

## INTRODUCTION

This book is intended for young adults seeking to discover some religious guidance for their lives, as well as to deepen their sense of Jewish identity. The Torah speaks to every age and every age-group, and I have attempted to mine from each sidrah a message that is of special relevance and benefit to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah plus age group.

Each of the messages emerges from an analysis of one or more episode in the sidrah; and this book should also serve, therefore, for an older age group as an engaging means of dipping into the weekly sidrah for some deeper insights and general instruction. The ideas expounded should also prove helpful to those called upon either to teach the weekly sidrah or to give a speech or *dvar Torah* to young people. With a minimum of adjustment, they should also be applicable to other religious occasions and to older generations.

During my 43 years as a rabbi I inevitably attended – and continue to attend - Bar and Bat Mitzvah parties on a regular basis. When the speeches are superficial, devoid of Torah, and containing no ethical or moral ideas, neither guests nor family come away with any clear and lasting impression that they have actually been part of a religious celebration. It could be any party or banquet. Humorous speeches are entertaining, and a joke or two are certainly acceptable, but the essence of the speech should take the form of a Torah message to the young person. It is to be hoped that *Torah for Teens* will provide this in an engaging and inspirational way, serving to guide our youth through the many dilemmas and other problems that will beset them during their emotionally turbulent and difficult adolescent years, and beyond.

In the *Sim shalom* blessing of the *Amidah*, the Torah is described as *Torat chayyim*, 'The Torah of life.' This is because all human life is chronicled in it. It describes real people, saints and sinners, in the full flow of the jealousies, tensions, temptations, loves, passions and frustrations, that characterised their everyday lives. The Torah shows us life in the raw: An Eve who was enticed into rebelling against God's command, and who dragged her husband down spiritually with her; a Cain who killed his brother, Abel; parents - Isaac and Rebecca - who favoured different sons; a Jacob who disguised himself as his brother, Esau, to wrest the firstborn's blessing from his father, and that same Jacob who fell in love with a beautiful girl, Rachel, who was switched by her father on the wedding night for her older and not-too-beautiful sister, Leah.

It tells us about the all-consuming jealousy of Jacob's sons for their handsome, ambitious, immensely talented, but highly self-opinionated younger brother, Joseph, who was clearly destined for greatness, culminating in their subsequent kidnap and sale of him. It describes the drunkenness of Lot and its tragic effects, and the rape of Dinah who made herself vulnerable by wandering around the countryside unaccompanied. It commiserates with the lonely, beautiful Tamar, twice-widowed daughter-in-law of Judah, who, in desperation at not having been given the husband promised to her, disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law in order to compromise him and force him to fulfil his promise.

The Torah describes both personal and military battles: victories and defeats, such as the tremendous inner struggles of Israel's great leader, Moses, to resolve his self-doubts and inner fears, and the battle with rivals who envied his position and who sought to exploit his areas of vulnerability. It demonstrates how those in whom he put his trust, to spy out the land of Canaan, heavily let him down by bringing a false report. It relates how the sister, Miriam, who watched over him devotedly as a baby, yet, in

later life, spoke out critically against him for his choice of a non-Israelite wife. And it discloses the depth of Moses' sadness that, notwithstanding the ultimate success of his mission to bring Israel to the very borders of the Promised Land, he, himself, was prevented by God from entering and witnessing the fulfilment of his life's dream. Why bad things happen to good people is underscored by the fact that the Torah starts with the punishment of banishment from the Garden of Eden for Adam's apparently minor disregard of God's instruction, and it ends with Moses' similar punishment: prevention from entering the land 'flowing with milk and honey' – a veritable 'Garden of Eden' – for, arguably, a similarly minor disregard of God's precise instructions.

These are just a few of the life-situations with which the Torah is jam-packed. And most of us – in our personal, family, professional or business lives – will certainly experience something very similar to one or more of those situations.

And that is why I have put together this book, comprising messages I have delivered to young people, in my former Stanmore and Canons Park community, over the past twenty years. This remains the largest Orthodox community in Europe, teeming with teens from whom I have also learned something about the changing patterns of life, and to whom I hope I have taught much about the Torah way-of-life. It is my sincere conviction that Torah continues to address issues of concern and importance in our lives, and that, by exploring the messages contained in each and every sidrah, young people will find invaluable guidance as to how best to cope with their problems, how to enrich their lives, and how to find inner happiness and enhanced self-esteem.

But the Torah is not only about the problems human beings encounter in their daily lives. It is also about guiding us to become more humane, compassionate, generous-spirited, charitable, disciplined, obedient and sensitive to the less fortunate and the less well off. It is about leading a consecrated life, a life that is based on the Torah's values and teachings. This also involves what one scholar has called 'negative ethics,' which means not only learning from the biblical personalities what we should do, but also, from their mistakes, learning what *not* to do. This means studying their lives and learning from their shortcomings and wrong-doing. In this way we can learn something beneficial from the sinners as well as from the saints. That is also what we mean by the 'Torah of Life.'

Speaking of life, many of the young people I have addressed have had particular interests and hobbies, and special talents which they were already exploiting. Sport is, of course, high up on their order of priorities, so I have tailored messages with special reference to football, cricket and tennis, as well as to other preoccupations, such as computers, acting, art and photography. As this book targets readers as young as Bar and Bat Mitzvah, I have directed several messages to the names and significance of those occasions as well as to aspects of their celebration. I have also drawn out messages from the various festivals for those becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah around those periods of the religious calendar.

I take this opportunity of thanking my former community of Stanmore for their unflagging interest in my various addresses to the young people, for their expressions of appreciation and criticism, as well as their frequently quite original observations. I also thank Mr Frank Cass for having had sufficient faith in this project to undertake its publication, as well as my dear wife, Gloria, and my beloved children and delightful grandchildren for having given me the love and joy without which the study and practice of Torah lacks a most essential ingredient.