

Man In A Fleeting World

By HaRav Simcha Wasserman, zt'l
Adapted by Yaakov Astor



Note: I personally sat in on the following shiur delivered in 1982 by Rabbi Simcha Wasserman, zt'l, son of Rav Elchanon Wasserman, hy'd, talmid muvakk of the Chofetz Chaim. I only discovered a recording of the shiur recently. It is a profoundly deep and reasoned explanation about the role of Torah in the world, in our lives, and why a Jew should make it the ultimate focus of his life's pursuits.

In adapting it for publication I did my best to minimize changes while at the same time staying true to the original. Nevertheless, one of the things that was impossible to convey was the twinkle in his eye that Rav Wasserman had whenever he spoke. He exuded a warmth that made you feel like you were his special child – even as you sat in a room filled with others. As great as this lecture is, there is so much more it alludes to, so much more of “Reb Simcha” that it hints at. Despite that, it is my fervent hope that this article inspires you no less than it inspired me.

A young man asked: How can a person find meaning in this world where everything is just temporary?

The dilemma was already posed by the author of *Koheles*: “What benefit is there to a person in all that he toils for under the sun?”

What is very interesting is that a non-Jew came up with the right answer to the same question. He was a very famous philosopher. Maybe you heard of him: Emmanuel Kant. He says that everything in creation is very logical; everything falls into place. Everything... except human life.

In human life, illogical things happen. People who we think do not deserve to suffer, suffer. People who deserve to suffer, have it easy. He says the only solution, the only answer, which could exist in a world where everything else is logical is that our life here is not the real life. It is a preparation to a life after life, a place where all accounting will be balanced out.

Of course, the *Mishnah* says this in *Pirkei Avos*: “This world is an entrance to another world. Prepare yourself here to have a good place over there.” This world is compared to *erev Shabbos*, and the World to Come, to *Shabbos*. Whoever prepared his food on *erev Shabbos* gets to eat it on *Shabbos*.

“Who am I?” It is impossible to really answer. My body is not me. My legs are not me. What I am is intangible. In *Tanach*, *Iyov* says, “Skin and flesh have you dressed me up with.” The personality is something which is wearing a body, which lives in a body. We do not know ourselves; we do not know who we are.

When we communicate with each other, it is not our faces that are communicating. It is *through* our faces that we communicate. The inner eye learns something from the face, from the expression.

It says in the *Yerushalmi* that when a person reviews what his *rebbe* taught him,

he should imagine the face of his *rebbe* at that time, because the expression of the face is transmitting the final phases of the idea. It is referring to our inner eye. Our inner “I.”

Faces function as an aspect of speech. Speech is a tool to transfer ideas and information from one mind to another. The expression on the face is a tool; it helps define the finer points which cannot be expressed in words alone. Nevertheless, the face is just a tool of the inner self.

When we talk to each other, who is doing the talking?

Function

Everything has a function. What is the function of this tape recorder? [He holds the tape recorder in his hands.] To store sound. Imagine if somebody said to me, “I need to hit a nail into the wall, but I don’t have a hammer. Can I use this tape recorder?”

I would advise against it. What would happen? The tape recorder would break. Plus, the nail will probably go into the wall crookedly, if at all.

Why? Because he is taking a tool designed for one function and using it for a function other than what it was designed for. This is a rule you can apply to everything: If you use something for a function other than what it was designed for, it will not work properly or at all.

In the first *perek* in *Mesillas Yesharim*, the *Ramchal* quotes a *Midrash*, “When *Hashem* created Adam, the first man, He took him around the trees of the Paradise and said to him, ‘What I did is both beautiful and perfect. You are going to handle it. Keep your mind straight; be careful not to make mistakes and spoil my work.’” By mistakes, the *Midrash* means using things incorrectly.

The question is: How do I know how to use things correctly? A lifetime of study would not explain to me the function of everything on Earth. How do we learn the proper function of things?

The Capital and the Dividends

Imagine an elderly person who finds himself suddenly followed by a stranger with a knife in his hands. The elderly person starts running. As long as he feels that somebody is behind him, he runs with a speed he did not know he had. As soon as the danger is over, he is exhausted. Where did he get his energy from?

This shows us that the energy which we use in daily life is not the full energy that we possess. There is a strong storage of energy in the human body we barely use. It is like money. A person builds up capital and puts it in the bank. He does not eat from the capital. He uses it to grow in value, earn interest and give him dividends.

The same thing happens in the human body with energy. That storage of energy, like capital, is producing and earning. We live on the earnings. But the principal remains in storage. Normally, we cannot access what is in storage. It is locked. However, under pressure, the lock opens and we access it from the storage.

Have you heard of the distraught mother who lifted a car to extract her child trapped beneath it? She became superhuman for a minute. She broke into the storage and used it.

Now, if this is the system for the body—that there is a primary energy, which is not for use, and whose energy produces the secondary energy that is for use—doesn’t it make sense that the same system exists for the entire universe?

The entire universe also has a system of stored energy, some of it for use and some of it not for use. Where is it coming from? This is very hard to answer.

This world is like the energy we have available for everyday use. It is like the dividends we access from a much greater store of capital. The next world is the capital. It is there waiting for us when we retire from this world – unless we use it up. Unless we use this world improperly.

The Two Guides

Everything has a function. If we use it as it was designed to function, we add to our capital even as we live off the dividends in this life.

How do we know what the function of all the myriad things in life is? How do we use the world properly and not destroy it along with the capital in the bank waiting for us?

There are two guides. One is the human conscience. Sometimes, we feel that something is wrong. Human conscience is real. But it has its limitations. It can be “reprogrammed.”

I remember a news conference with President Eisenhower when a journalist got up and said, “Mr. President, two weeks ago you told us just the opposite.”

“I lied that time,” the president responded. “What’s wrong with lying?”

I remember when I heard this. I felt if this can happen, then America is going down the drain. And it went down a great deal from the America I remember beforehand. America, morally, is breaking down. In any event, when presidents start openly saying “What’s wrong with lying?” after a time the people begin to think that maybe there is not anything wrong with lying.

The human conscience is a marvelous thing. However, it can be reprogrammed. What the conscience knows to be moral can be reprogrammed to be immoral. What it knows to be immoral can be reprogrammed to be moral. That is why there are so many things which are socially accepted that are really detrimental to society. We cannot rely on conscience alone.

That is why we need another guide. That guide is Torah. Torah is the information that *Hashem* wants us to have about how to use His universe properly. And the more you learn, the closer you come to understanding what function everything in the universe has.

The Machinery of Speech

Let me give you one illustration. One of the greatest gifts that a human

EXHAUSTED?

NEED THAT BOOST TO KEEP YOU GOING?

shs image 718330004

