

“V’zot Ha-brachah: being a fully rounded Jew”

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen

Unlike all the other complete sidrot of the Torah, which are read exclusively on Sabbaths, this final sidrah of the Torah has a special festival day, *Simchat Torah* (‘The Rejoicing of the Law’), reserved for its reading in the Diaspora. In Israel, which only observes one final day of Yom Tov at the end of Sukkot, Simchat Torah is merged with *Shemini Atzeret*.

This designation of the final day of Succot in the Diaspora as Simchat Torah was introduced in the period of the Babylonian Geonim and is first referred to in the halachic writings of the Spanish Talmudic scholar, poet, and philosopher, R. Isaac ibn Ghiyyat (1030-1089). It was the Babylonian authorities who instituted our annual cycle of Torah reading, a departure from the original practice of the Land of Israel which was to read smaller sections (*parashiot*) and to spread the reading of the Torah over a period of three years.¹ Hence, instead of the Diaspora’s second days – either side of the festivals – representing mere repetitions of their previous day, in the case of Sukkot the day following the festival of *Shemini Atzeret* was designated a day of joyful tribute to the Torah, read, studied, and completed, over the previous year.

Over the past seventy years, there has been a remarkable revival in Jewish learning, with the establishment of countless yeshivot and girls’ seminaries, especially in Israel. These cater to all standards and attract students after they have completed their secondary school education. Such a blend of secular education and Torah study makes for a fully-rounded Jew, able to bring a deeper and broader perspective into its study.

The great 19th century German rabbi, commentator, and philosopher, Samson Raphael Hirsch, (1808-1888) promoted this synthesis of Torah and secular culture – *Torah im Derech Eretz* - as the ideal to which Jews should aspire. To ensure that this did not remain a mere concept, but that generations of young Jews absorbed and promoted that religious philosophy, he established a school devoted to it in 1853. Although a Chief Rabbi, and burdened with all the demands of his office he also acted as the school's Director for the first five years of its existence. His project was opposed by the Reform community, on the one hand, and by most of his Orthodox followers, on the other. When the latter refused to send their children to it, Hirsch was constrained to go from house to house, raising funds and attempting to persuade his community to support his educational project.

He outlined his religious vision in an open letter to his Reform opponents, written in 1854:

Since Judaism encompasses the whole of man, and, in keeping with its explicit mission, promotes the happiness of the whole of mankind, it is wrong to confine its teachings to the *Bet ha-Midrash* (house of study) or within the home of the Jew. Our Jewish identity demands that our perspectives and objectives become universal. We must not be a stranger to anything good, true, and beautiful in art, science, civilisation, or learning. We must receive with joy and blessing everything of truth, justice, peace, and the ennobling of man, wherever it be revealed...We must dedicate ourselves with joy to every true advance in

civilisation and enlightenment, on the condition that this never obliges us to sacrifice our Judaism but rather to fulfil it with even greater perfection.²

Over two centuries after Hirsch had his dream of ridding European Jewry of its narrowness of mind and of its belief that the Jew had to reject secular culture to survive, that trend remains strong today, primarily within Charedi and Chasidic communities that do not permit their children to have a good secular education or attend university. In present-day Britain this attitude has come under the microscope of Ofsted: The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills.'

Those of us who are members of mainstream Orthodox communities, such as the UK's 'United Synagogue,' should not feel pressurised into thinking that we must support the Charedi line on account of our sympathy – if not identification – with their religious aspirations and ignore their rejection of secular education. We do not have to encourage them to become reliant upon charity for lack of secular qualifications, nor to discriminate against women in so many aspects of their communal and family lives. And we don't have to tolerate their denigration of non-Jews and, in circles such as the Neturei Karta and the vast Satmar sect in Williamsburg, their antipathy toward Medinat Yisrael and alienation from fellow Jews. That their philosophy has motivated so many of them to join Palestinian rallies, waving anti-Israel banners and uttering vocal opposition to Israel, says everything about their misguided religious philosophy. And their blissful ignorance of the fact that they are also the objects of the anti-Semitic animus underpinning the spirit of such demonstrations is the most obvious expression of their general unworldliness, the concomitant of a lack of general education.

Our beloved state of Israel is the ultimate expression of Jewish identity. It is our pride and the guarantor of security for every Jew in the world. And those who support our enemies' attempt to destroy our state are promoting the destruction of their own people.

So, as we conclude another annual Torah cycle, let us consider well the challenge of leading a Torah life, and what it does *not* demand of us, namely a return to a self-imposed physical and mental ghetto. It's bad enough that so many others wish to make us a pariah nation that we should impose that upon ourselves. Quite the contrary: Our sacred challenge is to follow the example of our first father, Avraham, who set himself the task of being *Ohr la-goyyim*, a light to the nations, as reflected in the change of his name from *Avram* ('exalted father') to *Avraham* ('father of the multitude of nations').

The efforts of Medinat Yisrael to help less fortunate countries — such as the lightning speed with which her experts appear with much-needed medical equipment and food supplies at the scenes of disasters, and the sharing of its agricultural expertise, including its water-purification and sanitation skills to famine-affected areas, as well as its innovative scientific and technological expertise — is a glorious, practical example of the application of Jewish values and ingenuity to the relief of human suffering. At the local level, we must include the *kiddush Ha-Shem* of Hatzalah, the non-profit Jewish volunteer emergency medical service organisations around the world, who respond immediately to emergency calls to patients regardless of their religion.

How, then, can those who shut themselves up in an ivory tower of learning be so myopic as to be disdainful of those who serve their fellow men and enrich the world, either directly or indirectly, by employing a synthesis of Torah values and secular scholarship

and research? There can surely be no nobler exemplification of the command *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocha* – ‘to love one’s neighbour as oneself’ (Lev. 19:18) – described by the great Rabbi Akivah as *klal gadol ba-Torah*, ‘the core principle of our Torah.’³

Significantly, Ben Azzai, a pupil-colleague of Akivah, seems to have viewed the reference to ‘one’s neighbour,’ in that verse, as lending itself to the suggestion that the Torah was referring exclusively to the extension of love to one’s fellow Jew. He taught, therefore, that the verse, ‘This is the book of the generations of Adam’ (Gen. 5:1) was ‘an even greater principle’ since it emphasized the relationship of all mankind to the first man, Adam, and the consequent brotherhood of all men.⁴ R. Shimon b. Eleazar neatly steered a middle course, pointing out the validity of Akivah’s source verse, but also the significant fact that ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ is followed by the words ‘I am the Lord’ – namely, the Lord of all mankind, and, consequently, of members of all faiths.⁴

That this core verse refers exclusively to one’s fellow Jew is the view of Maimonides and other early authorities.⁵ Before denouncing this view as xenophobic, we should be mindful of the fact that the Torah laws were given to a people that, quite literally, ‘dwelt alone and were not reckoned among the nations’ (Nu. 23:9). They had also been living as an exclusive community in Goshen for over two centuries before traveling in the desert for a further forty years, during which they had suffered agonies at the hands of the Egyptians, and hostility and attack from surrounding tribes. It was not unreasonable, therefore, that the Torah should have had fellow Jews in mind when it demanded of the Israelites an attitude of unreserved love of fellow man. Indeed, it would have been asking the impossible for the Torah to have demanded such love of those who had treated them

as aliens for centuries! No such inferences should be drawn, therefore, regarding modern-day attitudes toward gentiles, among whom Jews live as neighbours and fellow citizens, sharing equal rights and protection under the law and contributing to each other's welfare and prosperity in a host of ways. Later Jewish law established the principle of *eivah*, doing nothing that might antagonise members of other faiths.⁶ So important was this that several rabbinic prohibitions were relaxed so as not to exacerbate inter-faith tension.⁷

So, the conclusion of our Torah cycle might be regarded as a call for us to be fully rounded Jews, and to internalize the philosophy of *Torah im derech erez*. This involves interacting with wider society as well as with our own Jewish community, and playing our part in contributing toward the progress, harmony, and security of both. It calls for us to be guided by our Torah's principles, but also to be 'a light to the nations' around us. The promised consequence of embracing this philosophy is that 'the peoples of the world will see that the name of God is reflected in you, and they shall have respect for you' (Deut. 28:10).

It is without doubt that this calls for courage and determination. Our contribution – if not our very presence – might be resented in some quarters, our objectives misconstrued, our achievements denied, and our loyalty called into question. But that must never deter us. That this calls for great reserves of inner strength adds resonance to the clarion call with which we conclude this final sidrah (and that of the four previous books of the Torah): *Chazak chazak v'nitchazeik*, 'Be strong, be strong, and let us derive strength from each other.'

NOTES

1. This is popularly referred to as ‘The Triennial Cycle.’
2. On S.R.Hirsch’s open letter to the Reform community, see Michah Gottlieb, *The Road to Orthodoxy: Hirsch in Battle* (Oxford Academic: May 2021).
3. See Sifra *Kedoshim ad loc.*; Tal. *Yer. Ned.* 9:4.
4. Mid *Ber. Rabb.* 24:7.
5. *Avot D’Rabbi Natan* 16:5.
6. RMBM, *Yad. Hilchot De’ot* 4:3.
7. Tal. *Av. Zar.* 6b; Tur. *Sh. Ar. Yor. De’ah* 148:6, *et al.*