NO MISTAKING IT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And Hashem appeared to him in the Plains of Mamre; and he [Avraham] was sitting at the opening of the tent in the heat of the day. (18:1)

A writer will notice something unusual about this verse; normally one sets the scene, and then describes the current events, for example, "It was a blustery day; the garbage cans were drifting along the thoroughfare." Here, we might have expected the Torah to say, "Avraham was sitting at the opening of the tent in the plains of Mamre; Hashem appeared to him." Why does the Torah go out of its way to describe Hashem's appearance to Avraham first, and only then explain what Avraham was doing at the time.

There is an expression found in the writings of Chazal, our Sages of blessed memory, to describe people who do little and still want a generous reward: "They do as Zimri [a renowned sinner, see Bamidbar (25:1-15)], and ask for the reward of Pinchas (ibid. - see Sotah 22b)."

Truth be told, everyone likes a freebie. Take a wedding, for example. Often, the mechutanim give out some sort of small memento as a token remembrance of the wedding. By now, most of us have enough benchers, so your run-of-the-mill Birkas Ha-mazon/Zemiros Shabbos is not in great demand. But if anything out of the ordinary is endowed, just watch how quickly they are snapped up, sometimes in multiples of two's and three's. I've even seen minor skirmishes break out after a chasuna- goer leaves the table and comes back only to find his memento missing.

This is not to denigrate, G-d forbid, the value of the memento being given out. But imagine for a moment that instead of being given gratis, someone were to set up a table just outside the ballroom, and charge a very reasonable price for the very same sefer, mini-siddur, tehillim'l, etc. Suppose he was charging only two or three dollars - a screaming bargain. How many would he sell? Five? Ten? Ask a person for even the most paltry contribution, and my guess is that nine-out-of-ten, if not more, would quickly lose interest in the same article that just moments ago was so precious.

It's hard to deny; there's just something special about getting something for nothing.

There's another idiom: There are no free lunches. Everything has its price tag, and we get what we pay for. Sometimes we pay with our wallets; sometimes with our time; sometimes we pay by sacrificing our morals and our values to get what we want.

A Jew "from the heim" once told me the following vignette: It is customary that the parents of the

bride purchase the shtreimel (traditional fur hat worn on Shabbos) for the groom, which can be a costly item. His brother had recently become engaged, and one day a large package arrived in the mail. With excitement, he opened it up and took out his brand-new shtreimel. Everyone in the family gathered around him to see him try it on for the first time. But he was disappointed with how it looked and fit, and he couldn't mask his disappointment. There was nothing wrong with it; he had just hoped for something a little fancier and more elaborate. When the other family members had dispersed, he remembers his father telling him: "My son - we get what we deserve. I guess this is what you deserved."

Perhaps some readers cringe at the thoughtlessness of his comment. I admit I too was taken aback by its frankness. Perhaps, though, people were a little more honest and candid with themselves back then. They realized that even though there are freebies here and there, and at other times we may feel we've been slighted or treated unfairly, to a great extent - when one looks at the larger picture - we get what we deserve. Still, there lurks a little bit of Zimri in each of us...

When we read stories of great tzaddikim, one imagines they were born into greatness, and glided into their prominent roles with the greatest of ease. Perhaps writing their biographies that way puts our own souls at ease - it helps us to explain why they were great, and we are not. To those who delve a little deeper, though, it becomes painfully obvious that greatness is not served to anyone on a silver platter. More likely, it is to be found in the sweat and tears of hardship and self-sacrifice. No pain - no gain, as the expression goes. There are no shortcuts in the game of life, only imagined ones that more often than not lead to dead-ends.

It is told that in the days of Moshe Rabbeinu, a gentile king, having heard of his leading the Jewish nation out of Egypt, splitting the sea, receiving the Torah, etc. greatly desired to see how Moshe looked (there were no tabloids back then). It was beneath his dignity to journey into the desert to meet him, so he hired a skilled artist to study Moshe and ultimately paint his portrait. The artist spent many months until he was satisfied with his work and presented it to its commissioner. The king took one look at the picture, and gave the artist a slap across his face. "How dare you try to fool me! I am well versed in the reading of faces, and the picture you've painted is of a man who is of very poor character. Am I to believe this the great Moshe, who's name is uttered with such reverence in all the world?" The artist, however, stuck by his story that this was indeed Moshe.

The king, intrigued, journeyed into the desert to behold Moshe's countenance with his own eyes. To his shock, Moshe looked exactly as the artist had depicted him. He approached the great leader and expressed his surprise, based on his understanding of face-reading. "Why are you surprised?" asked Moshe simply. "Is this not the true test of man - to overcome his poor character and strive for greatness - not to be born into it?" (This story is quoted by Tiferes Yisrael [Kiddushin 4:77] and others. There is some disagreement as to its veracity [some say it was Aristotle and not Moshe [Midrash Eliyahu]). But for the most part the story is widely accepted [see Or P'nei Moshe (Chukas), Noam Ha-middos (88:2), P'ri Ha'aretz (Balak), et al.])

Perhaps it is precisely this that the Torah is trying to emphasize by switching the order of the verse. And Hashem appeared to him in the Plains of Mamre? Why to him and not, say, to you or me? To this the Torah continues, And he - Avraham, for his part, was sitting at the opening to the tent in the heat of the day! Even though, as Rashi explains, it was the third and most painful day after his bris milah, and the sun was baking, and Avraham had every reason and every right to stay in bed just this once and let someone else take care of the wayfarers (in the unlikely event that anyone would indeed journey out in the sweltering heat), for Avraham it wouldn't do. Perhaps someone would come by, and they'd be hungry and thirsty and in need of his help. With exceptional sacrifice, Avraham sat waiting by the entrance to his tent. It's as if to say: It is to the Avraham's in life that Hashem appears, not the imposters, let it come as no surprise.

There's a little bit of Zimri in all of us. We like to think we can get away with doing less and getting more. Chazal say otherwise: Le-fum tza'ara agra/Reward is given according to pain (Avos 5:22). In the long run there are no free lunches and no shortcuts; we get what we deserve, no more and no less. It's frank, at times painful, but its one of life's greatest lessons.

Have a good Shabbos.

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