

DON'T LOOK A GIFT-DONKEY IN THE MOUTH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This week's parshah sheet is dedicated to Yerachmiel Don ben Tzipora Chana. May the merit that comes from this spreading of Torah, as well as from all the many wonderful acts of chesed he and his family have performed over the years, inspire Heaven to grant him a complete and immediate recovery, and many years of health and happiness. Please doven on his behalf.

FRIDAY NIGHT:

To his father he sent 10 male donkeys carrying from the best of Egypt, and 10 female donkeys carrying grain, bread, and foodstuffs for the way. (Bereishis 45:23)

There are basically two approaches to Torah. There are those who approach Torah with the belief that what you see is all that you get. Thus, if it is not implicit from the narration, then it is not part of the story on any level. And, should you find meaning in words or phrases that is not obvious to the eye then it is meaningful only to you, because you have imagined the meaning when in fact it really is only a figment of your imagination.

On the other hand, there is the opposite approach: what is obvious to the eye is merely a veil for many different levels of meaning. And, if you find some hidden meaning that is consistent with the rest of Torah and the rules of Drash (exegetical extrapolation of ideas from the Torah), then chances are it was meant to be found, even if you are the first one to notice it (or at least mention it).

However, more often than not, if it is a true idea and meant to be found when it was discovered, it is already addressed by Sod. Just open Sha'ar HaPesukim written by Rav Chaim Vital based upon the teachings of the Arizal, and you will get a sample of what is built into the simple stories and narration of the Torah. The Torah tells stories, but the words of its stories tell their own story, often providing deep insights into life in this world.

In this story we learn about the reunion of Yosef and his family. After 22 years of separation from his father and family, a worldwide famine brought Yosef's brothers down to Egypt. This, in turn, gave Yosef a chance to reveal himself to them and finish a painful chapter in the history of the Jewish people. The Torah comments:

Pharaoh told Yosef, "Tell your brothers to load their animals and to go to the land of Canaan. Take your father and your households and return to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you will eat the fat of the land. You are commanded [to say], 'Take wagons for yourselves from the

land of Egypt for your little ones and your wives, and bring your father. Do not worry about your belongings, because the best of the land of Egypt is yours.' " (Bereishis 45:17-20)

Everyone was happy. Yosef was happy to return home once again, even if that homecoming was to be in Egypt. The brothers were happy because Yosef was found alive and well, and no worst for the wear they had caused him. Pharaoh was happy because his second-in-command would be even more committed to the welfare of Egypt if his family numbered amongst its inhabitants. All that remained was to bring the good news home to their father, and to bring their father down to Egypt.

The children of Israel did so, and Yosef gave them wagons according to Pharaoh's instructions and provisions for the way. To each man he gave a change of clothes, [but] to Binyomin he gave 300 pieces of silver and five changes of clothes. (Bereishis 45:21-22)

And, off they went up to Eretz Canaan to prepare the way for the next chapter of Jewish history: Golus Mitzrayim (Egyptian exile). A special gift for their father was prepared from his long lost son:

To his father he sent 10 male donkeys carrying from the best of Egypt, and 10 female donkeys carrying grain, bread, and foodstuffs for the way. (Bereishis 45:23)

Ten male donkeys? Ten female donkeys? What's the story?

SHABBOS DAY:

He appointed it as a testimony for Yosef when he went out over the land of Egypt . . . (Tehillim 81:6)

What's in a gift? It all depends upon the purpose of the gift, and in this case, Yosef's gift to his father was something quite Kabbalistic:

At the time that Yosef was separated from his father he already knew the wisdom of Above, b'Sod the holy upper Sefiros. In Egypt, he learned the wisdom of the lower Sefiros [of the Sitra Achra]; that is, where they latch onto from the right and from the left, ten from the right side and ten from the left side, and male donkeys (chamorim) and female donkeys (atonim). With this he hinted to his father what he learned there, as it says, "To his father he sent 10 male donkeys . . ." (Bereishis 45:23). (Zohar, Balak 207a)

Explains the Leshem:

He wanted to hint to Ya'akov Avinu that he withstood a great test, that he entered in peace and left in peace, remaining righteous and holy as before. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 342)

When it came to the Jewish people and the golden calf, Moshe pleaded before G-d to excuse their involvement. He claimed that it was to be expected, since G-d had made them so wealthy in the first place, comparing their situation to that of a handsome prince whose father had him finely groomed, put money in a purse around his neck, and then parked him at the front door of a brothel (Brochos 32a). What can anyone expect from the prince in such a situation?

What could anyone expect from the Jewish people in THAT situation, fresh out of idol-worshipping Egypt with gold and silver to literally burn. And, living elbow-to-elbow with the Erev Rav whose job it was to cause the nation to stumble? Indeed, the Midrash says that when the Prosecuting Angel wanted the Jewish people to drown in the Red Sea because they had worshipped idols in Egypt, G-d vetoed the demand, explaining that their behavior had been the result of living amongst the Egyptians for so long (Yalkut Shimoni 1:234).

How old was Yosef when he was sold into slavery by his brothers? Seventeen years old. Seventeen years old, handsome and refined, and living in the red light district of the world! And, even had Yosef survived one year on the same spiritual level as when he entered Egypt, what could have been expected of him after two years, let alone twenty-two of them?

The spiritual pressure that he must have lived with was tremendous. It was not as if anyone coming before him threw on more modest clothing when in his presence, or that he stayed home to avoid the Egyptian crowds. He was Viceroy of Egypt and was expected to conform in as many ways as he could, and you can be sure that the wife of Potiphar was not the only Egyptian woman who was attracted to him, as Rashi explains later on (Bereishis 49:22).

Then there were the philosophical debates. Egypt was an idol-worshipping society with many religious beliefs, all of which were contrary to the tradition Yosef had learned from his father. Although they saw themselves as being intellectually and spiritually advanced for their time, Yosef had to live among them knowing how wrong they were and that they were probably on a collision course with G-d at some point in the future. In order to avert that, perhaps he used the famine as an excuse to circumcise all Egyptians who came to him for food.

This is why, Chazal tell us, that Ya'akov Avinu did not respond immediately to the news that Yosef was alive and well and living in Egypt. It wasn't surprising to hear that Yosef was physically alive after 22 years, or even that he had a leadership role in Egypt. However, when he learned that Yosef was spiritually alive as well, then he finally had reason to end his 22 years of mourning, and his spirit was revived.

How did Ya'akov know this? According to the Midrash, Yosef had told his brothers to tell their father that he still remembered the last halachah they had learned together, the eglah arufah (Tanchuma, Vayigash 12). Coincidentally, that halachah concerns the actions of the Bais Din in the case of an unsolved murder, which in the case of Yosef was the revelation that he never died.

Some say that this was the message behind the wagons (agalot) that Yosef sent back to his father. In other words, agalah (wagon) having the same letters as eglah (calf), was Yosef's hint to his father regarding his spiritual well-being. But, according to the Zohar, it was in fact the sending of the donkeys, which represented the right and left side of the Sefiros on the side of the K'lipos (spiritual impurity) that transmitted the message to Ya'akov.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

If you want it like money and pursue it like buried treasures, then you will understand fear of G-d, and you will find knowledge of G-d. (Mishlei 2:4-5)

The Arizal lived between 1534 and 1572, about 432 years ago. With his help, we are better able to understand the Zohar, based upon the teachings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, revealed around 120 CE, which was published by Rabbi Moshe de Leon around 1390, some 150 years prior.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was the talmid of the great Rabbi Akiva, who was a Master Kabbalist par excellence, and from him one can trace the tradition of Kabbalah all the way back to Moshe Rabbeinu at Mt. Sinai:

The holy Ramak (Rabbi Moshe Cordevero; 1522-1570) gave his rebuke in [his work called Sefer] Pardes, and this is what he said: . . . Now that the wisdom of the Truth (i.e., Kabbalah), which is an inheritance for the Assembly of Ya'akov from Moshe Rabbeinu from G-d, has become revealed and made known amongst the wise of Israel, anyone who denies it or argues with it is called a apostate, for he denies a portion of Torah Sh'b'al Peh (Oral Law), and he removes himself from the Faithful of Israel. For, from the time that it became well-known amongst the Jewish people, that is, from the time of the Ramban (Nachmanides; 1194-1270) onward, there has not been a single Torah scholar from the wise of Israel . . . who has denied its validity. Previous to this time it was hidden and revealed only to a few fitting people in each generation, as it is known in the Teshuvot HaGaonim (589 - 1038 CE). However, from the time of the Ramban it became known amongst the Jewish people and not a single chacham from all the wise of Israel, from whose waters we drink when learning their commentaries on Talmud and Poskim, argued with it at all . . . (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 525)

This is why it is called Kabbalah, because as the word implies, it has been received and is, therefore, part of a tradition going back to Moshe at Sinai. And granted the Avos and their children kept the mitzvos (at least in Eretz Yisroel), even the rabbinical decrees, but Sod? Were they really learning Sod back then? Did Ya'akov truly know about the Sefiros and teach them to his sons, particularly Yosef?

In the Zohar, there seems to be no question, for that is what Yosef had signaled to Ya'akov through the male and female donkeys. He wasn't just confirming his adherence to the lifestyle of his ancestors, but he was referring to knowledge that belongs specifically to the realm of Sod. Which is interesting, because so much of our understanding today is built upon latter day revelations, the type of which was given to the Arizal by none other than Eliyahu the prophet.

Which just goes to show you once again that whereas secular knowledge may be accumulative, meaning that we get smarter in this area with each passing generation (in general), this is not the case with Torah knowledge, or what we call true wisdom. We may be more technologically advanced than previous societies, but they knew a lot more than we do about the way the world worked, spiritually-speaking that is.

For many that will be hard to believe since mankind seems to become more primitive the further

back one goes in time. But that is only based upon assumptions that have been based upon findings. The following is not based upon any assumptions, but based upon a Kabbalistic tradition going far back in time.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Cush fathered Nimrod, and he began to be powerful in the land. He was a great hunter before G-d, and thus was born the expression, "Like Nimrod, a great hunter before G-d." (Bereishis 10:8)

What did Nimrod hunt? What do most people hunt for food? Deer? Buffalo? Whatever wild animals existed at that time in that part of the world, that's what Nimrod probably hunted when he wanted to eat something. However, when it came to leading the world in rebellion against G-d at that time, Nimrod hunted something altogether different:

The Generation of the Dispersion were experts in using oaths and the Holy Names, and they used practical Kabbalah for the sake of idol worship, which they knew quite well had no power unless it draws from holiness . . . Their only plan was to fulfill the desires of their hearts. The leader of this generation was Nimrod who was very knowledgeable in using oaths and names to cause an angel to do his bidding. And this is what it says, "He was a great hunter before G-d," because he used to subjugate and trap all the "powers" using the Names of The Holy One, Blessed is He . . . (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 535)

Not only that, explains the Leshem, they didn't build a tall tower because they actually planned to go as high up in the sky as possible to actually challenge and fight G-d for control over the earth, or to plug a leak in the Heavens that bursts once every 1,656 years. How naïve can one be?

Rather, says the Leshem, the tower was built according to an extremely Kabbalistic dimension, based upon their understanding of how G-d made Creation and controls it. In Kabbalistic terms, they wanted to draw down the Malchus of Atzilus, the sefirah through which Divine Providence operates. We already know from the Talmud that the supernal light with which G-d made Creation was subject to abuse by evil people, which is why G-d hid it on Day One of Creation (Chagigah 12a). In essence, this was precisely what they were trying to do.

And what is even more amazing is that had G-d not come down and confounded their languages and put an end to their cooperation with one another, they might have succeeded in their diabolical plan. After all, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the House of G-d, as did Titus later on in history. Indeed, he even stabbed the Paroches in front of the Holy of Holies and it spurt blood (Gittin 56b). Titus even thought he had killed G-d Himself! And, all for the sake of free-will.

It is frighteningly amazing how far evil can go before G-d finally steps in and rights the wrongs. But that is a discussion unto itself. The main point here is to see how much we under-estimate the spiritual greatness of the early generations, either to the side of good or to the side of evil. We're only recovering and understanding what was most likely known and accessible in daily life long ago.

Kabbalas Ma'asios (Practical Kabbalah) according to tradition says that it was hidden by Rebi Akiva who, like his Creator, saw how the light would be abused by upcoming generations. Purportedly, the Arizal knew such secrets but is quoted as having said that he abstained from using what he knew for fear of the spiritual side effects it might have, in spite of all the miracles he is said to have performed, as so many other spiritual greats before and after him did.

The world is a lot different than modern man perceives it to be, and so is our past. Out of arrogance or absolute naïveté we assume that the way we know reality today is the way it has always been. All it takes is a few donkeys to set the record straight.

Have a great Shabbos,
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Text

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