

# SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

## **Mattan Torah - Seeing the Bigger Picture**

After the Ten Commandments, Scripture describes the scene of that incredible moment when we received the Torah on Har Sinai:

*And the entire nation saw the sounds, the flames, the voice of the shofar, and the smoking mountain.*

Chazal, our Sages, explain that during the Revelation that took place when the Torah was given, people transcended the normal limitations of the body and its senses. They could see what one normally hears, and hear the seen (Mechilta). Because this is something we're not used to, it is somewhat hard to conceptualize. The question is this: What was the need or purpose for this unusual phenomenon? While we believe the Almighty created the concept of nature whereby the seen is seen and the heard is heard, and as such He can manipulate these boundaries at His whim, we are also taught that generally Hashem does not traverse the barriers of the natural order to perform super-natural feats and miracles, unless there is a need for such. While this synesthesia - the commingling of the senses - surely enhanced and augmented the experience of receiving the Torah, what was its necessity, and what is to be learned from it?

Those readers familiar with the history of Bobov Chassidus will know that Bobov today, boasting thousands of chassidim worldwide, was not so long ago no more than a distant dream in the mind of the previous Rebbe zt"l. After the Holocaust, when the Rebbe arrived in America, what he found could aptly be described as a wasteland. European Jewry had been decimated by the Nazis, and those who escaped the death camps had little more on their minds than finding a job, a place to live, and perhaps starting life again. To dream that the pre-war Judaism of Europe could one day be rebuilt - than on the soil of North America (the "tu'mene land") Yeshivos and battei midrashos would once again bustle with the sounds of young men studying Torah - was something far beyond many people's most optimistic fantasies.

But the Bobover Rebbe was a dreamer. No sooner did he set foot here than he started rebuilding what had been lost. He opened up a shteibel (in the Westside of Manhattan) and arranged for daily prayers. Often, the Rebbe had to go out into the street and beseech Jewish passersby on their rushed way to work to come in for a few minutes and help complete minyan. Sometimes, the Rebbe would tell other people of his dreams to open up Yeshivos and girls schools and rebuild chassidus in America. Mostly, the Rebbes dreams were met with pessimism, if not open derision. "Rebbe," they

would respond, "things here are different. It's not Europe. It's hard for you to realize, but after being here a few years, you'll see that American soil is simply not fertile for the types of things you envision." They told the Rebbe to get a job, make some money, settle down and concentrate on building his own family (the Rebbe remarried after losing his first wife in the war). People had no time and no koach for his pipe-dreams, and nothing would come of all his fantasies. Luckily for us, the Rebbe did not heed to their scepticism.

The Rebbe was fond of recounting one particular incident which humorously illustrates the apparent futility of his vision. At the time, mikvaos (ritual baths) were few and far between, and one erev Shabbos the Rebbe set out with a companion to go to mikvah. Along the way, the Rebbe began to speak of his dreams. He pointed out some of the larger buildings they were passing by. "Do you see that large building... that would be just right for a Talmud Torah. We'll begin with one class, then add a second, and before you know it we'll have filled the whole building. And that one down the street - perfect for a girls school." As they walked, the Rebbe continued to dream of the Torah that would one day issue forth from large and impressive buildings such as these.

Before they knew it, they had arrived at the mikvah. Outside stood a mikvah Yid whose job was to collect money from those using the premises. The cost: one quarter. The Rebbe felt in his pockets, but they were completely empty. The Rebbe was penniless. Turning to his companion, who has thus far listened intently to the Rebbe's seemingly far-fetched and grandiose dreams, with a sheepish smile on his face, the Rebbe asked, "By the way, could you lend me a quarter?"

There is an expression: Sometimes one loses sight of the forest for its trees. This, to me, is what separates the really great from the good and the mediocre; the ability to stay focused on the larger picture, and not allow oneself to become overwhelmed with life's endless details and minutia. The Rebbe could easily have listened to the advice of his well-meaning supporters, who suggested that he focus on his own family, and not waste his time dreaming of greater things. Had he done so, daresay the face of Bobov chassidus, and perhaps even the face of Torah Judaism in North America, would be vastly different from the way we know it today.

One who truly desires to achieve greatness in Torah; not mediocrity, but to plumb its depths and reach levels of understanding reserved for the truly dedicated and committed, must per-force internalize this lesson. Otherwise, the small trials-and-tribulations that life dishes out daily will prove too great a distraction for a mind that must be totally immersed in the Torah's wellsprings. He must be able to see beyond the petty give-and-take of material wellbeing, and remain focused on something greater though less apparent.

Perhaps this is the message of "seeing the heard": Those who desire to "receive the Torah" must be able to gaze beyond the obvious and conspicuous, and fixate on the larger picture. On that which lays beyond. They must see around the trees, and perceive the measureless forest that lays beyond. They must see the voices that no one else sees.

Of course it goes without saying that one must still pay attention to the particulars of life; one who ignores reality will not likely succeed in making dreams become fact. But, as they say, don't sweat the details. Take care of the small stuff, do what needs to be done, do it well, but think big, and see beyond the petty and the trivial.

We're not the Bobover Rebbe. But as we approach kabbolas ha-Torah, each Jew has the opportunity to dream about how he can accomplish something truly magnificent with his life.

Have a good Shabbos.

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