SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: Should any man's wife go astray and deal treacherously with him . . . (Bamidbar 5:12)

It is a known fact that so much of the English language was derived from Hebrew, at least in the beginning. Sometimes it takes some digging to find the ancient Hebrew root of a modern English word, but sometimes it is still quite obvious. For example, clearly the word "fruit" is derived from the Hebrew word for fruit, "payrot," since without vowelization Peh-Raish-Vav-Tav would be read "fruit."

Another great example is the word "pardes," which means "orchard." It does not take a great stretch of imagination to derive "paradise" from "pardes," especially since the original paradise was a garden. The only question is, what kind of garden was it?

That may seem like a silly question until you factor in Kabbalah, which adds a whole different dimension to the discussion. For example, prior to the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the skin of Adam was made of light. He was so holy that the angels confused him for, well, for God. The world did not become so physical until after the sin, when it descended to the depths of Creation within which we still exist.

Hence the world in which he lived was also vastly different, existing on a much higher spiritual plane. So, though the Garden of Eden was actually a garden, an actual garden at that time was not like one you might imagine in our time. In fact, it might have been closely associated with another version of "pardes," which it will be seen is the real path to the true paradise.

The Arizal says:

> There are four levels [of Torah] interpretation, and their sign is Pardes: Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod. He must work hard in all of them to the extent that he can, and seek a teacher who can teach them to him. If he lacks one of the four of them relative to what he could have grasped, he will have to reincarnate because of this. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 11)

Torah is a multi-layered dialogue between God and man. A single Hebrew word, even a single Hebrew letter can be a prism for the simplest level of understanding of an idea to its most sublime level. It's just a question of how much a person is willing to spend the time and effort to reach levels of vision and comprehension.

When a child goes to Cheder he is taught Pshat (Chumash), perhaps even Remez (Mishnah). When he graduates to Yeshivah Ketanah he will be taught Drush in the form of Talmud, that he will continue to learn in Yeshivah Gedolah as he plumbs the depths of its many commentaries and halachic ramifications. Some may even eventually, make the leap to Kabbalah, which of course is Sod.

Why bother? To go from Pshat to Drush is necessary since it is really hard to live the life of a committed Jew without doing so. And when I say from Pshat to Drush I do not only mean going from Chumash to Talmud, because not everyone merits to do that. I also refer to an approach to life, one that obligates a person to make a point of understanding what he is doing and why.

What about from Drush to Sod? Aside from being obligatory, as the Arizal seems to be saying above, what life value is there in knowing the secrets of Creation?

I once saw a documentary on sleep which of course, included a discussion about dreaming. Why do we dream? What benefit is there in dreaming and what happens to a person who doesn't dream, like some who is sleep deprived?

Surprisingly we're not so sure. We have been able to develop an understanding of the smallest particles in Creation that we can't even see with the best microscopes, and we have been able to peer back in time by looking at the farthest reaches of the galaxy. Dreaming, however, remains a big mystery and therefore still subject to guesswork.

Part of the problem is that the brain itself is still a big mystery. Furthermore, we can't ask the person who is dreaming questions to know what he or she is experiencing. The most scientists can do is monitor the brain's activity during sleep and piece together bits of data. Something that is so much a part of human life is more out of reach than galaxies light years away.

But there are theories. In fact, one of the ways they discovered what dreaming may contribute to a person's well-being was by purposely depriving a person of sleep for days on end. They found that being dream-deprived for three straight days resulted in extreme hallucination to the point that the person began to lose the ability to distinguish between real life and dream life.

One thing we do know is that the average human brain is unable to process, at least in realtime, all the information it receives on a daily basis from all of the senses. Rather, the brain seems to be wired to make assumptions about the overall experience. This is in order to provide quick feedback so that we can make somewhat accurate decisions about what to do next. Whatever it cannot process "in time" it seems to store for future reference or "dump" at nighttime while dreaming.

At least that is the theory. In other words, though sleep may replenish the brain's energy within an hour or so, hours of dreaming allow the brain to purge itself of excess information that it did not or cannot process. This is usually because the information does not make sense to us at the time, or is simply beyond our experience to date.

That is something that can be very subjective. In other words, the more one understands about life the less questions he will have about life. The more profound his understanding of Creation is the less he becomes confused by the anomalies of history. He may not always like them but he won't become confused because of them. His brain will more readily process the input from his senses and will not need to dispose of them while he dreams.

Torah is called the "blueprint" of Creation (Bereishis Rabba 1:4). It is the master plan for history and the most eloquent and elegant expression of Divine Will known to man. Everything is found within it if you know where and how to look for it. Nothing in existence, no how bizarre or how profane can exist outside of Torah. If it exists it does so because of a potential that was built into Torah "thousands of years" before the world was even created (Pirkei Avos 5:26).

As one ascends from level to level in Pardes it is as if he penetrates the mind of God, so-to-speak. His vision of life and its purpose comes to resemble his Creator's more and more as he moves from level of Torah to level of Torah. Intellectual confusion fades, the questions about life disappear.

We are told that when the Jewish people crossed the sea that even a simple handmaiden "saw" more than even some of the most famous prophets of history. It says that God "tore" open all seven levels of Heaven and the Jews of that time saw all the way up. This is beyond human comprehension since both Yeshayahu and Yechezkel had a vision of the "Chariot," the inner workings of Creation and the basis of the deepest Kabbalistic secrets.

Whatever it means and whatever they saw one thing is certain. From that point onward they were a different people, evident by the fact that they were able to reach the level of k'ish echad b'leiv echad:

> *They traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai Desert, and they camped in the desert; they (read: he) camped opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:2)*

He camped opposite the mountain: *k'ish echad, b'leiv echad*—like a single person with a single heart. (Rashi)

Sod will do that to a person. It has the power to elevate a person out of his everyday mundane, and often petty reality onto a higher plane of intellectual and spiritual existence:

Four entered Pardes: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and Rebi Akiva . . . (Chagigah 14b)

> For example, by way of [meditating on] a [Divine] Name. They didn't actually [physically] ascend, rather it appeared to them as if they ascended. (Tosfos)

Kabbalah explains that the further one is from the Original Source of light the more separate he becomes from the rest of Creation. Likewise, the more he reverses the trend the more unified he

becomes with God, Creation, and all that exists. This is the entire purpose of "entering" and "ascending" through Pardes, the intellectual one.

The result ultimately is a leiv tov—a good heart. Thus, Lag B'Omer, the day on which Rebi Shimon bar Yochai revealed the secrets of Creation to his students, which became the basis of the Zohar and all Kabbalah that has since been published, is the threshold between a "simple" heart and a "good" one.

Simple hearts can become corrupted.

Good ones cannot.

This brings us to this week's parshah and its role in our preparation for the holiday and opportunity of Shavuos. After continuing on with the discussion about the responsibilities of the Levi'im the Torah turns to the topic of the adulteress woman, the very symbol of a selfish and perverted heart. This is followed by the laws of the Nazir, the very symbol of a selfless and upright heart, as the following story portrays:

Shimon HaTzaddik said: "Only once in my life have I eaten of the trespass-offering brought by a defiled nazir. On one occasion a nazir came from the south country and I saw that he had beautiful eyes, was handsome, and had thick locks of hair symmetrically arranged. I said to him: 'My son, what [reason] did you see to destroy this beautiful hair of yours?'

He answered: 'I was a shepherd for my father in my town. [Once] I went to draw water from a well, gazed upon my reflection in the water, and my evil inclination rushed upon me and sought to drive me from the world [through sin]. But I said to it: "Evil One! Why do you take pride in yourself in a world that is not yours, with one who is destined to become worms and dust? I swear that I will shave you off for the sake of Heaven!" '

I immediately arose and kissed his head and said: 'My son, may there be many nazirites like you amongst the Jewish people!' " (Nedarim 9b)

This shepherd had the big picture. His life may have been simple but his world view was sophisticated. His knowledge of Torah may have been basic but his understanding of it was profound. As such, he was blessed with a good heart and eventually a tremendous portion in the World-to-Come.

Text

Copyright © by Rabbi Pinchas Winston and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's online book store for more details! www.thirtysix.org