



THE ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE

by Leron Bernstein

THE GIFT OF INFINITY

Truth be told, I was asked to write an article for this newsletter, exactly 9 weeks and 1 day ago. The reason why I remember this so exactly, is because I had the best reason in order to disqualify myself from writing the article for that week's edition - my wife went into labour. Today, Yehuda Moshe is exactly 9 weeks old.



I'm sure it has become abundantly clear from what I said above, that this is not a 'Student's Perspective', this is rather, a 'Fellow's Perspective'. I, along with 7 other guys, or 'fellas' if u wish, was privileged to take part in the first Isralight Orayta Fellowship programme. We spent an exciting year under the tutelage of the Isralight Rabbanim, mainly Rav Aaron and Rav Binny, delving into the depths of our beautiful religion. We were granted a very unique opportunity to spend many hours with these great Rabbanim, where they shared with us the inner workings of their respective educational philosophies. We attended the fellowship four afternoons a week, spending the first portion of our time learning source material that exposed to us the inner heart of Judaism. This was then followed by shiurim by the Rabbanim on the content that we had learnt. The last hour of each day was spent learning with our Orayta chavrutot. This gave us the opportunity to forge wonderful relationships with the younger boys and it was a platform for us to see how much we were learning and growing - providing us with some 'on-the-job' training.

Throughout the year we were overwhelmed by the beautiful and enriching Torah that we were being exposed to, and I would like to share with you one idea that has had a remarkable effect on me.

Rav Kook eloquently teaches us in his essay "*Yisurim Mamrakim*" that the fundamental principle of our belief is in the greatness of the completeness of the *Ein-Sof* (*The Endless One*). Every glimpse of Hashem that we are able to get in this world is but a dull spark compared to what we should be getting if we want to come closer to grasping the truth of the greatness of the *Ein-Sof*.

He continues saying that even if we were to come as close as possible to an accurate description of the *Ein-Sof*, we would still be far off from the actual truth of the greatness of the *Ein-Sof*. In short, we cannot grasp the greatness of the *Ein-Sof*, especially using the words that we have, and given the mechanisms that we use to perceive and process the world around us and within us.

We are accustomed to use words to describe everything in our lives. It is important, however, to realize the true nature of words. The Hebrew translation of the word, 'word', comes in a few forms – 'Teivah', 'Milah' and 'Davar'. The beauty of the Hebrew language is in the myriad meanings of its words. 'Teivah' also means 'box', 'Milah' comes from the root meaning 'to cut' and 'Davar' can also mean 'thing'. All three of these words imply a limitation of some sort. The Hebrew language recognizes that the words that we use to construct ideas and convey messages are themselves constricting and limiting. They are but building blocks pointing us in the direction of the true message implied by them.

Rav Aaron always likes to use the analogy of a menu. Our words, in relation to the truth that we are trying to express, can be likened to the relationship between a menu and the food which it offers. Upon reading the menu, you might get very excited about one of the dishes. You could even get to the point of salivating with excitement. It is the menu that has brought you to this point and the dish might sound very good - but if you find yourself suddenly biting the menu, you will taste nothing but paper, and you will be left far from nourished! (and with the need for a very good excuse on returning the soggy menu to the waiter ☺). This analogy clearly distinguishes between what we have as pointers, in relation to what we are pointing to. The taste and experience of the dish itself, is much greater than – it is beyond – the sum of the ingredients and the description on the menu. To take another element of the analogy - imagine your dismay, if the waiter was to bring you just the separate ingredients as indicated on the menu – you would be able to 'taste' the compartmentalization, and you would feel the betrayal of the greater experience that you expected in eating the dish – not just a bunch of ingredients placed together. You could say, that the dish is the synergistic experience of the ingredients as 'implied' by the description on the menu.

We do not correlate to Eastern culture that becomes so overawed by the deficiency of words to describe the greater truth that its adherents strive to remain silent, lest they 'taint' the truth. Nor do we match up with Western culture where words are everything and G-d easily becomes boxed and objectified. As Rav Aaron points out, we are 'The Middle East' – the point of truth where the two extremes meet. We understand that our words are but utter, dull sparks of the truth, but this does not prevent us from using them as pointers to bring us to the truth found in experience. David Hamelech leads by example when he tells us that "To You (Hashem), Silence is Praise". Rav Aaron points out that David says this in his 65th Psalm and continues to praise Hashem with words for another 85 Psalms. Silence might be His Praise, but that doesn't stop us from using the words that He gave us as well.

So now for the big question – what is this big truth that we are trying so desperately to grasp? The answer is found in last week's Parsha, Parshat Va'etchanan. In Devarim 4:35, Moshe reminds the Jewish people what they gained at Mt. Sinai - "*Atah horeita la'daat, ki Hashem hu Ha'Elokim, Ein od*

Milvado". "You have been shown in order to know, that Hashem, He is the G-d! There is nothing but Him". This is one of the most famous expressions in the Torah – "Ein Od Milvado". The exact meaning and implications of this statement pave the way for major discussions on the nature of our existence relative to that of Hashem's. For our purposes, I just wish to extract one implication, which is that Hashem is found everywhere – permeating throughout existence – found in our every move in the deepest and most personal way.

Rav Kook teaches in his book *Orot HaTeshuva (Lights of Repentance)* that when we return to ourselves truthfully, then we will find that we return to Hashem. Conversely, when we return to Hashem truthfully, then we find that we return to the truest expression of ourselves. To connect to the truth of 'Ein Od Milvado' is to connect to our true selves. We reach this through the beauty of experience achieved by our Mitzvot– guided there by our words. "*Kol Mitzvotecha Emunah*" – "All your Commandments are Belief (Faith in Hashem)" (Psalms 119:86)

This is just a drop in the ocean of the invigorating Torah that I learnt over this past year. With it, I could not have been better prepared for the biggest experience of my life yet. On the afternoon of the 2nd of June, my wife and I left for Shaarei Tzedek hospital - we had no idea how different the world was about to become 10 hours later...

Witnessing the entrance of a child into the world is an experience which unequivocally teaches you that true experience is found beyond words, and that infinity lies within deep experience. To witness the pains and efforts of pregnancy, to be caught up in the chaos of labour, to feel the silence as the child enters this world, to hear the first sound and then in moments to be holding your baby boy in your arms - is mind-blowing. It is mind-blowing, because your mind could never conjure up the words or images powerful enough to convey the experience of those moments. It was in those moments that I experienced my greatest closeness to the *Ein-Sof*.

Our Yehuda Moshe is a very special boy. This is not just because he is gorgeous and he is ours, but because he teaches me how to live life. Every moment I hold him – I am right in the moment. I experience a deep connection to him, to myself, and to Hashem. It is an experience that would be betrayed by words. When I look into his eyes and hold him, I feel the infinity of that moment and existence as a whole – Baruch Hashem – Hashem is abundantly present.

When I bid farewell to my special Orayta chavruta boys, they asked me what one thing stood out for me from the year at Orayta. I shared with them that, before the programme, I strongly believed that only experiences that I could describe and understand logically were valid and true. From learning at Orayta, I realized that the truest and most valid experiences that we have in life, are those ones which cannot be described, understood logically, nor put into words.

Rav Aaron taught us that the expression, 'Seeing is believing' is backwards. Really, it is more accurate to say that, 'Believing is seeing'. Only after we have adorned ourselves with the wisdom of the Torah, will we have the ability

to truly see the world as it is. A beautiful pasuk in this week's parsha reveals this dramatically –

“V’Atah Yisrael, mah Hashem Elokecha sho’eil mei’imach, ki im Lirah et Hashem Elokecha, lalech b’chol drachav, ule’ahava oto, v’la’avod et Hashem Elokecha b’chol levav’cha uvev’chol nafshecha”

“Now, Israel, what does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear Hashem, your G-d, to go in all His ways and to love him, and to serve Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Devarim 10:12)

Rav Aaron taught us another translation of the word ‘Lirah’ – generally translated as ‘fear’, it can also mean ‘to see’.

The aim of the Jewish educator is to connect his students back to the Mt. Sinai experience. Rav Aaron – “Atah Horeita la’daat...” – “You have taught (us) to deeply know...” - you have truly guided us towards an understanding of ‘Ein od Milvado’. Thank you for teaching me the beauty of experience and revealing it as the gateway to a deep and personal connection with Hashem.