

RECEIVERS OF TORAH KNOWLEDGE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God told Moshe in the Sinai desert, in the Appointed Tent, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after leaving Egypt . . . (Bamidbar 1:1)

Simplicity. A desert is so simple, and in its simplicity, there is beauty. But, it is a different type of beauty, different from the beauty of a well-tended garden or a wonderfully designed building. There is beauty in complexity, and there is beauty in simplicity, and apparently it is the latter that is the foundation for Torah knowledge, as the Talmud states: Torah will stay with someone who makes himself into a desert (Eiruvim 54a).

The Talmud explains itself: Torah is compared to water which can only flow downward from Heaven to a humble person. However, like water, Torah can flow in any direction God wants it to. Therefore, the Talmud is saying that, just like water naturally flows from a higher level to a lower one, likewise does Torah naturally flow to a humble person. This is important to understand, especially since Shavuot this year is Motzei Shabbos, b"H. Staying up all night might be fun, and part of the Kabbalas HaTorah experience, but to actualize the opportunity of learning Torah every day of the year, one has to truly understand what "natural" means in this context, especially since the Talmud teaches elsewhere regarding childbirth:

A candle is lit on his head and he is able to see from one end of the world until the other end . . . There isn't a better period for a person than these days [in the womb] . . . They [the angels] teach him all of Torah . . . and as he enters the world, an angel hits him on his mouth and he forgets it. (Niddah 30b)

The educational experience always seems like we are taking in from outside of ourselves something new, something foreign. The teacher has knowledge of something that we as yet do not. The educational experience always seems like we are taking in from outside of ourselves something new, something foreign. The teacher has knowledge of something that we, as yet do not. His or her mission as a teacher is to impart that knowledge to students, to somehow get them to make the knowledge their own. Some have an easier time than others, but for most children this is an effective process, at least to some degree.

However, the Talmud is saying something revolutionary. It is redefining the process of education, and the role of the educator. According to the Talmud, the ideal student is a reality—he or she comes already educated from birth and way beyond their years. The angel taught them everything

before they were born.

Of course, there is one fundamental problem. The angel not only teaches each child the entire Torah, but it also makes each child forget what they were taught. Matters are further complicated by the fact that a baby is born with the inability to share its knowledge with others, increasing the likelihood that what was once learned is quickly forgotten after birth as well.

Forgotten, but not lost. The knowledge is still there, just on lower levels of consciousness. The educational process is just to help children, and then adults, recover the forgotten knowledge, and bring it to the conscious mind. That is why, as we become conscious of the knowledge, there is not only a sense of knowing something new, but a sense of recognition of something old, though we do not recall where we might have learned it previously.

It's somewhat like what happens to a witness to crime. Usually, the average witness does not pay enough attention at the moment of a crime to later recall perfectly what he saw. The surprise, the excitement, perhaps even fear is cause for a lot of distraction, so that even if the person was looking right as the perpetrator, part of him was not.

However, that does not mean that his mind didn't take a snapshot. On some level of consciousness, he has a clear picture of what he saw, just not on the highest level. Therefore, to bring what he remembers to a conscious level, the police show him pictures of previous criminals, and if there is a match, the witness will call out, "That's him!" An educator works the same way. His job is to present ideas and information in a way that can get past the barriers that develop as a result of living in this world, so that the knowledge on the outside can connect with the knowledge on the inside. When it does, the child will have a sense of recognition, a sense of joy, and a sense of growth. The knowledge will truly be his.

We can call it the "Sinai Experience." Notice how God didn't simply give the Torah to Moshe Rabbeinu and tell him to teach it to the Jewish people. God gave the Torah in a spectacular way, with sounds and lights, and all kinds of other experiences that were designed to have one effect: neutralize the yetzer hara. The entire experience was to make sure that everyone became focused to the point of being mesmerized, so that the Torah they heard on the outside touched the Torah they possessed on the inside, until they became one in the person, and with the person.

An adult will forget many things from his childhood, but not the time he was almost run over by a car. The shock of the experience brought all of his senses to bear on the events of the moment, and the education was indelibly imprinted on his mind, conscious and unconscious. For the rest of his life, he will look both ways before crossing the road, because as he approaches a curb, his brain will recall and use his emotions to make him conscious of where he is, what he is doing, and what can happen.

Ever watch the face of children watching a good magician? Ever notice how long they will pay attention to the magician, even the ones with attention issues? Ever notice how, after the show is

over, the children will start imitating what they saw, and with great accuracy, right down to the hat and cape. Too bad magicians aren't teachers, and teachers are magicians, because when the two come together, they make a great educator.

For, to be a great educator, you have to be a magician of sorts. Not the rabbit-from-the-hat type, mind you, but a magician nonetheless, because the proper education of children is nothing short of magical. It takes a special kind of magic to get a child's attention, and to keep it long enough to make the connection between the outside and inside knowledge. What kind of magic are we talking about?

Ask children themselves.

"What did you think about that magician?"

"He was awesome. Simply awwwwwesome."

There you have it, the number one tool for neutralizing the yetzer hara and getting through to a person's inner knowledge: awe. Indeed, if you had asked an adult standing at Har Sinai and witnessing the giving of Torah, he would have used a similar term to describe the experience, and why he was pleasantly overwhelmed by it as well.

Recently, there was a large convention in New York of Orthodox leaders to discuss the perils of modern technology, and what to do about it. The reason for the concern is quite real, and you rarely get second chances at solutions to such issues. Too much leniency won't solve the problem of Jews who are misusing technology to break the Torah, and too little leniency might push the ones they are trying to save even further away, beyond future reach.

It's a very tough call, one that requires a lot of Divine intervention to come up with a solution that is even remotely correct, if such a solution exists prior to the arrival of Moshiach. After all, what are we talking about? We're talking about two worlds colliding, the Torah world which depends upon individuals to find their own excitement in the learning and mitzvos, and one that is readily, well, for lack of better terms, awesome.

Abuse aside, is not today's technology absolutely remarkable, and more than that, a lot of fun? Just watch people with their cell phones; they're mesmerized. Thanks to modern technology, the world has become one huge toy shop, with all kinds of goodies to empower you to accomplish great things, or at least waste a lot of time and money trying to. At the very least, it is very entertaining.

Into that spiritual abyss falls a child (and lots of grown up children as well) raised to be an Orthodox Jew. If a Jew living in Meah Shearim in Israel is not free of the influence of such a world, since it is all around him, and even his parents probably use cellular phones, then how can one living in one of the great metropolitan centers of the gentile world withstand such influence, and not get pulled into it?

The answer is simple to say, but difficult to put into action: Torah is better.

It is clear now, after all of the millennia in which technology was not so impressive, since most of it was used for going to war, killing people, and destroying property, that the Har Sinai experience was as awesome as it was to tell all future generations that imbedded in Torah is such an experience, every time you learn. You just have to know how to re-create it.

The first thing to acknowledge is that technology, for all of its excitement, is cheating. All you have to be able to do is to afford the gadget, or at least be able to borrow enough money to purchase it. It does not require much personal effort to use, having been made user-friendly. That is why, for all of its fun, it is limited in how much pleasure it can really deliver on a long term basis. We are hardwired to accomplish, and to appreciate only that which we truly work for. The harder we work, the more we feel good about what we have achieved.

The second thing to acknowledge is that, as educators, and with the exception of few very talented teachers of Torah, we lack the necessary skills to give children, and ourselves, a proper Sinai experience. I don't mean that we're unduly incapable of creating lightning and thunder every time we learn, but that we lack the ability to do that which has a similar impact emotionally. Until we change that, the world of technology is going to be a stiff competitor for the Torah world, and it will, tragically, deplete the numbers of its ranks. It already has.

Personally, I stumbled into sort of a solution to the problem, at least for myself, thank God. I still love technology, and I am still in awe of what mankind has been able to accomplish. Nevertheless, I am more in awe of Torah, far more in awe of Torah. What I have found transforms me into a desert, because to be in awe of something is to be humbled by it, to be open to it, and it is the humbled person who is undistracted and ready to receive.

If it is technology that is creating the awe, then the person will receive whatever it is the technology is giving him. If it is Torah he is ready to receive, then he will receive what the Torah is giving him: direction in life and a path to self-perfection, the greatest pleasure known to mankind.

Recently, I heard an interview in which Professor Steven Hawking was asked what he felt his greatest contribution as a physicist was. Sitting contorted in his wheel chair, and speaking through a computer, he answered, "How existence could come into being without a Creator." It's one thing to think that, but to state it so proudly? He might as well just say that he works for the Sitra Achra and is here to promote heresy. He may be a genius, but only in science. He may be in awe of technology, but he lacks awe of God, and of Creation. As a result, he receives from technology, but not from God; he's not a mekubal—a receiver, and lacks any connection to his inner knowledge that would show him otherwise.

We were taken out of Egypt to become mekubalim, receivers of Torah knowledge. The Sinai Experience was designed to break through the barriers to connect up the exterior knowledge with the interior knowledge, to bring it to the conscious mind, so that it can be our own. It won't just

happen; Torah won't do it on its own. We have to open ourselves up to the awesomeness of Torah, and though that may be more difficult than playing a computer game or using the latest cell phone technology, the reward for doing so is nothing short of, well, awesome.

Text

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