

PEEK BEHIND THE CURTAIN OF LIFE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for free, as well as the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic." (Bamidbar 11:4-5)

The watchmaker stood behind the curtains where no one could see him, as he let his brother, the salesman, deal with the customers. Together they had run their little store for many years, which had gained a reputation over time for excellent craftsmanship, and quality service. They were a good team, he the talented watchmaker, and his brother, the gifted salesman.

Every now and then, he would take a break from his work and peer out at the customers from behind the curtains of his work area, as they went from showcase to showcase, admiring the various different watches. He would strain himself to hear what they were saying from a distance, and though he was pleased to hear their praise, it saddened him, somewhat, that all they could talk about was how the watch might look good with this outfit, or on that occasion.

He knew that there wasn't much more to expect. Did they know how a watch worked? Could they see the sophisticated mechanism inside making it do the most important thing of all: keep good time? Could they be expected to appreciate anything more than what their eyes showed them? As far as they were concerned, a handsome watch could be filled with only air, as long as it told time accurately, and brought them some respect from their peers.

"If only they knew what goes into making a watch like that!" he would think to himself, as he returned back to his desk and began his careful work once again. "If only they could appreciate what makes a watch tick," he commented, as he put on his special glasses that allowed him to work with such small and fragile parts.

One day, after his brother stepped out for a moment, a customer came in to the store. He immediately took off his glasses and wondered what to do. He rarely spoke to the customers, and he wasn't very good at selling even his own masterpieces. So he got up, and peeking through the curtain he said in a soft tone, "My brother will be back shortly, if you'd like to look around in the meantime."

The customer looked at him and smiled. "Sure, no problem," he said, as he turned to look at some more watches.

Satisfied that he had done his part, he also turned around, to go back to his work again. However, he

had barely closed the curtain when he heard the man say, "Are you the watchmaker?"

He paused for a moment, and from behind the curtain, he answered, somewhat hesitantly, "Yes, I make watches."

Assuming that the conversation had ended there, he continued back to his desk. However, the man in the store continued. "Could I watch you work?"

"Watch me work?" he said under his breath. No one had ever asked him that question before, and he suddenly felt as if the stranger was prying on his personal life. However, before he could answer no, the man spoke again.

"I would really love to watch you at work . . . I've always been fascinated by watches, and how they work . . . ever since I was a young boy. I used to take them apart," he explained, hoping to win over the watchmaker, "but unfortunately, I was never very good at putting them back together again."

The watchmaker smiled, and softened. He turned around and walked back to the curtain again, opened it, and looked at the man. "If you wish," he told him.

He held the curtain open for the man, who came into the back area. Taking one look around at all the various different watches, instruments, tools, and components, the man stood in awe. "Wow . . ." he said softly. "This is an amazing place." The watchmaker felt proud.

"Please, no questions while I work," he told the man, who quickly agreed and took a seat, close enough to watch everything the watchmaker did, but far enough way as to not bother him. That is where he stayed for the better part of an hour without making a sound, as he watched, with fascination and growing respect, every move of the watchmaker.

Finally, after realizing that he himself was late for work, the man quietly got up to leave, not wanting to bother the watchmaker.

"Going, are you?" the watchmaker said without looking up from his work. "Not by choice," the man said. "I have to get back to work. Thank you so much for sharing this with me."

The watchmaker was silent for a moment, so the man turned once again to leave. "Hope you saw what you wanted to see," the watchmaker told him.

The man smiled. "Are you kidding," he said. "This was one of the greatest experiences of my life!"

And then the man added something that pleased the watchmaker to no end: "I will never take a watch for granted ever again!" Then he turned around, and walked out.

As Rashi explains, the Jewish people made two mistakes in this week's parshah. The second of these is the more obvious, because the Torah speaks about how the Jewish people complained about a lack of food, when they had plenty. Even the way they asked for meat wasn't very nice, and they are held responsible for that as well.

The first mistake made by the Jewish people is only clear after Tosfos' explanation. He explains that when the Jewish people left Mt. Sinai, it didn't wild horses to drag them away, like it should have. Rather, they left the place where Heaven and Earth touched like school children who hear the bell that ends a day of school. They may not have run out the door without looking back, but, apparently, they weren't sad to leave either.

How did that happen? Even if it was time to move on, and it was, why did it not pain them to do so? The world is an awesome place, especially today with all the technology and empowerment it provides. However, God actually coming down and speaking to the nation was far more awesome, and it should have been hard to turn their back on the experience.

The difference, of course, was the golden calf. The golden calf changed everything, thanks to the Erev Rav, who will keep at it even in this week's parshah because one of the main things the Erev Rav was selling the Jewish people when they tried to sell them the golden calf was superficiality.

They tried to convince them that thinking is for thinkers, that is, for people whose greatest pleasure is just to think. They have no problem passing up some of the most basic, and yet most pleasurable things in life, which is fine, if you want to be like them. But, who wants to be like them when there is so much out there to enjoy? Why get bogged down with the inside of the watch when you can just buy one and enjoy it as it is?

The answer is that one's enjoyment of anything in life is greatly enhanced when he understands what makes it tick. That's why God gave Torah on the four levels of Pardes, which stands for: Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod. Torah can be understood on a simple level (Pshat), or its hints can be used to discover hidden layers of meaning (Remez). The Talmud and Midrash (Drush) reveal even deeper levels of understanding, but Kabbalah (Sod) is basically a peek behind the curtain. Once you look, you'll never take reality for granted again.

The Arizal says that everyone is obligated to learn everything on all four levels, to the best of his personal ability, and that a person will keep reincarnating until he does (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 17). He must even hire a teacher to help him succeed at this, if he can't make sufficient headway on his own. From the Arizal, it seems that Pardes is not an option but the way of life.

The obvious question is: How many people are fortunate enough to learn that much Torah, and on so many levels? Even talmidei chachamim who are well versed in the Talmud and its many commentaries may rarely spend any time learning Sod; they struggle hard enough just to learn Pshat, Remez, and Drush, so how can we expect ourselves to do any better?

Of course God never expects more from a person than the ability He gave him allows him to accomplish, though usually we are underachievers, not overachievers. As the Mishnah says, reward is based upon effort, not impact, which is affected by all kinds of circumstances that can be beyond what we try and accomplish. If so, how does this jive with what the Arizal has taught?

Some of us are fortunate enough to learn Torah on all four levels the conventional way, and that is great. However, for the rest of us, Pardes is not just four areas of Torah learning, but also four levels of approach to intellectual investigation, the goal of which is to enhance a person's appreciation of life.

Have you ever walked by something on a daily basis, and only on a rare occasion stop to take note of it? Then, one day, for some reason, you happen to stop and take a closer look at it, for example, at some kind of exquisite flower (this happened to me), and when taking a closer look, you see detail and color that you never really paid much attention to in the past. Suddenly, your world comes to a complete standstill as you gaze in awe.

This is a simple and mundane example, but it can be applied to all aspects of life, with great results. The Western world has gone out of its way to create things that create awe, and this doesn't encourage us to take the time to appreciate the awesomeness of everyday natural life. The most exciting reality is the one in which we live, yet most people feel just the opposite, and they're willing to pay good money and spend much time experiencing an artificial reality just to put some kick into their lives.

How childish! That is a large part of the meaning of being a child, being superficial, overlooking the gifts of life that are staring you right in the face, and therefore, always wanting more, and better. Kids barely understand what the term "blessing of life" even means, if they know about it at all.

I doubt the Jewish people ran away from Har Sinai like schoolchildren who just heard the bell go, signaling the end of school. However, what Tosfos probably means is that they left Har Sinai lacking a full appreciation of what just occurred there, even if it was over. They didn't take sufficient time to think through what they had been a part of, because had they done so, they would have asked to stay there a little bit longer, just to linger, just to run the Har Sinai experience through Pardes, on whatever level they could.

What about us? Are we satisfied with only the watch, the one we can see, and not the one actually keeping time? Pleasure in life, the fulfillment of personal potential, and one's personal connection to God, and therefore one's portion in the World-to-Come, require us to as much as possible, so that we never take life, or any aspect of it, for granted again.

Text

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