

MAKING QUITE A SEEN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d appeared to [Avraham] at the Oaks of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. (Bereishis 18:1)

A large part of life is about reading messages. The greatness of Avraham was that he could read messages, particularly from Heaven. G-d didn't speak to him until he was seventy years of age, but it was as if Avraham had always been speaking to G-d, Who had always been speaking to him, through subtle messages - through what we call Divine Providence, "things" that happen in life that say, "Hi! It's G-d over here paying attention to your life and trying to get in touch with you to help you find the truth."

Reading messages is not just about seeing them, it is also about FEELING them. The mind always sees things that could serve to be interesting, but if the heart is not in it, then the person will not pay attention. That had been the problem with Noach's generation.

After all, Noach was building an ark for 120 years and when asked why, he would answer that G-d was going to bring a flood of destruction. "Well Noach," the mind might say, "either you're crazy or we are." At that point Noach could answer, "You're right. So check me out. Do a psychological test and subject me to a lie detector test. If I check out, you ought to do teshuvah before it is too late."

However, as man has done throughout history, they ignored Noach and ASSUMED that he was out of his mind. They learned otherwise when the waters came, but by then it was too late to go back and do it all over again. G-d even changed the weather the last week before the Flood, to give them one last chance to read into the unusual circumstances, a warning from the Creator that the purpose of creation was not being fulfilled, time was running out, and to get back on the right track.

"Unusual weather we're having this week, don't you say?"

"Yes, very unusual indeed!"

"What do you suppose it means?"

"I'm not quite sure, but I bet that next week the weather will return to normal once again."

One week later? Try ONE YEAR LATER.

This is why the waters rose 15 amos (about 30 feet) above the highest mountain, and the Ark listed in the waters 11 amos (about 22 feet). Fifteen corresponds to the numerical value of the first two letters (Yud-Heh) of G-d's Four-Letter Ineffable Name, while 11 corresponds to the last two letters (Vav-Heh) of the Name. When all four letters are together as one, then we have what the prophet describes as:

On that day, He (G-d) will be One and His Name One. (Zechariah 14:9)

The prophet is talking about none other than the Days of Moshiach, when all mankind will find it impossible to ignore the kingship of G-d over creation. When mankind can, and does ignore G-d's rulership over creation and His involvement in the affairs of man, then the Name of G-d is said to be "divided," at least in the minds of men, apparent from their G-dless behavior.

We are taught that everything about the Flood was measure-for-measure. Thus, the waters moving upward towards Heaven was symbolic of the way mankind pushed the supernatural reality of G-d out of their minds, Heavenward, so-to-speak, while they tried to take control of life on earth - represented by the Ark - which is run by the more hidden aspect of G-d's Providence, symbolized by the last two letters of G-d's Name.

Another way of looking at this separation in G-d's Name is defining it as the separation between the mind and the heart within a person, with the first two letters - Yud-Heh - corresponding to the mind and intellect of a person, and the last two letters of the Name - Vav-Heh - corresponding to the heart of a person. Whither the heart goes, that is where the person is likely to go in the end, no matter what the mind screams.

This is what made Avraham unique and so great. His eyes saw, his mind questioned, and his heart waited for the answer. His mind and heart worked together, and that is what gave him the capacity to acknowledge the hand of G-d in creation and in his life, and gave him the merit for G-d to speak to him, and guide him. Within Avraham, G-d's Holy Name came together and became one.

As Rashi teaches at the end of Parashas Beshallah, it is Amalek's desire and drive to divide G-d's Name. Thus, it is Amalek's desire to cause a separation between a person's mind and his heart, so that he will not feel motivated to pay attention to the messages of Heaven, to do teshuvah, and to get going when the going gets tough.

Hence, Avraham was Amalek's greatest enemy. That is why it is HIS descendants who stand completely opposite him, a merit that guarantees a Jew a portion in the World-to-Come. In the meantime, it is in this merit that G-d appears to us, sometimes in a direct prophecy, other times through the Divine Providence of our lives.

Shabbos Day:

After all these events, G-d tested Avraham . . . (Bereishis 22:1)

On the surface, the "Akaidah" is about a father who was willing to "bind" his son as a sacrifice to G-d, and about a G-d who doesn't accept human sacrifices. However, on a deeper level, the Akaidah is about how our assumptions about life become the very basis of our vision of reality, and ultimately, our greatest challenge.

For example, there is a great discussion about whether or not G-d removed Paroah's free-will. After all, it says that G-d "hardened" Paroah's heart, which would imply that had G-d not "interfered," Paroah might have acted differently towards the warnings implied by the Ten Plagues. Instead, from the fifth plague onward, it appears that Paroah was powerless to do that which was obvious to even the least-learned Egyptian.

However, this is not true. Paroah maintained his free-will throughout, as is evident by the way that he could still play games with Moshe Rabbeinu until the end, regarding his decision to free the Jewish people. However, the difference was that once G-d had decided that Paroah's resistance had gone far enough, He sent the plagues in such a way that "encouraged" Paroah, or at least prevented him from being able to be afraid of what he was witnessing.

It is like someone who has decided that G-d does not exist, or that if He does exist, He does not play a role in the affairs of man. Rather, he believes the events of everyday life are somewhat random, without any real cosmic meaning. This is not something he can prove, but rather it is at best an opinion and an assumption.

Now, perceptions are based upon assumptions, and hence, faulty assumptions lead to faulty perceptions, an axiom of life. Thus, even though his own brother, let's say, who believes in G-d sees the hand of G-d in all that is happening in history, he himself will be unable to see - even though it may be so obvious that he will have to admit that, if he DID believe in G-d, he could see how history could be attributed to Him.

On the other hand, not believing in G-d, or the ASSUMPTION that He is not "there," affords the agnostic brother room to read into the events of his life enough randomness to continue his mistaken assumption. Living within his assumption, he is unable to get beyond it and come to the realization that it is his assumption about the involvement of G-d in life that continues to hide G-d from him, not history itself.

In Avraham's case, it was his assumption about the meaning of G-d's command to bring his son Yitzchak up as an offering that gave reality to the tenth and final test of his life. He had assumed that bringing Yitzchak up as a sacrifice also meant killing him as a sacrifice, since that is what people have always done to all their sacrifices to G-d. To his complete surprise and joy, this time it didn't, for

as the Midrash teaches, G-d told him:

"I asked you to bring him up as a sacrifice, and now I am asking you to bring him down as a sacrifice. I had never intended for you to kill him, though you may have assumed otherwise."

However, Avraham had not known that, or even assumed that at the time, which is what made his test real for him. It was his assumption about G-d's intention that gave meaning to the tenth and final test and made it real -- even though it would not end as Avraham thought that it would, with the slaughter of Yitzchak.

Nevertheless, Avraham was rewarded for his belief and his loyalty to G-d, because that is what became apparent regardless of what G-d knew would happen. When it comes to a test of mankind, what counts is not what G-d knows about the present and future, but what counts is what WE think about them, and how we act accordingly.

Many times in life we face situations that worry us, and perhaps appear as if they are about to make a great demand upon our faith and loyalty. We may struggle to meet the challenge, and prevail only to find out that our fears were unfounded, or we may lose the challenge only to heave a deep sign of relief when we find out that the challenge never came to be.

However, that is only from our perspective. In Heaven, they are busy recording the reward of the one who rose to the occasion even if the occasion did not come to be, and recording the failure of the one who smiled prematurely, unaware that the essence of a test is what we assume, perceive, and how we respond to our perception of the moment, no matter how history plays itself out in the end.

Thus, it is a person's own assumptions about reality that can be his best friend, or worst enemy. Correct assumptions lead to correct perceptions about reality, and the ability to see the hand of G-d in life, even at times when it may be far less obvious to other people. On the other hand, incorrect assumptions about reality can blind a person to the hand of G-d in life, even at times when it is so obvious to others - even in the face of obvious danger.

It is our job in life to build our assumptions, to investigate them and test them, until they are refined to true assumptions about life in this world. G-d will help us by testing us in order to reveal the assumptions upon which we base our lives, either by confirming our correct assumptions, or by bringing down our false ones.

It is the goal of Torah to help us realize what is safe to assume about life, and what is wrong to assume about life. It is the Akaidah that symbolizes the importance of being committed to this task, for Heaven designs our tests based upon those beliefs.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

Avraham stretched out his hand and took the butchering knife to slaughter his son. (Bereishis 22:10)

Divine Providence is a very complex and intricate reality. Very often, events that seem to have nothing to do with each other at the time, turn out having EVERYTHING to do with each other when it really counts.

For example, in this week's parshah Yitzchak almost dies. Well, actually he does die once he thinks that Avraham is actually going to carry out the mitzvah of sacrificing his beloved son to G-d. As a result, an angel has to give him a new soul, but that too was part of the Divine Providence of the entire episode.

According to the Midrash, even the angels fell for it and thought that Yitzchak was actually going to die for good. Thus, says the Midrash, they cried from Heaven and their tear drops fell into Yitzchak's own eyes. The consequence of this was that Yitzchak's eyes were weakened, and eventually he became blind:

Later, when Yitzchak was old and his eyesight was poor, he called Eisav his eldest . . . (Bereishis 27:1)

What a terribly negative event. It is a nightmare to become blind, especially for the "people of the book," for whom reading and learning Torah is such an important part of life. Yet, the implication of the above verse, as Rashi also points out, is that it enabled Ya'akov to come and take the blessings meant for Eisav from his father Yitzchak, who had to rely upon his other, less accurate senses to confirm which son stood before him at the time of the blessings.

Mere coincidence? We don't believe in coincidences. Then what connection is there between the tears at the Akaidah and Ya'akov receiving the blessings intended for Eisav?

The truth is, it is not the first time that we see that the angels have not been privy to all of G-d's intentions. The Talmud tells us that when Rebi Akiva was being killed by the Romans, the angels also questioned the gruesome death of so great a Torah scholar, to which G-d answered, "Silence!"

Yet, Kabbalah tells us that Rebi Akiva's death was his final rectification in This World, and his death along with the death of the other nine martyrs of his time gave creation the spiritual wherewithal to make it to the Days of Moshiach. The Roman era had seen a very low point in the history of mankind, and G-d had considered destroying the world once more at that time. The death of the Ten Martyrs gave creation justification to exist until the end of history.

When G-d silenced the angels, Kabbalah teaches, He was really telling them that the reason they can't relate to the purpose of Rebi Akiva's death was because they lived on too low a spiritual level (angels cannot grasp higher levels than the ones on which they were created). For, some events in the history of man emanate from even the highest and most sublime levels, to which we can only relate after time, when history completes itself and the purpose of everything - even the "bad" things

- becomes apparent to all.

Thus, the tears of the angels and the blinding of Yitzchak's own eyes represent this profound concept, which was acted out through Ya'akov's taking the blessings to the surprise of all involved (perhaps even Rivkah who arranged for Ya'akov to fool his father). We can't always see the connection between events in our own lifetimes, but we have to have faith that G-d does, and that somehow today's disaster is only the historical set-up for tomorrow's victory.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Haftarah

This week's Haftarah has within it one of the most moving stories in all of Tanach. The story is of Elisha the prophet who was shown hospitality by a woman while passing through a place called Shunam. In appreciation, Elisha, finding out that the woman was childless, prayed to G-d on her behalf that she should give birth the following year.

True to his prophecy, a son was born to the woman the following year. However, one day while the boy was out in the field with his father, he became very ill and shortly after, he died in his mother's arms. The woman, broken-hearted, placed the boy in Elisha's special room in her house, and set out to face Elisha. "What point was there in giving me a son only to take him away soon after, and break my heart even more?" She cried to Elisha.

Elisha, who had not been informed by G-d of the event, returned with the woman to her home, where he found the boy dead on the bed. Shutting the door behind him, on the woman and Gehazi, his assistant, Elisha went to work to try and revive the dead child. He did exactly that. The boy was restored to his mother, who was even more grateful to the righteous prophet than she had been the first time. Reviving the dead is an even greater miracle than prophesizing the future birth of a child.

It is an important lesson to learn and it fits in very nicely with our parshah, which speaks of a similar matter. Avraham also could have asked, "What good was there in promising a son and spiritual heir, if I am supposed to kill him before he can really be either?" Often in life, we too would like to ask G-d, "Why did You give this good thing to me if You only planned to take it away from me shortly after?"

There can be many reasons in the end for this. Sometimes we lose what we love because we don't appreciate enough what we had while we had what we had; abuse it and you just may lose it. Sometimes we are just mistaken. We assumed that when Heaven gave us something good, it was a permanent acquisition. From Heaven's point of view, it had always been a temporary one, because that was best for all parties involved. Sometimes, it is to set the stage for an even greater miracle, for an even greater act of Heavenly chesed, and we are expected to hang in there and wait to see what G-d has in mind. We are expected to trust in G-d and know that all that He does, He does for our

good, our family's good, and the world's good in general. Heaven doesn't always see life as we do, but it always sees life the best way it can be, based upon where it is holding at any given moment in time.

Have a great Shabbos,
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