TORAH IS A MIRROR
BY RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner tells of the time he brought a nursery school class into the synagogue sanctuary for a tour. He showed them the bima, the ner tamid, the cantor's and rabbi's lecterns. Finally, the tiny kids stood before the huge doors of the Holy Ark.

"What do you suppose is in there?" he asked them.
"Nothing!" one child answered, "It's empty."
"A new car!" another shouted.
"An old, old Torah!" responded another.
"I know! I know" one child insisted, "It's a mirror!"

Each of the kids was right. For Jews distant and disconnected from Judaism, the first child was right: The Ark is empty. Judaism is alien and barren of meaning and substance.

For others, Judaism holds only a superficial, aesthetic appeal. It's all Bar Mitzvah parties, bagels and lox on

Sunday morning, and what we'll be wearing to Yom Kippur this year. Religion as cultural entertainment -- a warm, ethnic sentimentality without ethical or spiritual demands.

For some, Judaism is a tired, old, depleted faith. They hear in it nothing important for a modern mind, and what they do hear is interpreted as misogynist, racist, or coldly legalistic.

But for those who are prepared to look deeply and imaginatively, the Ark contains a mirror, reflecting the truth about ourselves, our values, our accomplishments and our limitations.

Menachem Mendel, the Kotzker Rebbe, taught that the uniqueness of Hasidism was this: All Jews are taught, "You should not lie." Hasidim teach: "You should not lie to yourself." It is this reflexive turn, the turn inward, that characterizes the Kotzker's Torah. I first learned

this wonderful insight when studying with Rabbi Harold Schulweis z'l at a Tikkun Liel Shavuot a number of years ago. Rabbi Schulwies proposed this reflexive turn as a way to hear the Ten Commandments anew each year at Shavuot. He turned each commandment inward and challenged us to look deeply into the mirror of Torah.

The Sixth Commandment, for example, teaches "You shall not murder." Within this is the commandment, "You shall not murder yourself." What are all the ways we daily murder ourselves?

"You shall not steal... from yourself. " When do we steal from ourselves? What do we steal? And how do we make restitution?

"You shall not commit adultery...against yourself." How have we adulterated ourselves, betraying sacred principles, practicing moral promiscuity and spiritual unfaithfulness?

"You shall not bear false witness...against yourself." When do we offer false testimony about ourselves? Or to ourselves? And why?

"You shall not covet...yourself." We covet when we simply cannot live knowing that a neighbor has possessions and position that aren't ours. We covet ourselves when we simply cannot live without all that was once ours but is no more. What are the attachments to the past the hold us back from the present and the future?

"Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy." Where is the sanctified Sabbath within you? Where in your life is a place of peace, your haven and refuge from competition and conflict?

"Honor your father and mother...within you."; What does it mean to carry a father's love or a mother's

wisdom within? What has become of the fatherly and the motherly in you?

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." What were the promises and commitments I once made to myself that were subsequently broken, ignored, or allowed to slip quietly into lazy neglect?

"You will have no other gods before Me...including yourself." When have I made of myself the measure of all things and the center of the universe?

"I am the Lord your God." Where is the image of God within me? What have I done with that precious gift?

This morning, on the festival of Shavuot, we celebrated receiving the gift of Torah, the mirror of our souls. It is ours, but only if we are brave enough to look deeply and honestly within and to allow what we see there to move us toward action.

The Hasidic master once asked his students, “What is the most important moment in all of Jewish history?” And the students answered readily –

“The moment God gave us Torah on Mt Sinai!”

“The day the Holy Temple was erected!”

“When the great Maimonides sat down to write the Code of Jewish Law!”

“No,” my children,” responded the Rebbe. “The greatest moment in Jewish history is now. This moment. All of those moments were great. But they mean nothing if they have no place in this moment. This moment, right now, is the greatest moment in Jewish history.”

Shavuot is not only about history, it’s not only about receiving Torah at Mt Sinai long ago, in the words of

Judith Plaskow we are all standing again at Sinai right now! Xander and his classmates – in a more immediate sense as they stand on the cusp of a new chapter in their lives, university and beyond.

We must insist on the importance of this moment. We must insist that Torah be read in the present tense. Not about yesterday, but about today and tomorrow. The essential question is not what **was** or what **is**, but **what ought to be**. The question is not what the synagogue is, but what ought it to be? Not what the world is, but what it ought to be. Not who we are, but who we aspire to become.

This is Sinai, this is the power of the Torah and its commandments as a mirror; to demand that we see ourselves, our responsibilities in the commandments of the Torah. May it be our life, may it lengthen our days.

*Special thanks to Rabbi Ed Feinstein for his teaching and crystalizing of this material.