

Message from the Parsha

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Not in the Heavens

From ancient times to today, Jewish tradition has emphasized the importance of human engagement with the divine words of Torah and its continuity. This concept is rooted in this week's parsha, which reminds us that Torah is not "up in the heavens" or "across the ocean", but is in fact, "very close to us, wherever we may find ourselves" (D'varim 30:11-14).

This approach is demonstrated exceptionally well in the teachings and life of the Vilna Gaon, one of the greatest Talmudic scholars of all time. His student, Rav Chayim of Volozhin, recounts how the Vilna Gaon would refuse divine assistance from maggidim (celestial beings) in his own Torah studies, stating:

I do not want that my knowledge of God's Torah be communicated by any type of medium. Only what my eyes should be able to perceive [the wisdom of Torah] according to what God wishes to reveal to me [through my studies]. God should give me a portion in His Torah through my toils, struggles which I pursue with all my strength. (Introduction to Sifra diZeni'uta of Rav Chaim of Volozhin)

For the Vilna Gaon, the essence of Torah is now in the hands of mankind,

with God's wisdom and words sanctified through our own discovery.

The Talmud further reinforces this notion of human authority, albeit within established protocols of our Tradition. In the famed story of 'the oven of Achnai', (Bava Metzia 59b) the sages push the bounds of these verses even further, insisting that these verses are not merely about accessibility to Torah, but about who has authority over Torah. When R' Eliezer enlists the help not only of miracles and wonders, but even of a BAT KOL, a heavenly voice, to demonstrate that his interpretation of the Halacha is correct, his interlocutor, R' Yehoshua declares "it is not in the heavens!" This bold statement asserts that the authority to interpret and apply Torah has been entrusted to humans.

This trust and authority to interpret and reapply Torah goes beyond just studying and observing Jewish laws. When we have knowledge of the halachic theorems which Jewish ideals and law are predicated upon, God entrusts us to take part in crafting the Torah to engage in every generation, demonstrating God's desire for partnership with us in building up new levels of Torah, guaranteeing the immortality of our covenantal relationship. Particularly in the face of new and emerging challenges that arise over the course of human and Jewish history, God

seeks out our active participation in the development of the Torah.

In fact, it is in the face of new challenges that this responsibility becomes especially crucial. This past year, we have witnessed and experienced unprecedented circumstances that have required innovative halachic thinking as poskim and as a people. How should Shabbat observance be managed, with soldiers, doctors, social workers, and so many others required to move from one place to another, in what is now the second longest war in the country's history? Am I allowed to travel back home from telling a family that their soldier son was killed in battle, if Shabbat has already begun? Can I eat kosher food that was brought to the base by a family that traveled on Shabbat? How do I search for chametz before Pesach if there are soldiers who keep such foods with them in our barracks? What are our obligations and prioritizations towards charitable giving, with thousands of Israelis still wounded, displaced, emotionally scarred, laid off, and grieving?

These and so many more questions I have heard over the last year aren't directly addressed in the canon we've inherited, leaving it to us, with God's permission and help found in the rabbinic literature, to forge new pathways in Torah as we face realities that are directly related to the

messianic age. We continue this work daily. While this opportunity arises from tragedy, it simultaneously demonstrates the beauty of the enduring relevance and eternity of our Torah traditions, and how they hold a message for every generation.

The final words in Talmud regarding the oven of Achnai incident are as follows:

Years after, Rabbi Natan encountered Eliyahu the prophet and said to him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that time, when Rabbi Yehoshua issued his declaration [that we don't follow the word of God in heaven]? Eliyahu said to him: The Holy One, Blessed be He, smiled and said: NITZCHUNI BANAI NITZCHUNI BANAI.

These final words can be translated in one of two ways. The first is that "My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me." Indeed our parsha reminds us that the axiom of rabbinic protocols takes precedence over divine pronouncements. Or that final comment can be translated "My children have immortalized Me; My children have immortalized Me." Reading it this way, we see how by taking responsibility for the development of the Torah we help guarantee its immortality and the future of our covenant with the Divine.

As we approach a new cycle of Torah reading after the holidays this year, we hope for resolution to the many halachic dilemmas, the return of our hostages, calming of tensions, and healing for our people. Through our continued engagement with Torah, may we fulfill our role as partners with God in bringing more light into our world.