

## *Thought of the Week*

**By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda**

TORAH STUDY in its true sense is a religious experience. It is a human encounter with the Divine. Therefore, prior to study, the learner recites a blessing ("birkat ha-Torah") in which he acknowledges the Divine origin of the Torah. Moses in his Song (Deut. 32:3) declares: "When the name of the Lord I proclaim, give glory to our God!" The Hebrew for "glory" here is "godel" meaning greatness. The awareness of God's greatness must imbue the student of Torah; this increases his ability to appreciate and benefit from the teachings of Torah. Without this sense of encountering Divine greatness, Torah study often turns to be sterile and futile, an exercise in frustration and distortion. Birkat ha-Torah, more than just a symbolic token of gratitude and praise, is a prerequisite for fertile and constructive study of Torah. It sets the proper mood and puts the subject matter in its right focus. The beracha of Torah enriches and elevates its study; so, in turn, the study of Torah advances and deepens its beracha – refining man's sensitivity to marvel at and be inspired by the Divine quality and beauty of Torah.

## Thought of the Week

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THE IDEA OF A JUST GOD (Deut. 32:4) that the one God, the Omnipotent Creator of the world, is also its Righteous Ruler – is Judaism's most remarkable contribution to the history of ideas. In pagan religions, gods were usually conceived as embodiments of might and force and worshipped as powerful sources of sustenance and protection. They were believed, however, to be capricious, impulsive, cruel, shrewd, and governed by evil temptations and uncontrollable appetites; they did commit iniquities. They certainly were not paradigms of virtue and morality. Their might made them right. Since believers tend to imitate their gods, in both attitude and deed, a pagan society could never grow into a morally decent society. The only people in antiquity that shunned idolatry and clung to ethical monotheism was Israel. In Israel's faith, God is perceived as the source and epitome of morality – of justice and loving-kindness. God is the model of perfection for human behavior. So sings Moses:

The Rock! Perfect is His conduct  
Sure, all His ways are just  
God of faithfulness! With no falsehood  
Righteous and upright is He

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ROSH HASHANA marks the birthday of the universe and humankind. While other religions celebrate the birth, death and resurrection of gods and semigods (Paganism), or of a god-man (Christianity), or the birthday of a human hero (Islam), Judaism celebrates the birthday of all creation and the beginning of all human history. In Judaism, the creation—not the Creator—has a birthday. The birthday of all humanity—not any human hero—is celebrated. The birth of our world is a source for solemn rejoicing. The Jewish New Year is celebrated not as a civil-mundane affair, marked with levity and merrymaking, but rather as a religious-sacred date of devotion and inspiration, marked with awe and prayer—reflecting Judaism's reverence for the existing world. The message of Rosh Hashana is that life in this world is sacred, and humanity is charged with divine dignity.

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... *ROSH HASHANA*, the beginning of the year, in the birthday of the universe. Whereas paganism celebrates mythology--birth, death and resurrection of gods--in Judaism, creation--not God!--has its birthday. The birth of all life is a source for man's solemn rejoicing, which reflects Judaism's reverence for the existing world. Its New Year is not just a civil-mundane affair, but a religious holiday of awe and inspiration, signifying that life in this world is sacred; humanity is charged with Divinity. The yearly renewal of cosmic life, Rosh Hashana, evokes man's desire for his own self-renewal, "teshuva." "Teshuva," literally, returning or answering, means human responsiveness, man's answer to his sense of duty, his return to himself and God. The prayers of Rosh Hashana envision the "teshuva" of all mankind, the constant refinement of the human spirit.

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By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

**THE WHOLE AND THE BROKEN:** Two sets of Tablets were kept in the Ark: the new, whole and intact, together with the old, shattered into pieces by Moses. Below are two of the many lessons this teaches us:

Lesson One: To respect a scholar who has in adversity forgotten his learning. Although "broken," he represents the dignity of his "whole" life experience.

Lesson Two: To enshrine within ourselves both a "whole heart" and a "broken heart" (Is. 38:3; 57:15): The "whole" in our commission of duty; the "broken" in our prayers. We seek to worship God with complete devotion, wholeheartedly, "*be-lev shalem*." But we turn to Him in our crushed, contrite spirit, heartbroken, offering Him a "*lev-nishbar*" — our truest sacrifice, which God never despises (Ps. 51:19).

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**RESPONSIVENESS:** Since the days of the Temple in Jerusalem, the form of communal worship is shaped by responsiveness. One recites a verse of prayer, and all around him respond in acclamation. Worship in Judaism is not a formal "service" that is "conducted" by clergy and "attended" by laity; this distinction between "clergy" and "laity" has no place in Judaism which is a "kingdom of kohanim," (priests), all equal in the task of worship, the rabbi being the teacher, and his congregants his students. Worship in the synagogue is a dynamic experience in which all fully share and actively participate. The words of prayer uttered by one are echoed, accentuated and verified by the explicit response of all. From Moses' Song (Deut. 32:3): "Whenever I call the name of the Lord, express glory to our God!" Through responsiveness in worship, both the congregation and the individual emerge stronger: the congregation more solidified and the individual more fulfilled. The act of responsiveness develops the sense of responsibility.

Friday, October 6, 1989 C

## THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

LIPS INSTEAD OF BULLS: Hosea teaches the way of returning to God (14:3): "Take with you words, and return to the Lord. Say to Him: 'Forgive all iniquity; accept our good deeds'; instead of bulls, we will offer our lips." Prayer and good deeds are more acceptable to God than sacrifice; sincere confession by words ("lips") is more desirable than any ritualistic offering ("bulls").

Christian translations, however, miss the point. *The New English Bible* (1970): "And we will pay our vows with cattle from our pens." *The New American Bible* (1970): "That we may render as offerings the bullocks from our stalls." As understood in Rabbinic Judaism, Hosea conveys the general Hebraic prophetic view: God has no delight at all in ritual sacrifices ("bulls"); He seeks only the person's "heart" and "lips" -- his pure intentions and good deeds.

Friday, September 20, 1997

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## THE WEEK

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By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

**MOSES AND ISAIAH:** Both start their words by rhetorically invoking the attention of “heavens” and “earth” (Deut. 32:1-3; Isa. 1:2).

Moses:

*Give ear, O heavens, as I speak!  
Hear, O earth, the words of my mouth!*

Isaiah:

*Hear, O heavens;  
Give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken!*

Midrash: “Give ear” (*ha'azinu*) suggests a closer distance than “hear” (*shime'u*). Moses uses “give ear” for heavens and “hear” for earth, and Isaiah the reverse. Reason: Moses, singing to God, was closer to the heavens; Isaiah, rebuking the people, was closer to earth.

This Midrash is a literary comparison between the two passages: Moses opens his *ha'azinu* song with words of praise to God (32:3-4); addressing God, he is metaphorically “closer” to heaven. Isaiah focuses his *shime'u* prophecy on the people’s shortcomings; addressing the people, he is literally closer to earth. Both prophets, however, link “heavens” with “earth.” While Moses addresses God, he speaks to his people. While Isaiah rebukes his people, he conveys the words of God. Being “close” to “earth” – to the people – is the loftiest virtue of the prophet.

**RABBI ZVI YEHUDA**

MOSES AND ISAIAH, both rhetorically address the whole universe, "the heavens and the earth."

Moses starts his Song (Dt. 32:1-3):  
Ha'azinu:

*Give ear, O heavens, as I speak!*

*Hear, O earth, the words of my mouth!*

Isaiah starts his prophecies (1:2):  
Shime'u:

*Hear, O heavens;*

*Give ear, O earth, for Hashem has spoken!*

Poetically calling upon the heavens and the earth to listen, both prophets in reality speak to the people, addressing and evoking the people to give heed. By pointing to the entire universe, as audience and wit-

ness, the prophets indicate that the social moral order has cosmic validity. The Creator is also the Lawgiver, determining the laws of natural order as well as the rules of moral order.

Why does Moses use "give ear" for heavens, and "hear" for earth, and Isaiah the reverse? Midrash: The idiom "give ear" indicates greater intimacy and closeness than "hear." The general term to invoke attention is "hear" (*shime'u*, as in "*shema*"); but when one stands near another person or whispers a secret to a close friend, one speaks, so to say, to the very "ears" of the listener; hence, "give ears" (*ha'azinu*, from *ozen* for ear). Moses, singing to God, was metaphorically closer to the heavens. Isaiah, rebuking the people, was closer to earth.

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

LIPS INSTEAD OF BULLS: The way of returning to God is described in Hosea (14:3): "Take with you words, and return to the Lord. Say to Him:

*Forgive all iniquity; accept our good deeds!*

*Instead of bulls, we will offer our lips.*

Good deeds and prayer – kindness to others and sincere confession before God – rather than any ritualistic offering, are what God desires and accepts: "lips" and not "bulls." Modern Christian translations, however, miss the point completely. The New English Bible (England, 1970): "And we will pay our vows with cattle from our pens." The New American Bible (U.S., 1970): "That we may render as offerings the bullocks from our stalls." This implies that the ultimate purpose of worship is the ritual sacrifice. Hosea's message is altogether different and much more profound: God does not seek a person's bulls (i.e., ritual sacrifices), but only the person's pure intention and good deeds. Hosea emphatically proclaims that true devotion to God consists not of ritualism, but of human integrity, sincerity in thought, speech and deed. Prayer is not an appendage to the sacrificial cult, but its substitution: "Instead of bulls, we will offer our lips" – replacing fat offerings with pure prayer.

## Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

APPRECIATION OF HISTORY, remembering and learning from the past, is taught by Moses. In his final Song (Deuteronomy 32:7), he urges his people: "Remember the days of antiquity; seek to understand the past generations. Ask your father, he will tell you; your elders, they will explain to you." The idea of meaningful history, that historical events yield lessons, emerged with the collapse of the pagan, mythological world-view, which perceived all events as fated by a preordained, capricious decree. By calling upon the people to record history and learn from it, Moses further liberates them from the shackles of paganism. The people of Israel are taught by Torah that human deeds determine human destiny. Inspired by the lessons of the past, the people can change the present and shape the future. Instilling in his people a sense of human dignity, Moses replaces pagan fatalism with Torah: A philosophy of duty and responsibility to improve the world. This is the core of Torah's appreciation of history.

## THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

**RABBI ZVI YEHUDA**

*SHIRAH AND TORAH* – Poetry and Teaching:

*Remember days gone by*

*Explore years of generation after generation.*

*Ask your father and he will tell you,*

*Your elders, and they will inform you.*

These poetic lines from *Ha'Azinu* Song (Deuteronomy 32:7) serve as a *midrashic*, or homiletic, basis for the legal authority of the historically transmitted rabbinic tradition (*Talmud Bavli Shabbat 23a*). Far from being incompatible, Poetry (*Shirah*) and Teaching (Torah) are entwined in Judaism. The *Ha'Azinu* portion is called *Shirah* (Poetry). Yet the verse (31:19), "Now write for yourselves this *Shirah*," is applied to the entirety of Torah and serves as the halachic source for the general duty to write "for ourselves," or have it written for us, a Torah scroll (*TB Sanhedrin 21b*). *Shirah* is Torah: Poetry conveys Divine teachings. And Torah is *Shirah*: Divine teachings endow life with enchanting music.

## THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

By **RABBI ZVI YEHUDA**

**SHIRAH AND TORAH** (Poetry and Instruction):

*Remember days long gone by,*

*Explore the years of generation after generation.*

*Ask your father and he will tell you,*

*Your elders and they will inform you.*

These poetic lines from *Ha'azinu*, Song (Duet. 32:7), serve as a midrashic basis for the authority of the rabbinic *halachic* tradition (Shabbat 23a). Far from being incompatible, poetry and instruction are intertwined in Judaism. The *Ha'azinu* portion is called *Shirah* (Song). Yet, the verse (31:19) "Now write for yourselves this

song" is the halachic source for the *mitzvah* (commandment) upon each Jew to write (or have written) for oneself a Torah scroll (Sanhedrin. 21b). Shirah is Torah – poetry conveys teachings. Torah is Shirah – for its teachings endow life with the music of beauty and harmony.

As a song has many layers of meanings, which transcend the obvious, so is Torah. It has "70" phases of implications; various methods of exegesis; numerous rules of hermeneutics. Like a song, it is not meant to be taken on a literal level alone. We must search within and between its lines. Then we learn to enjoy its enchanting, unending music.

## Thought of the Week

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By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

SHIRAH AND TORAH (Poetry and Instruction):

*Remember days long gone by,*

*Explore the years of generation after generation.*

*Ask you father and he will tell you,*

*Your elders, and they will inform you.*

These lines from Ha'azinu Song (Duet. 32:7) — poetic as their form is — serve as a midrashic basis for the authority of the rabbinic halachic tradition (Shabbat 23a). Far from being incompatible, poetry and instruction are intertwined in Judaism. The Ha'azinu portion is called Shirah (Song). Yet, the verse (31:19) "Now write for yourselves this Song" is the halachic source for the mitzva upon each Jew to write (or have written) for himself a Torah Scroll (Sanhedrin 21b). Shirah is Torah — it conveys teachings. Torah is Shirah — its teachings endow life with the music of beauty and harmony.

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By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

TORAH IS SHIRAH (19): "Now write down this Shirah (Song)!" More than just the "Hazzinu" song (32:1-43), "this Shirah" includes the whole Torah. The Hebrew may also indicate "write for yourselves" (in the plural), addressed to all Israel. From this our Sages derive the mitzvah on each Jew to write a Torah scroll, or have one written for him (San. 21b); "Shirah" referring to Torah. For Torah is Song!

As a song has many layers of meaning which transcend the obvious, so does Torah. It has "seventy" phases of implications; various methods of exegesis; numerous rules of hermeneutics (science of interpretation). Like a song it is not meant to be taken just on a literal level. We must search within and between its lines. Then we learn to enjoy its enchanting, unending music.

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## Thought of the Week

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By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

SHIRAH AND TORAH, POETRY AND INSTRUCTION (Dt. 32:7):

*Remember days long gone by,  
Explore years of generation after generation  
Ask your father, he will tell you;  
Your elders, they will inform you.*

These poetic verses are the midrashic basis for rabbinic-halachic authority in Judaism (*Shabbat 23a*). History leads to continuity of tradition. Poetry and teaching are entwined. The portion of these verses, *Ha'azinu*, is called Song (*Shirah*; 31:19), "Now write for yourselves this Song." This verse is the halachic basis for the duty to write the Torah Scroll (*Sanhedrin 21b*). *Shirah* is *Torah*: It conveys both poetry and teachings; its poetry is instructive and its teachings poetic, endowing life with beauty and harmony.

## THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

MOSES AND ISAIAH rhetorically address the whole universe, "the heavens and the earth." Moses starts his song (Dt. 32:1-3) and Isaiah his prophecies (1:2) with the two imperative verbs "*ha'azinu*" ("give ear") and "*shime'u*" ("hear").

Moses: *Give ear, O heavens, as I speak! Hear, O earth, the words of my mouth!*

Isaiah: *Hear, O heavens; Give ear, O earth, for Adonai has spoken!*

By pointing to the entire universe as audience and witness, the prophets indicate that the just social order has cosmic validity. The Creator of the natural order is the Giver of torah, the moral law.

38 CLEVELAND JEWISH NEWS / OCTOBER 6, 1995

Why does Moses use "give ear" for heavens and "hear" for earth, and Isaiah the reverse? *Midrash*: The idiom "give ear" indicates greater intimacy and closeness than "hear." The general Hebrew term used to invoke attention is "hear" (as in "*shema*"); but when one stands near another person, or whispers a secret to a close friend, one speaks, so to say, to the very "ears" of the listener (*ha'azinu* from *ozen* for ear). While singing to God, Moses, symbolically, was closer to heaven. Isaiah, while teaching the people, was closer to earth. When we teach, when we speak to people, when we aim to reach their heart and mind, even as we convey to them a divine message, we should recognize that we are closer to earth.

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Friday, September 17, 1993

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## RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

TORAH, HISTORY AND POETRY (Dt. 32:7):

*Remember days long gone by,  
Explore years of generation after generation,  
Ask your father, he will tell you;  
Your elders, they will inform you.*

These poetic verses call for historical awareness while they also presume the reliability and authority of the elders and sages in Judaism (TB Shabbat 23a). Study of history leads to continuity of tradition, to instruction (Torah). Poetry and teaching are entwined. The portion containing these verses, *Ha'azinu*, is called Song (Shirah; 33;19), "Now write for yourselves this Song." This verse is the halachic basis for the duty to write the Torah Scroll (TB Sanhedrin 21b). Shirah is Torah: It conveys both poetry and teachings; its poetry is instructive and its teachings poetic, endowing the text with richness of meaning and endowing life with beauty and harmony.

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THE TORAH, says Moses (Deut. 32:46-47), must be taken wholeheartedly: "For it is no 'empty word' ("davar rek") to you; it is your life." It must not be approached by you lightly – as "rek:" vain, trivial or insignificant – for the Torah is conclusive, crucial and consequential for you: It is the very core of your life. When it seems "rek" to you, elaborate the rabbis, then it is because of your ("mikem"): It is a reflection of your own attitude of lightmindedness. The Torah is regarded in Judaism to be the *raison d'être* of creation and the ultimate source of direction, governing all aspects of man's experience. All-embracing and inexhaustible, the Torah is meant to be neither a supplement nor an adornment but rather a dominant force, shaping man's way of life, scope of ideals and set of values. Thus, the Torah for man is either all vital – when he adheres to it earnestly – or, otherwise, plainly futile ("rek") – when he does not. When man, with his totality, embraces Torah in its entirety, he opens himself to its profound insight and wisdom, revealed only in its completeness.

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**INVESTING IN TORAH**, toiling and struggling to explore and apply its teachings, intensifies the value and appreciation of it. Torah, says Moses in his farewell message to the people (Deut. 32:47), “is not a trivial demand (empty word) from you; for it is your very life.” Indicatively, the term is not “for you” (“lachem”) but “from you” (“mikem”). Moses means more than the obvious – that Torah is no vain idea, no frivolous teaching for the people; rather he focuses on the people’s attitude – how they receive and perceive, cherish and cultivate the Torah. He instructs: From your stance (mikem) do not approach the words of Torah as petty, as unimportant requirements from you (mikem); rather treat and promote them as the core of your being, as they are your very life. If the words of Torah seem silly and empty to you, insist the sages, it is because of you: this emptiness stems from you (mikem)! For Jews Torah is not a remote entity or deity to be untouchably adored or appeased; it is a life experience in which one gets fully involved and immersed, engaging one’s whole being in its words. Torah is life – a dynamic, living world of insights and rules to be diligently studied, constantly enriched and thoroughly fulfilled. As with life so with Torah: one gets from it what he invests.