

## **DARSHANUT**

Darshanut, derived from the Hebrew root darash [explicate, expound], presents the expository, homiletic interpretation of the Bible. Its origins are as old as the most ancient aggadic and midrashic teachings and as new as the sermon or D'var Torah delivered on the most recent Shabbat. The intent is a challenge to relate the Bible to the problems, issues and goals of daily living.

We encourage our readers to contribute to Darshanut. The submission should be based on the Bible, no more than 750 words in length, and as relevant and current as you would like to make it. For more information on submissions, see the inside back cover.

## **THOU WORM JACOB**

### **THEODORE STEINBERG**

Isaiah 41:14-15 reads: *Fear not thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel; I will help thee, saith the Lord . . .* The NJPS translates: *Fear not, O worm Jacob, O men of Israel*, and then in a note states that an emendation of the word for "men," [m'tay] yields "maggot." All in all, a rather grubby phrase.

Our feelings about worms, if we think about them at all, are not especially inviting, but worms are important in the cycle of life. Earthworms enrich the soil by eating it and excreting topsoil; the digestive system of silkworms produce what is perhaps the world's most lovely and costly fabric. But why call Israel a worm? The general context of the verse is favorable to Israel, but the terminology is hardly complimentary.

Rashi suggests that the language is merely descriptive for Jacob and his family who were as weak as worms: "*She'ain lakh gevurah ela ba'peh*. [Their strength was in their mouths]." Radak adds that the mouth is good for at least two things, of which one is prayer. Israel can pray for God's help and support. Radak must have been a bit of a naturalist, for he notes that worms can and do chew up

*Theodore Steinberg, an Associate Editor of JBQ, lives in Jerusalem and delivers his Divrei Torah at the weekday morning minyan of Kehilat Moreshet Yisrael.*

everything that is in the soil, and even the mighty cedars of Lebanon fall before them. Worms may grind slowly, but they patiently grind it all. Maybe the reference to Israel as a worm is to suggest that over the long run, Israel has proven itself to be, like worms, tough and durable.

When an earthworm, and perhaps other species, is cut into two pieces, both sections are known to be capable of regenerating themselves into full-fledged worms. This reminds one of historian Simon Davidowitz's comment that the Jews are "an everdying people." By this, he is said to have meant that the Jews are always concerned about their imminent demise, culturally or physically. So they keep girding up their collective strength and somehow manage to defeat the enemy, whether it is from within or without. Thus, being called a worm has certain positive connotations.

This text appealed to this writer because it summoned up some memories of a book read long ago; *Report to Greco*, the autobiography of the distinguished Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis. I have always admired and vaguely remembered two short statements in *Report to Greco*, both about worms or worm-like creatures. Both passages express the notion of self-transcendence, by which Kazantzakis meant a creature – human or not – which manages to surpass or grow beyond its natural self. And that surely is a religious notion. (Thanks to the Internet, I was able to recover both statements.)

First, the butterfly, "the glorious metamorphosis of the humble caterpillar – a mere grub which spreads its wings and becomes a creature of splendor in its next existence." Is that a natural allusion to what we call *olam ha-ba* [the world to come]? Second, the flying fish, "which for a brief moment of heroic endeavor, leaps out of its native environment, transcending itself as if aspiring to a higher, freer existence."

Both passages stimulate thoughts and wondering: Beyond all the pains and aches and disappointments and hurts and hungers of daily life, there is an undying aspiration for life in its fullness, for love, for roots, and, in the long run for transcendence, for *olam ha-ba*, a better and finer world, for knowing the One who created and stands behind the Universe.

Is this an understanding of Jacob the worm, that we learn from a mere slimy grub that yearns to be a butterfly – Israel, the Jewish people, and its dreams?