

NEW TEST, SAME STRUGGLE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was desirable to make one wise. (Bereishis 3:4-5)

And the cycle begins again, b"H. On Simchas Torah we read Zos HaBrochah and completed another cycle of weekly Torah readings, b"H. It is the first Shabbos after, and we now begin the next cycle with Parashas Bereishis—again.

I don't know how many other religions celebrate their "holy" work as the Jewish people do. I don't know if they have a special day on which they celebrate receiving it and dance with it with as much joy as Jews have done now for thousands of years with their Torah scrolls. Then again, Torah is so very different from other "holy" works, the only one dictated letter-by-letter, word-by-word by God. No other religion even makes that claim.

Torah was also given to 3,000,000 people who were privy to the prophecy. Such a claim, if not true, would not survive from one generation to the next. You can only successfully make such a claim if the next generation knows that their parents, or at least their grandparents were actually part of the 3,000,000 present at the receiving of Torah.

The truth is, an observant Jew does not really care much about any of this. They do not need a "proof" that Torah is authentically Divine, the direct word of God. They do not know otherwise, and not because they simply accept the idea on faith. It is because, whether they know it or not, Torah itself proves this to them everyday they learn and live it.

Yes, we have yeshivos as a means to keep the Torah tradition alive. How many talmidim learning it however, well after "school" has finished and until their dying day, even think about this? On the contrary, they take for granted that Torah tradition is alive and well, perhaps oblivious to how many less fortunate Jews are leaving the fold because they never quite "got it."

For one reason or another, those who have turned their backs on Torah after having been born into the "Torah world" never crossed that "threshold" that allows one to eternally bond with Torah. They knew to be obedient to it and were until they were old enough to say "No." They never got to know what they could have, so they had no problem leaving it behind.

The dilemma is exacerbated today like never before. The hedonistic practices of other cultures have always drawn some disenfranchised Jews away from Torah all through history. Modern

technological advancement today however, is like a magnet for Jews with little or no love of Torah. The secular world appears very, very, exciting for an observant Jew for whom Torah seems very, very boring.

Consequently, the Internet and everything associated with it has come under fierce attack in the Torah world. A tremendous amount of energy and resources are being poured into the curtailment of Internet by Torah advocates, because it is an easy and affordable portal to so much that the Torah forbids.

Furthermore, the Internet also allows such dubious activities to transpire anonymously. This removes a hurdle of personal shame that often acted as a last chance gate-locker for someone with still an ounce of fear of God. Smart phones only magnify this problem.

To some, the response seems paranoiac. They probably just haven't heard the horror stories that have occurred as a direct result of Internet access. It's not just about children, so many who have been damaged for life, but about adults as well. The Internet or Internet-related activities are the reason for many family break-ups, for reasons that once did not apply to members of the Torah world.

All of a sudden, finding a better way to share the excitement of Torah to stave off intrusion from a very secular and enticing world has become secondary to dealing with the problem of the Internet. It's like worrying about the ship's entertainment program when the ship itself has sprung a major leak. All the community's focus must first, by necessity, be on "plugging the hole."

The community's focus may not be on the central problem, but the focus of this week's Perceptions will be.

To begin with, there may not be a nation-wide solution to the problem, at least until exile ends. Contrary to what it may seem like, we are a nation in exile. Even worse, the Shechinah is in exile, suffering every moment that a mosque squats on its rightful place, and its people are spread throughout the world.

When Pharaoh began to bathe in the blood of Jewish babies, we cried hard enough to end the exile. The problems facing the Jewish people are having a similar impact. It is helping us to realize that we need God to end this exile and solve our spiritual problems through redemption.

Until such time, it is still possible to discuss what it is that is missing from the Torah world to deal with the issue of making Torah come alive for disinterested Jews. It is still relevant to discuss the building of some kind of educational bridge between where we are now and where we ought to be. It is the first step towards actually building such a bridge.

Warning: This is a two-part discussion. It will start this week and finish next week, b"H, in time for Parashas Lech-Lecha. This is because it is not a topic that has become relevant only because of the challenges of modern society. It is because it has been and is the challenge in every society since

man first walked the face of the earth, all that way back to the Garden of Eden.

Think about it for a moment. What did the snake offer Chava that tempted her away from God's way to his way?

The snake said to the woman, "You will surely not die. For God knows that on the day that you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like angels, knowing good and evil."
(Bereishis 3:2-3)

This may cause many to yawn today and say, "That's it? That's the best you can offer? You want me to violate the will of God for only THAT?" This was not Chava's reaction, though. On her very high spiritual level, smart phones and Internet would not have spoken to her. This did, as the Torah reports:

The woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was desirable to make one wise. (Bereishis 3:4-5)

Before proceeding, let us recall that Chava, and then Adam, passed up the the Tree of Life, a.k.a., Torah, to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Even though the Tree of Life promised immortality, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil had a death sentence attached to it, they chose the latter. They risked everything for a "bite" of the Aitz HaDa'as.

The pull was that strong, that blinding, that intoxicating.

What went wrong?

It has to do with inverted realities. Adam and Chava were already living in Paradise. Yet, the snake, which is really the yetzer hara, was able to convince Chava that real Paradise was a bite away. They had the real Paradise, and yet they chose the fake one. How could that happen? Ayekah—Aleph-Yud-Chof-Heh? Well, how could the Jewish people have a Temple and do that which caused its destruction? Eichah—Aleph-Yud-Chof-Heh?

The Ohr HaChaim provided an important insight that explains all of human history and its spiritually destructive nature. Simply, the fruit of the Tree of Life was the bark itself, something you could not know until eating it. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was apparent, and attractive, just by looking at it.

This was not a coincidence. It was designed this way. God made the Tree of Knowledge look more attractive than the Tree of Life so that a person would choose it only after checking into it, not from a distance. He wanted, WANTS, a person to come to Torah because it is true, not because it is fun. God wants people to pursue Torah as part of a pursuit of the ultimate pleasure in life, not for a temporal thrill often associated with the pleasures of this world.

Anyone who has truly tasted the "bark" of Torah knows that it is more than worth it. Once "inside," it is not difficult to stay there, even in a world as materially exciting as the one in which we live. Helping

someone enter that level of Torah life is another story, one that Adam HaRishon apparently failed at. It is also one which the Torah world struggles with as more and more religious Jews leave the fold, in part or completely, for the excitement of secular life.

What can be done to turn the tide of assimilation?