

Faith Lectures: Revelation: Torah From Heaven

26 March 2001

[Unedited verbatim transcript]

Jodie Cohen Good evening Chief Rabbi, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to welcome you all to the fourth lecture in the Chief Rabbi's lecture series on Faith. The subject of this evening's discussion is "Revelation: 'Torah from Heaven'". We will take a few questions after the talk but, without further ado, I would like to pass you over to the Chief Rabbi, Professor Jonathan Sacks.

Chief Rabbi, Professor Jonathan Sacks

Friends, as is my wont, let me begin with a story. I recently heard a wonderful story about a fruit seller in lower East side in New York who complained to a friend that he wasn't doing very much business. The friend said, "Well, look, you know, you're living in a very Jewish area. Do something to bring in the Jewish customers. Put on the shop 'Fresh fruit from Israel'" - which he did and he got a lot of customers. After a week he decided to go one better. 'Fresh fruit from Jerusalem.' Even more people came in. The next week he decided to go one better still and he put on the shop 'Fresh fruit from the kotel'. After a week his friend came in and said, "How did it work?" And he said, "Terrible! They all came in, kissed the fruit and left."

Friends, you know that I respect that kind of faith, the kotel-kissing kind of faith, but I have been trying in these lectures to chart another kind of faith that allows us to speak from and to our intelligence. I have been taking a lot of risks and tonight will be no exception.

I want to thank those of you who have written me very wonderful and extensive letters. Forgive me for simply just not physically having had the time to reply. We will try and look, at the end of the lectures, at some way of creating a real dialogue between those of you who want to take it further - especially those of you who have written. Just bear with me on that.

Tonight I am going to throw out a lot of ideas. I am sorry. I could not do otherwise given the nature of the subject. If my previous lectures have constituted a kind of chapter, tonight represents a kind of book. So, decode it at leisure if you don't follow it while it is going on.

However, let me begin with a drama. It is a drama in two acts. Its setting is the same place but the two acts are separated by something like 500 years.

Scene 1: Mount Sinai, otherwise known as Mount Horev. The Israelites are gathered at the foot of the mount. God speaks and there follows the unique moment, not only in Jewish history but in the religious history of mankind, the only time when God is spoken of as speaking to an entire nation. There is thunder, lightning, a blast of the shofar - vayar ha'am - "and the people are afraid" - veyanu'u - "and they tremble" - veyamdu mirahok - "and they stand a long way away". And they say to Moshe rabeinu: You go and speak to God; if we continue to hear His voice we will die."

A later commentary on that moment, which you will all know - we say it on Friday night, just before Lecho dodi, Psalm 29. This is a commentary on that moment which talks about Kol hashem bakoach, kol hashem behodor - the sheer power and majesty of the voice of God. Kol hashem shover arazim veyishaber hashem et arzei halevanon. This is a voice that shatters cedars, the cedars of Lebanon. There is an overwhelming presence of the voice.

Scene 2: 500 years later. Now it is Elijah who is on Mount Horev. Elijah stands on that mountain where Moses once stood and he sees in front of him a whirlwind shattering rocks, crushing mountains and God is not in the whirlwind. And then there is a violent earthquake - but God is not in the earthquake. Then he sees a fire - but God is not in the fire. Finally, he hears a kol demama daka - and that is where God is. Kol demama daka is standardly translated as 'a still, small voice'. An accurate translation of it would be 'the sound of a thin silence'.

But my translation of it is different. What is a kol demama daka? A voice that you can hear only if you are listening. That is the drama of Torah min hashomayim. That mighty revelation which is the very beginning of our collective history turns a group of slaves into a nation, but which, over time, no longer forces itself on us - bakoach - by sheer power, but becomes instead a kol demama daka - a voice to which we have to listen if we are to hear it at all. That is the drama of revelation.

My subject tonight is the most controversial of all subjects in modern Jewish history, the belief that Torah min hashomayim - that the Torah (which means of course in this context the five Mosaic books) is the unmediated word of God. That became wildly controversial, especially in the 20th century. We know that it was not solely a modern controversy. Already in the time of the Mishnah - we are talking about here by the 2nd century, quite possibly before then - we have in the Mishnah in Sanhedrin chapter 12, that amongst those she'ayn lahem helek le'olam haba - amongst those who have no share in the world to come are - ha'omer ayn Torah min hashomayim - those who deny the doctrine of Torah from heaven. That is taking the controversy back almost 2000 years.

We know as well, by implication at the very least, that something very much like this challenge occurs in the Bible itself. Do you know where? Where is Torah min hashomayim challenged? - It is actually in the Korach rebellion - and this is all by implication. When Moses prays for some sign to be given that ki lo milibi - "that all this stuff I am telling you and in God's name is not from my own making it up". In other words, already one of the strands of the Korach rebellion - and it is a very complex passage - but one of the strands is an assault on Moses as a prophet reporting the words of God. That is, therefore, a continuing debate in Jewry.

However, it was in modern times, starting with Spinoza, that the drama became very acute and in the end split Jewry into many fragments and that is where it is today. Let me say in advance that I believe - and here I am not asking you to share this belief but I am speaking strictly personally - I believe that Torah min hashomayim - the concept of Torah as revelation - is not simply one belief in Judaism. It is the belief of Judaism - the one from which all else follows and without which nothing would follow at all. I even believe that it is more than that. That without Torah in hashomayim Judaism ceases to be what it is, namely a faith, a covenant between God and his people and becomes nothing more than an ethnicity or a culture - which is a great thing to do but it is not exactly what makes us unique as a people.

I would even go further. G. K. Chesterton. What's the definition of an antisemite? One who hates Jews more than is strictly necessary. I think G. K. Chesterton might fairly be said to belong to that category. He once said, and of course got it significantly wrong, that America was the only country founded on a creed. In fact, as you know, the American experiment was done by the those early Puritans specifically on the Jewish model, because Israel was the first and fully the only nation to be founded on a creed. Its creed created Jews as a nation before any of the normal characteristics of a nation: before they had a land; before they had sovereignty. All the normal things you associate with a nation. Before then, Jews were formed into a nation by the creed by the covenantal moment at Sinai. Therefore, that covenantal definition is, for me - and I am willing to be proved wrong - but, for me, it is the only coherent definition of Jews as a people, the only definition which has stood the test of time.

So tonight we are going to look at an extraordinary drama. I am going to very briefly outline, in about three minutes, the history of biblical criticism. Equally quickly, I am going to say why I think there was such a thing and why I am unmoved by it. And then I want to turn to the positive side: my analysis of what revelation is in Judaism, what Torah min hashomayim is - and what is that other principle in Judaism, lo bashomayim he - the Torah is not in heaven, which is an equally important principle.

Let us begin. Here we are in the mid-17th century with that descendant of Marranos called Baruch alias Benedict de Spinoza who writes a book, which eventually gets him excommunicated from the Great Synagogue in Amsterdam, called "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus" - a best-seller if ever I heard one! This book, as you know, scandalised both Jews and Christians because they thought that Spinoza was an atheist. Novalis, however, called Spinoza "a God-intoxicated man".

Spinoza in this book becomes the first biblical critic. He argues that the Torah is not the word of God, it is the word of man - and which man? Presumably Moses, which Spinoza is prepared to accept for the most part. However, de-ciphering an extremely cryptic riddle by the 11th century commentator the Ibn Ezra, Spinoza concludes that some few passages in the Mosaic books, some few - a few verses here and there, were added to the Torah after the death of Moses. Thus far Spinoza.

Secondly, you know that that process which Spinoza began was taken progressively further over the next 200 years to a point where at least some scholars were suggesting - indeed most of the time - that rather than being the work of a single author, the Torah, the Mosaic books, were the work of several different authors working at different times in different environments and that became known as the documentary hypothesis. And this of course culminated in the work of Wellhausen that there were four authors operating, as I say, in different milieu.

One was called "J". One was called "E". "J", of course, according to Harold Bloom was a woman. I am sure you have come across the "Book of 'J'". "J" is the one who uses the four-letter name of God, HaShem. "E" is the one who uses Elokim. So there was a "J" author. There was an "E" author. There was a "P" author who was a bit of a Cohen, a priestly author. There was a "D" author who wrote the Book of Deuteronomy, and there was a guy called "R", the copy editor, who stuck it all together.

That is the culmination, the high point, of historical or documentary criticism. That was the second stage.

The third stage, and here you just have to take it on trust, is that certain Christian movements, mainstream, began to accept the broad outline of historical criticism of the Torah and so, many years later, some Jews came to the conclusion that if Christianity can survive through admitting biblical criticism and Christianity is religion, then Judaism is religion. Therefore, Judaism can survive accepting biblical criticism. This was an enormous about-turn in Jewish life.

Those of you familiar with the history of Conservative Judaism will know that its great architect, the man who brought the Cairo Geniza to Cambridge, his name was Solomon Schechter. He was the great principal of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the home of the Conservative movement in the States, and was an unequivocal critic of biblical criticism. He called higher criticism "the higher anti-Semitism". So it was a real volte-face that Jewish groups took this on board.

That, in a nutshell, is 300-plus years of biblical criticism. Now, I want to say two things about it. The first, I am going to have to say in shorthand because it has been said about science by a famous writer called T. S. Kuhn in his book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions". It was said in a number of wonderful books on art by the great Ernst Gombrich. But I am going to tell it in the form of a joke. It is much easier to tell it that way rather than philosophically.

Goldberg, suffering from a serious whatever-it-is, goes to see his psychiatrist who then, wishing to diagnose Goldberg's condition, puts him through what is called the Rorschach tests where you have to look at an ink blot and say what it reminds you of. Goldberg looks at this ink blot and says: "Sex!" He shows him another ink blot. "Sex!" He shows him a third ink blot. He says "Sex!" The psychiatrist says, "Goldberg, you're in trouble. You're obsessed with sex!" And Goldberg says, "No, I'm not. Can I help it if you keep showing me all those dirty pictures?"

In other words, there was a view - and it prevailed in the enlightenment and you will read it in John Locke, you will read it everywhere - that first we see and then we believe. The truth, however, is quite other. First we believe and then we see. Our ability to observe things is dependent on our conceptual frame that we bring to bear on things and there are certain things we will only see if we have certain mental tools, and other we won't see at all. In other words, our perception is bounded by our expectations. And that is exactly what happened in the case of Torah and led to these three developments that I have given you.

First of all, Spinoza. Did Spinoza read the Torah and conclude that this work was not written by God? The answer is no. No way! Spinoza formulated a very famous principle called Deus sive natura - God or nature - that God was the universe, seen under a particular aspect. In other words, Spinoza, in common with most of the figures in the enlightenment who believed what was generally called Deism, that God was the First Cause, who launched the universe into motion and then withdrew - as it says in the loo in the Cambridge University library, "God exists: it's just that He doesn't want to get involved". And that is the Deist view of God.

Whenever a philosopher looks at God as Spinoza did, then he will understand God as a concept, as the universe seen in a different way or the First Cause. In other words, as an "it". And there is one thing an "it" cannot do and that is speak. That is the primary difference between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle; between the God of Judaism and the God of Deists, or Pantheists, or pantheists, that there is only one thing God cannot do, i.e. God cannot speak. Because God is not a person. God is a force, a totality, whatever it is. But God is not a person and therefore, by definition, God cannot speak. Therefore, before Spinoza ever opened Tenach, he knew that Torah could not be the word of God because for him the phrase "God speaks" is a contradiction in terms.

Therefore, you have to conclude that whoever wrote it wasn't God. Therefore, it was a human being. In which case, which human being? That is conclusion at which Spinoza arrived. But it was the premise with which he began. There was no way Spinoza, in his conceptual framework, could understand a God who speaks. In general, there is no way philosophy can understand a God who speaks. That is number one.

Then we move forward in time. And if, for the 17th and 18th centuries, the central word was "reason", in the 19th century, what was the central word? - The key word for the 19th century is "history". History of a particular kind, bounded by another key word of the 19th century which is the word "progress". Man - or history - is seen as an unbroken upward path from primitive to sophisticated, from simple to complex. And you found that in philosophy through Hegel. You found it in biology through Darwin. You found it in anthropology through Sir James Frazer and that particular school that saw all contemporary societies as infinitely more sophisticated than primitive societies. The organising principle of the 19th century is history.

Therefore, when Wellhausen sits down and reads Tenach, what does he want to see? He wants to see history. Now you and I know that there are different voices in the Torah. The Torah is scored in different genre: law, narrative, x speaks, y speaks, God, man, etc. etc. So, therefore, if you grade those on the level of, according to your understanding, the more primitive and the more sophisticated, then you begin to disentangle it and say the primitive bits came very early; the more sophisticated bits came very late. Then

you do a chronology. You tear the thing into little bits and you date them to what you think is the most primitive to early: what you think is the most sophisticated as late - which is exactly what Wellhausen did.

Wellhausen was interested in history before he ever opened Tenach. Once he opened Tenach he found confirmation of the only thing he could see it as in the first place: a historical document that was produced over the course of history - which we can now disentangle into different layers.

Therefore, Spinoza and Wellhausen saw in the text exactly what they expected to see.

And now we come to the third stage which is Christianity. Here I want to make two fundamental points. Have any of you read Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian short story writer? You have? So you will remember his little short story called "Pierre Menard, [?] author of Don Quixote", which is a story about a crazy lunatic guy called Pierre Menard who sets out to write Don Quixote in exactly the same words as Cervantes wrote Don Quixote. The only difference was that Don Quixote in 1605 is talking from the advantage point of the late Middle Ages whereas Pierre Menard is talking exactly the same words - he is ironic and anachronistic, etc. etc. In other words, Borges is giving us the metaphysical fiction that you have two books which have the same words but they are two different books. That is his fiction.

Now let me ask you: do we have a case of that, not in fiction but in fact? The answer is obviously yes. There are two books which are completely different from one another but which have the same words. What are they? Tenach and Old Testament. They are completely different books. But they have the same words.

Tenach is whatever it is for us. The Old Testament - which is a quite different document, which in Christianity is seen as prefiguring a particular semi-divine, semi-human being who is the Messiah, who liberates humanity from original sin. There is no way that reading emerges out of the Jewish reading of Tenach. There is no way at all. These are two different books. They just happen to have the same words. I beg you to internalise that. Bite it. Inhale. Whatever you like! You can have two books with the same words but they are different things.

Now, this is a fact which Jewish thinkers forgot to reckon with. And they made a very big mistake. They made the following mistake: that what the concept of revelation means in Christianity is not the same as what revelation means in Judaism. There is a totally fundamental difference and you can see this if you ask the following question. Where does God reveal himself? In what?

In Christianity the answer is: in a person. In Judaism the answer is: in words.

Now that is a very fundamental distinction. It means that, for instance, the four Gospels in Christianity are not revelation: they are evidence of revelation. They tell the story of revelation - which exists not on the page but in a person, in a life, etc. That is why, incidentally, Christians found it not difficult to accept the documentary hypothesis that there were four authors of the Tenach. Because in fact Christianity has exactly that. Where does it have it? In the four Gospels. Instead of "J", "P" and "D" they are called Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But there was never any attempt to, as it were, weave those into a single document because they are not revelation: they are evidence of, testimony to, the Gospels. The besorot tovot - declaration of good news - all the rest of it. They are not revelation. They are evidence of revelation.

Therefore, where in Christianity God is incarnate in a human being, in Judaism that concept is, as you know, inconceivable because if God is incarnate in a human being, God is in Judaism incarnate in every human being as tzelem elokim. And as for one individual being the son of God, we believe that every Jew

is son or daughter of God, chavivim Yisroel shenikrim banim lamakom. "Precious are you O Israel," says Rabbi Akiva, "because you are called God's children." Or, as God announces through Moses to Pharaoh, Beni bechori Yisrael - "My child, my firstborn, Israel."

In other words, Judaism and Christianity occupy extremely different world views. I am not critical of either nor do I wish to compare them, but they are different at absolute root! And what is fundamental is that in Christianity you can accept the book of criticism because the words are not holy! The words point to that which is holy. Whereas in Judaism, the words themselves are the vehicles of revelation. They are what is holy.

That is why, when Christianity saw Tenach, it saw what it wanted to see, which was evidence of this person already there in the prophecies of Isaiah, etc. etc. That is why we can not go down the road of Spinoza or of Wellhausen or of Christianity ancient or modern - because their book is not our book, even though it has the same words. You read it as a history book, as Wellhausen and Spinoza did. You read it as a testimony to something beyond the text, as Christianity did. Whatever you do, you are not reading Torah: you are reading a different book that belongs to a different genre, a different literary category. It's a different book.

Now, I just want to ask: Does this mean that subjectivism is true? As in "Alice in Wonderland", somebody said to Alice that "words mean exactly what I want them to mean" - I think.

[Interjection from member of audience: "Humpty Dumpty".]

[Quotation is from "Through the Looking Glass" by Lewis Carroll]

Humpty Dumpty said it! Excellent! Thank you. "When I use a word ... it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

Am I forced to that conclusion? If there is a Spinozist reading, a Wellhausen reading, a Christian reading and there is a Jewish reading - are they all merely subjective? You choose what you like and you take your pick: what is called in literature nowadays 'deconstructionism'. And the answer is no. The answer is no. I do not hold all these readings on a par. And the reason is - that the Spinoza approach, the Wellhausen approach and from a Jewish point of view the Christian approach, do not read the text. They read through the text to something beyond the text. Something which, in the case of Spinoza and Wellhausen is the question: 'What actually happened?' In the case of Christianity, the person who was in his life revelation. They don't read the text. They read through and beyond the text. They take the text as a means of learning about something more interesting than the text.

And believe me, I believe that is not a way to read a text. That is why, for those of you who are familiar with recent biblical scholarship, recent biblical scholarship has moved in a new direction altogether. We have three new schools of biblical criticism, all of which are much closer to - although not identical with - the Jewish approach.

One is called 'redaction criticism', which is looking at the text from the point of view of the final edition. Number two, there is a school called 'canonical criticism', which is not about those funny robes I have to wear so that people know who I am and that sort of thing. 'Canonical criticism', which has been developed by a professor of bible at Yale, Brevard Childs, is looking at the text as it was understood and received in the communities of faith. That is canonical criticism.

Thirdly, the bit that you are probably most familiar with because it is very accessible and enormously enlightening, which is literary criticism of the kind that you have probably read through the works of Robert Alter, Mayer Sternberg, etc. etc. You have read these people, yes?

So these three all do what earlier schools did not do, which is read the text. Don't read through it, beyond it, above it, behind it. Just read the text. All of those are the dominant forms of biblical criticism. None of them is like the Jewish view because none of them takes the text as the word of God. But at least they read the text and that is what makes these three new schools of biblical scholarship much more amenable - and I read them and I learn a great deal from them. As you know, I try and read all the apikursim! And I enjoy them - but I am not thus far impressed.

So here we are: that was my negative thing. Why Spinoza? Why Wellhausen? Why Christian biblical criticism? And the short answer is: each one had a particular logic at a particular time - but I don't believe each one was a response to the text as text. Still less a response to the text as word of God.

Now let us move on to the positive point. I want to begin with an extraordinarily powerful and enlightening paragraph from the great 19th century Jewish historian, Heinrich Graetz. Listen very carefully to what he says:

"The pagan perceives the divine in nature through the medium of the eye and he becomes conscious of it as something to be looked at. On the other hand, the Jew conceives God as being outside of nature and prior to it. The divine manifests itself through the will and through the medium of the ear. The pagan beholds his God: the Jew hears Him."

That is, I think, a wonderfully perceptive remark which must set us now on the trek to discovering what is Judaism. Incidentally, that analysis is carried out by lots and lots of people and I don't want to quote them all. Life's too short.

So you have, in other words, two kinds of culture. You have the culture of sight. You have a culture of sound. You have a culture in which the central intellectual act is seeing - the Greek *theoria* means 'seeing'. Theory is something you see. Or the Latin - *idea*. You know how you go - round the corner from you is a video shop? The word 'video' - the 'v' is a soft consonant which gets dropped. It comes from the same word as 'idea'. And *idea* is something you see. Greek culture is a sight-oriented culture. Judaism is the paradigm of a ear-oriented culture in which the primary act is not seeing but listening.

Now what does a visual culture produce? [Interjection from audience: "Statues and ..." - inaudible] Statues. Paintings. Architecture. Sculpture - and spectator sports. The most dignified of which (I daren't say anything about football because my team always lose whenever I do.) - but theatre. Theatre. Drama. In other words, those are the visual arts and of all of those, in every department, Greek culture reached a pinnacle that has rarely if ever been surpassed. They were the greatness of Greek culture.

In Judaism, where's the art? Where's the architecture? Where are the paintings? Where's the drama, the theatre? There isn't any. And this is fascinating because this shows us that Judaism is a culture not of the eye but of the ear. And it is not just, as you might think, because the third commandment prohibits the making of graven images. It is not just that. It goes much further. It goes into the very texture of biblical narrative.

Let me ask you a question. What did Abraham look like? Anyone know? Tall? Short? Fat? Red hair? What did Moshe Rabbenu look like? We haven't got a clue!

You know that, as Eric Auerbach pointed out in a very famous essay he wrote called "Odysseus's Scar" which is in his book called "Mimesis". Homer is full of vivid descriptions of the surfaces of things. You see, when you read Homer.

But when you read Tenach, you don't see anything very much. The text is what he calls "fraught with background". Anything interesting is left out of the text and you have to supply it from your own imagination. The Jewish text, the biblical text, is fraught with background. Or let me give you a different point. In other words, the prohibition against graven images even applies to visual descriptions in Tenach. You never get a description of somebody unless it is strictly necessary for the narrative. When do you need to know that somebody is beautiful? When somebody might threaten to take his wife and kill him - or to explain how come they fell in love at first sight. So we discover that Sarah was beautiful; that Rivka was gemilut chassidim; that Rachel was beautiful. But beyond that, 'beautiful'? What does that tell you? We still don't know what colour was her hair.

In the "Sunday Times" this week, apparently Cleopatra was short, fat and ugly but she was seductive anyway. One way and another, Jewish culture is so non-visual that we don't know what anyone looks like. Walter J. Ong - who is not a person you may have read but who has written some wonderful books: one called "Orality and Literacy"; another even better called "The Presence of the Word" - points out that sight deals in surfaces whereas sound deals, at the literal and metaphorical sense, with interiors.

What, for instance, do we see when we look at somebody? Obviously the most important thing we look at is their face. But what other clues do we have about their identity, their class, their lifestyle? Their clothes. Now, could you please, with the exception of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, give me a list of occasions where clothes appear and play a role in the book of Genesis?

[Interjections from audience.]

Esau - Jacob dresses up in Esau's clothes. Joseph - the brothers take his cloak and spill blood on it and they say he has been torn by a wild beast. Joseph in Egypt - [interjection] - they dress differently? Well where do clothes occupy a central part of Jews in Egypt? The story of Joseph. You remember? When Potiphar's wife - Joan Collins! - tries to seduce him and she runs away and he has her dress in his hands - No, sorry! She is holding onto his garment and he runs away. And she says that see, this is proof that he tried to rape me.

Any further example? [Interjections.] Tamar dresses up as a prostitute.

Now what is common to all those four occasions? The answer is: clothes deceive! (a) It wasn't Esau; it was Jacob. (b) Joseph hadn't been killed by a wild animal. (c) Joseph hadn't attempted to rape Potiphar's wife. (d) Tamar was not a prostitute. All of those are used to deceive. Good, bad, it doesn't matter. All of those were used to deceive. Sight does not reveal the truth. It reveals the opposite of the truth.

Now what is the Hebrew for a garment? [Interjection: Begeh.] What is the Hebrew for betrayal? [Interjections.] Oshamnu, bagadnu! Now just look at that! The very word that means 'clothes' means 'betrayal! In Judaism, it is not what you see that tells you what there is. It is what you hear - and that is all. If you rely on sight, you'll get it wrong.

What are we supposed to look at to get it right? Tzitzit. Ure'item oto uzechatem. Yes? Tzitzit are about seeing. And does anyone know what is the beginning of the sedrah in which tzitzit function? [Interjection: Shlach lecho.] Shlach lecho - which is about the spies. And the same word is used. Yes? Ure'item et ha'aretz - that is the motif word. "And you will see" - that verb occurs only three times in the Torah, twice in this sedrah. It says about tzitzit - ure'item oto - "and you shall see them".

The spies saw and they drew certain conclusions. They were the wrong conclusions. You know what they saw? Listen to this. If you ever need a defence of taking Judaism seriously, here it is. You remember that among the many things that Moses told the spies to do, he said: Look at the cities. Uma he'arim asher-hu yoshev bahena habemachanim im bemivtzarim. Go and look at the cities and see if they are open or fortified. And they came back and they say, vehe'arim betzurot me'od - we saw extremely well-fortified cities. In Dvarim Moses adds the touch that they were fortified up to the very heavens. So what did they do? They concluded that if the cities are strong, therefore the people are strong. That was the conclusion.

You know what Rashi says? Im bemachanim heim yoshevim - if they live in open cities - siman hu shechazakim heim - it is a sign that the people are strong because they don't need to barricade themselves behind great defences. They are quite sure that if anyone attacks them they will win. If bemivtzarim heim yoshevim, siman hu shechalashim heim - this is a sign that they are weak if they live behind walls.

Therefore, the spies saw - but what they saw wasn't there. They saw a strong people, but it was actually a people who were terrified.

And I just add, as my commentary on Jewish life, that do not think that those who live behind high walls, a self-imposed ghetto, are necessarily the strongest Jews. The strongest Jews are those who are able to live without those high walls. Confident in their faith they can engage in dialogue with other people's faith - or other people's culture.

Anyway, there it is. Sight does not tell you the truth. What about the other senses? Look at this. I want to give you an essay on the other four senses. We'll take sight out of the picture because the person concerned is blind. Here is Isaac and he is about to bless his son. What senses does he use? First of all he uses taste. Give me some of this venison that I associate with you. I want to taste what I like about you. Then - touch. He feels the garment. And then - smell. Re'ach bnei. "See, the smell of my child is like the smell of a field which God has blessed."

The three senses other than sight. Did they tell him the truth? What told him the truth? Hakol kol Yaakov. "The voice is the voice of Jacob." If only Isaac had listened to the voice instead of using the senses of smell, touch and taste, he would have got the right answer. He hears hakol kol Yaakov. - "The voice is the voice of Jacob" - but then he ignores it. You will understand, apart from anything else, this is a little drama about how it is sound and not sight that generates truth in Judaism.

Let me, incidentally, while we are at it - this is such a powerful tool for understanding things. I will just mention one thing very quickly. Sight cultures and sound cultures generate different ethical systems. What ethical system is associated with a sight culture? It is what anthropologists call a 'shame culture'. What is associated with a culture of sound is what is called a 'guilt culture'.

Shame is the terror we have of being seen by others in a situation that is unworthy of us. Guilt is the inner voice. Greece, of course, was a shame culture. Judaism is a guilt culture. Look, that's what we have mothers for, isn't it?

So, now I will show you something which I didn't see anywhere at all. Here it is. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and they eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Aytz hadat tov vera. And everyone asks - in fact it is the question Maimonides asks right at the beginning, Chapter 2 of "The Guide of the Perplexed" - What is so bad about eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge? Surely that is the highest thing we should aim at - to know the difference between good and evil? How can that be a sin?

However, I want to suggest here, using this new device: what was it that happened as a result of eating the fruit? First of all, what was the fruit? Ta'avah he laynayim. It was something you looked at and couldn't resist. It was desirable to the eyes. What then happens after they eat the fruit? Vatifakachnah aynay shnayhem. The eyes of both of them were opened and they felt shame. Before then, arumim hame velo yitboshashu - before then they were naked and they were not ashamed.

Now you see what is actually going on in the story of Adam and Eve. It wasn't that they acquired the knowledge of good and evil. It is that they acquired the wrong kind of knowledge of good and evil: that associated with sight rather than sound. That which looks nice instead of God's voice. They move from a culture of the ear - which is the Jewish culture, to the culture of an eye which is the pagan and Greek culture.

With this we come to the extraordinary idea of revelation in Judaism which still, I must admit, fills me with wonder and awe. In the ancient world, the world of myth, the world of paganism and including the world of Greece, there was no problem about revelation. No problem at all. Because the gods were eminently visible. You couldn't spend five minutes without bumping into one of them. Here it is. Where is God? It's the sun. It's the moon. It's the stars. It's the sky. It's the wind. It's the rain. It's the storm. It's the sea. The gods are anything but remote. They are right there, all around you. And the dividing line between the gods and nature on the one hand, or between gods and human beings on the other, is fuzzy at best. There is no problem of revelation.

The problem of revelation occurs only with the birth of Judaism, of radical monotheism, when God all of a sudden transcends the universe and is no longer seen in nature but wildly beyond. At that moment there is a crisis. Here it is in one of its most beautiful expressions, Psalm 8:

"When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers."

That is pure monotheism. This is monotheistic metaphor which is so radically different that the most supreme thing you can see is only the work of "Your fingers". And then he asks, ma ...ben-adam ke tifikedeinu - what then is man that you are mindful of him?

This extraordinary thing. Or when Isaiah says: hashomayim kisi vecha'aretz hadom raglai. "The heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool." This is the radical moment in which God is no longer in nature but worldly and totally beyond it. What on earth contact can we make with this being immeasurably vast and, above all, invisible?

The answer is a truly radical answer. There was - and many of you will know more about this than I do, so correct me if I get this wrong - a very great mathematician, I think in Cambridge, in the 1940s or 1930s, called Alan Turing. Have you heard of him? Alan Turing was one of the first theoreticians of the computer. Turing, as well as drafting something called the Turing machine which sort of heralded the concept of software also was interesting in the question of artificial intelligence. At what point does a computer become an intelligent life form? This has been a big subject for the last 20 years: he was the first to raise it. He constructed something called "The Turing Test". What is The Turing Test? It's very simple. It says that if you can hold a decent conversation with it (presumably during krias haTorah), then that is intelligent life form. If you go and speak to this thing - in other words, if you are typing in stuff and stuff is coming back to you and after five or ten minutes of conversation you cannot tell whether that is a human being or a computer, then you have artificial intelligence. That computer has suddenly become a person.

Now I don't think we are there yet, are we? We have cars that talk back to you and goodness knows what nowadays, but I think we can tell the difference. Anyway, there it is. Turing told us that fundamental

thing. What is essential to our concept of a person is conversation - or what I have called during these lectures 'dialogue'.

Dialogue is the essential meeting of one self and another self: of one person and another person. Essential to that moment is communication: words spoken; words heard; words responded to. That to and fro which creates conversation which is the single, most fundamental test of personhood that we know of.

Therefore, here is a Jewish understanding a long, long time ago - many thousands of years ago - that the definitive moment at which two selves, two persons touch and relate to one another, is when they can speak to one another and listen to one another and respond to one another.

In other words, the great insight of Judaism, having said that the most radical thing about Judaism is that God is a person - that I have told you in all the other lectures - the most radical thing is to draw the inference that if God is a person, then that which is holy is language. That is how God reveals Himself. That is when God reveals Himself. Not as a force or a power or a big 'It', or a concept. But when God reveals Himself as a person it is when God speaks. It is through speech, language, words that that point - heaven and earth - touch. Through words. And no religion, I think, has been more fascinated, or indeed attached a higher significance to words so that even very secular Jews have become our major theoreticians of language in the past century. People like Wittgenstein, Lévi-Strauss, Chomsky, George Steiner, etc. etc. That is through words. Through words God created the world. *Vayomer elokim yehi - And God said "Let there be" - and it was.* Through words, human beings create order. The first thing Adam does is name the animals. The beginning of taxonomy, of classification, the beginning of human domination of nature. Through words. Adam relates to the first 'other' in history, the first significant other. *Zot ha'pa'am - This time [I have found]*

Etzem mi'atzamei - bone of my bone

Basar mibasari - flesh of my flesh

And it is through words that society is built. You remember this incredible satire on the pretensions of human civilisation. The Mesopotamians on a plain in Shenaar create a major technological breakthrough. What is the breakthrough? They create bricks. The first artificial building material. *Hava nilveno levaynim.* And immediately through this technology they say, *We can storm the heavens. Let us make a tower.* And you know that lovely joke there in the Torah. They are building this tower which reaches to heaven. I think before aeroplanes you couldn't really get the point of this joke. But here it is. You know, God says: *Let us go down and have a look.* They are building this tower to heaven and God is taking out his magnifying glass and saying: *Let's have a look at this thing!* And what does God do? He shows them that that which is really creative is not technology but language. He takes away their language. They can't do any more. That is *kedushat halashon.*

And now we can say - and here I am going to say it in one paragraph but, please, this is another book. Here it is.

We can now map Judaism on the logical geography of world religions. There are basically two religious moments. East and West. Whatever. I don't want to generalise. Either there are people who think that God is objective, in other words out there. Or God is subjective, in other words in here. These are the two basic things. Either we will find God in the universe out there, or we will find God in the soul in here. The objective as against the subjective.

Judaism says neither. Judaism says both of those are secondary. Where do you find God? In the arena not of objectivity nor of subjectivity but inter-subjectivity. And that is the realm of language, where two persons - both of whom have an inner life - communicate with one another. Language is the place of inter-subjectivity. And I don't know of any other religion that locates itself in that arena.

What, therefore, is distinctive of Judaism is that God speaks and, through speaking, enters a dialogue with mankind. That is the first belief of Torah min hashomayim: words are holy.

Now let me ask you some simple questions. What does the third movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in A Minor, Opus 130 mean? Can you imagine if I had put up here a canvas by Mondrian? What does that mean? Or - Napoleon's Russian campaign. What does that mean?

The answer is that these questions are questions that we cannot answer. We haven't got a clue what an answer would be. We don't even know where to look.

Then, however, when we discover that Beethoven (you'll forgive my German: I never learned any) - that when Beethoven wrote over that movement "Das heilige danke ..." [?] and when he writes at a certain point "Neue Kraft geföhlen" - "A song of God and thanksgiving" and "Feeling new strengths", and you suddenly understand that that is Beethoven's recovery from an illness and you suddenly feel: Oh, now I can understand what that music means.

When Mondrian puts under that dazzling canvas "Broadway Boogie-woogie", you suddenly see what he's getting at.

You want to know the meaning of Napoleon's Russian campaign? You read "War and Peace" and you know at least what Tolstoy thought it all meant.

Without words there is no such thing as meaning. And that is why the soul in itself, the universe in itself - are not a place to find meaning. It is only when we have words that we can give meaning to anything. We could not read meaning out of creation. The Gemara says that if the Torah had not been given we would have learned industry from the ant, modesty from the cat. But the truth is that if the Torah had not been given, we could equally well have learned cunning from the fox, scavenging from a wolf, violence from a tiger. The universe does not contain meanings on the face of it.

Secondly, history does not bear meanings on the face of it. Do you really think the Egyptians saw yetziat mitzrayim [the exodus from Egypt] in the way we did? Or to give that lovely description of history by Joseph Heller author of "Catch 22" who defined history as a

"trash bag of random coincidences blown open by the wind".

In other words, without words nothing conveys meaning. That is why I say that revelation is the belief in Judaism, not one belief in Judaism. We believe in creation. We believe in redemption. We believe, in other words, in God in nature, God in history.

But if we did not have the Torah we could not even arrive at the concept of creation because nature does not carry a meaning on its surface. If we did not have the Torah as history, we would not understand redemption because there is no unequivocal meaning of history. That is why Torah is essential to meaning because Torah locates kedushah in language.

I quote a lovely sentence of that great writer Paul Johnson who said at the beginning of his "History of the Jews" that

"The Jews stand right at the centre of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose."

That is because Judaism holds what is fundamentally holy is not a place, a person or a power. What is fundamentally holy is words. God's speech to us and our response to God. Meanings lie in language. We

would not find them anywhere else. That is why Judaism is the supreme example of a religion of language and, therefore, of meaning.

If we do not find God in the Torah, we will not find Him anywhere else.

I challenge anyone to oppose that.

In Torah, God speaks to man and asks Ayeka? Where are you? We speak to God and ask God - Where is He? And in that dialogue between earth and Heaven, Judaism lives.

Now, just bear with me. (I have got to get to the end of this: nearly there, almost there.) And now I can begin to answer the question: What is Torah min hashomayim?

I said to you in a previous lecture that we have three metaphors. The Bible uses three metaphors to describe our relationship with God, each of which is necessary. Because each of which captures something that the others do not.

Metaphor 1: Adon and eved. Master and servant. As when God says, ki li bnei yisrael avadim, avadei hame. The Children of Israel are My servants. That is, God is the mo'ach, the owner, the supreme power, and we are His subjects. That is number one. Number two, the image of husband and wife, that wonderful image in Isaiah, in Jeremiah, above all in Hosea. Ve'erastich li le'olam. I will betroth you to Me for ever. And, finally, beni bechori yisrael. God is a parent: we are His children.

Those are the three metaphors. And each metaphor gives us an understanding of what is Torah min hashomayim.

Here is the first one. Husband and wife. Let us take husband and wife. I said to you in a previous lecture that marriage for Judaism is the supreme example of a relationship which binds us to somebody else while respecting the dignity and independence of that other person. It is a covenant not of power or manipulation but of love. Now, when you get married, you use language in a special way. Here it is. When I say the following words, "I promise" - what am I doing? I am not merely describing a promise, I am making a promise. It was J. L. Austin, the Oxford philosopher, who called this "the performative utterance". Speech used to create something and specifically to create a moral bond. As a husband does to his wife under the chuppah and says, Harei at mekudeshet li betabat zu kedat Moshe beYisrael - that is doing a marriage. It is not talking about it: it is doing it. Doing things with words. The first fundamental proposition of Torah min hashomayim is that at Mount Sinai God said Harei at mekudeshet li - Behold you are betrothed to Me as a people and this will be your marriage contract. The Torah is the marriage contract between God and the Jewish people.

The Torah is not just a book. It is functionally equivalent to a wedding ring. In other words, so long as we have it, God is still bound to us and we are bound to Him. That is the first metaphor. Husband and wife.

The second metaphor: it is a political metaphor. God is master, we are His servants. (I'll make this very short.) The Torah is exactly to the Jewish people what the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of America is to the United States. The Torah is as adon and eved, the written constitution of the Jewish people as a nation under the sovereignty of God and that is the Torah. It is a constitutional document, a political document, the first ever written constitution of any country whatsoever. That is the whole Torah, the five books of Moses, all of which fit exactly what George Mendenhall has discovered is the treaty formula in the ancient Near East. The whole Torah is a constitutional document establishing us as citizens of the Republic of Faith.

Thirdly, the most poignant of all: God as a Father, as a parent. What happens to parents? They have to learn that sometime or other kids are going to leave home. And what do you give them? First of all you have got to give them space. But, secondly, you give them a reminder that even though you and I are going to be living a long way apart, I want you to remember me - namely - a letter, something or other. That is the third definition of Torah min hashomayim. It is God's letter to us. His way of saying : While our paths may diverge, there may be times when I am a long way away - read this letter I have written you and then I will be there with you. That is the most poetic concept of Torah min hashomayim - God's letter as parent to a child.

That is how Jews survived for 2000 years in exile, without ever once feeling abandoned by God because, so long as the Torah was with them, God was with them. That was His letter. That was the kol gadol velo yasaf --the great voice of Sinai that never ended. And that was the drama of the kol demama daka. That voice that we could hear if we listened hard enough. Wherever they were in Eastern Europe, in Spain, in Yemen - wherever they were, when they read Torah they heard the voice of God and they knew we were together.

That is the three meanings of Torah in Judaism. It is not a conventional text at all. The Torah is not like a book you find in a library. It is: (1) Like a photograph or a letter from a father to a child. (2) The wedding ring between husband and wife. (3) The constitution which forms Israel as a nation under the sovereignty of God.

What all those metaphors have in common is that they establish a relationship between God and His beloved, if sometimes obstinate and thoroughly wayward, people. That is the meaning of Torah min hashomayim. The words through which God binds Himself to a people and the people bind themselves to God. What is Torah? Torah is the world we enter when, through an act of active listening, we hear the voice of God.

In other words, to put it more accurately, the real principle should not be called 'Torah from Heaven'. The principle should be called 'Heaven from Torah'.

That is what Torah min hashomayim is. Holy words, the words in which God binds Himself to us. But I have to just tell you that there is another act of this drama and it will be all skewed if I don't tell you this. Here it is.

You know that in general in Judaism there is a move, across time, from God being very active and the Israelites being very passive to the Israelites becoming active and God being further away in the scene. That you will see, whichever perspective you look at. But if you look at the various covenants you will see it very simply. What were the first covenants God made with Noah, with Abraham, with Jacob? In those three cases it is God Who is doing all the talking and Noah, Abraham and Jacob do not have to do very much. Look at the later covenants - the one made by Joshua, in Joshua Chapter 24. Or by Josiah. Or by Ezra, when they came back from Babylon. Who was taking the initiative? Human beings. God does not play a part in that at all. So there is a move from God's action to human action, and here in the middle is Mount Sinai. When God speaks and the people answer and that covenant could be formed only through mutuality.

So we move from a world in which God speaks to a world in which there is dialogue between God and humanity, to a world in which human beings speak and God listens but He doesn't speak. This gave rise to the most extraordinary drama of all. We know that, over time, it may have taken as long as a thousand years, Tenach was canonised. First the Mosaic books. Then the prophetic books. And then the Ketuvim. And that took centuries and centuries to happen.

But what then happens is that when the biblical canon is closed, when we have a book called Tenach and there are going to be no more additions, the whole of Judaism moves into a new key. What does it move from? It moves from revelation to - - What do the rabbis do? Interpret. So Judaism shifts from revelation to interpretation. From divine speech to human decoding of that speech. From passive recipience to active interpreters. And that is the change from the world of the prophets to the world of the sages.

It is that point, when God has moved back to allow space for man to grow, that the human role in revelation takes on its greatest dignity. And you know how it takes on its greatest dignity? I have to tell you the story even though you all know it by heart, the story of the tanur shel achnai. In Baba metzia, daf nun tes, amud beis it goes as follows.

In the old days people cooked outside - if you lived in Israel. I don't advise this in England. They cooked outside. You probably know, because we are getting near Pesach and koshering, that you cannot kosher an earthenware vessel and you cannot purify one either. What do you have to do with it? You have to smash it. Now imagine the following situation. Here you are, living in Israel, you have got a nice cooker outside in the courtyard and if a dead insect falls in it, it is tameh, it is impure so you have got to smash it. Even if somebody is trying to cook a meal, you have to keep smashing the oven and get another oven. I mean, it's crazy! So somebody invented a labour-saving device called 'the pre-smashed oven'. Brilliant thing! It came in pieces. You put sand between the pieces. You made it. If it was impure you took it apart again and you put it together again. A pre-smashed oven.

Rebbe Eleazar said: "Great!" The other sages said: "No! Too easy. Forget it. "- and you know that there was then a major debate. Rebbe Eleazar said, "I'm right! Believe me, Reb Eleazar ben Hircanos. I'm not a shlemiel! I'm right! If I am right, this tree will prove it." And the tree that was in the courtyard shot into the air, one hundred feet - and some say four hundred feet!

The sages said to Eleazar ben Hircanos: "We are talking about cookery, impurity. You think you can bring a proof from a tree? What's a tree got to do with the argument?" So, Eleazar says: "If I am right, this river will prove it." And immediately the river started flowing uphill. And they said: "You can't bring a proof from a river." So he said: "If I am right, the walls of this Beit Midrash will prove it." And immediately the walls started falling down. Rabbi Akiva got up and said: "Walls, if two rabbis are having an argument, what has it got to do with you?" And so, out of respect for Rabbi Akiva they didn't fall down. Out of respect for Rabbi Eleazar they didn't stand up straight, and they remain leaning to this day.

Finally, Eleazar said, "If I am right, a voice from heaven will prove it." And down comes a voice from heaven saying, ma lechem ... Rebbe Eleazar shelo te'. bekol makom? - What have you got against Rebbe Eleazar? Surely you know that the law is like him in every case? And Rav Yehoshua stands up and looks to heaven and says: "You already gave us the Torah, Rebono shel olam and in Your Torah you wrote Lo beshomayim hi! - The Torah isn't made in heaven! It's made down here on earth! You're outvoted! You and Eleazar against half-a-dozen rabbis: the half-a-dozen rabbis win.

And at that moment they outvoted the Almighty. Says the Gemara, one of the rabbis met Elijah. You know that Elijah was the guy who moved from heaven to earth. He said to Elijah: "Tell me, Elijah, what did the Almighty say when He was sitting in the heavenly yeshivah and he heard that he had been outvoted by the rabbis?" And Elijah says: Kochayich ve'omar nischoni bnei. The Almighty sat there like a Jewish father, shlepping naches. Smiling, and says: "My children are cleverer than I am."

It is at that moment when Torah shebichtav moves into Torah she ba'al peh - the written Torah moves into the spoken Torah - when revelation moves into interpretation - that human beings reach a height and a dignity that they had never had in any other religion in mankind. And that is the key second movement of that drama. I.e., I have explained to you all along that Judaism is about making space for otherness and

that is how God makes space for us. By ending prophecy, giving us the power to interpret - or, strictly speaking, at least from the eved-adon model, what Jews then become is the American Supreme Court. They are not a legislature but they are a judiciary and rabbis can interpret the written constitution as they see fit, as do Justices of the American Supreme Court.

And there it is. That is what the two movement drama of Torah from Heaven is. Therefore, I hope I have given you something of this drama, that Judaism - out of everything in this created world - says kedusha belongs to language. That the most significant religious experience is the dialogue between Heaven and earth, which we now call Talmud Torah - learning Torah. Because when we learn Torah we enter into that I/thou relationship with the Almighty. We hear His voice and we assimilate it and we interpret it.

That is why Judaism has - and I don't know if you have ever noticed this - How many commands do we have in Judaism? Oh, the restaurant in Wigmore Street! Free advertising here! You would have thought that a religion with 613 commands has a word that means 'obey'. The whole of Hebrew does not have a word that means 'obey'. Did you know this? What is the verb that the Bible uses instead of 'obey'? Lishmoa. Shma Yisrael. And you know that Shma means not 'to obey': it means 'to listen', 'to hear', 'to internalise', 'to understand', 'to respond'. There is no English word that means what the Hebrew word Shma means.

The King James Bible invented a word for the purpose. The verb that they chose was 'to hearken'. But now, nobody hearkens any more so the English translators of the Bible don't know what to do with this verb. They don't. I mean, they translate it as 'obey', but it absolutely does not mean obey. Because the Almighty never imposes himself on us. He asks us to be active shapers of His word through listening, interpreting, responding. And that is Shma. And that is why the key mitzvah of Judaism is to listen because that which is holy is sound. We are a culture of sound, not a culture of sight.

Friends, I have tried to explain to you what it is to believe in Torah min hashomayim. Or, more precisely, what it is to read Torah covenantally. To encounter Torah as a covenantal document is not to read a book. It is to be addressed. To be called. To be summoned. To listen. And to listen within those words to the kol demama daka. The voice of God, reaching us from the vastness of space and through 4000 years of history, the voice that we hear - if only we have the courage to listen.

Thank you. [Applause]

Jodie Cohen: Thank you, Chief Rabbi. I am sure everyone will agree that your talk was entertaining but that it was also extremely inspiring and thought-provoking. We have time for three questions. We are going to take them all at once.

Annabel Reis-Nadav: The question relates to a point that you made later on in your talk, to do with Torah being in the hands of the people, in the hands of the rabbis. How does this impact on halachic cases in practice - agunot is an obvious one - where things possibly seem more to do with the people and people's understandings and perceptions of things rather than halachic interpretations?

Marcus Freed: Chief Rabbi, your statement that there is no Jewish art, sculpture or drama -

Chief Rabbi: No, no. Sorry! - you have remedied that -

Marcus Freed: Apart from it being bad for business - I really just wanted to ask if it was exactly that straightforward, the distinction between Jewish culture and Greek culture, based on three main examples.

One: the extreme focus on visuality that is given in the Gemara Baba Metzia that talks about Rabbi Yochanan and asks the question about "What is male beauty?" - and it goes through different ideas of beautiful men culminating in Rabbi Yochanan's story. Although it concludes that beautiful men have beards is, I think, the Gemara's answer!

Then there is the whole area of festivals with the culmination of Purim spiels. And there is the mitzvah of menorah: the medhadrin min hamehadrin answer is the visual answer of eight lights rather than one. Or the aesthetics of the etrog. Or the aesthetics of the lulav, and so on.

Then, finally, the Gemara in Minocho where Eliyahu HaNavi [Elijah the Prophet] answers the question about who in the market place will gain a place in the olam haba [world to come] and it says that it is the 'badchanim', the jesters, who will gain redemption because they make people happy.

So, that is my question.

Jonathan Shine: Hi. This is my second lecture and my second question. You said earlier in your speech that our perspectives may well be bound by our expectations - something to that effect - which I think is a very profound and wise idea. But surely your and my perspectives are bound by our expectations? You are not only a Jew but also the Chief Rabbi - so surely your perspectives are bound by the attachments that you have to who you are and, therefore, eloquent and brilliant though your words are, you are still confined by who you are in terms of the way that you look at revelation.

Chief Rabbi: Ok. Three very good questions.

Aguna: how come we have survived that long without that one coming up?! I have to be blunt with you. We could solve the Aguna issue at a stroke. The question is: are we willing to pay that price? I am not being jokey at all; I am being absolutely serious. We can solve the Aguna problem basically by abolishing marriage. We would do what Hamlet said to Ophelia: "I say, we will have no more marriages." That, in effect, is what the more radical proposals amount to. I do not think that any of them plays, I have to say. But, in effect, the proposals are: (1) A conditional divorce at the time of marriage. (2) The appointment of a shaliach, an agent, to deliver the divorce. In other words, you enact a divorce at the moment that you get married. The effect is to make the marriage conditional, or actually halachically non-existent.

I personally believe that I have to explore every other method before any of us could say that that is the nuclear option. But I am very blunt with you. If you take these more radical proposals, they all are tantamount to abolishing marriage.

Now, I care very much about the Aguna issue. I care about it not because people have put pressure on. It was almost the first thing I did as Chief Rabbi, it was to set up a review and to address the issue of Aguna. And, just to remind you, I did not see that television programme about it. I think I was on it but I did not see it so I do not know what I said. [Laughter] Listen, I've got enough tzores [troubles] already: I have to listen to myself saying these things?!

However, we have done the following things. We have created this pre-nuptial agreement - the only one in the world that has the imprimatur of our leading halachic authority in the world. Secondly, we have created communal sanctions and you all know about these. For instance, if you say to a guy that he cannot be called up at his son's barmitzvah unless he gives his wife a get [divorce]. Such sanctions have, in the last few years, delivered a lot of gittin [divorces].

(3) Here is the key one, and I do not have enough time to explain to you why it is the key one. But, thirdly, we succeeded in getting get legislation in 1996 through Lord Mackay, the previous Lord Chancellor, who was a very wonderful person. However, that law has not been implemented for reasons that have got nothing to do with get. They have to do with the whole thrust of the Mackay proposal which was to move divorce from litigation to mediation - which is, in fact, something I approve of anyway. But the present Lord Chancellor believed that this law was predicated on a profession that does not exist. There are not enough mediators to handle it. And, bye the bye, since get legislation was attached to that as a little clause, it has not yet been implemented.

As you know, there have been two attempts to introduce it through private Members' legislation, but private Members' legislation does not work because there are two MPs whose idea of fun on a Friday morning is to sit in the House of Commons and say "No" to all private Members' Bills. They have said "No" to all without exception. I managed to persuade one of them to drop his opposition to the Bill, but even the Leader of the Party to which the other one belonged could not get him to agree. So, we have work to do. Who knows when the General Election is going to be? But, the second it is over we have got to get legislation undertaken and accepted by the Government as part of its legislative programme.

The prenuptial agreement and get legislation interact. Anyway, that is get legislation. As you know, I have set up a get and Aguna task force which is doing pilot projects: all sorts. But, most especially, I put my money where my mouth is. I took on personally the toughest Aguna case that we have had in many years and we solved it in eight days.

Here I come to the ultimate issue: in Judaism the will is sacrosanct. Human will: God's will. Therefore, just as marriage has to be consensual, divorce has to be consensual. That is what makes Jewish marital law different from the law of the land in almost any country today in which the court issues the divorce. In Judaism, the husband or the wife issue the divorce. It is always done through the husband to the wife, but either party can initiate it. So, if marriage is consensual, divorce has to be consensual. And that is because Judaism regards the individual human will as more sacrosanct than the will of government. Judaism is the most extreme statement anywhere of human liberty - which means human will.

Therefore, if we are going to educate people at all, we will have to educate them not only as to how to make and sustain a marriage, but to educate them as to how dissolve it without unnecessary acrimony. And there is no short cut. There is no way in Jewish law that we can just, as it were, create this new concept, which is hostile to the most basic elements of Judaism, that a divorce can be thrust on you against your will. We just can't do it. That is going to the foundations. So a supreme court in the United States can go so far through interpretation and no further. It can go quite far - but not all the way. Because there is such a thing as the original constitutional document. That is why, much though I dearly love and admire and esteem Blu Greenberg, she was wrong when she said: "Where is a rabbinic will there is a halachic way."

The short answer is: There may be; there may not be. Here, the greatest halachic minds of the last century, all of whom have looked at this, have not been able to come up with a solution. I truly believe that that does not mean Aguna is insoluble. It is eminently soluble. Eminently. And it will be whenever we get get legislation that 90 per cent of the cases will be solved through that. But the other 10 per cent will have to be solved, case by case, individually without taking shortcuts. And look, I have to tell you that I would not be happy with myself - I couldn't face the Almighty in the time to come - and may it be many years from now - if I had not done every single thing in my power to free Agunot. Believe me, I care about it. I care about it desperately.

I have, kein ayin ra, two daughters. I do not want them to be able to say, "Our Dad didn't do everything he could to enhance the place of women in Judaism." But, there are certain things we cannot do because they are too much against the grain. So, you just have to accept. I am sorry about that.

The second question. Jonathan Shine: remind me. Yes, sure: I see things through my perspective. You see things through yours. That's ok. You know this wonderful Purim announcement in the Jewish Press of New York? "Announcing to Mr and Mrs Max Goldberg the birth of a son, Dr Irving Goldberg!"

The truth is that I was not born a rabbi. I was not born into a family of rabbis and I went to Cambridge to study economics. I then went into teaching philosophy, secular philosophy. I came to the rabbinate very late in life: partly because I wanted to show that you don't have to speak with a terrible English accent - You know, it was once said of one of the great figures in the London Beth Din of a previous generation that he spoke ten languages - all of them Yiddish!

I didn't want people to think that you have got to be born into it, or speak with a heavy accent, or - as the Red Queen said to Alice in Wonderland - that you have to believe six impossible things before breakfast. I have tried, as honestly as I can, to read every person I can who disagrees with me. I know the works of Nietzsche and Spinoza better than I know the works of Moses Maimonides. I have exposed conjectures and refutations. I have exposed my faith to every possible refutation. I have to take that risk. Life, as they sing in the Nachman of Bratslav song, is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is never to be afraid.

This is what I am doing. I am saying: This is not one way of reading Judaism. What I am really doing in these lectures is: Can we let Judaism speak to us, knowing all we do about 21st century science, human science, hermeneutics, socio-biology? Can Judaism still speak to us across almost 4000 years. And I am trying to give a thing which may resonate with you, it may not. But I do not think it is just my private and highly subjective reading of the tradition. So, I know you are thinking of that wonderful quote from Mandy Rice-Davies and the Profumo affair that he would say that, wouldn't he? But I am trying to take Judaism a little above the "He would, wouldn't he?" and above what would be said by somebody who never encountered cultures other than his own. I really have taken it on myself, as far as I can - and I hope we all will, to interact with cultures other than our own and we will find in them very beautiful things that we won't find in Judaism.

But, as my next book says - [laughter] - I'll leave you to read the book!

Finally, Marcus. Listen! Of course, you are doing great stuff here. You're doing the Jewish thing! Marcus, amongst his many talents, is a playwright and dramatist and actor-manager and all the rest of it. He also acts in lovely dramas which bring out ethical issues for the new Money and Morals curriculum. That's it. Judaism is drama. But it is not drama on the stage. But now we are in a culture where we have to use that instrumentality and I am in favour of using all cultural instrumentalities. What I think Judaism misses most right now is a first-rate religious film director. A first-rate religious poet. You read Yehuda Amichai. You read Amos Oz's latest book "The Same Sea", which he gave me a couple of weeks ago. These great minds. How come we are not using them - as you are using them Marcus - to enhance our Jewish values? That is why I have entered into a dialogue with Amos Oz which will become a public dialogue in Israel in May and I would have loved to have had a dialogue with Yehuda Amichai, but he died first.

So, therefore, yes. But your ultimate point is so correct. It is the Gemara in Sanhedrin you were quoting that the ben olam haba is the person who cheers other people up. It is the comedian. It is the humorist. I cannot tell you how moving it was when last Wednesday I was addressing the 45 Group. That is Ben Helfgott's group: Holocaust survivors. They wanted me to speak about my book "Celebrating Life" because it cheered them up.

Somebody got up and told me this story of how he had been in a concentration camp and how he had said to his friend throughout their years of surviving that it was humour that had kept them alive. I will one day give you a lecture on Jewish humour. But in the meanwhile that is only done by people with not a great sense of humour: Bergson and Freud being two very obvious examples! But humour, I think, has a spirituality all of its own. So, Marcus, I say: Use your many many wonderful talents to bring a Jewish presence to the arts. I will even give you "Certified under Chief Rabbinate supervision" [laughter] - not that it will do very much for you!

And I will finally end with your remark about beards! I don't know if any of you remember the Gulf War? We were in Israel during the whole of the Gulf War and as the days were coming close, we got gas masks. Everyone had to have a cheder atum, a sealed room, and then put on one's gas mask. We didn't know until the 39th and final scud had landed whether any of them would contain chemical or biological weapons. The trouble was that a big announcement was put out on the radio, "If you have a beard, the gas mask doesn't work!" So, what happens? The first siren sounds. The first scud missile lands. Everyone else, the kids and Elaine, are in the sealed room with their gas masks on - and I'm shaving off my beard! [Laughter]

I have to tell you that it was the most wonderful thing - because it was terribly stressful: our kids were young at the time and it was a stressful experience. But as soon as we took off our gas masks, they all shrieked, "Mummy! Who's that strange man here?!" And Elaine said, "Oh, how romantic! That's the fellow I got engaged to!"

Anyway, the next morning I went out in the streets of Jerusalem to see what I assumed would be a unique sight, never seen in 4,000 years: Jerusalem without beards! Because, after all, the radio told everyone that if you had a beard you should shave it off! Do you think that they were all without beards? A nachtige tag! I was the only shlemiel in the whole of Yerushalayim who listened to instructions.

Laila tov! [Good night.] Thank you.

[Applause]

Jodie Cohen: I am afraid that we have run out of time for this evening but I would just like to round up by thanking the CST for their continued support, and the Office of the Chief Rabbi and all the organisers of this lecture series for their tireless efforts.

The next lecture is on the 8th May on the subject of "Jewish identity - The concept of a chosen people".

Finally, will you join me in thanking the Chief Rabbi once more for another inspiring lecture. [Applause]

END