

Sermon Rosh Hashana 5769 – Day 1

WHAT NOW?

An Italian, a Frenchman and a Jew arrive in Heaven and each is judged. The angel escorts the Frenchman to his heavenly reward. They enter a beautifully arranged banqueting hall with all the foods that a French connoisseur could dream of.

The Frenchman turns to the angel and says, "This can't be mine. There must be some mistake. I was immoral most of my life and I was hardly G-d fearing."

The angel replies, "There is no mistake. These delicacies are yours but there is a catch. Every day at 5:00 pm they will bring in a large pot of soup that is boiling hot. You will be immersed in it. If you can take the pain you can partake of the banquet."

"Sorry" said the Frenchman "I just could not tolerate the pain."

The Italian, too, is taken to his reward a similar banquet with pasta and all the best Italian food you can wish for on Rosh Hashanah.

Again a similar dialogue takes place, the Italian admitting to a life of financial fraud and corruption. "This can't be mine. There must be some mistake."

He too is advised that at 5:00pm each day he will be immersed in a boiling hot pot of minestrone soup and he again states that the pain would be too much to bear. It's just not worth it.

Finally the Jew is taken to his eternal rewards. They enter a beautifully arranged banqueting hall with all the foods that a Jew can only dream of... Chopped liver, kugel, gefilte fish, sweet herring, salty herring, kishke, cholent, sushi, beef lo mein, and of course, the most beloved food for Jewish men – tofu and soy beans.

He too cannot believe his luck.

"This can't be mine. There must be some mistake. I never went to Shul, I never did anything Jewish... How can this be mine?"

Again the same response: "5:00 pm each day, you will be immersed into boiling hot chicken soup with kneidalach. If you can take the pain the banquet is yours."

"Fine", said Yankel, "I'll take it".

The angel is stunned. "The Frenchman and Italian – and countless other gentiles – have declined the offer; what makes you different?"

Yenkel responds: "What should I tell you? I know Jewish functions all too well. 5:00 is not 5:00 and the soup is never that hot."

Well, welcome all to one of the great Jewish functions of the year. But one in which we are on schedule...

Plus, many of us have been through some serious "hot water" these past few months... weeks... days. So now you're ready for amazing blessings. Yes, we're going through very difficult times at the moment which is affecting many of us directly and all of us indirectly. But Judaism places great emphasis on the New Year being a new beginning – To quote the Talmud: *Tichleh shono ukloloseah*, may the year end with all of its curses; *Tachel shono ubirchoseha*, may the New Year begin with all of its blessings. It's a new year, a new page, a brand new book. May all of us and our families, along with Klal Yisroel, and through us all good people, be blessed with a year filled with blessings; good health, happiness, nachas, fulfillment, and yes, some gelt...

So it's an election year. The refrain seems to be change, change, change... Change we can count on... Change we can believe in... Change is coming... Why the big deal about change? Someone said: Can anyone come up with another slogan... for a change? Why is it that virtually every candidate, from the right and from the left, feel that the surest way to touch a nerve with the electorate is by invoking change?

Yes, we've been through a few difficult years, but I think there's more to this change thing... People need change. We crave change, something new. Just ask the 40 year old suburbanite why he went out and bought himself a sports-car convertible; "I needed a change".

Isn't it a most interesting fact that fish swim to the surface when it rains to get a drink of the rain water... here they are surrounded by an ocean of water. But that does it cut it. They want something new and fresh.

I believe it is our nature to look for change, for something different... something above the 'surface', something satisfying. We're surrounded by so much wealth and comfort but it doesn't satisfy. We're constantly looking for something fresh and refreshing that will.

I want to talk to you today about what I believe to be the most common question people ask themselves: What now?

No matter at what stage in life; after every milestone, challenge, success or accomplishment. We then turn around and ask ourselves: So what now? Is that it?

We've just landed the perfect job for ourselves... we just drove out of the showroom with the car of our dreams... we just bought a new home in the exclusive neighborhood we've been talking about getting

into for 15 years... we just completed a complicated business deal... a deal that took us four years to complete... the deal of a lifetime, bringing together companies from across the country... netting us more profit than we've ever imagined possible...

The next morning... or a week or two later... we invariably look ourselves in the mirror and ask ourselves: What now? Is that it? It doesn't satisfy. There somehow never seems to be a finish line that we can cross and we've arrived... they seem to keep moving the finish line each time we advance.

Subconsciously this is why we are so hungry for change... for something new. Give me something more, something satisfying. Something where we can feel we're doing something real, something that's not a means to some further end but is an end in itself.

We're stuck in the cycle it seems where the lines are blurred between what are the means and what is the end. We work hard to be successful so that we can give our kids a good education; they in turn will use their education to be successful so that they're kids can get a good education in order to provide for they're kids' education... repeat steps 1 and 2...

Try sitting down and drawing up a chart of two columns: things you do that are the "means" and things you do that are the "ends"... I think that would be an excellent exercise every once in a while just to clarify our priorities and where we're headed...

You know the story of the pool simple "yiddle" (European immigrant) who is out fishing, only to be harassed by a CEO who took an "important" day off from his busy life to fish... (The yiddle is totally chilled and relaxed while the CEO is quite anxious to make sure his important day off or relaxation is a success...) The CEO, impressed with the other guy's intelligence is trying to convince him to go into business and become a CEO one day. But the poor guy can't understand why. "You'll manage a whole team of people". "So what?" "You'll make a good living and be a macher..." "So what"? "You'll be so successful you'll be able to go on vacations and go fishing." "Vell" he says in his strong Yiddish accent; "that's exactly vot I'm doing..."

The whole world is debating what is life really all about... what is the purpose, where are we headed...

I don't want to become too philosophical... that could have its own hazards...

The ten year old boy was home from school due to the flu. He was alone with the nanny who didn't speak a word of English, when he started feeling really bad. So he decided he'll call the doctor. But he didn't know the phone number. He picked up the synagogue bulletin: Rabbi Dr. Jerome Goldstein. Perfect, my rabbi is also a doctor, let me give him a call. Rabbi takes the call, pleased to hear from one of his junior congregants. How can I help you, my son? Well, I have this terrible flu... Sorry, son, but I'm not that kind of doctor, for flues... I'm a doctor of philosophy... "Philosophy? What kind of sickness is that?"

So there's the ongoing debate...

Some say it's all meaningless, just enjoy. I saw a license plate the other day: LIV42DY. Just enjoy yourself while you can... OK, that's an interesting world's view... Just have some ice cream... But you

know for any intelligent person that doesn't cut it. Besides, after a tub of ice cream we always ask ourselves the question: What now...?

Others say its retirement that makes it all worthwhile, when we finally get to relax and cross that finish line... now that's when we've arrived... But how much sense does that make? To work 50 years for a 'maybe' of 15?

Still others believe it's all about the hereafter ... it's in the afterlife where life gets some meaning ...

"Do you believe in life after death?" the boss asked one of his employees.

"Yes, Sir," the new employee replied.

"Well, then, that makes everything just fine," the boss went on. "After you left early yesterday to go to your grandmother's funeral, she stopped in to see you ."

But us Jews are too practical to accept that... we know intuitively that this awesome, beautiful world of ours has got to have lots of meaning and purpose in it... right now in the here and how... not just in the hereafter... But it seems to keep alluding us.

Friends, each time I walk away from officiating a funeral I hear the same sentiments: Is that it? Is this how life works, it's just over? Even if the person lived until 98, and I'm happy to say I'm increasingly doing more funerals for over 90's... people still feel a void, an emptiness inside. Yes, they'll pay lip service to it - "He lived such a full life, he did everything he ever wanted to do, traveled where wanted to go." But on the inside people are shaken up. They walk away shaking their heads... Is that it? We just collect all the pieces and the game is over?

Some people try to defy mortality by becoming famous. "True, it's all meaningless, but at least let's perpetuate this meaninglessness into eternity..." I recently went to see a very wealthy man to discuss his getting involved in our building project, maybe he can help us complete the new building... When I walked into his office he was on Google. He was Googling himself... "Rabbi, do you know how important I am? I have 25 pages on Google!?" Oh, so that's the purpose of life – lots and lots of Google pages?

What now? (Besides, what's 25 pages? Some people have 50 pages, 100, and more...)

Read any of the interviews on famous people and you'll see they invariably come back to something personal, a relationship, a child, a charitable endeavor. They know, perhaps better than anyone, that fame just doesn't cut it; that when 100 million people know your name you still ask the same question, perhaps with even more emphasis: what now?!

I said to you earlier that the businessman will always come back after even the most successful deal and ask that same question, what now. How about a doctor, after healing someone and saving his life. Does he also say – what now? How about a paramedic who brings someone back from cardiac arrest and

saves their life? Does he also ask the question? How about when you hold your new born child in your hands... or your grandchild... do you still ask the question?

I don't think so... Somehow we sense something real is going on. We're dealing with life itself. So there are some real things in life after all...

My dear friends, it's because life is sacred. It's holy.

What does holy mean? Let's demystify this. People think of holy as special, important, significant, etc. but why use the word holy? What does it really mean? It sounds so mystical...

The Torah says: Vehiskadishtem – you shall be holy people. Ki kadosh oni – because I (Hashem) am holy. Holy than means being like G-d. G-d is holy; we should be holy too.

How do I mean? G-d is not a means to an end; He IS the end!

A teenager recently said to me: Rabbi I have two questions. Who made G-d and why do we need Him? Good questions... In our material, scientific world where everything is relative, where the value of anything is only what can I get from it... where kids have parents only because they need someone to pay for college... the question bothered him – why do we need Him. I explained to the young man that G-d was not made and we don't need Him. He is not a utility, he is not here to serve a purpose; he IS the purpose. I tried to introduce to the young man the concept of REALITY, that there are some things that are real. G-d is real, and was always here, so no one had to create Him. G-d is Reality with a capital R!

That's what holy means, sacred, true, real, an end unto itself. G-d is asking us to live lives filled with holiness, with acts of mitzvahs which are the end itself, not a tool or a utility.

That's what a mitzvah is. Mitzvahs are G-d's representatives here on earth, and they carry His quality of being real, true, satisfying. A Torah scroll, for example, is holy, not because you use it, not because you read from it. Many torahs never get used, they are still holy just the same. It's not about what you can do with it. It's a torah...

The only thing other than mitzvahs that carries this quality of holiness is human life. Life is sacred, because man is created in the image of G-d. As such, life is an end in itself. We do everything possible to save a life. We don't consider the costs when it comes to saving a life, regardless of whether the person is 19 or 90. That's because life is something sacred, real, Divine, not a utility that can be measured in terms of how much return there will be.

It always upsets me when I hear people say: "It's too bad we lost the 6 million. I can only imagine how many doctors, scientists, musicians, artists were amongst them..." this type of talk makes me nuances. Is that what the value of human life comes down to... their contribution to society? Are we beginning to view human life like a commodity to be evaluated on its merits? Isn't that what the Nazis did?

That's how they priced things out in the slave trade, based on how many years of work you have left, just like when you buy a used car you pay based on how many miles its got left in it.

There's the problem today with medical insurance companies and hospitals and the government not wanting to spend money on people unless they know they'll live a certain amount of time, so that the investment makes sense...

Director of HMO dies and comes to heaven. He's greeted by G-d who says: Welcome to heaven. But you can only stay 48 hours, then you got to go. We need the bed.

So the doctor who saves a life doesn't ask – What now? Because he or she knows intuitively they've just done something real.

Think about it. The doctor is just doing his job, and he will move on to the next patient as is his routine. But somehow he knows deep down that something real just happened. It doesn't leave him wanting. It satisfies him. But why? If you think about, what's the big deal? So he saved a life... so that it can now continue to wander around aimlessly like the rest of us for 80, 90 years... If life has no purpose, why suddenly is there purpose in preserving it...

Its because life is holy, we're created in the image of the Creator and carry that quality. We know this intuitively. We feel it in our gut when we hold our child or grandchild... this is not a tool to anything; this is reality!

My dear friends, allow me to impress upon you today that the same holds true with every mitzvah. When you light a Shabbat candle, this is a holy act. It is an end in itself. When you put up a mezuzah you are not just doing a nice tradition. You have crossed the finish line... you've experienced truth... you are touching the Divine... Ever wonder why mitzvahs are so satisfying... they make us feel good... they don't leave us wanting.

I asked you last year on Yom Kippur to take a moment each morning and night to place your right hand over your eyes and recite the six words of the Shma – *Shma yisroel adonoi eloheinu adonoi echod...* Why did I ask you to do this? Did I get a raise from the Board of Trustees? Am I expecting some extra brownie points in heaven? I asked you to do this because it is something real... I know you will feel fulfilled each time you do it. It will change your life because each day you will do something real... something that if we lived for one day alone would make it worthwhile...

This is why, throughout history, our people lived and died to do a mitzvah. With their last breath they used the opportunity to say the Shma... Why did they do that? Under the worst of circumstances they held fast to their Jewish observance. Why? They weren't doing it for return. It would have been much more "beneficial" at the moment not to do the mitzvah.

My own father grew up in Communist Russia. As a 5 year old child, orphaned from his mother, his father would take him into a closet each night to teach him that there is G-d who created this world, teach him the holy letters of the Aleph Bet, the Hebrew alphabet... He did this in the closet with candlelight so that the communist neighbor, living in the same room separated only by a curtain, wouldn't get wind of it...

A Chasid by the name of Rabbi Cahn, who spent years in the Russian gulags for the crime of teaching Torah to Jewish children, writes in his diaries about the only two times he cried during this entire ordeal. Once at the train station when he said goodbye to his family. He held strong and didn't want his wife to see him cry, but there she was, infant in hand, a 6 year old next her... but he still held strong... It was only when his 3 year old daughter got onto her tip toes and began jumping up and down so she can get a glimpse of her dad in the train car before he is taken away... not knowing when and if she'll see him again... He broke down...

He arrived in the Siberian Labor camp a few weeks before Rosh Hashana. He had two concerns... He didn't have his Tefillin... and what will be about a shofar... Days before Rosh Hashanah a package arrived from his father. He goes through it... there is some food... some underwear... he's searching, looking, and then suddenly beneath it all... there they were... his Tefillin!!! It was as if he's just discovered the Crown Jewels! He put them on and prayed, even though he had already prayed that day he prayed again... and he cried...

And beneath it all – he discovered a shofar... his joy was limitless. He told some Jewish inmates but they thought he lost his mind. Here you are in the gulag, doing time for spreading Jewish observance, and you want to blow the shofar? On the first day of Rosh Hashana, he writes in his diary, he blew only one lone sound, a tekiah. After all, he didn't want to get caught, in which case they would confiscate the shofar... what would he do on the second day... do you hear this, my friends? Second day he already blew a full set of ten, figuring, what could happen already? If they take away the shofar, he doesn't need it anymore...

As many of you know, I often go to pray at the gravesite of the Rebbe, of blessed memory, in keeping with the time-honored tradition that the resting place of a tzaddik (righteous person) has tremendous merits and their prayers on our behalf from on high are very effective. Many of you here, as I look around the room, have been with me to the Ohel, as it's called, in Queens.

On occasion Chassidim will gather to spend a Shabbat at the site, to honor the Rebbe's yahrzeit of birthday. A few thousand Chassidim gather, camp out in tents and celebrate the Rebbe's life and his teachings. These Shabbats are most memorable and meaningful.

Last winter, in honor of one such occasion, my three older boys and I decided we would spend Shabbat at the Ohel. As luck would have it, my watch battery died that Friday. So there I am relaxing around the house, when my wife says to me: Shalom, do you realize its 45 minutes to Shabbat... Oy vey... the boys and I decided we're going for it. We grabbed the things we needed... I grabbed my special card I got from Chief Ronnie, which helps me in case I ever get pulled over for any minor traffic infractions... After all, I'm a busy rabbi... And we set out.

We now have 40 minutes to get to Queens... it's Friday afternoon at rush hour... as you well know, it takes 40 minutes to get to the LIE... Anyway, armed with my "rabbi" card I drove like never before... I did a maneuver at the Lord & Taylor-Shelter Rock Road intersection that will go down in the annals of rabbinic driving history...

The clock is ticking... It's now 20 minutes left. We finally get to the LIE, which is packed bumper to bumper. But there's always the shoulder. No problem, I've got the card... But then we get onto the Cross Island Pkwy, bumper to bumper parking lot... and there's no shoulder to speak of... here my card helps *vi ah toiten bankes*... It does me no good.

It's 6 minutes to sunset, my boys look at me, I look at them... we've heard these stories before... but it now became clear to us we were going to have a "story" of our own... with 2 minutes left to sunset we pulled off right there on Union Turnpike, got out of the car, took whatever clothing we can put on our person (no carrying...), I even put my talit under my coat, we closed everything up, clicked the alarm clicker, put the keys on top of the tire (don't tell a soul)... and we looked at each other.. Shabbat Shalom!

If I tell you, dear friends, this was one of the best times we've had together... It was the most exciting, bonding experience we've ever had. First we davened the *mincha* prayer because it's got to be before sunset... we prayed mincha right there – Union Tpk... We prayed with extra concentration because we don't know if mincha was ever prayed at that spot before... Then we headed out for a nice walk. It took a little over three hours and we arrived at the Ohel... a bit cold but fine, and we had a most inspiring Shabbat!

When I told the story the next day to my JLI Adult Education class someone asked me: Rabbi, do you feel bad that you have this restriction? I said – Bad? There's nothing better! "But rabbi, isn't Shabbat about rest and relaxation?" No, it's not. True, Shabbat (usually) offers rest and relaxation, but there are many other ways to accomplish those things... Yoga, exercise, vacations. Shabbat is not about that. Shabbat is a holy day... It's not negotiable. It's the real thing...

My friend Larry Pinner taught me something I'll never forget. As you might know Larry and Sheryl's architectural firm, Pinner Associates has been totally dedicated to Chabad and our various construction projects for the past ten years. I once was trying to express my gratitude to them for this amazing dedication and generosity, when Larry turned to me and said: "Rabbi, but this is the good stuff!" He nailed it right on the head. Life is filled with lots of stuff. But a mitzvah, that's the real thing. It's the good stuff!

So friends, lets make it a year of change. Change for the better. Change we can truly believe in. Let's not accept the status quo of the regular rat race of life. That is all good and important and will continue, and may we all be successful in every area of life. But like the fish, let's come up a little bit.. let's try to rise up a bit above the surface of things... for a refreshing drop of something different, something real. Let's resolve that we will give ourselves the pleasure of nurturing ourselves with mitzvahs, with additional acts of goodness and holiness. May G-d grant all of us the gift of a year of health, wealth and nachas... a year filled with fulfillment, purpose and satisfaction.

Sermon Rosh Hashana Day 2 - Torah as G-d's Masterpiece Artwork

A fellow in Boro Park decides that he wants a pet. Going into the neighborhood pet store, he's quickly attracted by the bright plumage and poise of the three parrots.

Pointing to the first, he asks the Jewish pet store owner, "How much for that parrot?"

He is stunned by the reply: "Five hundred dollars."

"What could possibly make that bird be worth that kind of money?" he wonders aloud.

"Well," explains the owner, "this parrot knows the entire Tanach (Five Books of Moses plus the Prophets and Writings) by heart!"

Sure enough, they say the first three words of a number of biblical verses, and the parrot flawlessly completes the verses!

The fellow expresses his amazement but, noting the stiff price tag, points to the second parrot and asks the price. He's even more astounded when he hears: "Two thousand dollars!" To explain the steep price, the storeowner continues, "This parrot knows the entire Talmud by heart -- with the commentaries of Rashi and Tosafos!"

Twenty minutes of testing follow, with the parrot responding precisely and correctly about even the most obscure Talmudic subjects!

Deciding that two grand was out of his price range, the customer pointed to the last parrot, hoping for a reasonable buying price. "Oh that one? He's \$5,000."

The customer exclaims, "What can this bird possibly know that could even remotely justify that outrageous price?!"

"Well, we really aren't sure what he knows," admitted the store owner. "But the other two call him 'Rebbi' (Teacher)!"

As a rabbi I am often called Rebbi, or teacher, but the truth is I learn from the people more than I teach them. I especially enjoy my conversations with children and teen agers in the congregation. They're so innocent and honest; there's much to be learned from them.

Today's sermon is inspired by a meeting I had with a Bat Mitzvah girl, Emma Podolsky, who celebrated his Bat Mitzvah at Chabad on Shabbat the week before last. Thank you Emma.

I asked the young lady to tell me what her favorite hobby is. She said she loved art. She said that she loved to draw and was pretty good at it.

I asked her why she loved it so much. She thought about it for a moment, and then gave me profound answer: “I enjoy seeing my imagination come out onto a piece of paper.” Wow! How’s that from a 12 year old girl...

In general people are attracted to art. We’re intrigued by it; even mystified a little. I think we run to the art galleries to connect with something spiritual, less mundane, and to get away from the mechanics of the day to day grind.

And then it occurred to me that the Torah is exactly that: Art. G-d’s masterpiece artwork!

No doubt many of you are thinking: Torah is art? Torah is law! At best, it’s literature. But art?!

However, according to Emma’s definition, which is absolutely correct, Torah is in fact art of the highest form. How do I know this? It says so in the 10 Commandments.

The 10 Commandments begin with the words: I am the L-rd your G-d; in Hebrew: *Anochi Hashem Elokecho*. In truth, the correct Hebrew term for “I am” is *Ani*, not *Anochi*. In fact, *Anochi* is borrowed from an Egyptian dialect. Why would G-d begin his first statement with an Egyptian word?

Our sages tell us it’s because the word *anochi* is made up of 4 letters which stand for an acronym of a verse that says it all about what the Torah is: *Ano nafshi ksovis yehovis*; I (G-d) have taken my soul, I have written it down and I have given it to you.) So Torah is G-d’s soul on paper; G-d’s imagination right there on the parchment!

Just like loving, dedicated parents might envision in their minds the type of life and future they imagine and hope for their beloved child. G-d has painted a picture in Torah of the perfect life which He envisions for us, His beloved children.

He envisions a life with true values of family; marriage with real life-long, deep seated commitment; a life filled with goodness and kindness; a life where one day a week we stop to reflect on the Creator of life; a life where at every doorpost there is a sign reminding us of the Creator and His purpose; a life where before every bite of food or drink of water our children know they need to pause and acknowledge gratitude...

Torah than is the greatest masterpiece art from the greatest artist of all time.

If you like, you can look at it as “paint by number.” Imagine if a fine artist gives you the outline to fill in. Think of it as a Chagall by number. All you’ve got to do is follow the instructions and fill in the blanks and presto – you’ve got a Divine Masterpiece.

How much is this masterpiece worth? Well, we all know the value of art can be astronomical. A signed original from a famous artist can be worth millions, even priceless. How about a “signed original” from the Master Artist of all times, an original more than 3000 years old?! Priceless!

We need to be very careful not to tamper or change even one iota of Torah's timeless message. People often ask me why I am so stubborn about the old fashioned laws. Surely the Torah, like everything else in the world, needs an update from time to time to make sure it is still relevant...

You see, if we were dealing with a book, books tolerate change; at times they even necessitate updating. But art? Whoever heard of updating art? Maybe we should replace the Mona Lisa's nose with something more creative based on the new designs of today's plastic surgeons... how about that? Impossible! Any change on a work of art brings its value down tremendously.

Why? It's because art is an expression of the artist's imagination, of their soul. That's why the value can be so high. If I make even the slightest change it no longer is his soul's expression. It might be beautiful, maybe even nicer than before, but it's not his. Torah is the expression of Hashem's soul... "I have taken my soul, I have written it down and I have given it to you..." We need to be very careful not to touch it... Any minutia of change and it no longer is G-d's Torah. It might be wonderful and nice and helpful; but it no longer is His.

People often tell me: "Yes, Judaism is beautiful, it's wonderful. But aren't some of these things a little old fashioned?" To which I always have the same response: "I've never seen an expiration date on the Torah."

You see, we're used to things going in and out of style. Styles change, what used to be in, is now old-fashioned. We had single-breasted suits, then double-breasted, 2 buttons, 3 buttons. I hear they're coming out with a new style: no buttons. If you ask me, I think that's great. If you lose your buttons it's no problem; you're in style! So, we're used to things becoming old fashioned and outdated. What we don't realize is that some things never go out of style.

You remember when Coke came out with the "New" Coke, it lasted about 6 months. Then they went back to what everyone wanted: Good old fashioned Classic Coke. Like Coke, Torah is the 'real thing', its best in its original classical form, it doesn't need to be updated.

A man was visiting the Louvre in Paris and he's looking at the most valuable collection of paintings. Try as he might, it didn't mean anything to him. He had no idea what was so beautiful and valuable here. (That's what happened to me when I went there....) "These paintings aren't anything special," he said. A man, who happened to be a fine artist, was standing nearby and overheard his comment. He turned to the man and said: "These paintings are not on trial. You are!"

The ancient, timeless wisdom of the Torah is not on trial. It has been tested and proven time and again. How many things do you know that are 3000 years old, unchanged... If Torah were a stock we'd sell everything we own and buy 'Torah'... It was the Torah's system of law and order, of right and wrong. If there is monotheism in the world today it is thanks to Torah. If there is morality in the world it is thanks to Torah. If there is goodness and kindness in the world it is thanks to Torah. If there is equality in the world it is thanks to Torah. These wonderful things that have become the bedrock of modern civilization were first introduced to the world by Abraham and Sarah and the generations of our ancestors that followed.

With all the advances and modernity of today's sophisticated world, we are still totally at a loss when it comes to issues of right and wrong. The lines are blurred. We find ourselves falling back on our past for answers to these and other pressing questions regarding life's purpose and the like, how our parents and grandparents lived, the Constitution, the 10 Commandments. Why are we always looking back for answers to these questions? Because these are not things the human mind can discover and develop. These are self-evident truths based on the belief in a creator to the universe. If all our wise men of today would adhere to the 10 Commandments, society would be infinitely better off. The saying goes, "The best things in life never change." The Torah and its teachings are timeless, relevant today as they were 3,500 years ago.

Friends, this doesn't mean we're all going to become observant Jews tomorrow. If you accept the Torah as whole and unchanged does not mean you'll be observing it all the next day. That's not practical and doesn't work. All I'm saying is, let's not cut the Torah down to size to fit our observance level. Let's not change the rules so that we are winners. Let's leave the bar where it is, and do the best we can to reach higher and higher towards the bar. We should take baby steps, beginning with one mitzvah at a time until we grow into our observance. But why tamper with the original?

Some years back we took a busload of people from this community for a tour of the Crown Heights Jewish community. We visited the Rebbe's shul, his personal library, the matzah bakery. Then we visited a Chassidic art gallery. The people were enthralled by a particular painting depicting pre war European *shtetl* life; they all wanted desperately to have this particular painting. But it was quite expensive, perhaps \$10,000 or so. The group of people I was with were not very wealthy, but they really wanted it... so they settled for prints. Virtually every person on that trip came home with a \$20 print copy.

One man was especially taken by the piece. I saw him go to the back office where the curator of the gallery sat. He emerged a few minutes later with the original piece. I asked him what happened, knowing it wasn't within his budget. "I'm going to send him \$50 a week" was the reply. He'd pay it out.

We can choose to decide Judaism is too difficult, we can't "afford" it, and settle for the print. Or we can embrace the untouched, priceless original. True, we can't "afford" it right now, but we'll pay it out... We have a whole lifetime to grow into it. First we'll start with Shabbat candles, a rather small commitment, (or Tefillin for the guys). A month or two later we can try having Shabbat dinners at least once a month at our homes. Later we might affix some kosher mezuzahs. Maybe we'll eventually consider going to shul once a month as a family. Its baby step by baby step... When we feel ready, we can become kosher, at home at first. Eventually maybe we'll go further... maybe we'll keep Shabbat once or twice a year... it's a long term plan of installments... but you get to take home the original... You are introducing your family to authentic, timeless Judaism that is 3300 years old, unchanged since Sinai.

We all worry about Jewish continuity, about how we will transmit Judaism to our children and grandchildren. It's a very serious concern, nowadays more than ever. Think about what happens when you go out to an art museum and settle on the print... What happens to that print? It doesn't as much as

make it out of the tube... You only bought it to placate your guilt at not buying the original, but it's not something you're proud of. Your children don't even know the family has it in its possession. There's no chance they'll pass it along to their children...

How about when you buy an original, signed masterpiece? It hangs right there prominently right over the fireplace in the family's living room. The children know about it and its important place in the family home. It has real meaning to them; they understand its value. You can be sure one day it will hang in *their* living rooms; and one day it will hang in *their* children's living rooms... Its pretty much guaranteed this will be passed along... no one leaves an expensive masterpiece behind... After all, it's something precious and valuable...

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Schneerson, of blessed memory (father-in-law of our Rebbe) had an affinity for art. He often said that if one appreciates art and has a creative imagination, that this can be a useful tool in developing an appreciation for Torah and spiritual growth. Occasionally he would have opportunity to visit some of the famous art museums of Europe.

On one such visit, he came across a stunning work by the famous Italian artist Rafael. It was a painting depicting a battlefield, down to the last detail: the soldiers on their horses screaming as they attack and are being attacked; the generals on tall towers with binoculars in hand shouting commands; wounded being carried off by fellow soldiers; compassionate army physicians running alongside stretchers carrying the wounded; the entire picture down to the last detail, right there on the canvas, reflecting the reality precisely. The Rebbe writes in his diary that many tens of thousands of artists and army experts had visited this painting, and all agreed it was correct, down to the last stroke of the brush.

Legend has it, that a high level retired general from the Czar's army once visited that museum. He stood there motionless, gazing at the painting for seven consecutive hours... and then fainted... When they revived him he said: "This painting is so real. I felt as if I was really at the battlefield. I fainted from sheer fright..."

My dear beloved friends, if Torah is our G-d given painting, we need to take the time if we want to appreciate it. Just walking by a work of art, giving it a moment of attention and nodding our approval doesn't cut it. We need to take the time to gaze deeply into the words of our holy, timeless Torah. We need to explore its every nuance and detail. We need to take it in... It will move us beyond what we think imaginable!

As a young rabbinic student I was traveling Europe with a handful of friends. When we visited London we went to see the Crown Jewels of course. We were very taken by them.. (I believe we were especially moved considering our background as students of Chassidic thought and Kabala, which often use royalty as a metaphor for G-dliness.)

One of us was "the businessman" type, the kind of guy who would fit right into Jackie Mason's story about how when Jews go to restaurants they immediately being figuring out how much money the guy is

making... they begin counting the tables, how many rows, times how many shifts, multiplied by how much per plate... this was exactly this guy's personality. So there we are, standing there at the Crown Jewels, taking it all in, when this fellow pipes up: "Excuse me, how much are these worth?" The woman tour guide seemed rather annoyed. She snapped back at him in her strong British accent: "Sir, I'll have you know, there's no price for them; it's the Crown Jewels."

It reminded me of the Midrash which says the following: When G-d wanted to give Shabbat to the Jewish people he called Moses and he said: Moshe, *chemda genuzah yesh li b'veis otzorey, veshabbos shmo*. I have a precious gem in my treasury room... it's called Shabbat. Please go and tell my children I want to give it to them.

I've heard about this Midrash since I was five years old. I often wondered about it. Why did G-d need to make this elaborate introduction? If He wants to give us Shabbat, well, let Him give it to us. If he wants to give us another set of laws that will govern our behavior on the seventh day of the week, fine. But why the dramatic introduction?

It's because He wants us to know this is not a set of rules. Shabbat is not a nice tradition that we do because that's what our ancestors did. It's Shabbat... It's the Crown Jewels!

G-d, the Creator of the entire world, who created everything around us, the people, the plants, the planets, the entire amazing, gorgeous universe of life, says to us: That's all fine and good. But Shabbat is different, it's from His treasury room! It's priceless... It's the Crown Jewels... It's the good stuff...

One of the arguments people have about Judaism is that it's too physical for a religion, with too many dos and don'ts. If you're going to give me religion, they argue, give me something spiritual, something transcendent; something that offers everlasting bliss and eternal salvation, maybe some outer-worldly experiences, mountain top meditation exercises. Now that's a religion. But Judaism? Who needs a religion that tells me what to do all the time? And down to the nitty gritty... what to eat and when to eat... who to marry and how to marry... what I can and can not do on the weekends...

My dear friends, please consider that Judaism is not really about detailed ritual at all. It's art! It's all about G-d giving us a chance to experience a life that He alone has imagined for us. It's all about our loving Father in Heaven, the Master Artist, giving us his color by number instructions so that we can go ahead and draw for ourselves our own masterpiece in the image of the Divine. He made it easy for us. All we got to do is follow the instructions and stay in the lines, and we'll end up with a Divine Masterpiece which will make life fulfilling, joyous, purposeful and blessed.

The Talmud tells us about a conversation the Sages had about Scripture, the 24 Books (comprised of Torah, Prophets and Writings) that make up the Written Book of Torah. Originally the Sages felt that only 23 Books should be included. They wanted to exclude Song of Songs, a prophetic work by king Solomon where he uses a loving relationship between a man and his beloved woman to describe our people's relationship to G-d. The Sages argued that Song of Songs is not "Torah" – there are no laws or instructions in it; it is merely a metaphor for the relationship. It is poetry, not Torah law. It's nice, but let it be an addendum to Torah.

Then Rabbi Akiba, the eldest and wisest of the Sages arose and said: “My dear colleagues and students. You don’t understand... you missed the whole point. If all the other 23 Books are holy, Song of Songs is holy of holy.” All the books of laws and instruction are there only because of G-d’s deep, infinite love for His children. It is really all about the “art”, the loving, limitless connection with Him that He wishes for us to appreciate; this is why the rules are there, so that we live our lives according to His dream and imagination for us... Embracing the Torah lifestyle is not compliance to a system of law. It’s signing on to a marriage with a beloved... with all of the joy, radiance and blessing that come with it...