



# THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

# IN THE PARSHA

## The 'Wisdom' of the East

There are jokes which are very funny on the surface, but which, upon reflection, can be quite painful and disturbing.

One of them, which was told frequently twenty years ago or more, concerns a matronly woman from the Bronx who seeks to visit a famous guru somewhere in the Far East, perhaps in the mountains of northern India or Tibet.

She boards a plane at John F. Kennedy airport and begins the long and arduous flight, which necessitates several stopovers and the changing of planes. She lands at the closest airport to the remote ashram, or temple, where the guru has his mountain retreat. She finds a bus that takes her part of the way to the ashram and, although she's never even seen a donkey before, summons a donkey cart to continue her

trek to her encounter with the guru.

Totally exhausted, she finally arrives at the guru's quarters. To her great disappointment, she learns that the guru has just begun a three-day period of fasting and meditation and cannot possibly be interrupted. Anything but total solitude is forbidden.

She pleads and begs and finally resorts to one of the strategies of persuasion that she learned back in the Bronx. She tells the guru's guards that she only wants to say three words to him.

On the condition that she limits her message to just three words, they allow her access into the guru's inner chamber. There she finds him sitting in the lotus yoga position, totally entranced in his meditation.

She approaches him, but he remains unaware of her presence. Finally, she bends over him and whispers in his ear: "Melvin? Come home!"

I used to tell his story many times, not so long ago, when so many young Jewish men and women, from the Bronx and from elsewhere, left to the Far East in their quest for spiritual truth and a meaningful path in life.

The story always drew laughs from the crowd, but the laughs were inevitably followed by a contemplative silence as the audience began to reflect upon the point of the story. Young Jews by the thousands had become alienated not only from their

May the Torah learned from this issue of  
TT be in loving memory of and לעיני

**Sharon Horowitz a"h**

on her 48th yahrtzeit  
the first night of Chanukah

*Mina and Howard Millendorf  
Sharon, Shlomo, Elior, Amiad,  
& Yagel Rabinowitz*



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Jewish roots, but from Western civilization in general.

Although this phenomenon is no longer as prevalent as it once was, Eastern religions remain attractive to many, and not just to young Jews but to a wide variety of individuals in search of a “New Age” alternative to Western culture.

The reasons why so many are dissatisfied with the Western way of life center around the relentless pressures and frantic pace which that way of life entails. Eastern religions offer an alternative which promises serenity, tranquility, and inner peace.

This leads us to a question that surprisingly connects to this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Vayeshev* (Genesis 37:1-40:23).

The question is: “Is there anything wrong with seeking tranquility and inner peace? Are they not highly desirable components

of a healthy and meaningful lifestyle?”

An answer can be found in the words of the *Midrash Rabbah* that appear in most contemporary editions of Rashi’s commentary, although they are absent from earlier manuscript editions.

The first words in this week’s Torah portion read: “Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned...” The Bible then narrates the story of Jacob’s son Joseph and how he is sold into slavery by his brothers.

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, comments: “Jacob wished to dwell in peace and tranquility but immediately was beset by Joseph’s troubles and tribulations.”

These words imply that it was somehow improper for Jacob to desire a calm and serene existence. The comment even suggests that Jacob was punished for his

wish by suffering the disappearance, and supposed death, of his favored son.

Why? What possible sin would Jacob have committed by hoping for tranquility? Had he not suffered enough during his years of exile? Were the family crises described in detail in last week's *parsha* not sufficient torture?

Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter (the second Rebbe of Gur), the author of the *Sfat Emet* ("Lips of Truth"), a profoundly insightful Chassidic work, suggests that the calm and peaceful life is not necessarily the religiously desirable. Such a life is conducive to complacency.

"What God wants from the Jew," he writes, "is for him to have a life of constant toil in the service of His Blessed Name, because there is no limit to striving for perfection."

The Torah's ideal is a life of action and involvement in worldly affairs. The Torah rejects the attitude of detachment and passivity which is implicit in the teachings of Eastern religions.

The Torah cannot envision the good life if that life is without challenge. Achievement of inner peace is not the ultimate value, especially not if it results in withdrawal

from responsible action within society.

The author of the *Sfat Emet* led his flock and wrote his works in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But the important lesson he taught was expressed about a century before, in the words of Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzato, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian mystic, whose work *Mesilat Yesharim* ("The Path of the Just") contains the following demanding passage:

A man must know that he was not created to enjoy rest in this world, but to toil and labor. He should, therefore, act as though he were a laborer working for hire. We are only day laborers. Think of the soldier at the battlefield who eats in haste, whose sleep is interrupted, and who is always prepared for an attack. "Man is born to toil" (*Job* 5:7).

The teaching of both of these authors was anticipated by this passage in the Talmud (*Berachot* 64a), as translated and elucidated in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*:

Torah scholars have rest neither in this world nor in the World-to-Come, as in both worlds they are constantly progressing, as it is stated: "They go from strength to strength, every one of them appears before God in Zion."

The differences between the ideologies of Judaism and other religions are sometimes subtle and hard to define. But in contrasting Judaism with the religions of the Far East, the differences are quite clear. The latter promise inner peace and serenity and advocate detachment. Judaism makes no such promises. It tells us that life is all about struggle and challenge, and it demands that we be actively involved in improving the world. ■

לעילוי נשמת אבינו היקר

ישראל בן בצלאל ויענטא בלומא ז"ל

Dedicated in loving memory  
of our dear Father

**Cyril Newman z"l**

כ' כסלו

On his 7th Yahrzeit

Judith Berger, Zale Newman,  
Chaviva Braun and families