

Adin Steinsaltz  
(Even-Yisrael)

# A Dear Son To Me

A COLLECTION OF  
TALKS AND WRITINGS

Maggid Books

# Contents

*Foreword* xi

## **TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE**

*Chapter One*

*On Whom Can We Rely?* 3

*Chapter Two*

*Heritage and Inheritance* 9

*Chapter Three*

*Nationalist Fanaticism* 17

*Chapter Four*

*What Is a Jew?* 21

*Chapter Five*

*Auto–Anti-Semitism* 33

*Chapter Six*

*The Rebbe’s Century* 37

## **IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL**

*Chapter Seven*

*“Is Ephraim a Dear Son to Me?”* 47

*Chapter Eight*  
*Israel at Fifty* 55

*Chapter Nine*  
*Peace and the Greater Land of Israel* 65

*Chapter Ten*  
*Unity* 71

*Chapter Eleven*  
*Prophecy and Government* 77

## **IN COMMUNITIES, THE WORLD OVER**

*Chapter Twelve*  
*The Time Is Short and the Work Is Great* 87

*Chapter Thirteen*  
*What Will Become of the Jewish People?* 95

*Chapter Fourteen*  
*The Challenge of the Community, Large and Small* 101

*Chapter Fifteen*  
*Where Do Torah and Science Clash?* 107

## **TO THE INDIVIDUAL**

*Chapter Sixteen*  
*The Golden Mean and the Horses' Path* 123

*Chapter Seventeen*  
*Heroism* 127

*Chapter Eighteen*  
*Self-Investigation* 133

<i>Chapter Nineteen</i>	
<i>Gemilut Ḥasadim</i>	141
<i>Chapter Twenty</i>	
<i>One Step Forward</i>	147
<i>Chapter Twenty-One</i>	
<i>On Character Education</i>	153
<i>Chapter Twenty-Two</i>	
<i>Boundaries of Holiness</i>	159
<i>Chapter Twenty-Three</i>	
<i>The Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life</i>	165
<i>About the Author</i>	171

## Chapter One

# On Whom Can We Rely?

**S**ome events are seen as historic turning points when they occur, but in retrospect are revealed to be much less significant. Other events may not seem so conspicuous, but create profound changes. I wish to focus on events of the latter kind.

During the past year, a number of important Jewish leaders have departed. They were leaders, not necessarily in the sense that the entire people followed them. But they were people whom everybody – both those who agreed with them and those who did not – was compelled to relate to in some way. They blazed a path, and even those who did not accept it recognized its significance. It could be said that they set the parameters of reality for all, and their absence emphasizes the tremendous problem of lack of leadership.

Indeed, the most strongly felt problem in the world today, in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world, is the lack of leadership. Who will lead, who will show the way?

At the end of Tractate *Sota* (49a–b), there is a saying of Rabbi Eliezer the Great:

From the day the Temple was destroyed, the sages began to be

like scribes, and the scribes became like public officials, and the public officials like common people, and the common people are themselves deteriorating.

**“The sages began to be like scribes.”** What do we expect of the sages, the leaders of the generation? New patterns, new paradigms. We ask for breakthroughs, for the paving of basic paths, the solutions to key problems. Instead, the sages become like scribes, the teachers of young children. They repeat what everyone knows. When they speak, they deal in small details, and solve problems that have already been solved. If they write books, they write anthologies and summaries. They are incapable of innovation because they are no more than scribes, teachers.

**“And the scribes became like public officials.”** They cease to teach and become like policemen. A large part of the teachers’ work in schools throughout the modern world is to impose order and discipline. In certain places, their function is simply to ensure that the students stay in their seats, do not talk, and do not disturb each other. In other places, it is to make sure they do not use weapons or drugs. There is no time left for learning, because the scribes have turned into guards.

**“And the public officials [become] like the common people.”** The public officials mentioned in the Talmud are the officers and clerks of the court, whose function is to enforce order. Instead, these officials have become like the common people – simple, sometimes coarse, somewhat violent, somewhat delinquent. Instead of representing and enforcing law and order, they turn into yet another unruly, violent gang.

**“And the common people are themselves deteriorating.”** The simple people are deteriorating, not necessarily in the economic sense, but in the spiritual sense – in what can be expected from them, in their gut reactions, in their basic demeanor. In this class – the lowest stratum of society – the general deterioration is indeed felt. Let me give one example. In a book written some 200 years ago, the author innocently writes: “Even the most frivolous, delinquent Jew at least wears a *tallit katan* and prays three times daily.” Today, such a person is almost considered a man of stature.

This deterioration is an ongoing process of impoverishment to which one gets accustomed, and which one eventually accepts as the

normal state of things. When my late father came to Israel as a *halutz*, he had a dream that here, in this country, we would grow wings. That we would not only have a new earth here, but also a new heaven. Yet the people now inhabiting this land are gradually becoming *amei ha'aretz* (which in Hebrew means both “people of the land” and “ignoramus”), a fact discernible in all aspects of life, from ways of expression to ways of conduct.

When I was a pupil at school, it was still possible to walk in the street and hear “juicy,” vital, heart-warming Hebrew. Today, whoever listens to the language spoken in the street gets a strong sense of deterioration. And this is also true in matters that are more serious. There were times when no one locked their doors in Tel Aviv. Today, there is a theft in Israel every seven minutes. At the beginning of the century, one rabbi wrote: “Jews and blood – are there two more extreme opposites than this?” Today, a murder is committed or attempted every thirty-odd hours. This deterioration, then, is not just a matter of style. It affects the very foundations of life.

Rabbi Eliezer the Great adds: “And no one demands, and no one seeks, and no one asks.” This poetic sentence seems to contain three synonyms. But there is a gradation here: He who “demands” does so with vehemence, requiring an answer and a solution. Less assertive is he who “seeks,” who searches for and wants an answer, and least demanding of all is he who only “asks” a simple question. But everybody has become accustomed to the existing situation, “and no one demands, and no one seeks, and no one asks.”

Rabbi Eliezer the Great concludes with the words: “On our Father in heaven.”

This sentence, “On whom can we rely, on our Father in heaven,” sounds like an expression of helplessness and despair. Imagine a sick person whose doctor tells him: “From now on, you would do well to rely on the Almighty.” Such a person knows his situation is serious indeed.

However, this statement can also be read in a different tone – not as an expression of despair, but as a statement of fact, a piece of practical advice, a positive suggestion. And this has a number of aspects.

First, perhaps our generation would have preferred to find different leaders, but we cannot. We would have liked to find other teachers,

## *On Whom Can We Rely?*

other policemen, perhaps another people, but we cannot. There is a downhill trend, a deterioration. But there is one point that strengthens our heart: in the collapse of ideologies, theories, systems and politics, there is one thing which remains stable and on which we can rely – our Father in heaven.

And beyond that, the sequence of “sages, scribes, public officials, etc.” implies a theoretical, emotional, and social structure in which we expect to lean on other people. Rabbi Eliezer’s statement is a call to change direction. He says we have been leaning on sages and scribes and officials for too long. We have been leaning on them so much that we have forgotten our direct connection and direct commitment to the Master of the Universe, and this is why we are deteriorating. And he calls upon us once again to lean on the source of all things, our Father in heaven – or, in other words, to rebuild our direct and personal relationship with God.

In the Torah, we find several verses asking: “What does the Lord your God require of you?” (Deuteronomy 10:12). This is directed at each and every individual – not to the leaders, or to the audience, or to someone else, but to you. In the description of the making of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, this point appears in a verse directed to all generations. This special verse is phrased in a seemingly strange way: “The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, these here today, all of us alive” (Deuteronomy 5:3). This combination of words with the same meaning comes to give added stress. This verse says emphatically that the covenant is not of yesterday, and not with another people, but with us, each one of us, and not in a different time or place but “here, today.”

This demand is very real. It requires the transfer of commitment, together with the burden and the effort, from the society to the individual. It prevents us from hiding behind any social, public, or historical structure, and it says: If we want a solution to the problem of deterioration, we are required to create a personal relationship with God, not only emotionally, but operationally – “We, here, today.”

And this demand is difficult because our Father in heaven, unlike a policeman, accepts no excuses, and cannot be deceived.

In the period between the destruction of the Temple and the



coming of Mashiah (the Messiah), when all systems break down and there is no longer anyone to follow, everyone will be called upon to start walking on his own, with all the multitude of commitments that this entails. Thus everyone ought to start saying: "The world was created for me" (*Sanhedrin* 37a). At the same time, if something immoral or unjust happens in the world, one must say, "It is my fault." If there is a child in this country that suffers, an adult who commits a crime, the responsibility rests not only on this or that government office: it rests on me. When one personally feels the pain of the existing problems, this creates a new set of attitudes. I no longer have anyone to lean on, and so I must establish a direct line of communication.

In other words, it is clear to us that there is darkness, and that we need light. Perhaps more than one lighthouse has been extinguished. So there is only one way. Each and everyone must light his own candle. If all these candles are lit, together they will create a great light, perhaps even greater than any other source.

In the saying "On whom can we rely, on our Father in heaven" there is, then, a hope, even a promise to the Jewish people. Not only that we have on whom to lean, but also that we are capable of making the transition from hiding behind others' backs and of beginning to assume personal responsibility for what others do, and for what they ought to do.

A great advantage enjoyed by the Jewish people is that the Almighty has not required us to resort to an intermediary. In a certain sense, each of us has a "hotline" to God Himself which we can pick up and say – "You." Yet we must remember that this phone also rings in the other direction; He turns to us from time to time and asks – "What are you doing?" This question was first directed to Adam – "Where are you?" (Genesis 2:9) and it goes on being asked to this very day.

This question is asked with added vehemence in a society that is not as united as it should be, and which breeds mistrust. Such a society must once again ask, seek, demand, and rebuild anew from the small contribution of each individual. Let everyone remove the dirt at his front door, and the entire street will be clean. Let everyone light the candle of his soul, and the land will be filled with light. Let everyone take one step forward and upward, and we will shake the entire world.

When God took our forefathers out of Egypt, He performed

## Chapter Two

# Heritage and Inheritance

The Jewish people today is at a critical stage in its history. Many of us believe – despite the horrifying assimilation rate – that the maternity wards can make up for the absence of study halls. Nevertheless, if we continue along this path, we are moving toward a non-luminous future, a future in which we will become like the Samaritans – a small, detached, insignificant sect. What is liable to happen to the Jewish community in Russia in the coming decade will happen to European Jewry within twenty years; to American Jewry within thirty years; and to Israeli Jews within fifty years. Russian Jewry is at the forefront of the battle because the situation there is the most severe. If we succeed in stopping the erosion in Russia – nay, if we can change the direction of the flow – it will be a sign that such change is indeed possible, and that we are not merely standing at the limits of our past, but moving toward a viable future.

I wish now to touch on a wider issue: the meaning of the term “Jewish heritage” and its significance for us today. I will begin with a verse at the end of Deuteronomy: “Moses gave us the Torah, the inheritance (*morasha*) of the congregation of Jacob” (Deuteronomy 33:4). Our sages (*Sanhedrin* 91b) say:

## *Heritage and Inheritance*

“Rabbi Yehuda said in Rav’s name: If one withholds a *halakha* (= teaching) from his pupil, it is as though he has robbed him of his ancestral heritage, as it is written: ‘Moses gave us the Torah, the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.’”

This is a very powerful statement indeed. It does not address the question of whether or not we should teach Torah; rather, it says that the Torah is an inheritance for the entire Jewish people. We must not withhold it from its proprietors, and whoever does so commits a grave transgression. *Midrash Tanna'im* on Deuteronomy 33:4 says:

“Do not say ‘*morasha*’ (inheritance), but rather ‘*me’orasa*’ (betrothed). This comes to teach that the Torah is betrothed to the people of Israel. And whence do we learn this? From the verse (Hosea 2:21–22): ‘And I will betroth you unto me forever... and I will betroth you unto me in faithfulness.’”

And *Midrash Sifrei* (on Deuteronomy, paragraph 345) adds:

“Do not say ‘*me’orasa*’ (betrothed) but ‘*morasha*’ (inheritance), which comes to teach that the Torah is an inheritance for the people of Israel.”

*Midrash Vayikra Raba* (Vilna edition, 9:3) brings a story which shows how much the world has changed, and yet how much it has not. The tale speaks for itself.

“Rabbi Yannai was once walking on a road and saw a man with a most impressive appearance” – big, rich and dignified, whose paunch walked ahead of him. Rabbi Yannai did not know this Jew, but, given his attire and conduct, he assumed him to be important, scholarly and influential.

“So Rabbi Yannai said to him: Would you like to come to our house? The man replied: Yes. Rabbi Yannai brought him into his home, and gave him food and drink. As they were eating and drinking, he examined the man in his knowledge of the Bible, and

found that he had none; he examined his knowledge of Mishna, and realized that he had none; his knowledge of *Aggada*, and saw that he had none; his knowledge of Talmud, and lo, he had none.”

Thus it turned out that this impressive-looking guest, who bore himself as if he were a venerable rabbi, was a total ignoramus.

What, then, could Rabbi Yannai do? “He invited the guest to say Grace after Meals. Said [the guest]: Let Yannai recite grace in his own home.” So Rabbi Yannai understood that his guest could not even say this blessing. “He told him: Can you at least repeat what I say? Said he: Yes. Said Rabbi Yannai: Instead of Grace after Meals, say: ‘A dog has eaten Yannai’s bread.’”

This is certainly an offensive statement, but this was how Rabbi Yannai felt. His guest “stood up and grabbed Rabbi Yannai, saying: My inheritance is with you, and you are withholding it from me!”

“What legacy of yours is with me?” asked Rabbi Yannai, puzzled. “He replied: I once passed by a school and heard the voices of little children saying ‘Moses gave us a Torah, the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.’ They did not say ‘the inheritance of the congregation of Yannai,’ but ‘the congregation of Jacob.’”

And this is how this story ends: Rabbi Yannai felt ashamed because he had become aware of his guest’s true stature. The man’s total ignorance was no reason for Rabbi Yannai to humiliate him. The Torah does not belong to Rabbi Yannai and his friends, but to the entire Jewish people. Therefore, the person who knows no Torah is not a dog; he is an educationally deprived person, a spiritual pauper who should be pitied, not abused.

“Said Rabbi Yannai to that person: What then has made you worthy of eating at my table?” I must assume that if you merit my company, you must have done many good deeds. “The man replied: Never in my life have I heard something negative about someone and run back to that person to tell him about it; and never in my life have I seen two people fighting without having made peace between them. Said [Rabbi Yannai]: So much civility and good manners are in you, and I called you a dog! And he applied to him the verse (Psalms 50:23): ‘He appraises his path’: he who assesses his actions is worth a great deal.”

## *Heritage and Inheritance*

This person, who had no Torah, no Mishna, and no *Aggada*, turned out to be a giant in good conduct.

This story, which took place some 1,800 years ago, reveals a great deal about society, human relations and estrangement, and shows that none of these issues are new. But at the focus of this story is the reaction of the guest. This man had no knowledge whatsoever of the Jewish sources; he could not even recite grace after meals. Yet when told “Get out of here, you are a mere dog, I have nothing in common with you,” he knew one thing: that the Torah is his inheritance, something which not even Rabbi Yannai could withhold from him.

*Midrash Tanhuma* (*Vayak-hel* 8) adds:

“When the Almighty told Moses to make the Tabernacle, he said about each and every item within: ‘And you (singular) shall make’ (Exodus 25:13, 17, 18, etc.); But when it came to the Ark, He said (ibid., 25:10), ‘And they shall make.’ Why? Because the Almighty commanded the entire Jewish people to make the Ark so that no Jew would ever be able to say to another: I gave a lot more for the Ark than you did, and therefore I have a greater share in it than you, while you gave only very little for the Ark, and therefore you have no share in the Torah. This is why the Torah was likened to water, as it says (Isaiah 55:1): ‘Ho, everyone that thirsts, come to the waters.’ Just as no person feels too shy to say to another, ‘Give me water,’ so no one should feel ashamed to ask someone lesser than he, ‘Teach me.’ And just as whoever wants water should drink for free, so whoever wishes to study Torah should study it without a fee, as it says (ibid.): ‘Yea, come buy... without money and without price.’ And why was the Torah given in the desert? To teach that just as the desert is ownerless, so too the words of the Torah are for whoever wants to learn.”

Finally, *Midrash Sifrei* on Deuteronomy, paragraph 345, illuminates another reason why the Torah is called “the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.” Even an individual Jew who once learned Torah and then strayed to distant places is not ashamed to return, for he says: It is to

my ancestors' property that I am returning. *Midrash Tanna'im* on Deuteronomy 43:4 likens this to a prince who sailed to far away countries. Even after a hundred years, he is not ashamed to return, for he says: "It is to the kingdom of my forefathers that I am returning."

"The inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" is, then, the inheritance of all Jews throughout the generations, in all their wanderings, however far off they may be.

From this sampling of sayings by our sages, we can see that these are not just heartwarming homilies about the relationship between the Jews and the Torah. Rather, a broad worldview is being outlined, one which is summed up in the *Zohar* as the threefold bond between "[the people of] Israel, the Torah, and the Holy One, blessed be He" (see *Zohar, Aḥarei Mot* 73a).

The threefold bond is also a national and social definition. It underscores the fact that the Torah is "the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob." The Torah is not the property of a certain group or brotherhood. In the Jewish people, there is no sect of "knowers" to whom alone the Torah was given. Rather, the Torah is for the entire Jewish people. Furthermore, the Torah, which is also called an "inheritance," is an ongoing legacy. No Jew is free to consider whether he wants it or not, nor is it for any of us to decide whether to take it or leave it. Rather, the Torah is the inheritance (*morasha*) of the entire people as a legacy (*yerusha*), as heredity (*torasha*).

This view also has practical implications. First and foremost, it is a matter of attitude. On the one hand, the fact that the Torah is "the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" means that it is a legacy for my forefathers, for myself, and for my descendants. Even one who left this path a hundred years ago, and presently knows nothing about the Torah, can still return and reconnect himself with it, saying: "It is to my ancestors' property that I am returning."

On the other hand, no one can hold the Torah in his lap and claim that it is his own private property, or that it belongs only to his specific circle or group. For the Torah is the patrimony of the Jewish people as a whole, which includes each and every one of its members.

How was this inheritance taken from us? It got lost in the exiles,

## *Heritage and Inheritance*

in the “desert of the nations,” sometimes even in our own land. And it is my duty to return what was stolen from us to its owners, to all those entitled to it. This calls for a great deal of work, on both ends.

On one end are the recipients, who do not always know that they have such an inheritance. To use an ancient parable: a prince, born far away from his homeland, may not know that he is of royal descent, and is surely unaware that he has a great legacy in another country. What should this child do? He must learn about his estate; he must discover that there is a treasure awaiting him.

On the other end are the givers, or those capable of giving. The Torah is not something secret, or somebody’s monopoly; on the contrary, we are commanded to make sure that it reaches the hands of every potential inheritor, all those who belong to “the congregation of Jacob.” We must not deprive them of their legacy. Whoever tries to veil the Torah, or hide it, or build fences around it, separates his people from their heirloom, which is, and remains, theirs at all times.

This, then, is a twofold effort: of the child who grew up ignorant of his patrimony, and of he who holds any part of that inheritance and is capable of transmitting it. Both parties together must exert themselves to make the ends meet. Our great task is not to convert gentiles, but to proselytize Jews.

This heritage must therefore be transmitted and distributed, even to those who do not know it exists. One who holds in his hand even a tiny portion of this treasure has no right to keep it to himself. This is a direct, personal calling; it is not the responsibility of lawyers or of special institutions or organizations. It is the simple, humane duty incumbent upon me, who sees princes roaming the streets naked while I hold their plundered property in my hand.

To put things in proportion: the land of Israel is the Holy Land, the only land that is holy. Jerusalem is more sanctified than all the land of Israel, and beyond the sanctity of Jerusalem is the sanctity of the Temple Mount.

But above and beyond all this is the sanctity of the relationship between the Almighty and the Jewish people. This silver cord, this life-line which links every Jew to his Creator, carries the sanctity from which all other sanctities derive. When one keeps this life-line intact, when

one enables this flow of life to continue – this is where God is. Beyond that, He cannot be revealed.

The task of returning what has been lost to its owner is a very dramatic one. Sometimes one can only do a small part of it. Sometimes a person may begin, but not get to see the end. This is especially true because so many of the recipients are suspicious of the inheritance they are being offered. At other times, the paupers may have become accustomed to their poverty; they may have decided they do not want to be entangled with a great legacy. But whenever one has the privilege of returning that legacy, it is a powerful experience indeed.

There are still so many who need this, who cry out for this. And all of us, each and every one of us, can do something in order to weave this silver cord anew, to once again extend this thread of life.

25 September 1996