

SPIRITUALLY-SENSITIVE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Your settlements will be in fat places of the earth, and [you will also have] from the dew of heaven above . . . (Bereishis 27:39)

One thing is for certain: God has a lot of patience. In fact, He has so much patience that, ironically, this has resulted in a lot of people becoming either agnostic or atheistic over the ages. Like us, they see so many sinners seemingly acting with impunity, but unlike us, they figure that if God was truly there He would have lowered the boom by now. The fact that He hasn't makes them feel as if God, if He ever existed, forgot about us altogether.

What about the fact that every once in a while He does? Too random, they say. Why sometimes yes, and sometimes no, they ask. Not knowing the principles of Creation and Divine Providence they are easily confused, and when you factor in their desire to not believe in God, it becomes obvious that they are easily conned as well, at least by themselves.

The first thing they have to know is that there are some things that God will put up with, and certain things that He won't. Some things are bad and erosive, but since these don't directly go against the purpose of Creation, oftentimes they can be remedied without total destruction. On the other hand, other sins are so contrary to the purpose of Creation that the perpetrators have to be eliminated, even if they lack a full appreciation of just how serious their crime against God and Creation is. Not everyone wiped away in the Great Flood was totally evil.

The Malbim brings this concept to light when comparing two episodes in history that are separated by time, but not by nature. These are the story of Lot and the angels in Parashas Vayaira, and that of the concubine of Givah in Sefer Shoftim (Ch. 19). Both stories involve an attempt to sodomize a guest, but whereas Lot only offered his daughters in place of his guests but never got the opportunity to actually give them over, the concubine that the Levi sent outside to save himself was in fact taken by his would-be attackers, violated, and killed.

However, whereas the episode of the concubine resulted only in terrible civil war, the city of Sdom and its satellite towns were completely destroyed, and the Malbim asks about the difference in treatment. What was worse about Sdom that resulted in its complete and utter elimination, and what limited the Divine response in the story of the Levi and his concubine?

The Malbim answers that the difference was that the occurrence in Givah was a random event, meaning that it did not represent the attitude or philosophy of the rest of the nation, just of some

spiritually depraved individuals who had been influenced by Canaanite ways. And, even though it led to a terrible civil war that almost brought about the demise of the Tribe of Binyomin, that was more a Divine payback for Michah's idol in Dan than because of how the Levi and his concubine were treated.

However, it is not called "Sodomy" for no reason. As the parshah relates, and Rashi explains, it was the way of the land in Sodom, even permissible by law, explains the Malbim. As such, it was an expression of the philosophy towards life of the entire city; if someone didn't agree with it, they had to move to another city to avoid it.

For this reason, God completely destroyed the entire city, even the people who might not have practiced it. (It is safe to assume that not everyone in Sdom was as evil as the next person, since the Midrash points out that there were some relatively decent people living there, perhaps even nine righteous people, since Avraham only asked God not destroy Sdom if there were 10 righteous people living there.) Sdom's practices went against the very fabric of Creation, and therefore, Creation could no longer bear its burden.

Hence, to be saved, Lot had to get out of Sdom, which he had difficulty doing. Even the verse indicates this since the note over the word "and he delayed" is a Shelshet, which goes up and down and up and down and up and down, indicating hesitation. The place was going down, and Lot had difficulty leaving?! Why? As Rashi says, because of his investments (Bereishis 19:17)! Had it not been for the angel tugging at Lot's hand, who was only there in the merit of his Uncle Avraham, Lot would have perished with his Sdomite neighbors—even though he had not been as depraved as they had been.

We see this concept elsewhere in the Torah. When Korach challenged Moshe Rabbeinu and was subsequently punished, so were the 250 men, mostly from the Tribe of Reuven who camped close to Korach and who joined him in his rebellion. "Woe to the wicked and woe to his neighbor!" Rashi quotes to explain their inclusion when God vented His wrath and Korach because, just by proximity one can be associated with bad people.

Hence, as Rashi points out, the prayers of Rivkah Immeinu in this week's parshah were less effective than those of Yitzchak Avinu, since he was a righteous person, the son of a righteous person, and she was a righteous person, the daughter of a wicked person. And, even though earlier, Rashi praised Rivkah for learning neither from her evil family or her wicked community, nevertheless, Rashi is implying, she was affected on some level by both. We may not always be sensitive to the impact of spiritually-insensitive people, but Heaven is.

One of the most dangerous aspects of living amongst spiritual desensitized people is the way they relate to Hashgochah Pratis—Divine Providence; they don't. Events can occur that believers will recognize as the hand of God, but which they see only as random occurrence. Even though the odds of certain events happening, or happening together with other events, are extremely low, sometime

even impossibly low, still, spiritually insensitive people will assume randomness before they assume Divine guidance.

That was Eisav, and Yitzchak knew this. This is why, unlike when he blessed Ya'akov, he left God out of Eisav's blessing. Even though Eisav's success comes from God just as does Ya'akov's, Eisav chooses not to see or acknowledge this fundamental fact of life, and as any outreach professional knows, nothing backfires faster than mentioning God to someone who wishes to discount Him. His descendants are no different.

God doesn't have much of a problem with that. He doesn't expect Eisav to be spiritually-sensitive to His Providence, unless the Jewish people are doing their job of being a light unto nations. When the Jewish people are being the good spiritual neighbors they were designed to be, then Eisav is expected to act up to par, at least turning to the Jewish people to help interpret history in meaningful way.

The problem occurs when the Jewish people approach history in Eisav's way, randomizing Hashgochah Pratis, especially in Eretz Yisroel, the land of Hashgochah Pratis. However, it is worse when one has to live as a neighbor of Eisav for an extended period of time, because just by spiritual osmosis, a Jew begins to look at history Eisav-like. Then, even when Divine Providence seems to indicate a Heavenly message it goes largely unheeded.

This is dangerous. When one wonders how it can be that four-fifths of the Jewish population chose to remain behind in Egypt when it was clearly the time for redemption, this is the reason why. When one contemplates how Jews, throughout history, could stay too long in places in which it was clearly dangerous to live, it is because they didn't think God was telling them to move. The few that did, left, but the rest stayed and paid the price.

In fact, that was the blessing that Yitzchak gave to Ya'akov Avinu when he said:

May God give you of the dew of heaven, and the fat of the land with much grain and wine. (Bereishis 27:28)

Yitzchak wasn't just saying that Ya'akov should be blessed with the dew of Heaven and the fat of the land. He was blessing him that when he would receive both, that it would always be from God, meaning that it would always be clear to Ya'akov, and to his descendants, that it is from God. In other words, Ya'akov Avinu was blessed with the ability to always see the hand of God in what happens to him.

That is why when Ya'akov meets Eisav later on in Parashas Vayishlach, he can say with confidence that he has all that he needs. How could he possibly know that when everyday brings new financial surprises, usually in the form of bills and unexpected expenses? What happened to "saving for a rainy day"?

The answer is as we just said: Since Ya'akov knew that everything he received in life was directly

from God Who always had his best interest in mind, he knew that if he lived a spiritually-responsible life, God would always make sure that he had whatever he needed whenever he needed it. That was the blessing his father gave to him before he went out into a world that would try and contradict the reality of God, in particular, Lavan his future father-in-law and employer. He had to make sure that he did not come to depend too much on Beit Lavan—the White House.

But that was a long time ago when the Forefathers could talk to God and clarify His message, and what they could not speak to Him about, they could sense correctly because of their heightened spirituality. As the Ramchal explains in Derech Hashem, it was a time of unique people who had the ability to affect all of their future generations by everything they did, so their ability to discern truth had to be powerful.

However, today, as we near the end of the fourth and final exile, we are so distant from prophecy and the kind of Divine Inspiration that earlier generations enjoyed as matter of everyday life. It would seem as if the best we can do is simply live our lives as best we can, learning as much Torah as possible and performing as many mitzvos as we are able to do. But, as far as Divine messages are concerned, we will have to wait until God sends someone we know who has spoken to Him.

Not true. This is what Dovid HaMelech meant when he said:

This is from God, that which is wondrous in your eyes. (Tehillim 118:23)

He was telling us that God does talk to us, even today, through the events of our history, if we pay attention to what is happening. Two people can look at the exact same event and see the same thing but understand it differently. If one realizes that everything is a function of Hashgochah Pratis, and sees the wondrousness of what is occurring, then they will see the hand of God and learn something from what is happening.

But, if one is not real with Hashgochah Pratis, and does not see the wondrousness of what is occurring, then he will not see the hand of God in what is happening, and learn little from it. He will simply adapt to the situation and try to make the best of it. And that is when the Jewish people find themselves staying in exile too long.

Text

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