

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS COINCIDENCE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And if you treat Me as happenstance, and you do not wish to listen to Me, I will add seven punishments corresponding to your sins. (Vayikra 26:21)

There are two main parshios that deal with the issue of reward and punishment, this week's parshah and Parashas Ki Savo. Once upon a time they created dread in the hearts of Jews each time they came around because of the harsh reminder that we have to pay, big time, for our sins.

Today these parshios create dread because there are usually a lot "Rashis" to learn when reviewing the weekly parshah. The consequence part doesn't talk to our generation that much, even to people who religiously keep the mitzvos, with the exception of a few very righteous people. Furthermore, they're just not as upbeat as the rest of the Torah, so that kind of makes them less appealing to read as well.

The question is, why? The answer is not too far away, but actually in this week's parshah:

And if you treat Me as happenstance, and you do not wish to listen to Me, I will add seven punishments corresponding to your sins. (Vayikra 26:21)

The Hebrew word for "happenstance" is "kerry," and usually implies a chance occurrence. For example, Rashi uses a form of the word to distinguish between the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu and that of Bilaam:

And He called to Moshe . . . (Vayikra 1:1)

A calling preceded all statements and commandments. It is an expression of love, an expression that the Ministering Angels use, as it says, "One called to the other" (Yeshayahu 6:3). However, to the gentile prophets He revealed Himself with an expression of happenstance and uncleanness, as it says, "God chanced—vayikar—upon Bilaam" (Bamidbar 23:4, 16). (Rashi)

We have said all along that there is no such thing as coincidence. When it comes to history, there is no such thing as "auto pilot." When it comes to the "random" appearance of history, there is only hester panim, the hiding of God's face, the withdrawal of the more obvious clues that what is occurring is completely the result of God's will.

Recently a son of mine took an aptitude test and brought home an example of some of the

questions. So, of course, I could not resist but try my hand at some of the questions to see how I would do. Some of them are pictorial, requiring the person to look at previous examples, figure out the pattern, and then determine which picture of four provided examples fits the pattern and completes the final row of diagrams.

The first one was easy, and though I knew that subsequent questions would become increasingly more complicated, I did not expect the next to be so difficult. I've already spent over an hour of time trying to resolve it, with no success. I even tried breaking the diagrams down into their most basic components to solve the riddle, which feels a little like cheating and obsession, but as of yet I have not been able to crack the pattern.

A few times it has led me to believe that there is a mistake in the drawing, either intentionally (how sadistic can you get?), or accidentally. This is especially so after seeing which drawing is the correct one, since I wasn't even able use the "answer" to better understand the "question." There has to be a mistake.

But then again, this is not the first time this test has been used. Given the amount of times the test has been taken by countless people over the years, it can be assumed that if there was a mistake it would be have been detected by now and corrected. The "ball" was back in my court once again and I had run out of options to "hit" it.

Hester panim works similarly. It's when God makes things occur in a way that disguises the patterns of history, making events seem random to us. They are anything but random, but not seeing the pattern, even after seeing the "answer," our minds beg us to believe that a pattern does not exist, that history is random, and that God is not actively involved in the affairs of man.

With respect to the diagram on the test, I was forced after time to rethink my strategy. Once I had felt that I had exhausted all of the most obvious ways to crack the pattern, I started to consider different assumptions about how the puzzle worked. For example, rather than assume that the pattern was in rows from left to right as the others had been, I looked at it vertically, as columns, from top to bottom.

Immediately certain mysteries fell to the wayside. Though they were not enough to solve the problem it certainly seemed as if it was a couple of steps along the path to resolution. It was if a I could hear the author of the test question say, "Now you're getting somewhere."

I do not plan to spend any more time on resolving the diagram, as much as I'd like to, unless I need a change of pace from my work. Nevertheless, though I may never earn the satisfaction of having solved such a puzzle, I leave it with a better understanding of how assumptions about anything can blind a person to the message of what he is looking at.

When it comes to puzzles on an aptitude test it might just mean a lower score. However, when it comes to the events of history, the Torah is telling us, it can mean the difference between life and

death, and even the way a person might leave this world: peacefully or in the most difficult way possible.

As I was writing this parshah sheet, I received the following from a friend of mine (a random occurrence?):

Every Yom HaAtzmaut, the Rebbe of Sadigur made his way to the Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv. There he would join the other congregants praying Hallel with great joy. After the services, the Rebbe would join the dancing throngs outside in the streets, clasping hands and dancing with enthusiasm and happiness. It was always obvious that the Rebbe of Sadigur felt a special joy on Yom HaAtzmaut. One year, one of his chassidim got up the nerve to have a personal audience with the Rebbe and question him about his Yom HaAtzmaut behavior . . . "In March, 1938," [the Rebbe answered his chassid] "the Nazis, y"s, swallowed up Austria and entered Vienna. Their first move was to accomplish the degradation of the Jews, and as the Rabbi of the Jewish community, they chose me, giving me a big broom and had me sweep the streets of Vienna. As I did that work, I prayed, 'Master of the Universe, may it be Your will that I merit to take a broom and sweep the streets of Eretz Yisrael.' Obviously it is not fitting for your Rebbe to be seen in the streets of Tel Aviv sweeping in front of everybody, so on Yom HaAtzmaut I get up at 3 am, take a big broom and with great (happiness) I sweep the streets of my neighborhood. After sweeping in Vienna, the Nazis y"s, shoved a Nazi flag in my hands and made me climb to the top of a tall building and plant their swastika on top of the roof. As I climbed, I turned to the Creator and said, 'Master of the Universe, may I yet merit to wave the flag of Israel in a high spot in the Land of Israel.' And so I plant on my roof the flag of Israel on Yom HaAtzmaut, with happiness and (burning enthusiasm), thanking God that He accepted my prayers.' " (Aleí Tamar, p.69, Shevi'is, Ch. 4, Halachah 7)

The truth is, before this I had not heard of the work "Aleí Tamar," and I have still yet to see this story inside the sefer itself. The story, however, I have heard before, and once from a very reputable source. Even if true, I can only assume that it is a controversial one in many Torah circles.

I did not bring this story to proclaim Yom HaAtzmaut a national holiday for all Jews. That takes authority, halachic authority. I included this story because it illustrates how situations can affect a person's assumptions about life, and therefore their perceptions. "There are no atheists in a foxhole," and no doubt a lot of State-of-Israel-dissenters would quickly change their tune as well if life in the Diaspora turned bitter and they needed a place to run and hide.

The story itself reminded me of a similar story I heard, this one about the Klausenberger Rebbe who after being liberated from the camps would not make a blessing over a simple glass of water before immersing himself in a mikvah. Forced in the camps to drink all kinds of things other than clean water to survive, the Rebbe gained an appreciation of something so basic as a glass of water, and the simple blessing one makes over it before drinking.

I heard recently in the name of a Torah giant of yesteryear (I believe Rav Ya'akov Kamenetsky, zt"l) the following warning: "Be careful when putting on your first pair of tzitzis, because they are the ones which you will wear the rest of your life." Obviously he was not referring to actual tzitzis since the average religious Jew will purchase and wear many pairs throughout his lifetime. He used tzitzis as a metaphor to refer to our assumptions about life and how we apply them.

Rabbi Kamenetsky, zt"l was warning us that no matter how brilliant we become as a result of all our learning, all of it will be filtered through assumptions about life and history that we gained while young. That's just the way the human mind works, which is why it is so important to get it right the first time. There are a lot of very bright and learned people out there with certain assumptions that are blinding them to certain historical facts and events, many of which I have included in a book called, "Drowning In Pshat."

Thus, as much as such people believe in Divine Providence and that everything is from God, when it comes to certain key issues, like Eretz Yisroel and its connection to the redemption process, they act as if the miracles of the last six decades were random occurrences. They are unable to see the hand of God in all that has occurred because they have difficulty seeing how such miracles could have occurred and for whom they have occurred.

This is very dangerous. As mentioned last week, Rav Dessler warned about having to answer to such a "kerry" attitude on the Day of Judgment. As history has shown countless times we often have to answer to such an approach to Jewish history in this world as well. The last thing we want, the parshah tells us, is for God to slip deeper into a "kerry" mode because then the situation will only get worse before it gets better.

Text

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