

# Torah Talks

## "Between Responsibility & Human Frailty"

### Hillel @ Virginia Tech

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Source Sheet by Dr. Samuel J Kessler

#### Part One

#### Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*

*Lift up your eyes and see.* How does a man lift up his eyes to see a little higher than himself? *The grand premise of religion is that man is able to surpass himself*; that man who is part of this world may enter into a relationship with Him who is greater than the world; that man may lift up his mind and be attached to the absolute; that man who is conditioned by a multiplicity of factors is capable of living with demands that are unconditioned. How does one rise above the horizon of the mind? How does one free oneself from the perspectives of ego, group, earth, and age? How does one find a way in this world that would lead to an awareness of Him who is beyond this world?

#### Exodus 20:15-18

(15) All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance.

(16) "You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die."

(17) Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray."

#### שמות כ': ט"ו-י"ח

(טו) וְכָל-הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת  
וְאֶת-הַלְפִיזִים וְאֶת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת-הַהָר עֹשֶׂן  
וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּנְעוּ וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרֶחֶק:

(טז) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר-אַתָּה עִמָּנוּ  
וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל-יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים פֶּן-נָמוּת:

(יז) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם אַל-תִּירְאוּ כִּי  
לְבַעֲבוֹר נִסּוּת אֶתְכֶם בָּא הָאֱלֹהִים וּבְעִבּוֹר  
תִּהְיֶה יְרֵאתוֹ עַל-פְּנֵיכֶם לְבַלְתִּי תִחַטְּאוּ:

(18) So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

(יח) וַיֵּעַמְד הָעָם מֵרָחֵק וּמִשָּׁה נִגַּשׁ  
אֶל־הָעַרְפָּל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים: (פ)

### Shabbat 88a

The Torah says, “And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; **and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount**” (Exodus 19:17). **Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said:** the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: **If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aḥa bar Ya’akov said:** From here there is a **substantial caveat** to the obligation to fulfill the **Torah**. The Jewish people can claim that they were coerced into accepting the Torah, and it is therefore not binding. **Rava said:** Even so, they again accepted it in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: “The Jews **ordained, and took upon them,** and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them” (Esther 9:27), and he taught: The Jews **ordained what they had already taken upon themselves** through coercion at Sinai.

### Shabbat 88a

**Ḥizkiya said:** What is the meaning of that which is written: “You caused sentence to be heard from heaven; the earth feared, and was silent” (Psalms 76:9)? **If it was afraid, why was it silent; and if it was silent, why was it afraid? Rather,** the meaning is: **At first, it was afraid, and in the end, it was silent.** “You caused sentence to be heard from heaven” refers to the revelation at Sinai. **And why was the earth**

### שבת פ"ח א

(שמות יט, יז) ויִתְצַבּוּ בַתְּחִתִּית הַהָר א"ר  
אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה  
הקב"ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם  
אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו  
שם תהא קבורתכם א"ר אחא בר יעקב  
מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא אמר רבא  
אעפ"כ הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש דכתיב  
(אסתר ט, כז) קימו וקבלו היהודים קיימו  
מה שקיבלו כבר

### שבת פ"ח א

אמר חזקיה מאי דכתיב (תהלים עו, ט)  
משמים השמעת דין ארץ יראה ושקטה אם  
יראה למה שקטה ואם שקטה למה יראה  
אלא בתחילה יראה ולבסוף שקטה ולמה  
יראה כדריש לקיש דאמר ריש לקיש מאי  
דכתיב (בראשית א, לא) ויהי ערב ויהי  
בקר יום הששי ה' יתירה למה לי מלמד  
שהתנה הקב"ה עם מעשה בראשית ואמר

**afraid?** It is **in accordance with** the statement of **Reish Lakish, as Reish Lakish said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “And there was evening and there was morning, *the sixth day*”** (Genesis 1:31)? **Why do I require the superfluous *heh***, the definite article, which does not appear on any of the other days? It teaches that the **Holy One, Blessed be He, established a condition with the act of Creation, and said to them: If Israel accepts the Torah on the sixth day of Sivan, you will exist; and if not, I will return you to chaos and disorder.**

להם אם ישראל מקבלים התורה אתם מתקיימין ואם לאו אני מחזיר אתכם לתוהו ובוהו:

## Part Two

### Exodus 32:1-6

(1) When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.”

(2) Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”

(3) And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.

(4) This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

(5) When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: “Tomorrow

### שמות ל"ב:א-ו'

(א) וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בִשְׁשׁ מִשָּׁה לָרְדָת מֹנֶהֱרָ וַיִּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם וַעֲשֵׂה־לָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי־יָנָה מִשָּׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה־תְּהִי לּוֹ:

(ב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְקָם אַהֲרֹן פָּרְקוּ גַזְמֵי הַזֹּהָב וְאֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם וְהִבִּיאוּ אֵלָי:

(ג) וַיִּתְּפְּרוּ כָל־הָעָם אֶת־גַּזְמֵי הַזֹּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם וַיִּבִּיאוּ אֶל־אַהֲרֹן:

(ד) וַיִּקַּח מֵיָדָם וַיַּצַּר אֹתוֹ בְּחֹרֶט וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסִּכָּה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

(ה) וַיֵּרָא אַהֲרֹן וַיְבֹן מִזְבֵּחַ לְפָנָיו וַיִּקְרָא אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר תָּג לָהּ מִחָר:

shall be a festival of the LORD!”

(6) Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

(ו) וַיִּשְׁכְּמוּ מִמַּחֲרַת וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת וַיִּגְשׁוּ  
שְׁלָמִים וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם לֶאֱכֹל וְשָׂתוּ וַיִּקְמוּ לְצַחֵק:  
(פ)

#### Avodah Zarah 5a

§ The Gemara discusses the sin of the Golden Calf. **Reish Lakish says: Come and let us be grateful to our ancestors** who sinned with the Golden Calf, **as had they not sinned we would not have come into the world.** Reish Lakish explains: **As it is stated: “I said: You are godlike beings, and all of you sons of the Most High”** (Psalms 82:6), which indicates that they had become like angels and would not have propagated offspring. Then, God states: **After you ruined your deeds: “Yet you shall die like a man,** and fall like one of the princes” (Psalms 82:7).

#### עבודה זרה ה' א

אמר ר"ל בואו ונחזיק טובה לאבותינו  
שאלמלא הן לא חטאו אנו לא באנו לעולם  
שנאמר (תהלים פב, ו) אני אמרתי אלקים  
אתם ובני עליון כלכם חבלתם מעשיכם אכן  
כאדם תמותון וגו'

#### Avodah Zarah 5a

Is this **to say that if they had not sinned** with the Golden Calf **they would not have sired** children? **But isn't it written** that Noah and his children were instructed: **“And you, be fruitful, and multiply”** (Genesis 9:7)? This instruction was **until Sinai.** Isn't it **also written** about **at Sinai: “Go say to them: Return to your tents”** (Deuteronomy 5:27), which means that they were instructed to resume marital relations? That verse is referring **to the enjoyment of conjugal rights.**

#### עבודה זרה ה' א

למימרא דאי לא חטאו לא הוו מולדו  
והכתיב (בראשית ט, ז) ואתם פרו ורבו עד  
סיני בסיני נמי כתיב (דברים ה, כז) לך  
אמור להם שובו לכם לאהליכם לשמחת  
עונה

#### Avodah Zarah 5a

**But isn't it written: “That it might be good for them, and with their children forever”** (Deuteronomy 5:26). This verse is

#### עבודה זרה ה' א

והכתיב (דברים ה, כו) למען ייטב להם  
ולבניהם וגו' לאותן העומדים על הר סיני

referring to those who stood at Mount Sinai.

#### Avodah Zarah 5a

**But doesn't Reish Lakish say: What is the meaning of that which is written: "This is the book of the generations of Adam, in the day that God created man" (Genesis 5:1)? Did Adam the first have a book? It teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, showed Adam the first every generation and its expositors, every generation and its Sages, every generation and its leaders. When Adam arrived at the generation of Rabbi Akiva, he rejoiced in his Torah and was saddened by his death. Adam said: "How weighty also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them" (Psalms 139:17).**

#### Avodah Zarah 5a

**And Rabbi Yosei says: Son of David will not come until all the souls of the body have been finished, as it is stated: "For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth; for the spirit that enwraps itself is from Me, and the souls that I have made" (Isaiah 57:16).**

#### Avodah Zarah 5a

**Do not say we would not have come into the world, rather, as though we had not come into the world. Is this to say that if the Jewish people had not sinned they would not have died? But isn't the chapter on widows whose husbands die childless (Deuteronomy 25:5–10) written in the Torah, and the chapter that addresses the inheritance a deceased father bequeaths to his sons (Numbers 27:8–11) is also written?**

#### עבודה זרה ה' א

והאמר ר"ל מאי דכתיב (בראשית ה, א) זה ספר תולדות אדם וגו' וכי ספר היה לו לאדם הראשון מלמד שהראה לו הקב"ה לאדם הראשון דור דור ודורשיו דור דור וחכמיו דור דור ופרנסיו כיון שהגיע לדורו של ר"ע שמח בתורתו ונתעצב במיתתו אמר (תהלים קלט, יז) ולי מה יקרו רעיד אל [וגו']

#### עבודה זרה ה' א

וא"ר יוסי אין בן דוד בא עד שיכלו נשמות שבגוף שנאמר (ישעיהו נז, טז) [כי לא לעולם אריב ולא לנצח אקצוף] כי רוח מלפני יעטוף ונשמות אני עשיתי

#### עבודה זרה ה' א

לא תימא אנו לא באנו לעולם אלא כמי שלא באנו לעולם למימרא דאי לא חטאו לא הוו מייתי והכתיב פרשת יבמות ופרשת נחלות

**Avodah Zarah 5a**

These passages were written **conditionally**. **And are verses written conditionally? Yes, as this** is what **Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish** says: **What** is that **which is written**: “**And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day**” (Genesis 1:31)? This **teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, established a condition with the acts of Creation, and He said: If the Jewish people accept the Torah at the revelation at Sinai, all is well. But if they do not accept it, I will return you to chaos and disorder.**

**Avodah Zarah 5a**

The Gemara **raises an objection** from a *baraita*: “**Who would give that they had such a heart as this always, to fear Me, and keep all My commandments, that it might be good for them, and with their children forever**” (Deuteronomy 5:26). The *baraita* states that it **was not possible to nullify the Angel of Death over them, as the decree was already issued** from the time of creation.

**Avodah Zarah 5a**

Rather, the *baraita* explains that **the Jewish people accepted the Torah only in order that no nation or tongue would rule over them, as it is stated**: “**That it might be good for them, and with their children forever.**” This indicates that had the Jewish people not sinned they would not have achieved immortality, which contradicts Reish Lakish’s statement.

**Avodah Zarah 5a**

The Gemara answers: Reish Lakish **said** his statement **in accordance with** the opinion of

**עבודה זרה ה' א**

על תנאי ומי כתיבי קראי על תנאי אין דהכי אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש מאי דכתיב (בראשית א, לא) ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום הששי מלמד שהתנה הקב"ה עם מעשה בראשית ואמר אם מקבלין ישראל את התורה מוטב ואם לאו אחזיר אתכם לתוהו ובוהו

**עבודה זרה ה' א**

מיתיבי (דברים ה, כו) מי יתן והיה לבבם זה להם לבטל מהם מלאך המות א"א שכבר נגזרה גזרה

**עבודה זרה ה' א**

הא לא קיבלו ישראל את התורה אלא כדי שלא תהא אומה ולשון שולטת בהן שנאמר (דברים ה, כו) למען ייטב להם ולבניהם עד עולם

**עבודה זרה ה' א**

הוא דאמר כי האי תנא דתניא רבי יוסי

that *tanna*. As it is taught in a *baraita* that **Rabbi Yosei says: The Jewish people accepted the Torah only in order that the Angel of Death would not rule over them, as it is stated: "I said: You are godlike beings, and all of you sons of the Most High"** (Psalms 82:6). Then, God states: **After you ruined your deeds, "yet you shall die like a man, and fall like one of the princes"** (Psalms 82:7).

אומר לא קיבלו ישראל את התורה אלא  
כדי שלא יהא מלאך המות שולט בהן  
שנאמר (תהלים פב, ו) אני אמרתי אלקים  
אתם ובני עליון כלכם חבלתם מעשיכם אכן  
כאדם תמותון

#### Avodah Zarah 5a

The Gemara asks: **And also, according to Rabbi Yosei, isn't it written: "That it might be good for them, and with their children forever,"** from which it may be inferred that although it will be **good** for them if they remain in this elevated state, **there** will still be **death**? The Gemara answers: **Rabbi Yosei could have said to you: Since there is no death, there is no greater good than this,** i.e., the promise of the verse is immortality.

#### עבודה זרה ה' א

ורבי יוסי נמי הכתיב למען ייטב להם  
ולבניהם עד עולם טובה הוא דהויא הא  
מיתה איכא (רבי יוסי) אמר לך כיון דליכא  
מיתה אין לך טובה גדולה מזו

#### Avodah Zarah 5a

The Gemara inquires: **And according to the first *tanna* as well, isn't it written: "Yet you shall die like a man,"** which indicates that their mortality was decreed only due to the sin of the Golden Calf? The Gemara answers: **What** is meant by **death**? It means **poverty. As the Master said: Four are considered as though they were dead: These are a pauper, a blind person, a leper, and one who has no children.**

#### עבודה זרה ה' א

ות"ק נמי הכתיב אכן כאדם תמותון מאי  
מיתה עניות דאמר מר ארבעה חשובים  
כמתים אלו הן עני סומא ומצורע ומי שאין  
לו בנים

