

SMALL COINCIDENCES

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Fire and thick clouds descended on Mount Sinai as millions of Jewish people trembled in awe at the foot of the mountain. And then the voice of the Almighty spoke directly to all the people, the first and last time that such an incredible divine revelation would occur in all the history of mankind. What did the Almighty say to the Jewish people on that historic day at Mount Sinai? He gave them the Ten Commandments.

But what about the rest of the Torah? Where and when was that given to the Jewish people? In fact, all the rest of the Torah was also given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. The encampment remained at the foot of the mountain for over a year, and during this time, Moses taught the entire Torah to the Jewish people, and the process of study began.

This week's portion, however, when presenting the laws of the sabbatical year, opens with a strange statement. "And Hashem spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai, saying . . ." What is the connection between Mount Sinai and the sabbatical year? wonders the Talmud. After all, wasn't the entire Torah taught at Mount Sinai. Why make particular mention of Mount Sinai with regard to one commandment?

The Talmud explains that this we are meant to draw a parallel from this commandment to all the other commandments in the Torah. Just as the laws of the sabbatical year, which require that the land be left fallow every seventh year, were taught in full at Mount Sinai so too were all the laws of the Torah taught there.

The question remains: Why were the laws of the sabbatical year singled out as the example which all the other laws follow?

The commentators point to an interesting passage a little deeper into the Torah portion we are reading this week. "And if you shall say, 'What will we eat in the seventh year? Behold, we cannot plant nor gather in our produce,' then I will command My blessing for you in the sixth year, and it will yield enough produce for three years."

What an amazing statement! Here is clear proof (among many others) of the divine origin of the Torah. First of all, do laws of the sabbatical year sound like something people would make up? And even if we could conjure up some motivation for instituting such laws, how exactly did they plan to deliver on the three-for-one crop in the sixth year? This was not written by men. It couldn't have been.

This, the commentators explain, is the point the Torah is making here. Just as the sabbatical laws were formulated by the Almighty and not by men, so too are all the other laws of the Torah from Mount Sinai, divine in origin and not the product of human imagination.

A man, who had business in a distant city, bid his wife farewell, left his apartment and went out to the street to find a taxi. To his delight, a taxi was standing at the curbside. At the airport, he found a skycap waiting to take his luggage just as he opened his door. His ticket was waiting for him at the counter, and once again, he was delighted to discover he had been assigned his favorite seat. What wonderful coincidences, he thought.

The coincidences continued throughout his trip, and he marveled at his good fortune. Finally, he arrived at the hotel in the city of his destination and found that a delicious meal had been prepared for him. Moreover, the food was prepared and arranged exactly as he preferred it!

Aha! he thought. This is too much to attribute to coincidence. Now I clearly see my wife's loving hand. She made sure that I was happy and comfortable every step of the way. I must thank her not only for the meal, but for every convenience I have so fortuitously encountered on my trip.

In our own lives, most of us can easily think of at least one or two times when we saw clearly the Almighty's hand leading us through difficult times. But think about it. Doesn't it stand to reason that all the other good things that have happened to us in the normal course of events, all the little coincidences that we are so accustomed to taking for granted, all of these were also engineered by the loving hand of the Almighty? Once we come to this realization, our relationship with Him will rise to a new level and will be forever spiritually enriched.

Familiarity Breeds Respect

Anticipation. What a wonderful feeling. As the long-awaited event draws ever closer, we cannot help but count the days. Five days left. Four days. The excitement builds and builds until it is almost unbearable.

We experience this excited anticipation at this time of the year, during the days of Sefiras Haomer, when we count down towards the Giving of the Torah on Shavuot. But the count does not follow the expected pattern. We do not count 49, 48, 47 and so on, calculating the diminishing number of days remaining. Instead, we count 1, 2, 3 and so on, calculating the days that have already passed. Why is this so?

A look into this week's Torah portion offers an illuminating insight. Hashem reassures us that if we are faithful to the Torah, He will shower us with blessings. Among these is the promise to "place My Abode among you, and I will not be revolted by you." The choice of words here is quite puzzling. If

Hashem chooses to establish His Abode among the Jewish people, why in the world would He be revolted by them?

The answer lies in a very familiar concept. We have always been conditioned to believe that "familiarity breeds contempt," and indeed, it is true in most cases. When we observe a person from afar, we develop an idealized impression formed of his most striking characteristics. But as we become more familiar, as we draw closer, we begin to notice the minute faults, the moles and warts, both literal and figurative, that are not visible from afar. We no longer think of this person as such a paragon of virtue but as an ordinary person with human failings - if not worse. Furthermore, a relationship that falls into familiarity loses its glamour and mystique. The old thrill is often gone.

One might have thought, therefore, that when the Creator chose to establish His Abode among the Jewish people it would spell the beginning of the end for His special relationship with them. Although, He certainly is all-seeing and all-knowing, when the shortcomings and foibles of the Jewish are not brought into the spotlight of the Divine Presence, so to speak, they are not as easily dismissed. When Hashem actually dwells among the Jewish people, a higher standard of behavior is required; anything less would be "revolting" to Him. From the side of the people, furthermore, one might have thought that the thrill of having the Divine Presence among them would eventually dissipate, and the people would take it for granted, once again causing Him to be "revolted," so to speak. Therefore, Hashem reassures us that this will not happen. The relationship would grow ever stronger, breeding respect not contempt.

During the days of Sefiras Haomer, our counting is not merely an emotional outburst of impatience and anticipation. Rather, it is a sober expression of a gradual process of drawing closer to Hashem, whereby each day is a building block resting on the previous day and forming a foundation for the next.

As we contemplate the approach of the awesome Giving of the Torah, as we condition our inner selves to become attuned to the eternal truths of the universe, we undergo a process of growth. As we draw closer to the Creator, we are increasingly overwhelmed by His infinite greatness. And we become ever more purified and more beloved to Him. The Count of the Omer, in its ideal form, is the record of this growth, of this blossoming relationship.

Two cross-country travelers met in a roadside inn.

"Tough trip," one of them commented to the other. "But just one thousand miles to go, and I'll reach the coast. How about you?"

"I'm also heading for the coast. I've covered two thousand miles already, and I've had a very good trip."

"Really? Say, if we're both going coast to coast, how come I find the trip tough and you don't?"

The other thought for a moment, then he said, "It's really quite simple. You say you have a thousand

miles to go, which shows your mind is totally focused on the destination, and the entire trip is just terrible drudgery. I say I've already covered two thousand miles, which shows the trip itself has value to me. I enjoyed the spectacular vistas, seeing new places and observing their ways of life. I look at my two thousand miles as an accomplishment, and so, I'm having a very good trip."

In our own lives, we acknowledge that we need to strive toward idealistic goals, to a life of goodness and spirituality, but we sometimes lose sight of the transcendent value of each passing day in helping us achieve those goals. We think that at some future time we will become more spiritual, that we will live a higher and better life. But these goals cannot be reached by a mere decision and a snap of the fingers. Only by painstakingly building a structure of days set upon days can we reach the peaks to which we aspire. And in the process, we will discover that getting there is itself a very rewarding and enriching experience.

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