Locked Outside the Garden: Why It Is Difficult for Jews to Come Home to Authentic Judaism

View PDF



Rabbi Yehoshua “Shu” Eliovson is a 20-year pioneer of social media, the "emotion of technology,” specializing in new forms of consumer engagement related to behavioral health. After playing a pivotal role in several early-stage Internet IPOs, he created one of the earliest teen communities on the web (TheLockers.net) two years prior to advent of Facebook, integrating peer-counseling and crisis-support layers within popular social-web user-experiences. Rabbi Shu is also the founder of JamShalom, a grassroots Jewish renewal movement (www.JamShalom.com). He is an expert of Pastoral Counseling for crisis intervention, at-risk youth, positive parenting, and marriage, and is a highly demanded public speaker on the topic of media and youth culture. This article appears in issue 24 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Many years ago, the parents of a young man who was thrown out of yeshiva high school reached out to me for help. They recently discovered that their son, who never went back to any school ever again, and instead took his GED and was now college-aged and living on his own, was no longer shomer mitzvot—no longer observing the precepts of our Holy Torah. They were beside themselves with grief. Their worst fears from the time when he was forced to leave the yeshiva in the middle of his senior year had come true.

I went to see the young man, a boy whom I have known since his early childhood, and we spent hours talking in the park about Judaism, Hashem, and Torah. The conversation was warm and open and natural—a respectful intellectual conversation. Until he broke down crying.

When he finally recomposed himself, he reached into his pocket and to my surprise pulled out a kippah. And this is what he said to me as he clenched that

kippah tightly in his hand:

“I know what you want, and I know what my parents want. They want me to put this back on my head. But that will never happen again. I will always carry it with me, because this is my heritage. But I don’t get to wear this. The rabbis who gave up on me, and who give up on so many of my friends, have made that perfectly clear. And don’t get me wrong; I respect them. I respect the Torah with every fiber of my being. I get it.

“But that’s just the thing,” he explained as he held up his kippah. “I know what this stands for. And I know what I am. And I am not this.

“And when I look into my soul, and search as hard as I can for the potential to live up to this, I know that I don’t have that ability. DON’T YOU SEE,” he exclaimed as tears welled up in his eyes again, “I don’t GET to wear this!
“I never will.”

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Since that time, nearly 20 years ago, I have counseled scores of men and women and boys and girls who have strained relationships with their Judaism—teenagers, singles, married individuals and couples, parents, and even rabbis. Furthermore, via TheLockers.net, an anonymous online community for Jewish teens that I administered from 2003–2011, I had the privilege of being the proverbial fly on the wall as thousands of young Jews openly discussed their most intimate lives. Today I lead JamShalom, a grassroots Jewish outreach movement that provides Shabbat experiences for the 16- to 30-year-old attendees at rock music festivals, wherein I have engaged with over 1,000 young Jews of various backgrounds.

One of the most heartbreaking truths I have realized is that the majority of individuals I have encountered who were raised observant, but who are not anymore, have not left Judaism because they dismissed the Torah and our heritage. Rather, they have left because they have dismissed themselves as candidates to keep the Torah and to live up to our heritage. It is not Judaism they have given up on. It is themselves.
And as I have sought through the years to regain ground and close the painful chasm that left these beautiful and caring souls separated from their Judaism, it was imperative for me to understand how and why this was happening.
Here are my observations.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

A Crisis of Faith

We have been in exile for 2,000 years. This exile has left scars upon us. Among those scars is a double-pronged insecurity. The first prong is born of a defensive fear—a fear for the continued preservation and continuity of Torah Judaism in the face of overwhelmingly negative odds. And this leads us to defend the traditional or "preserved" form of Judaism fiercely, and to "push" that rigid Judaism. Hard. The second prong of this insecurity is born of centuries of anti-Semitism, forced conversions, and assimilation, and it causes us to fearfully struggle to minimize our children's exposure to outside faiths and philosophies. This, despite the fact that sages such as the Rambam specifically allowed and practiced the incorporation of non-Jewish philosophies into the teachings of Judaism.

Yet in a modern world of digital and social transparency, our defensiveness and isolationism projects an air of deep insecurity to our children, an insecurity that ultimately conveys as a fundamental lack of emmunah, faith: We do not trust the Torah to resonate on its own merit.

We convey a fear that if a Jew were exposed to an outside faith, and that faith was placed side-by-side with Judaism, the alternative faith might be the winning choice.
Of course, one can argue the merit and demerits of more open exposure to outside ideas and ideals all that one wants to. But those arguments, in today's information age, are largely irrelevant—because our youth already are exposed to outside faiths and values. We can shut down our personal conversation with them if we don't like the topic, but we cannot shut down their search.

We live in an information age, an age where every value, temptation, religion, and ideal is on the table before our youth, and before any seeking or religiously unsettled person in the Jewish community. The circled wagons of yesterday's Jewish community have suddenly collapsed. And today, the question we must answer is: In a world with every idea and every value and every temptation on the table, why would our children—why would we—choose Judaism?

We must dig deep to find compelling answers. We must rise to the challenge, because in a world of open dialogue, you either get relevant, or you die.
Most importantly, we must reclaim our own faith in the everlasting relevance of our divine heritage. Because the Truth—any genuine Truth—does not need to be afraid of questions.

Recognizing the Presence of Truth

The very essence of Truth is that by its nature of being True, questions only serve to strengthen it, by proving its ability to stand up to “less-true” challenges.

How interesting it is that the Jewish holiday ritual whose entire purpose is to convey our heritage from one generation to the next, the Passover Seder, is geared to provoke our children into asking questions. The process of proving the relevance of our great spiritual dynasty to another generation is to throw down the gauntlet and say “Bring it on! We challenge you to start asking questions!” This is because questions, once answered, only prove a stronger Truth. And the fearless invitation to our children to ask their questions conveys an absolute emmunah in the timeless relevance of Torah.

Each and every one of us must ask ourselves: Do I truly believe there is a God? Do I truly believe there is such a thing as a Jewish Soul? Do I truly believe that the Torah is the very word of God revealed to that type of Soul for that Soul’s own good?
If so, then the Torah should not require any salesmanship! The connection of that Soul to that Source through that Word should be the most intuitive experience of connection in the world! It should be the greatest drug in the world!

And if it is not, it means one or more of these four things is true:
1) There is no God (and there is!).
2) There is no such thing as a Jewish Soul.
3) The Torah is not the True Word of God for that Soul.
4) Someone—our teachers, our rabbis, or we ourselves—has unwittingly corrupted the message or forgotten it somewhere along the way, so that it no longer resonates on its own merit.

Of course, items 1, 2, and 3 are not the problem. The problem is item 4, and it is representative of the scars of 2,000 years of exile.

The good news is, that one does not have to look far into Jewish spiritual literature, from the Ramchal to the Grah to Sifrei Kabbala, to know that it is the natural desire and yearning of the Soul to return to and unify with its Source. And with this in mind, we can reframe our entire notion of what it means to work to bring a Jew closer to his or her Judaism.

For if the Soul naturally wants to return to it’s Source, then the challenge is not in preventing Souls from wandering away or keeping them fenced in (with high walls and razor wire), but rather in bringing down the barriers and walls that stand between a Soul and Hashem; to identify and remove those elements that are

obstructing a Jewish Soul from finding its way home—especially when that obstruction is our method of education itself.

We must contemplate this thoughtfully. For it becomes clear that the key to keeping people close to Judaism and in bringing them back lies not in keeping the outside elements outside, which today is impossible. Rather, it lies in understanding what is obstructing between that Soul and his or her Source, and helping to bring those barriers down. And this requires listening and deep personal connection.

We must understand and have Faith, that when the broadcast becomes clear, the Soul will know its way home. And it will migrate naturally and joyfully in that direction.
Someone once asked Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, zt”l, how he made so many tens of thousands of Jews become religious again. Reb Shlomo got very angry and said that he “never made anyone become anything!”

“I simply shared my love of Hashem and of Torah and Authentic Jewish Experiences with them, and accepted them as they are and without any agenda,” he explained. “After that, whatever happened came naturally from within themselves.”

The Fall of the Rabbi

There are rabbis out there who are jerks. There. I said it. And we have all met one or two on our own personal journeys.

The problem is, so have the vulnerable and spiritually frail Jews of our generation. And very often, one encounter like that was all that a frail Soul can take, and the pain of that experience then locks that Soul outside the Garden of Hashem forever.

There was a time when earning ordination as a rabbi was a rare and select thing. Moshe Rabbeinu only gave it to one person. And Rabbi Akiva, despite having tens of thousands of students who all were on the most saintly of levels, still only bestowed ordination upon five of them.

Indeed, throughout Jewish history, we have many stories of would-be rabbis who traveled all across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East as they sought the one rebbe who was meant to be their rebbe—the one that they would apprentice to for many years in the hope of one day having that rebbe rest his holy hands upon the head of the would-be rabbi and bestow upon him ordination.

But something changed, to my observation, after the Holocaust. In the aftermath of that horrible destruction, many of our remaining great sages set up new houses of study in the United States, Israel, England, and other parts of the world. During the time they were alive, most of these saintly rabbis personally knew every student who was accepted to his yeshiva and whom he ordained. There was still a “resting of hands” that took place between rabbi and apprentice, and any young man who went out with the status of rabbi was, indeed, a reflection of the quality, integrity, and the middot of the holy rabbi who ordained him.

But then these great rabbis died.

And several of the schools they created became “institutions.” And becoming a rabbi at these institutions became the equivalent of receiving a master’s degree in halakha.
Today, there are individuals with the most abrasive bedside manner and who are absolutely lacking in any spiritually intuitive skills, who still receive ordination from the Israeli Rabbinate or from any number of major rabbinical schools around the world. In fact, one can conduct most of his ordination from the Israeli Rabbinate via the Shema Yisrael email correspondence program, appearing before them only once among dozens of other applicants, for a final exam.

Personal character and the capacity to be a spiritual guide are no longer the carefully enforced prerequisites to become a rabbi. A good technical mind and hearty memorization skills, coupled with a pleasant demeanor when sitting before the admissions panel will often do the trick.

The evidence of this is highlighted all too well in a recent experience I had.
A moderately observant couple I was speaking with on a flight from the United States to Israel asked me in all sincerity why a person needs a rabbi nowadays, other than for funerals and weddings, when one can find all the answers to halakha that they need via Google. Their sincere question bespeaks all there is to say about what we have done to the lofty title of “rabbi,” and how badly our major rabbinical schools have allowed the standard of what a rabbi is to become degraded from what it historically stood for.
This couple was simply reflecting what most people experience today—that a rabbi is not by definition a spiritual guide; he is simply a source for halakhic facts and rulings, and a person to perform the functional component of lifecycle ceremonies (with no heart or passion required).

This encounter broke my heart. If their perception and experience was as it should have been, they would have known that a rabbi is much more than a

human halakhic search engine. They would have experienced their encounters with a rabbi as an encounter with Torah spirituality and Hashem. They would have encountered a person of God, who, before seeing the law, saw the people in front of him and connected with them on a personal level. They would have encountered a person who, by his very being, took the time to understand them and where they were on their journey, before ever quoting any halakha to them. And when finally being given a pesak halakha, this couple would have encountered a guide who would present the opportunity to observe the halakha (a mitzvah of Hashem!) in a manner that would have connected those Souls in front of him to that Word from that Holiest Source—Hashem.

Looking back, when we think of the rabbis whom we most connect to throughout Jewish history, whether it was Moshe Rabbeinu, the Nevi'im, Rabbi Akiva, or even our own rebbe (if we are blessed to have one), we don't think of them first for their halakhic rulings on how to kasher a pot. We think of them as spiritual guides.

But in a the modern era of impersonal halakhic rabbis, a catastrophic impact is manifest: Laypeople still believe rabbis to be the representative of the Jewish God and the Torah, and these laypeople judge themselves by the harsh and absolute attitudes of this newer generation of overly intellectual and lacking-in-spiritual-intuition rabbis. They are no longer drawn to the God and the Book of these rabbis. Rather, they are driven away—because if the person feels small, religiously inadequate, or not-quite-up-to-par when standing before the rabbi, then the person concludes that he or she is surely an irrelevant speck before God.

And so, in the place of a rabbi being the one who opens the doors and brings down the walls between a seeking Soul and Hashem, the emotionally disconnected halakhic rabbi becomes an armed guard at the gates, wielding an unforgiving and absolute sword of Torah, making it intimidating for a lost neshama to even approach.

All or Nothing, or Is It?

Most of us are taught Torah in absolute terms. Here are the 613 mitzvoth. Do them. Do them all. Do not fail.

Here are the teachings and guidelines of the rabbis. Do them. Do them all. Do not fail.

There are those who feel suffocated by what they perceive as a smothering mountain of humrot, stringencies, and halakhic fences. These humrot have been put around the mitzvoth of the Torah and directives of our sages in order to

protect the observance of those mitzvoth. But of much greater concern is that for most people today, including among many of our teachers, the hierarchal distinction between what observances come from the Torah, which come from the rabbis, what is a syag, and what is a minhag (custom), has been totally overlooked or lost. The damage of this is threefold:

1) People often will violate a deOrayta mitzvah of the Torah for the sake of observing a minhag, and other such mistakes of incorrect prioritization. For instance, many yeshiva students will refuse to tuck in their tsitsith when asked by their father to do so, inadvertently violating a mitzvah deOrayta for the sake of a hiddur mitzvah.
2) Individuals who are not capable of taking on all of the mitzvoth are often intimidated or scared off by the overwhelming body of the "whole ball of wax" of all these combined components, and cannot separate between what is inherent to Hashem's intentions, and what are the hiddurim (extras) that should only be practiced by an advanced servant of Hashem.
3) As a result, we surely have violated the spirit, and perhaps even the letter of the command of Hashem of Al Tosef (do not add to the Torah), for we have added to His Torah in a manner that has ultimately obstructed His Revelation from his nation.

But when we consider it closely, it becomes clear that any suggestion of the Torah as an all-or-nothing endeavor actually suggests a denial of the Torah as the Revelation of God. For if God is infinite, so too is His Word.

And the very nature of an Infinite Torah is that no person will ever "do it all." In fact, we all know very well that if we approached any great tsaddik or gadol, and asked him if he were doing "everything," he would smile at us and say: "Not even close!"

Such is the nature of God's Word.

But this confuses many people. What, one may ask, is being suggested here? Is the argument being made that Torah is a half-time commitment? That individuals can pick and choose? That a suggestion is being made that "Since no one can do everything, I'll just do what I want!?"

Well...sort of.

Because that is what the revelation at Har Sinai was all about.

Na'aseh veNishmah—A Euphemism for the Ages

It is a bit crazy to suggest that we merited the Torah by saying, “We will do, and we will hear.” Okay, so God basically decided to give His Holiest Torah to a nation of consumer suckers? To the people who put their entire life savings on door number three, even though they had no idea what’s behind it?

And apparently this God does not want to deal with any circumspect customers that actually want to read the label on the package before buying it and taking it home. Strange.

But it actually is not strange at all, when we consider the ubiquitous perseverance of the expression “Na’aseh veNishmah” right up through the spoken languages of today. Think about it.

Imagine that someone you love—your parent or spouse or best friend—came up to you and asked: “Hey can you do me a really big favor?” How would you respond?
You would say, “Sure! What is it?” Na’aseh! veNishmah...

But if a total stranger came up to you on the street and made the same request, you would most likely respond: “It depends... What is it?” Nishmah... oolai Na’aseh...
So what does this mean?

It means that Na’aseh veNishmah is an expression that we reserve, to this very day, for people we love and trust. And it conveys two things:

1) Whatever you need, I want to do it 100 percent.
2) I trust you that whatever you have to ask, it can only be good for me. It will never compromise me or harm in any way.

In other words, the phrase communicates absolute commitment and absolute trust.

With a stranger, I am not certain of either of these things, and so my response is tentative and measured.

Therefore, we merited our Holy Torah because of our deep relationship with Hashem as evidence by our “Of course! What is it?” reply to Him. Total commitment. Total trust.
But now let us go back to our example of a loved one, and imagine that you were incapable of actually fulfilling the request, either for physical or emotional reasons. For example, perhaps you were asked to pick up your friend’s car from

the mechanic next week, but you will be out of town. Does that make your statement of trust and commitment to your friend any less authentic or sincere?

Or perhaps your spouse asked you to clean the drain gutters on the roof, not knowing that you had a deathly fear of heights and might get vertigo and fall! Does that emotional limitation in anyway contradict your absolute love and devotion to the needs and wishes of your spouse, and your trust in him or her?

And so we come to an amazing hiddush: There is an absolute delineation and distinction between our Trust in Hashem, coupled with our commitment to doing what He asks of us on one side, and our actual capacity at any given moment to act upon that trust and commitment. And this is true whether that limitation is of an emotional or physical nature.

In other words, I can have perfect emmunah in Hashem, and accept the entire Torah, and still possibly not even be ready to say the first word of Shema or sit at a Shabbat table.

And there is no inherent contradiction in this.

But let’s go further.

A Fence around the Torah, God-Style

There is another peculiar element of Mattan Torah, the giving of the Torah. God tells Moshe to build a fence around the bottom of the mountain, lest the people come running up the mountain. For if they run up the mountain they will surely either burn up in fire, or it will cause the world to crash down on them (fire or stoning, and not by man, but as a spiritual event).

Moshe does as God instructs, and then climbs all the way up the mountain to meet Hashem. Upon arriving, Hashem tells Moshe to go down and warn the people again not to cross the boundary!

Moshe argues a bit with Hashem, reassuring Hashem that he has already set up a fence and the people already know very clearly not to cross the boundary. But Hashem insists that Moshe go down again and deliver this message one more time, and then he can come back up the mountain.

Very strange business.

First of all, Hashem gave Moshe the instructions the first time without Moshe having to climb a mountain for no apparent reason. So why have him come all the

way back up, just to send him down again? Second, Moshe was correct: The people had been warned, a fence was in place, and there was no sign of any potential problem. Third, we know from the next events of the Torah that not only did the people not seek to climb the mountain, they sought to get as far back from it as possible!

So why would Hashem make such a production over something that He obviously knew was not ever going to be an actual issue?

The most obvious answer is that this explicit condition by Hashem that predicated Mattan Torah was meant to send a message to the Israelites. Hashem went as far as having Moshe climb up and down the mountain just to dramatically and powerfully drive this message home!

Imagine everyone's faces, when, after three days of intense preparation Moshe ascends the mountain into the smoke. And then comes down many hours later and nothing has happened?! "Uh, Moshe… why are you back?" "Um, God really does not want you to cross the boundary that is here, because He wants to keep you from getting hurt while receiving His Torah. He is really concerned that in your enthusiasm to receive His Torah, you might rush your ascent toward Him, and ultimately bring spiritual self-destruction upon yourself." "Uh, Okay. I mean, I think we already got that. But wow; if God sent you all the way back down here to tell us that, it must be pretty seriously important. This fence against over-enthusiasm and running too quickly up the mountain to Hashem must be fundamental to our receiving HaShem's Torah. Got it."

Want-To Judaism

When one examines the Torah's expressions of Hashem's desired relationship with us, it is startling how firmly love is emphasized. In fact, nearly all the times that awe (yir'ah) or service (avodah) of God is mentioned it is preceded by the foundation of love.

LeAhavah u'leYir'ah et Shemekha

LeAhavah et Hashem Elokeikhem, u'le'Ovdo

We are taught by our Sages that the world, in its very existence, is a manifestation of God's love.

Our Shema prayer, the first words on our lips when we awaken, the last words when we go to bed, and the last words we are meant to utter in life, emphasizes

loving Hashem with all our heart, Soul, and “umph”! And of course, the central observance of our faith, Shabbat, is an expression of God’s love.

But love is a funny thing. Because you can’t force it. You can only grow it. It has to call to you; to draw you in. As soon as someone pushes, love starts wilting.

And this perhaps helps us understand why our Mishkan, the first house of Hashem in the world, the precursor of the Synagogue, Church, and Mosque, has the root word M-Sh-kh—to draw in. Because if you want to see Hashem dwelling in the hearts of people (veShakhanti beTokham), you must create a space or experience that draws them in.

True spirituality, and true Judaism, is a “want-to” experience. Period.
How do you get the people to build a place for Hashem in their lives? “Kol NeDiv Libo”—help them open the doors of their hearts. The answer is already inside them.

Defining “Religious”

As I have matured in life, I have grown to wonder more and more about our definition of a Torah-observant or religious Jew. Certainly, our emphasis has become corrupt.
When asked, most people will identify an observant Jew as a person who keeps Shabbat, keeps Kosher, studies Torah, prays regularly, and observes the laws of family purity. But here’s the problem. All of those mitzvoth fall squarely in the category of ben adam leMakom—between people and God.

We have two categories of mitzvoth: Those that are between humans and their Creator, and those that are interpersonal.

So it would seem logical that it is absolutely outside our purview as human beings to be pulling out our spiritual yardsticks and measuring our fellow human beings according to those mitzvoth that fall under God’s jurisdiction! Right?

And how much more glaring and corrupt does this invasive arrogance become, when we play in God’s territory, while pretty much entirely under-emphasizing our own jurisdiction—the laws that govern human relationships!

After all, we all know that if we had a wonderfully humble and sweet Jew who devoted his entire life to social justice, tikkun olam, charity, helping the poor, and volunteering in orphanages—but did not keep Shabbat or kashruth—we would probably say: “Oy, someone should be mekarev that guy!”

But if we have a person who keeps kosher, keeps Shabbat, and keeps the laws of family purity, but is stingy, selfish, and obnoxious, we would still consider him or her quite frum.

In fact, that person might even be able to get ordination from a major rabbinical school.
When someone asked Hillel to teach the Torah while standing on one foot, the ikar (main thing) was how one treats other human beings.

The great Torah principle that Rabbi Akiva is most remembered for highlighting is based on how one treats other human beings.

Tens of thousands of Rabbi Akiva's students missed this point, however, and for that baseless hatred between human beings we mourn 33 days, while the destruction of both Temples only gets three weeks.

When we sinned against God so many millennia ago and went into our first exile, it lasted 70 years. For sinning against our fellow human beings we are at 2,000 years and counting.

On Yom Kippur, our holiest day, God reassures us that any sins we committed against Him are forgiven without hesitation. But regarding our sins against another human being God is much more reserved, and tells us that we may not even approach Him until we have made it right with those we have harmed.

So what does it mean to be a religious Jew? How is true Jewish Torah observance defined?

Hillel seemed pretty clear. Rabbi Akiva seemed pretty clear (although his students missed his point). Yom Kippur is pretty clear. And our exile—the one we are trying so desperately to get out of—is pretty clear, too. But are we too much like Rabbi Akiva's students to hear the message?

Is it the boy with tears in his eyes and a kippah in his fist who needs outreach? Or is it the rabbi who locked him out of Hashem's garden with unforgiving judgment and readiness to throw away one Jewish Soul?

A Missing Relationship

To wander off topic for a moment, I love nature. I care a great deal about the environment, and seek to encourage others to be sensitive not to harm the fragile world in which we live.

But here’s the thing: You can talk all you want about the facts and statistics related to carbon emissions and the ozone, clean water, preserving natural resources and recycling. But if the person you are talking to does not have an existing sense of personal connection to nature—a relationship—then that person is not going to care too much about what you are saying. And that person is not going to make any serious lifestyle changes because of it, no matter how compelling the facts are.
Moshe Rabbeinu knew this. That’s why in Parashat VaEt-hanan he told us that “you should know today and bring to your heart that Hashem is God.” As my college rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Cohen, explained: “If it doesn’t get from your head to your heart, you aren’t going to change.”

In business they know this, too. They teach it as a component of every MBA degree. People don’t make business decisions intellectually; they make them emotionally, and then back them up with their intellect.

In other words, you have to care about something to change your life for it.
And at the essence of it all, this is what we have lost in the modern transmission of Judaism: A cultivation of a relationship with Hashem.

And it’s strange, because until the second or third grade we actually cultivate a very loving and joyous relationship, only to suddenly abandon this approach. I have done straw polls of hundreds of Jewish school alumni, and all seem to agree on this. Until about the third grade connecting to Hashem is fun and joyful, and that joy carries over into finding expression in the observances of daily mitzvoth, holidays and Shabbat. But then, for reasons unfathomable, the celebration comes to a screeching halt, and all education turns towards a growing list of “have-to” demands ascribed to a rather harsh and demanding God.

And the relationship dies.

We must ask ourselves why the Torah goes out of its way to predicate the service and awe (yir’ah) of Hashem with the prerequisite of loving God. And we must ask ourselves why our siddur, before discussing in the Shema our obligation to love God and serve Him, introduces the Shema with blessings that emphasize God’s abundant love for us.
In marriage, we subscribe to the disciplines and sacrifices involved because we love our spouse. And so too with parenthood.

Love gives the “have-to’s” of doing things for another person wings. Feeling compelled to serve another without a relationship has a word, too: It’s called

slavery.
In so many ways, the Jewish educational experience has replaced our marriage to Hashem with a cold and harsh indenture to an Absolute and Cold Master. And we have convinced ourselves that the intellectual explorations and philosophies of mitzvoth are enough.

But learning that parks itself in the mind of the listener, by its very nature, does not translate into sustained action. A person is only moved a limited amount of distance by fear or argument. A lifestyle change requires an emotional connection. It requires a relationship.

The Power of Prayer

Every relationship depends upon communication. The ability to hear and be heard is where every relationship lives and dies.

Think about it. You cannot commence a relationship with someone, from a friendship to a first date, without first greeting the other person.

But let’s go deeper. Let’s imagine there was a person with whom you got along amazingly, except for one small annoying thing that the person did that drove you crazy. Yet you could not communicate with this person at all. Eventually, you would stop spending time with this person over their annoying habit, because there would be no way to fix it.

In contrast, imagine you knew someone with whom you had many, many differences. But the communication between the both of you was exceptional and you were always able to hear and share ideas with one another. You would love spending time with this person and the friendship would be strong, because you would always be growing together and learning from each other.

So too with HaShem. A relationship with Hashem starts with being able to talk to Him. If you can’t talk to Him, then He is still just an intellectual idea. A God you cannot talk to is not the All-Hearing and All-Knowing and All-Loving God of whom we teach.
If we want to give our children and ourselves a relationship with Judaism and Torah, it starts with a relationship with the Giver of that Torah and Faith. And a relationship with that Giver starts with being able to talk to Him. It grows when we know that He listens. And it thrives when we feel His response.

And if you found yourself wondering how we could ever know that He listens and responds, it is only because you, the reader of this article, have yet to make it a

practice of talking to Hashem. Because if you did, you would already know that the rest flows quickly thereafter.

Last week at my Friday night Shabbat table, a young man stopped by after dinner to hang out. We have a very open home, and many young people drop in on Friday nights. This particular young man has been drifting away from his Orthodox upbringing for some time, but thankfully still feels very comfortable within our home on Shabbat.
Because it is Elul, the month we say is an acronym for the passage of Shir haShirim of “Ani leDodi veDodi Li—I am devoted to by Beloved, and my Beloved is devoted to me,” I spoke a bit about this essence of a loving relationship that is core to (re)approaching God on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur.

This young man, we’ll call him David, sat down next to me a bit later to speak privately. He asked me: “If I wanted to start rebuilding a relationship with Hashem, how would I do that?”

So I explained to him about conversation being the cornerstone of any relationship, even with God. I pointed out to him that if we are interested in building a relationship with someone, we set a time to meet. And if we really like them, we will seek to make those meetings regular. So we agreed he would begin again with Hashem by setting a steady time a few days a week to talk to Hashem. I told him he could use his own words, for which I could give him a beautiful structure, or we could find some excerpts from a siddur.

And I cautioned him NOT to commit to too long a block of time to talk with Hashem (at least 10 minutes in order to have enough time to focus, but after that whatever feels comfortable), and not to commit to doing it too many times a week. Because the yetser haRah loves to get us to overcommit and burn out, and a good rebbe sometimes helps his students the most by holding them back and tempering their fire, rather than pushing them too hard and seeing them burn out. After all, it was Hashem Himself who had Moshe Rabbeinu put the first fence against a too-fast approach to Torah around Har Sinai.

So this week, for the first time in his life, this young man is talking with Hashem from his heart. And while for over 20 years he was observant, he called me this week to tell me that it is the first time in his life he has felt that Hashem is really there and really interested in him.

And from there it will grow. Naturally. Because the Source is real, the Torah is real, and the Jewish Soul is real. And the Soul naturally wants to swim to its

Source. It just needs us to lower the obstacles and help it to hear its own voice.

Opening the Garden Gates

Judaism is a lifelong journey, not an array of perfunctory tasks. Our connection to God is a relationship, not an intellectual idea. The mitzvoth are a gift from God to enrich our lives through their meaningful observance, not to somehow entertain Him through their hollow performance.

We must cultivate true spiritual leaders who deserve the noble and great title of rabbi, and who are deserving representatives of a loving God and His loving and wise Torah.
We must trust and believe in the power of the Torah to prove itself against the world's challenges, and its inherent ability to speak to and resonate within the individual Jewish Soul.

We must decouple the foundations of trusting God and believing in the infinite truth and beauty of all of His mitzvoth from the capacity to observe any specific mitzvoth at a given moment in an individual's Journey.

We must encourage patient and graduated growth in the practice of mitzvoth, rather than creating an overwhelming feeling that everything must be fulfilled at once and nothing less is adequate.

We must find the approaches to engagement that cultivate desire, replacing the tools of intimidation that compel obedience.

We must become religious about the foundation of our Torah that emphasizes the mitzvoth of how we treat one another (ben adam leHaveiro), and avoid judging the stature of another Jew by the aspects of their Judaism that belong to God and the individual.

We must cultivate and openly celebrate personal relationships with God and the mitzvoth we practice, first in our own lives, and then in the way we share Judaism with our children and our students.

And we must learn to talk to God as we would talk to our closest friend. And discover as individuals how much He has always been waiting to hear from us, and how much He cares to be part of our lives.

The Garden of Judaism is beautiful. Let us re-open the gates for our children and for ourselves.