



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
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IN THE PARSHA

Words of Fire

“Words, words, words,” he shouted at me. He was a young man, raised as an observant Jew, but now in rebellion against his traditional upbringing. His parents had asked me to meet with him for several sessions to see if I could at least temper his rebellious spirit, and perhaps even convince him to return to the path they desired him to follow.

To put it mildly, he was reluctant to meet with me. But he agreed to do so, and in fact was a bit more cooperative than other youngsters, of a similar mind, with whom I have had such discussions. He spoke, argued, debated, questioned, and expressed himself quite articulately. Occasionally, he even listened.

I well recall his major concern with traditional Judaism. He felt that our religion insisted that we limit our experience of the world to the verbal modality. “There is so much to see and hear, to touch and feel, to taste and smell, in this world. But all our religion tells us to do is to use words. Read,

study, pray. Words, words, words. I want a richer life, a more robust experience!” he exclaimed.

The attitude expressed by my young friend is not at all limited to rebellious youth. Many of our adult coreligionists have similar objections, although they are often too ashamed to articulate them. But, when they let their guard down, many Jews, including some who are regular participants in synagogue services, admit to finding our religion overly focused upon thought and language.

It is interesting to note in this regard that one of the most profound Jewish thinkers of the 20th century characterized our religion as one of “*shmiah*,” listening and hearing, and not as a religion of “*re'iyah*.” seeing. I refer to Rabbi Dovid HaCohen, a close disciple of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel.

Rabbi HaCohen’s personal lifestyle was an extremely ascetic one, having committed himself to the role of a Nazirite and thus renouncing the pleasures of the products of the vine. It is thus no surprise that he wrote a book called *The Voice of Prophecy*, in which he maintained that our religion relies upon the ear, and not the eye, the auditory sense to the exclusion of the visual sense. Hence, the single most popular phrase in the Jewish religious language is, “*Shema Yisrael*, Hear O Israel”.

As for me, I am quite confident that neither my young friend, nor those adults who find

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our religion excessively verbal, nor even the pious and philosophical Rabbi HaCohen, are correct. For me the Jewish religion is much more full-bodied and allows for the entire panoply of the human senses: visual, certainly, but also our senses of touch, taste, and smell.

Historically, in the days of the ancient Temple, there were many glorious examples of ceremonies and rituals which employed a wide range of activities besides the mere recitation of words. Granted, nowadays such examples are fewer, but they are readily and regularly accessible to every Jew.

The most powerful of these rituals has its source in this week's Torah portion, *Vay-akhel-Pekudei* (Exodus 35:1-40:38). I refer to the verse near the beginning of the *parsha* which reads:

“You shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations on the Sabbath day.” (Exodus 35:3)

It is instructive that although we are forbidden to kindle a fire during the Sabbath, it is fire which symbolically ushers in the Sabbath and it is fire which accompanies it at its conclusion. Sabbath begins when, traditionally, the woman of the house lights the Sabbath candles. It ends when the family, and sometimes the entire congregation, gathers around a torch of fire and participates in the *Havdalah* service.

The use of fire to bracket the Sabbath experience is a dramatic example of a non-verbal experience which involves the sense of touch, with the experience of heat and warmth, as well as the visual experience of seeing.

The view of the modest candles heralding the approach of the Sabbath is what sets

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the tone of tranquility and serenity which defines that holy day.

The fiery image of the *havdalah* candle, which *halachically* must be torch-like, symbolizes the return to the activity and productivity of the coming week.

But *Havdalah* does not only incorporate the senses of vision and touch; it also includes the sense of smell—the spices—and, of course, the sense of taste—the cup of wine. A multi-sensory experience if there ever was one.

The fire of *Havdalah* is its dominant image (see accompanying photo of *Havdalah* at an Israeli Air Force base) and contains such rich symbolic meaning. This meaning is best conveyed by the following passage in the *Midrash*, which describes Adam's emotions at the conclusion of the first Sabbath of creation:

“The sun set at the conclusion of the first Sabbath. Darkness began to descend. Adam was terrified... What did the Holy One Blessed Be He do? He prepared for him two flint stones. Adam rubbed them together. A fire was ignited, and all was illuminated. Adam blessed the fire, and thus it is written ‘and the night will be light for me’ (*Psalms* 139:11). What blessing did he recite? ‘Blessed are You, Lord our God... Who

creates the lights of fire.” (*Bereishit Rabbah* 11:2)

The message here is clear. Fire was given to man. Man is to use it to continue the work of God's creation. Just as God worked during the first six days of creation, so too must man be productive during the six days of his work week. The Almighty gave Adam fire so that after his restful Sabbath, he could return to the world of action.

How different is this Midrash from the Greek myth of Prometheus. Prometheus stole fire from the gods of Mount Olympus, from Zeus. In contrast to the Greek tradition, in which the gods are protective of fire and wish to keep it from man, the Torah insists that it was God who enabled man to create fire so that he could continue the process of creation using his own resources.

We can readily conclude, then, that there is much more to our religion than words. There is a place, and a prominent one, for visual imagery, for delicious tastes, and for fragrant scents. And above all, there is a demand that we move from our essentially passive Sabbath stance to one of creative and constructive action.

Our faith contains much more than “words, words, words.” ■

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