

REFLECTIONS, DISSECTIONS AND CONNECTIONS

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

I'm sure the question has occurred to many of you: Haven't we been through the ritual of concluding the Torah and beginning again from Bereishis many times before? Doesn't it seem as if our excitement and inspiration tends to wane rather quickly? This year it occurred to me that rather than work to preserve the Yom Tov's emotional and spiritual high, we might do better attempting to implement the festival's core message.

Over the course of the year, our level of interpretation and understanding of the Torah and its Divine laws are expected to expand as we gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of the Torah's message through our learning. Perhaps the message that we need to take from the Chag is that we must try to shed the superficial, materialist way with which we tend to interpret the world around us. We need to expand or reshape the prism with which we view the events of our lives and reach for a deeper and truer grasp of their meaning.

A recent incident concerning a painting by a young student at the Yeshiva, who is an unusually gifted artist, brought this concept graphically to life. A couple of months ago, I commissioned this student, Binyomin Allen, to draw a painting of my beloved Rebbe, the Nesivos Shalom ztl, surrounded by the great personalities and Hassidic rebbes of yesteryear that molded his life values. Binyomin produced a spectacular work of art, masterfully incorporating the various institutions that the Rebbe founded and led during his lifetime.

The picture now hangs in my dining room, unfailingly eliciting gasps of admiration from our guests. Over the Chag, a legacy graduate who is now a beginner student in the Yeshiva, joined us for a meal and was transfixed by the painting. I asked him what aspect of it moved him so. He was gazing at the frame of Rav Mottel of Slonim, a saintly man whose rather gaunt features and large hat created a striking image on the canvas. "Rabbi, it's that 'Clint Eastwood guy' on the left," he exclaimed. "He is some cool dude. I really like that guy."

Well, Clint Eastwood and l'havdil the heiliger Rav Mottel are, of course, so drastically different, they almost can't be said to inhabit the same universe! But the comment made me more fully aware that we can only interpret what we see with the values and outlook that form the template of our minds. Our home is a reflection of the finite world that encompasses us. We are limited by that finite world and have difficulty stepping outside of it. We interpret events, relationships and Hashem in a manner that that doesn't threaten our sense of security, and will not force us to step outside our comfort zone physically or spiritually. Our challenge is to open up our minds to a far more honest and

objective grasp of ourselves and the world around us.

A story my dad once related to me highlights a person's tendency to superimpose his mindset-and frequently, his tunnel vision - on whatever confronts him. My dad, born and raised in Manchester, England, recalled that when he was eight or nine years old, a saintly Chabad chasid, Rav Yitzchok Masmid, came from Russia for a visit. He was raising funds for Chabad activities behind the Iron Curtain. This tzaddik barely ate more than a bit of dry bread with drink . He learned all day and avoided even sitting on a chair, so as not to benefit too much from this world. He would sit on the edge of a chair and get up every ten seconds, afterwards sitting back down! My grandfather and father accompanied him on Shabbos to the central synagogue where he was scheduled to make an appeal. This was in 1928 when the public's favorite recreation was to attend the Sunday horse races and bet on their favorite horse.

Rav Yitzchok sat during the services next to the president at the front of the shul. After he made his appeal, my Dad heard the president asking a fellow nearby, "Jake, what did you think of that Rabbi's sermon"? The man replied, "Tell you the truth, Sam, I didn't understand a word, but Blimey - he'd sure make a good jockey"!

The nimshal is pretty clear. We can only absorb from a 'spiritual exposure' as much as the vessels are equipped to receive. It's amazing how we can witness things that are so elevated and yet perceive so little!

Due to my weakness for Jewish art, our home has quite a varied collection of contemporary and Renaissance-style paintings, as well as lithographs in various rooms. In the children's room hangs a colorful depiction of Noah's ark replete with many different animals positioned on deck. The giraffe's head sticks out, and Noach's Zaidy- like image is rather amusing. It reflects the childlike vision that we had in first grade of this Biblical drama. But do we ever graduate from that vision?

Stepping out of our homes into the Sukkah allows us to do just that; to leave behind the limited vision to which we've been conditioned, and to realign our mindset directly with our Neshama's source. The culmination of the Chag is our spirited dancing with the Torah when we commit ourselves to gaining a truer appreciation of the Torah's teachings. Let's attempt to expand our spiritual horizons with a deeper, more Torah-aligned analysis and interpretation of Hashem's message to us.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos.

Sincerely

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