

NON-TRIVIAL PURSUIT

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

The song of Ha'azinu encompasses a panoramic view of Jewish history. It tells of the past, present, and future of Klal Yisrael. However, Moshe does not end the portion with a song. He exhorts them to take his words seriously and apply them to their hearts. Then he reiterates the most prevalent theme of all his teachings *"be careful to perform the entire Torah, for it is not an empty thing for you, for it is your life"* (Deuteronomy 32:46-47).

The spectrum from "not an empty thing" to "it is your life" is extremely broad. It is quite disconcerting to see Moshe telling the nation he had guided with the words of Torah proclaim that Torah is not an empty thing. Can he have meant something deeper?

Rashi tells us that he in fact did mean something deeper. There is no empty thing in Torah. Every fact and seeming minutia bear tremendous relevance, even the seemingly trivial fact that is written in Sefer Braishis, "the sister of Lotun was Timna," (Genesis 36:22) is a springboard for philosophical, historical and even kabalistic discussions (see Sifri 336).

Again, something needs clarification. The Torah tells us that there is not one thing empty, irrelevant, and trivial in the Torah, as it is your life. Is there no middle ground? Can something be important yet not be life encompassing?

When I was in seventh grade one of my classmates was frustrated at a difficult commentary that Rashi had cited. "I don't like this Rashi," quipped the student.

My Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel Dishon, stopped him short with a story that occurred to his friend Chaim. Chaim was on a tour of Paris' Louvre. On the tour was an elderly American woman, whose appreciation for art must have begun and ended with her grandchildren's works which hung proudly on her refrigerator. As the guide passed the Mona Lisa, the oohs and ahs of the crowd were drowned out by the cynicism of the woman.

"Is she smiling or not smiling? Can't DiVinci make up his mind?" she kvetched. The Rembrandts and Reubens did not forego her criticisms either.

When the guide began to explain the distinction of painting style, the differences of oils and brushstrokes and a host of other amazing facts and analysis, the women let out a sigh of impatience. "I really don't see what is so wonderful about these pictures! My gr..." The guide cut her short. In perfect English with a French accent, he began.

"My dear madam, when you go to the Louvre you must realize the paintings are no longer on trial. They have already been scrutinized and analyzed by those who have spent their entire lives studying art. Every stroke of the brushes have been praised and critiqued. What hangs here are the standard bearers for every generation of artists to come.

"No my dear," he continued, "at the Louvre, the paintings are not on trial. It is you who are on trial. The paintings have passed the test. It is you who have failed."

Needless to say, my classmate understood our Rebbe's point.

In order to appreciate every detail of the Torah and to understand that every fact, figure, and seemingly trivial detail contain endless depth and countless meanings, one must make the Torah his life. Moshe is telling us more than a critique of Torah wisdom; he is teaching us a fundamental Torah principle. "There is not one empty thing in Torah when it is your life!" If one makes a serious career of Torah study, if he analyzes and commits himself to Torah knowledge, he will be amazed at the never-ending lessons, laws, and lifestyle morals he will glean from it.

Imagine, in 1637, mathematician Pierre de Fermat wrote a tiny theorem. On the margin of his notebook he noted that he found a truly wonderful proof which this margin is too small to contain.

For 350 years, in universities around the world, mathematicians toiled unsuccessfully to decipher the riddle. It was their life and they lived to fit in the missing pieces of what may seem to many of us as insignificant mathematical minutia. But to those who live math, it is not empty. For there is nothing empty in it when it is your life.

Surely, the everlasting words of the Torah contain the theorems that sustain us eternally. And they are to be found in its tiniest details. We must, however, actively pursue it. And when you are truly in pursuit of its truth, you will find that the Torah contains nothing trivial.

Good Shabbos

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Dedicated by Mr. & Mrs. Josh Kalter in memory of Helen Wincelberg

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