

He took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the earshot of the people, and they said, “Everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will obey!” (24:7)

Our greatest moment in history was when we received the Torah. Our nationhood became fused with our acceptance of Hashem’s Word. The anthem of our faith for all time was our resounding declaration, *Naaseh v’Nishma*, “We will do, and we will obey!” We set the standard of priorities for Jews for all time: we do/we act. The reason will come later. If we understand – good. If not – also good! That is what being a Jew is all about: uncompromising faith; unequivocal commitment. Yet, over time, people have strayed and alienated themselves and their descendants from the Torah. We can point the finger of blame at others, but it all points back to us. How strong was our commitment? How well did we transmit our beliefs? What method did we employ for conveying our feelings, our emotion about Torah observance? Better yet: Did we manifest emotion, joy and passion for *Yiddishkeit*, or were we, at best, complacent?

We all stood at *Har Sinai* and made that declaration. It became part of our psyche, our DNA. It is there, concealed under layers of history – some good, some bad – but it is there. That is why so many return after generations of estrangement and apathy. We made a promise to “observe and obey” – no questions asked. For some, it has taken a little longer to keep that promise.

Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, a”h, relates an episode concerning her great uncle, *Horav Hillel, zl m’Kalmia*, Hungary, a well-known *tzaddik* and *chassidic* leader, who was traveling by train on *Chol HaMoed Pesach*, accompanied by a group of students. They were engrossed in a *Talmudic* discourse when they noticed a young man of Jewish extraction remove a sandwich from a bag and begin to eat. They were shocked, since the meat in the sandwich was unkosher. In addition to this outrage, it was *Pesach*, and he was eating *chametz*.

The *Rebbe* and his students were dumbfounded. How could a Jew have such audacity – to eat *chametz* on *Pesach*, together with pork, in front of a distinguished Torah leader? No shame whatsoever! How could he do this? The students were beside themselves with anger – and they wanted to express their indignity to the young man. The *Rebbe* said, “No!” He would personally address the young man.

“My son,” the *Rebbe* began, “you know that your soul stood at *Har Sinai*, together with the rest of the Jewish nation. Have pity on yourself. Do not be a traitor to the covenant of which **you** are a part.”

It was an emotional plea, but it fell on deaf ears.

“*Rebbe*, I do not believe any of this. Do not waste your time on me. I am not interested in any of this.” Then the young man turned away from the *Rebbe* and his students, and returned to his lunch.

Rav Hillel was relentless when it came to a Jewish soul. He was not giving up. The students were embarrassed for their revered *Rebbe*, whom they felt was degrading himself by talking to this recalcitrant young man. It was below their teacher's dignity to "beg" this fellow to respect his "vows."

Rav Hillel expressed himself strongly to his students. "Do not think like this. This fellow is a lost soul, a son to a noble Jewish heritage, of parents and grandparents. Who knows how many bitter tears were shed over him, how many prayers his grandparents issued forth in his behalf?"

As the *Rebbe* spoke, his eyes welled up with tears, "You should know my dear students, that we have a Rabbinic axiom: 'Words that emanate from the heart will penetrate the heart.' My words are spoken from my heart. Thus, they will surely enter this young man's heart. If not today – then tomorrow, but they will pierce that layer of assimilation. I do not know when, but, I assure you, it will occur!"

Stories are inspirational and, undoubtedly, many alienated Jews of all ages do eventually return and embrace the religion for which their forebears lived and died. All power to the many who are in the trenches fighting to save every Jewish *neshamah*, soul, from extinction. What is being done, however, to reverse the trend **before** it begins? Why are we losing them in the first place? There is no single answer to this critical question. Many factors play a role in the acculturation and eventual assimilation of many of our Jewish brethren. We have a more pressing question: Why do some of our youth, despite having been raised in wonderful, distinguished, observant homes, suddenly drift off the face of the observant Jewish map?

I am sure no single answer addresses this anomaly. I recently read an article which was written by someone who was attempting to champion dialogue – and exposure – to Jews and members of other ethnic groups who do not live a life of Torah observance. While I disagree vehemently with his goals, the story which I feel he misconstrued has much merit.

A young Orthodox teenager rebelled against his parents. He basically went off the deep end, and began desecrating *Shabbos*, *Kashrus* and morality. His parents brought him to their rabbi for a talk. The rabbi passed him along to a non-Jewish psychologist. It took only one session, and the teenager was back on the path of Torah observance. What happened?

The boy had never encountered anyone to whom he had to explain his culture; his religion; his way of life. He never had to explain what it meant to be an Orthodox Jew – the beauty, the serenity, the sanctity. Thus, he had never articulated his core values for himself. Relating his story to a "stranger" allowed him to embrace his identity in a new and powerful way.

What has happened is that we have taken a complacent attitude to Torah: I am *frum* because my parents are *frum*. We take it for granted. Rather than inspiring, inculcating the next generation with the *bren*, passion/fire of *Yiddishkeit*, we serve it up cold, dispassionately, expecting our children to

accept it without feeling. It works for most. Nevertheless, we cannot afford to lose the few for whom it does not work. Observance should be vibrant, exciting, fiery – possessing religious fervor that embraces the entire human being. If **we** are excited, **they** will follow suit.