

THE SCIENCE OF THE MISHKAN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

They brought the Mishkan to Moshe, and the Tent and all of its implements . . . (Shemos 39:33)

In Parashas Terumah, we discussed how the Mishkan, being the rectification for the golden calf, was really a guide to achieve personal perfection. For, as the rabbis teach, each Jew was supposed to have been his own personal Mishkan, a merit we lost through the golden calf. That reality was transferred over the physical structure for the entire people, the Mishkan.

Therefore, every aspect of the Mishkan is a lesson, from the materials that were used, to their dimensions, and to where they were placed. But, perhaps one of the most important lessons that Mishkan teaches, especially today, comes out of the following Rashi:

They brought the Mishkan to Moshe, and the Tent and all of its implements . . . (Shemos 39:33)

They were unable to set it up, and since Moshe had not performed any work for it, The Holy One, Blessed is He, left that for him. No person was able to set it up because of the weight of the boards; no one had the strength to stand them up, but Moshe did it. Moshe said to G-d, "How can it be set up by man?" He answered him, "Let your hands be busy with setting it up and it will stand up on its own . . ." (Rashi)

This is very hard to understand. Six hundred thousand men between twenty and sixty years of age who were unable to figure out some way to put the boards of the Mishkan in place? After all, they had no problem taking the Mishkan apart and transporting the boards . . .

This is because the Mishkan was not just a microcosm of the world, but it was specifically the representation of the world of the Jew, and therefore only G-d could assemble it.. It's center piece was the Holy Ark in the Holy of Holies, which we are told, took more space than was physical present there (Megillah 10b).

And that was the entire point. The golden calf represented a rush back into the Egyptian world of Nature and materialism. The Mishkan represented our re-birth as the Jewish nation, a second time of leaving Egypt. Therefore, the Mishkan was not meant to be part of this world, but an encounter with the supernatural, and Purim was another example of this.

Indeed, the whole concept of Purim is based upon the lots (pur) that Haman drew to destroy the

Jewish people. Statistically speaking, he should have succeeded, and would have succeeded had he schemed against another nation in the world. The story of Purim and the reality of the Mishkan come to imprint in our minds and on our hearts: when it comes to the Jewish people, it is the laws of the supernatural, not those of the scientific world that ultimately govern the destiny and well-being of the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov.

SHABBOS DAY:

But Sarah was barren, she had no child. (Bereishis 11:30)

That is, "even a place (i.e., a womb) for a child she lacked." (Yevamos 64a)

And she conceived anyhow. What are the chances of THAT?

Statistics are much more of an everyday reality than most people know, or even care to know. We wake up each morning based upon them, eat what we do because of them, and even dare to cross the road or drive our cars because of statistics. Whatever risks we are willing to take to live our lives to the fullest we can have statistics built into them, somewhere, somehow. What ARE they anyhow?

STATISTICS: facts or data of a numerical kind, assembled, classified, and tabulated so as to present significant information about a given subject. (Webster's New World dictionary)

For, life can be dangerous, and potential loss is always just around the corner, or so it seems. Thus, as humans who choose to hang onto life and gain, as opposed to lose, we like to move with a certain amount of certainty. Life in this world, a world we did not design or create, is risky enough as is. So if there is a way to reduce that risk, if not actually then at least psychology, what can go wrong?

Well, for one, statistically-speaking, what are the odds that Creation occurred the way it is taught in the Torah? What are the odds that Noach built an ark and that it really saved him from the Flood as described in Sefer Bereishis? And what are the statistics on the story of the Exodus, and the chances that the Red Sea really split for the Jewish people, into twelve lanes yet, as recorded in the Five Books of Moses?

The odds are not good. Not good at all.

In fact, if statistical probability was the only reliable determiner of truth, as many swear it is today, there would be no way to believe anything the Torah says -(as they would like to believe). But, it turns out, there is another concept at play in the universe:

MIRACLE: an event or action that apparently contradicts known scientific laws, and is hence, thought to be due to supernatural causes, especially an act of G-d. (Ibid.)

Oxymoron's, they are, statistics and miracle. And, what's worst is that history seems to bounce back-and-forth between the two of them. There are times, it seems, when statistical law rules the universe and the future can be predicted with some kind of accuracy if certain causes and effects are known

in advance.

And yet, it seems that statistical law is sometimes suspended, and in spite of the natural laws we have come to learn and respect, events happen that seem to fly in their faces. In such situations the scientists and statisticians are left clutching their precise mathematical calculations in one hand while scratching their heads with the other, wondering which rule it was they misunderstood or forgot to take into account. But, of course, they remain ardently hard-pressed to use the "M" word, something that in the world of science can be the equivalent of being sacrilege.

Thus, there are some scientists who try hard to show how NATURALLY miracles, such as the Red Sea splitting for the Jewish people just in time to escape the oncoming and murderous Egyptian army, can occur. And, likewise, there are religionists who try to show just how statistically sound miracles can be, so much so that someone who "reveals" something remarkable whose statistics are not mathematically impressive is called, "on the fringe."

It's as if, all of a sudden, there is an eleventh commandment:

Thou shalt not make a big deal of the support of Torah that is not agreeable to the scientists of your time.

If scientific "laws" are G-dly at all, it is only because they were made by G-d. However, to assume that G-d lives by the same rules, especially when it comes to the Jewish people, is to ignore the main tenet of the Jewish people, that being, as we shall discuss.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Many are the plans of man, but it is the design of G-d that lasts. (Mishlei 19:21)

The funny thing about the Jewish people is that they seem so æ natural. True, it is remarkable that we are still here, but it's not like Jews walk inches above the ground and snap their fingers to bring about miraculous results in full view of the rest of the world. For the most part, the Jewish nation seems just like the rest of the nations of the world, with differences that seem to work against us, not for us.

That is - an illusion. Anything natural and normal about the Jewish people is a Heavenly trick to maintain the appearance of being natural for the sake of maintaining free-will. For:

... The entire reality of the Jewish people is completely above nature ... Klal Yisroel has no root or foundation in this world. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 334)

What does this mean? It means that, our Forefathers were conceived supernaturally, as it says in the Talmud:

Rebi Yitzchak said, "Yitzchak Avinu was unable to procreate, as it says, 'And Yitzchak entreated G-d opposite his wife' (Bereishis 25:21). It does not say 'concerning his wife,' but 'opposite his wife.'

Inferring from this that both of them were unable to have children . . . Rav Nachman in the name of Rabbah bar Avuhah said, "Our mother Sarah was barren, as it says, 'But Sarah was barren, she had no child' (Bereishis 11:30), that is, even a place (i.e., a womb) for a child she lacked." (Yevamos 64a)

Yet, here we are, descendants of Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivkah, and Ya'akov, Rachel, and also Leah. What are the odds of THAT? Indeed, even our enemies have marveled about the prolonged existence of our people, which, by ALL odds we should have assimilated and intermarried ourselves into oblivion by now (after 3,000 plus years), or wiped out by the hands of our many enemies who have tried countless times over the millennia to exterminate the Jewish people.

True, the Talmud warns that the Jewish people can, as a result of leaving Torah and mitzvos descend into the world of mazel (Shabbos 156b), a more naturally-governed world. This would mean, therefore, that they may find themselves in a world that IS governed by scientific law, and become subject to statistics. But even then, say the Mekubalim, there is still an element of miracle to their survival, though it is far less obvious (people survived for years during the Holocaust on rations on which the average person, could not have survived on for one month).

Thus, what many seem to forget in their rush to please the scientific world or those who worship it, is that even odds as great as 64 trillion to one mean nothing when G-d is that One. If G-d runs the world, maintains it, and orchestrates history, then there is always the potential for the unexpected, the unpredicted to come through. And not just in Hollywood, but also in real life.

For, as the posuk says:

Many are the plans of man, but it is the design of G-d that lasts. (Mishlei 19:21)

In other words, we can THINK we understand Creation and its history, and therefore we BELIEVE that we know what makes sense and what does not make sense, but at the end of the day, we are often quite wrong. This is, for the most part, what the following dialogue means. It took place between Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi and his son who had returned from the brink of death. When the father asked the son what he saw while unconscious, he answered:

"An upside down world. What is up over here is down over there, and the opposite is true as well."

To which the father replied:

"No, my son. In truth, you saw the real world. It is this world that is upside down." (Pesachim 50a)

Thus, G-d warns man:

For My thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not My ways æ the word of G-d.
(Yeshayahu 55:8)

Hence, there's no second-guessing G-d.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Let me tell you a story that happened today, in the middle of writing this parashah sheet. I was inspired to write this based upon an incident that occurred on Sunday, but I didn't get the inspiration until 10:15 this morning, Tuesday. I began to write it 20 minutes later, and got as far as the definition of a miracle when I realized it was 10:55. In five minutes I had to give a shiur around the block from my house.

Now, normally I go directly from my office to give this shiur, which is in a little basement apartment in Telzstone where I live, but on the other side of the building where I give my shiur. Today, due to a series of circumstances, I was coming from my home at 10:59 am.

It is a 30 second drive from where I had parked my car to the front door of the building where I am expected to teach each Tuesday at 11 am. So, I had no reason to speed, and being that I was going down hill, I was moving VERY slowly. I felt quite relaxed, still somewhat absorbed in the essay that I had begun and had to stop writing quite abruptly.

As I passed a garbage bin on the side of the street, just prior to making my left turn into a parking spot, all of a sudden, a group of birds - sparrows - darted out. And although they usually move out of the way of oncoming cars very quickly, and I was driving very slowly, and my car hit two of them. I heard the slight thud, and cringed.

To say that I was suddenly very upset is an understatement. I have difficulty killing flies and ants, let alone full-grown birds! We feed the birds on a daily basis at my house (except for Shabbos and holidays). I talk to them while feeding them, and thoroughly enjoy watching them shift feet and branches as they excitedly anticipate their breakfast of bread crumbs. Why did G-d let this happen to me, and now, of all times?

I parked my car and ran back to the spot, and sure enough two birds were lying on the ground, one on its back and one on its side. The one on his back did not move at all, clearly dead, and the one on his side was shaking, and that really bothered me. "How could I let him suffer like this," I asked myself as I returned to give my shiur, resolving to deposit my binder, excuse myself for a minute, and return to do the dirty work of ending the bird's suffering and his life.

As I approached the shaking bird, the one that had showed no signs of movement, the one I had assumed was definitely dead, all of sudden, jumped onto his feet. He then looked at me for a second, and then flew off as if nothing was the matter. I was in mild shock. However, the bird in front of me was clearly hurt and going nowhere fast, so I began my search for a good size rock to do the deed.

Then it occurred to me that I should not kill him in the street, but that I should remove him to a grassy area just off the street and drop the rock on him there. But I certainly wasn't going to pick him up with my hands, so I began to look for something with which to move him. Thank G-d, someone had left a board at the side of the garbage bin, which I easily broke into a manageable-size piece to elevate and move the bird.

Carefully and slowly I maneuvered the board under the bird. However, I did not get under it sufficiently, and as a result I budged him instead - just enough for him to turn over on his feet and yes, fly away. I stood there and watched them both fly away, straight up and out, fast and with grace, as if nothing had happened to them.

I just stood there for a moment, already five minutes late for the shiur. I rejoiced somewhat that I had not killed the birds after all. I thanked G-d, returned to my shiur, and spoke about the miracle of Purim and the connection to the Mishkan with far more enthusiasm than I otherwise would have.

As I walked away, I asked myself, "Now, what were the odds of THAT happening . . . especially while in the middle of an essay about miracles, and about to give a shiur on the same subject?"

A nice story, but a shallow one perhaps, in light of the events of the Jewish world today. In fact, miracles are not always positive. Sometimes people die in places they never go to, except on the day they are killed there, Rachmanah Litzlan - the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes people we think are the last ones that deserve to be taken by G-d are the first to be taken, and in ways we simply can't fathom. The odds were not good for the "bad" (that seemed) to happen, but it happened just the same.

Sometimes there are good miracles in the midst of the bad ones. Sometimes there are bad ones inside of the good ones. But, they are all miracles and, as the Talmud teaches, they are all for the good, if not now, then ultimately. Yes, Nature is no match for G-d, and natural rules make no sense regarding the Jewish people, Torah, and the relationship of both to G-d. He'll break 'em all just to fulfill His promises to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov.

Science then, as the study of natural reality, cannot ultimately get "its arms" around the supra-natural existence of the Jewish people, or even around the existence of the universe in general, since all of existence is ultimately not explainable in natural terms, much to the chagrin of many a modern man.

In recent years, we have seen science being used to prove the validity of Torah, and of G-d Himself. This method has its place, similar to Ya'akov donning the "hairy arms" of Eisav, to ensure that he received the brochah from his father Yitzhak, and using "methods" to out-manuever his father-in-law, Lavan. This is using the "natural" in the service of the "supra- natural."

However, we Jews have methods of understanding reality that originates from Har Sinai, and none of those methods, including those found in our Kabbalah, should be considered outlandish, or "on the fringe," simply because they do not comply with today's current scientific methods or concepts that are circumscribed due to their human origin. With this understanding in place, we can utilize some of the scientific methods to facilitate our search into Creation.

If we maintain this "supra-rational" orientation, we will not be shocked like the vast majority of people, when historical reality, or "the upside down world" winds down to its "natural" end, and is replaced by the "right side up" world that we Jews have been pining for, working toward, and

leading the rest of humanity toward for the last 3500 years.

That was the story of the Mishkan. That was the message of Purim. It is alluded to by the new moon that returns each month from the throes of oblivion. That WILL BE the message of the Haggadah, and perhaps this year, as history seems to be heading for a climax whether we are ready for it or not.

CHAZAK!

Have a great Shabbos,
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