the prism of some of those new insights, remains relevant to the lives and concerns of our younger generation. The more knowledge and the wider the reading we bring to the study of Torah, the more we will extract from it. That is also a main characteristic of *Torah im derekh erez*.

And that is why I decided to write *Torah for Teens*, with the avowed object of providing a readable and informative insight into the week's sidrah, from a modern-Orthodox perspective and with young people specifically in mind.

Erich Fromm, the famous psycho-analyst and social philosopher, distinguished between two modes of relating to a body of knowledge: the *being* mode and the *having* mode. A student in the former mode is affected and changed by the knowledge he assimilates. A student in the *having* mode merely 'possesses' the facts, as if they were in a knapsack on his back. They don't penetrate his psyche and change his perspectives, his approach to life or learning.

I used this concept to make sense of what I called 'The Religious Criminal,' such as the Chasidic Jew who this week was convicted of running a brothel. His religion was merely in 'the having mode,' external to his psyche. It was nothing more than a system of rituals to be enacted. It was not in 'the being mode,' affecting the entire emotion and moulding the moral consciousness of the adherent.

Too many teachers teach by rote. They merely teach facts. They teach pure, not applied, Torah. Their students are more than likely to end up in 'the having,' rather than 'the being mode.' *Torah for Teens* espouses the latter approach; it seeks to change the attitude of young people to the study of the weekly sidrah

and to enhance their appreciation of its message, its interest and its relevance to their lives and concerns.

As a teenager I went to a Yeshivah cheder every night as well as Sunday morning. We were taught the sidrah by rote, and were tested each Thursday to ensure that we knew the meaning of every word. He focused on separate words, not even on phrases; certainly not on ideas, on application. It was a boring experience, and the rebbe never broadened the scope of the text, applied it to our lives, or even compared passages thematically. If we raised any broader issues we were told that they were irrelevant.

I am reminded of the father who took his young son for a walk in the country:

"Dad," the young boy asked, "Why is the sky blue?"

"Good question, son. Well, it's, it's, rather complicated."

A little while later came another questions: "Why is the grass green, dad?"

"Well, you see ... well, it's, it's rather difficult to explain, son."

Another question soon followed: "Dad, why do birds fly and we can't?"

"Ah, yes, yes. Good question, son. I'm proud of the questions you ask, but I don't think this is one we can deal with fully just now. We need to go to have some tea. You'll need to ask your teacher that, son."

And so it went on, with the child asking lots of questions, and the father replying evasively each time.

After a while the son turned to his dad and said, "Dad, you don't mind me asking you all these questions, do you?"

"Of course not, son," replied the father. "How else will you gain knowledge?"

I raise many questions in my book. And I hope I provide answers to them, or, at the least, point the young reader in a direction where his own imagination may be activated.

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Notwithstanding its title, *Torah for Teens* was written, *bin'ureinu uvizkeineinu*, with our young adults, but also with the older generation, in mind. It may seem a

rather ambitiously broad span, but there are texts in every literature that are profitably read and analysed by all ages at different levels.

Without wishing to make any comparisons, but books like Orwell's *1984* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, can be read at several levels. A student or adult will naturally appreciate the subtle allusions and political metaphor. They will also bring to it a greater wealth of personal life-experience, and thus extract more from it, but that does not mean that it will not entertain, inspire and instruct the younger age group, or be a stimulus for its own imagination and spiritual quest.

If it wasn't for Rambam, in chapter 33 of his *Guide for the Perplexed*, I would not have the temerity to say that the same applies to the Torah's narrative itself. In that work Rambam strongly adduces the Talmudic principle, *Dibra Torah kilshon b'nei adam*, of 'the Torah employing the language of ordinary folk,' and using allegorical or figurative descriptions to convey its sublime and eternal truths. Hence, says Rambam, 'The Torah's (primary) objective was to (appeal to, and to) serve for the instruction of, the young...and the common people' (Friedlander ed., Pt 1, ch.33)

Indeed, I was taken to task by the reviewer of my book in HGS's *HaGan* Magazine for arguing that the story of Adam and Eve and the eating of the tree of knowledge was written to demonstrate the paramount importance of knowledge and the fact that God all along actually contrived it that Adam and Eve should demand that higher knowledge and the moral conscience and intuition inherent in the fruit of that tree.

My reviewer argued that, if my interpretation was correct, and it had been God's wish all along to bestow knowledge and moral conscience on humans as a result of their having partaken of the fruit, how, then, could God possibly have punished them?

My answer is, first, to quote Maimonides who actually states categorically that the language used in the story of Creation has to be understood allegorically. He actually explains Adam, Eve and the Serpent as representing the intellect, the body and the imagination (See *Guide*, pp. lxvii, lxi, 115-116).

Failing to view the story allegorically, or Midrashically, my reviewer inevitably failed to appreciate the fundamental principle of *ein moshivin al ha-drash*, 'one

does not challenge the internal logic or apparent inconsistency of a midrash or an allegory.' But, leaving that aside, my answer is that, viewing it as an allegory, *as we must, on account of the many problems inherent in a literalist approach*, the 'punishment' is nothing more than a metaphor for the turbulence that is inherent in the acquisition of knowledge and the disquiet aroused by the activation of conscience.

The allegory discloses two levels of human response mechanism: The instinctive, on the one hand, and the judicious, knowledge-based, on the other. Man was constrained to graduate from the instinctive response – depicted as a Garden of Eden, a place of moral bliss and intellectual tranquillity and compliance, where no moral or ethical challenges had to be faced, no conflicts, no strife, no envy, no ambition – and subject himself, as he developed, to the very real constraints of reason, conscience and moral judgment.

That was his destiny; but that was also his 'punishment,' namely, having to contend with a conscience that gives man no rest, that can devastate his mental equilibrium, that demands strict accountability for his actions and, much worse, which can render him worthless in his own eyes. That is also the allegorical meaning of banishment from the Garden of Eden. It is the Faust-like consequence of the pursuit of knowledge – with all its limitations - and of employing that limited amount of knowledge we are able to glean and use it as the arbiter for the exercise of moral choice and decision-making.

The punishment consists in having to face up to the elusiveness of true knowledge, to the bitter frustration of having one's views exposed as prejudices, one's theories disproved, one's axioms axed and one's certainties reversed, in the face of revised realities born out of the regular arrival of new knowledge revealed by cognate disciplines, by wiser or better-stocked minds, or, simply, by chance.

From the moral perspective, the 'punishment' of banishment represents the dangerous consequence of the temptation, violence and sin that characterise life outside the parameters of the symbolic 'Garden of Eden.'

So, if, with Maimonides, the Torah itself, especially the account of Creation and of the earliest *homo sapiens*, was consciously written in a style that the younger generation might enjoy and comprehend at their level, and the older generation

interpret more profoundly, you will understand why I entertain the belief that one can write a book that will speak to the youth, and help prepare them for a committed Jewish adulthood, while at the same time inspire and provide much food for thought and discussion within the older age group. The Chief Rabbi, who graciously provided the Foreword for the book, encourages me to believe that I have struck the right balance, when he writes "I recommend this work to everyone, not just teens. Each of us will find in it something new and arresting. Certainly I have."

In addition to writing a piece on every sidrah, I wanted to cover all the festivals and disclose the valuable teachings inherent in their rich symbolism. I also decided to include analogies from the hobbies, sports and interests which so many young people enjoy, and which I believe can also provide useful religious messages.

Religion and life cannot be separated, and Torah has something valuable to say and to contribute to every experience of life, be it war, peace, love, marriage, family, sickness, business, sport, violence, and so on. It also means that every aspect of life - its arts, its music, its literature, its science, its aesthetics and its technology – must all be viewed as a divinely-bestowed creativity. The ideal has to be, therefore, that synthesis of Torah and life, spirituality and modernity, that is the hallmark of a concept that, alas, has largely been discredited in recent decades, namely that of Modern Orthodoxy. My book promotes this philosophy vigorously and unashamedly.

That same reviewer, who, though overall was very complimentary, yet also took me to task - as was his prerogative - for telling my young readers to acknowledge the spiritual debt they owed to their local mainstream communities for having provided their early education and nurtured their spirituality and sense of religious identity, as well as for the social facilities provided, and not to defect, therefore, to separatist *Charedi* enclaves. My reviewer objected that young people must be given the freedom to choose their own religious affiliation. My answer is, why should the Charedim be the only ones to practice outreach? I also demand the right to set up my stall, and canvas for Modern Orthodoxy, and especially to affirm the necessity of loyalty to their family tradition. *Zacharti lakh chesed ne'urayikh*, 'I remember unto you the kindness of your youth.'

We are given a command, *Veshinantam levanekha*, to teach Torah to our children. The Rabbis allowed Torah teachers to stand *in loco parentis*, so that parents may delegate that responsibility to them, and fulfil the mitzvah of educating their own children in that way.

But teaching our own children Torah has to be closer to the intention of the verse. It has to be a more intimate, a richer and more meaningful, experience for the child to sit at his parent's feet. It has to do more for the spiritual and psychological bonding of the family, for the urgent inner desire of the child to explore his parents' feelings, his parents' world view, and yes, his parents' depth of belief and commitment, as a sounding board and guide for his or her own developing belief system. I hope this book will help parents discuss Torah with their children, and teachers with their pupils.

Never before in history have parents been so marginalised and so relegated to the fringes of their children's theatre of activity and experience. Never before have outside influences been so predominant and seductive as they are in our age, due to the ability of the computer to bring the world into our children's bedrooms, and due to the multi-billion pound publicity industry which makes youth its principle target. Physicality, not spirituality, is the focus of its promotion. 'Self,' not 'other,' is its prime philosophy. Human worth is measured in terms of possessions, not qualities. The emphasis is exclusively on what we are missing out on, not on the blessings we possess. So that 'I want,' instead of being, as in past generations, the naïve and naturally self-centred cry of the infant, has become the obsessive and comprehensive philosophy of the entire adult generation. To the extent that American banks can destabilise an entire world economy by acceding to the 'I want' demands of those who truly cannot afford their wants, and who have been conditioned to a right to live beyond their means.

All this is all part of a culture that has convinced our youth that their parents are not 'cool,' not 'with it,' no longer worthy role models; that they are in the slow lane, their values fuddy-duddy, their image out-moded; that the gig, the stage, the football pitch, the pub, the club and the casino are the new houses of worship, and that partaking of hallucinatory drugs is the new Kiddush. Almost as bad, that culture has enticed parents to compete with their children in the race for eternal youth. Age has become a lament instead of a celebration.

So-called celebrities are regularly robbing our children of their innocence, diluting their moral conscience, skewing their sense of perspective, alienating them from the values of their homes, expropriating quality time otherwise spent with their family, and, in general, commercialising and secularising their lives.

Torah for Teens sets out to offer a modest counterbalance to all that negative influence. Among the subjects it tackles are young people's sense of 'self,' their Jewish identity, morality, friendship and relationships, temptation, marriage, role-models, tolerance, success, wealth, relationship to parents, contentment, values, maturity, disability, community service, commitment to the State of Israel, the idea of chosenness, anti-Semitism, campus tensions, cruelty to animals, campus problems, terrorism, to name but a few.

Another most important objective in writing this book is to encourage our youth to turn to their Jewish sources of inspiration when they are perplexed and seeking guidance. I want them to appreciate how our Torah can guide them far better than any agony aunt in *Hello! Or O.K!* I want to show them that there isn't a single issue thrown up by any book or soap opera that is not well covered in some episode of the weekly sidrah. Issues such as love, hate, sex, violence, goodness and deviance, loyalty and disloyalty, gratitude and ingratitude, success and failure, hopes raised and dashed, functional and dysfunctional families, brotherly love and brotherly rivalry. All human life is there. It is a Torah of life. Life in the raw. Life as it should be lead, and as it is not lead, the lives of saints and of sinners, of those struggling to lead constructive lives and of those bent on exploiting others. My book attempts to unravel many of those issues.

I thank you all for attending this launch and for your interest in the project, and I hope that *Torah for Teens* will make a worthy contribution to the religious development of our younger, as well as the not so young, generation. I know we have touched on some rather complex topics this evening. Believe me: the book is much easier to follow!

