

Mitzvot and Tradition

מֹשֶׁה קִיבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמִסְרָהּ לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ, וִיהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים לְנָבִיאִים, וְנָבִיאִים מִסְרוּהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלוֹשָׁה דְבָרִים: הָיוּ מְתוּנִים בְּדִין, וְהִעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וְעָשׂוּ סִיג לַתּוֹרָה.

At Sinai Moses received the Torah and handed it over to Joshua who handed it over to the elders who handed it over to the prophets who in turn handed it over to the men of the Great Assembly. The latter said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah.

--Pirke Avot 1:1

רַב אָמַר, לֹא נִתְּנוּ הַמִּצְוֹת אֶלָּא לְצַרְף בְּהֵן אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת. וְכִי מָה אֵיכָפֶת לִיָּה לְהַקְדֹּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמִי שֶׁשׁוּחַט מִן הַצֹּאֵר אוֹ מִי שֶׁשׁוּחַט מִן הָעוֹרֶף. הָיוּ לֹא נִתְּנוּ הַמִּצְוֹת אֶלָּא לְצַרְף בָּהֶם אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת.

Rav said, the mitzvot were given only in order that human beings might be purified by them. For what does the Holy One care whether a person kills an animal by the throat or by the nape of the neck? Hence their purpose is to refine human beings.

--*Midrash* Genesis Rabbah 44:1

לֹא יֹאמֶר אָדָם, אִי אֶפְשִׁי לְאֹכֹל בֶּשֶׂר חֲזִיר... אֲבָל אֶפְשִׁי, וּמָה אֶעֱשֶׂה וְאָבִי שֶׁבְּשָׁמַיִם גָּזַר עָלַי.

A person should not say, "I don't want to eat pork"... but rather, "I want it, but what can I do if my father in Heaven has commanded me not to do it!"

--Midrash Sifra on Leviticus 20:26

זְכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת, לְקַדְּשׁוֹ.

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

--Exodus (*Shemot*) 20:8

He who feels in his heart a genuine tie with the life of his people cannot possibly conceive of the existence of the Jewish people apart from "Queen Sabbath." We can say without exaggeration that more than Israel preserved the Sabbath, the Sabbath preserved Israel.

--Ahad Ha'am, *Al Parashat Derachim*

Born Asher Hirsch Ginsberg in 1856, Ahad Ha'am was an early leader of the Zionist movement. He believed in building a strong Jewish national consciousness. Al Parashat Derakhim is a four-volume compilation of his essays.

The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self....

To set apart one day week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature—is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for man's progress than the Sabbath?...

In the tempestuous ocean of time and toil there are islands of stillness where man may enter a harbor and reclaim his dignity. The island is the seventh day, the Sabbath, a day of detachment from things, instruments and practical affairs as well as of attachment to the spirit.

--Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*

The Torah and all its commandments in their minutest details, as expressed in thought and deed, for a great and mighty Divine poem, a poem of confident trust and love. Every commandment and law has a unique musical quality that the congregation of Israel perceives and appreciates. It evokes the blossoms of reverent joy and song within us. It is for us to remove the warts from the ears of our sons, "the thorns and thistles that surround the noble flower," so that the waves of song will echo in their hearts as well, uplifting their souls with the same natural exaltation that is common to all in whom the spirit of Judaism is properly developed.

--Abraham Isaac Kook, quoted in *Banner of Jerusalem* by Jacob B. Agus

Rav Kook (1865-1935) was a great scholar, who served as the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in the land of Israel in modern times. He was a strong Zionist, independent thinker, and prolific writer.

What then is Torah? It is a coat of many colors, a spiritual garb of infinite variety. Torah is the embodiment of Jewish thought and vision; the repository of Israel's historic experiences; the vehicle of its communion with the Infinite; the medium of divine speech and human love; the authoritarian voice: Thou Shalt, Thou Shalt Not; the alternating currents of divine, thunderous wrath and the warmth of Messianic hopes and dreams for Israel and mankind. Torah is the distillation of the soul of Israel into the written word of its classic literature, in the Institutions in which it has taken shelter. But the Torah in the ideal cannot be chained to the written word nor contained wholly in the institutions designed for human beings. It is the indwelling of the divine spirit in living

souls as expressed in the genius of Israel.

Torah is the quintessence of Judaism. There can be no Judaism worthy of the name without Torah. A Torah-less Judaism would be pulseless, nerveless: a corpse, without life or potency.

--Abraham A. Neuman, *Landmarks and Goals: Historical Studies and Addresses*

Abraham A. Neuman was an American rabbi, historian, and educator. He served as president of Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning from 1940 to 1966.