

SIGNS FROM HEAVEN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

If a prophet appears, or a person has a vision and performs a sign or something wondrous, and after the sign or wonder he told you about he says "Let us pursue other gods which you have never known and serve them!" do not listen to the words of the prophet, or the one who dreamed the vision, because God, your God tests you, to see if you really love God, your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (Devarim 13:2-4)

The other day, on the way to shul to doven Shacharis, I turned to Heaven, and half-jokingly called out, "Dear God, give me a sign!" I say half-jokingly, because I did it in a tone of voice and dramatically like I used to see people do in the movies, as if I was merely mimicking them, just joking around — since we Jews don't really ask God for signs like that, or at least make decisions based upon them — something I could do in the streets where I live at 4:45 am.

As for the other half, the serious part, my request didn't come from nowhere; inside, I really wanted some kind of sign that I am on the right track by Heaven. I have been putting a lot of energy into the concepts I have been pushing over the years, which were recently summed in three projects, two books and one audio CD: Geulah b'Rachamim, The Equation of Life / The 13 Principles of Jewish History, and Survival In 10 Easy Steps.

In the course of four weeks, I had been interviewed four times on the radio (Israel National Radio), about these three projects, as well as on Internet T.V. (Tuesday Night Live). According to the feedback, the interviews had gone quite well, thank God, and as far as I was concerned, I had been given an excellent opportunity to clearly make my point, and I felt that I had.

However, in spite of all the listeners who supposedly tune in for such programs, there wasn't an explosion of book or CD sales after. There were some, b"H, but not nearly enough to make a difference to my financial picture, at a time that it has already been directly affected by all that is going on today in the world. The interviews were a lot of great, free advertising, but they did not amount to much as far as sales were concerned.

Nevertheless, I really felt that a lot of good was done. Tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people around the world who listen to INR's programming, heard what I had to say. Who knows the effect it will have on some of them? How many people get a chance to sanctify the Name of God in such a public way, which I had tried very hard to do. Sales, or no sales, I was happy with the outcome, b"H.

Yeah, but God runs the world, including, and especially, the economy. He supports every last one of us, even the people who don't believe in Him, so how much more so the people who do. There are secular people out there, writing books that are becoming overnight bestsellers, making them into millionaires, and in one case, a billionaire, and they are doing little to rectify the world, other than keeping people from cheating or killing each other for a couple of hours at a time. So, why not thousands of dollars for those who are directly working on tikun olam — world rectification?

Are you with me God, or aren't You? a little voice inside me said that morning on the way to doven, and it seemed to emerge in a real voice that, only half-jokingly, called out, "Dear God, give me a sign!" Everyone can use a little Divine encouragement every once in a while.

The day before, when I had gone to INR's site to download the latest interview (for my own records) about my most recent book, "The Equation of Life," I was pleased to see that they had summarized the interview correctly. They had emphasized that the number 11 is the key to the equation, and to life in general, since it represents, Kabbalistically, Godly knowledge that allows a person to see Creation as God does, and make the best of out of life.

Indeed, the entire interview had been about the meaning of this number, and how it even refers back to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and to the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, by Flight 11, buildings that were, themselves, in the shape of the number 11. This is why the number 11, like the numbers 25 and 36, the other parts of the equation, has become so prominent in my life and why, when it shows up in uncanny ways during the course of my day, it catches my attention.

In other words, to put it succinctly, I have "eleven on the brain."

Back to the story.

Anyhow, later that morning, after Shacharis, I was on the bus headed for Jerusalem, perusing my e-mails on my iPhone. One of the first was a forwarded e-mail from my mother, a story about a woman and her children who miraculously survived a car crash because, the story wants you to believe, their deceased husband/father came back to earth to look after them, as he had promised he would just before he died a year earlier.

It was a very nice story, whose main point was that angels take on different forms, one of which is called "friends," to which the story referred to as "angels without wings." As the story concludes about the importance of friends in one's life, and how Heaven looks out for us, it also "promises" that later that night, the reader will hear some good news about something he or she has been waiting to find out about, and even predicts the time it will occur: 11:11 pm.

I couldn't help but be moved by the incident. It had not been a long time since I had asked God for some kind of sign, just a couple of hours, and the story of Heavenly help, plus the seemingly random time chosen by the author of the story that just happened to be the most important number to me at

that time, certainly seemed like a sign of sorts. I mean, what were the odds, especially when we do not believe in coincidences at all (Chullin 7b)?

You think that story is interesting? I have even more incredible ones than that, but they take too long to tell, and you might not believe me anyhow. Or, maybe you will, when you recall similar stories that have happened to you in the past, when things happened, right on cue, and you felt as if Heaven was communicating directly with you, telling you something, giving you a message of some sort, either to direct you, or just to reassure you.

We call that Hashgochah Pratis, or Divine Providence, personalized Divine Providence. It doesn't have to be that the result is so amazing, and it may change absolutely nothing. At 11:11 that night, I was already getting ready for bed, and to my knowledge, no one called me at that time or told me anything significant that had to do with anything I was waiting to hear about.

In fact, what makes Hashgochah Pratis — which, of course, can be incredibly miraculous and life-saving — so significant is the timing. A large thing at the right time can go largely unnoticed or unappreciated, whereas a small thing at the right time can make all the difference in the world to a person, because of what it represents at that moment in time.

The question is, what if I am wrong? What if I read into something meaning that did not exist? What if I was just fooling myself, taking encouragement where it wasn't given? Don't people do that all that time? Isn't that what this week's parshah is warning against? History has been full of delusional people and false prophets; do I make myself one of them, God forbid, when I take that story, and the "11:11" as some kind of Divine sign?

It depends. It depends upon what the signs mean to you, and what they make you do. If you are unsure about what you are doing as far as its right or wrong, from a Torah perspective, you can't use signs to help you to decide. It is so easy to misread a sign, if it is indeed a sign in the first place, and that is not the way a Torah Jew is supposed to work. We do not plan to do something, or to not do something, on the basis of what we consider to be a Divine sign.

Rather, we make decisions based upon halachah. If we can't figure out right or wrong based upon halachah on our own, then we have rabbis who can help us do that, allowing us to choose a course of action that pleases God as well. Getting Da'as Torah on any issue, if the rabbi is knowledgeable enough and has fear of God, is, on some level, like asking Heaven itself, as far as your own culpability is concerned.

However, it is not a guarantee of success, as far as achieving palpable results. Sometimes, doing the right thing in life amounts to making great efforts in this world, for which we are duly rewarded in the next world, but not necessarily in this world, and sometimes, specifically not in this world, in order to maximize our reward in the next one. From Heaven's point of view, "A is truly for effort."

As a result, we humans can get down on ourselves. Being successor-oriented, especially when it

comes to physical and immediate results, it is hard for us to pay into a pot that we cannot see or feel, but simply believe in. Especially after being raised in the Western world, in which "A" is for visible success, it is hard to live with none, or very little, especially when we "see" reasons why, even according to God's plan for Creation, to achieve some as well.

"How much more could I be effective," says the Rosh HaYeshivah, "if only our funding was more forthcoming!"

"How many more people could I help," says the expert, "if I didn't have to worry so much about making a living!"

"How many more people could I save," says the philanthropist, "if I only had more funds to give!"

It's true, at least as far as we are concerned. However, God takes into account a lot more people and issues than we do when deciding how much physical success we can achieve, and does what's best for everyone involved, even though it doesn't seem that way to us. Indeed, sometimes it feels as if He has turned against us, has given up on us, even though we know that what we are doing is the right thing to do, at least as much as we can know it. It can, and often becomes, very disheartening.

"Okay," the voice inside the believer may say at times. "I appreciate that everything you do is for the good, even if it is a good that I can't relate to. However," the voice continues, "it would be nice to hear from You once in a while, just to know that You are with me, especially at the times that it seems that You are not. A little sign, God, perhaps?"

To such a request, God is only too happy to respond, and in a positive way. He built us; He knows our need for encouragement, and how much more He can get out of us, in terms of using our potential, if He gives it to us. So, usually He does, at just the right moment, and in just the right day, to give us just the right lift, to go on with our good work. It's His way of saying:

"Yes, my child, I am with You even now, even when it seems just the contrary. I see your despair, and desire to give up. I sense your confusion. This little sign, this act of Hashgochah Pratis, is just for you, to encourage you on, so that you will not abandon your course of action, and will stay with it until the time that I can grant you visible success, or at least as much eternal reward as you can achieve."

Nothing false about that. Text

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