

FROM A HEART OF STONE TO A HEART OF FLESH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: God's appointed [holy days] that you shall designate as holy occasions . . . Vayikra 23:2

The Jewish holidays come and go. Pesach was just here and now it is gone. Soon Shavuot will do the same thing, and Lag B'Omer before that. The days come and go regardless of our lives. We're more like riders on a roller coaster, "victims" of a system we can't control and barely can manage.

It's not really true, and Kabbalah has taught that for a long time. Apparently we have a lot more say in the direction of history than we think, which is why people tend to fall back into a default mode and let what man come, come. We don't really understand the fabric of reality very well, and the holidays remind us of this. They try to knock us out of our default mode.

What is reality, after all? Once upon a time, this was not such a difficult question to answer, at least not as difficult as it is today. Today it seems impossible to truly understand the fabric of reality, and for some, this calls into question many important aspects of life.

The vast majority of people remain uninterested in the discussion. They do not see how it affects their lives, which seem real enough. Actions have discernible consequences, and life has its responsibilities. They rise each morning to fulfill them, and retire each evening to do so the next day.

Such an approach to life, however practical it seems, only results in mediocrity at best, and cheating at worst. While honest people "go with the flow" and cope with results they cannot control, less honest people try to manipulate the system to their benefit.

There is another approach, a third category of people comprised of two groups. Both confront the questions about the fabric of reality, but each has a fundamentally different approach to the answers.

One group, a combination of God-rejecting intellectuals, questions the nature of reality to see where it will lead them. In their quest to better understand Creation, they stumbled upon knowledge that forced them to re- think previous notions about life.

The hope is, as always, that their quest will somehow have a positive impact on the quality of life. The fear is, as always, that without an objective standard against which to calibrate their observations and conclusions, there is no way to know if this has been the case until very late in the process.

The other group does something more interesting and practical. Instead of wading aimlessly and deeper into philosophical confusion, it turns the questions about the fabric of reality into the answer itself, as a story in the Talmud about Rebi Chanina ben Dosa illustrates.

One Friday night [Rebi Chanina ben Dosa] noticed that his daughter was sad. He asked her, "My daughter, why are you sad?"

She answered, "My container of oil became mixed together with my vinegar container, and I kindled Shabbos candles with it."

He told her, "My daughter, why should this trouble you? He Who had commanded the oil to burn will also command the vinegar to burn!" (Ta'anis 25a)

It is a short, but unusual story. It should have been about someone who wanted to light Shabbos candles, but who could not because they only had vinegar instead of oil. Unable to perform the mitzvah, sadness would be the result.

It should be at this point that the miracle worker says,

"He Who had commanded the oil to burn will also command the vinegar to burn!"

Then the person should ignite the vinegar and in joy watch it burn.

This is not the story of the Talmud, however. In the Talmud, the miracle was already occurring, before the miracle worker said anything. The sadness was not from an inability to perform a mitzvah, but from the way it occurred.

That being the case, what was the relevance of the words:

"He Who had commanded the oil to burn will also command the vinegar to burn!"

That part of the message had already been clear to Rebi Chanina's daughter, because it was already happening!

The answer is not something that could have been appreciated by the average person at the time. Today, however, it is something that physicists and Probability Theory have, inadvertently, proven to be true:

As rigid as physical Creation appears, it is not rigid at all, and man can play an active role in determining its direction.

Thus, Rebi Chanina ben Dosa was not merely telling his daughter how to perform the mitzvah of lighting Shabbos candles with vinegar instead of oil. He was explaining to her why she should not be surprised that it was even possible to do so.

To what extent can man play a role in the direction of history? To this extent:

God . . . gave over the forces and keys of the order of Creation, secrets of the world, to the generation of the Second Temple

and onward. They were given this hidden treasure to control Creation . . . as they desire . . . easily and without great need, like a person who uses that which belongs to him. (Sefer HaKlallim, Klal 2, Anaf 3, Os 9)

What does this mean? If the physical world objectively exists and is bound by rules, then it means the rabbis were given the "keys" to its "back door," in a manner of speaking. They were told the program of Creation and given the means to alter it at will.

If the physical world does not objectively exist, but is in fact being constructed as history moves forward, then it was revealed to the rabbis how to take control of the construction process. They are the actual builders of reality, as it says:

Rebi Elazar said on behalf of Rebi Chanina: "Torah scholars increase peace in the world, as it says, 'And all of your children will be students of God, and your children—banayich—will have peace' (Yeshayahu 54:13). Do not read "banayich," "your children," but "bonayich," "your builders." (Brochos 64b)

It is not clear from the teaching itself why the play on the word was necessary, since it does not require it. Secondly, builders of what? What is it that Torah scholars build if not the reality of peace itself?

Why not? It's not as if God made Creation once back at the beginning of time and it has remained the same way ever since:

This is what the Men of the Great Assembly meant when they wrote (in Birchas "Yotzer Ohr"), [that God is] "the One who renews Creation continuously in His goodness," [i.e.,] "continuously" literally, every time and moment. The clear proof is that it says, "To Him Who **makes** great lights" (Tehillim 136:7), and not, "to Him who **made** great lights."

(Nefesh HaChaim, Sha'ar 1, Ch. 2)

What is novel is that God is prepared to allow man to determine the direction of the next moment. In fact, He prefers it, which is the deeper meaning of the following remarkable statement:

This is what Dovid HaMelech said, "God is your shadow on your right side" (Tehillim 121:5): Just as a shadow moves in the direction of what casts it, so too does God cause the worlds to "shadow" the actions of man. The Midrash states explicitly: "God told Moshe, 'I will be what I will be' " (Shemos 3:14). What does, "I will be what I will be" mean? Just as you are with Me, that is how I will be with you . . . If you laugh, [the Divine Presence] laughs. If you cry, it cries. If you show anger or joy, that is what it will show. (Nefesh HaChaim, Sha'ar 1, Ch. 7)

Thus, man is the builder of reality. God responds to the reality that we construct.

This says that it is man who dictates the future. History responds to his will. If a person is convinced that reality is fixed and concrete, and as a result can only imagine it to remain that way, that is what it will do. If he thoroughly believes that reality is flexible and subject to his will, it will evolve as a function of that will.

This is the deeper meaning of the following:

In truth, nothing stands in the way of trust in God, as it says . . . "One who trusts in God will be surrounded by kindness" (Tehillim 32:10). (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 3)

Again, there are two ways to understand this. The conventional way is that reality is fixed, but trust in God, or "bitachon" in Hebrew, "causes" God to "renovate" reality and cause a miracle. Alternatively, reality is not fixed, and trust in God is a positive will that constructs a desired reality from the bottom up. It only looks, at least to the average onlooker, like a miracle.

This sheds new light on the following verse:

You open Your hand and satisfy every living thing [with] its desire. (Tehillim 145:16)

Conventionally, the verse means that God looks after the needs of every living being. Now it means that He uses the desire of beings to dictate the reality that He creates.

This is where Torah comes in, must come in.

What would be the result if a person purchased something requiring assembly, but its picture was missing? And, though all parts are present, the assembly instructions were not. What would happen?

If the person actually carried through with the assembly, more than likely he would produce something different than what was intended by the manufacturer. Furthermore, pieces would inadvertently be left over, calling into question the integrity of the finished product. In some instances, the person would probably just give up along the way.

If you stare at something long enough, you notice things previously overlooked or hidden. Such discoveries, in turn, lead to others, all of which help to enhance one's understanding of the thing in particular and life in general. But how does one know if he has the complete or accurate picture?

This is why science is constantly revising its view- point. After "staring" at Creation for a very long time, it has "noticed" tremendous things, things that have changed secular man's notion of reality. But they have no idea what everything should look like, or how to assemble the information in any ultimately meaningful way. Everything is only best guess.

Torah, on the other hand, is the description of the entire system. It is the "Manufacturer's" drawing which shows what should be built with all the available pieces, and how. It is a mind's eye view of reality not necessarily visible to the physical eye.

Next, Torah is the "assembly" instructions. It teaches which "parts" are meant to fit together, to allow for a meaningful "weaving" of reality. This greatly reduces the need for trial-and-error, an often costly and dangerous approach to the opportunity of life.

Finally, Torah is what allows a person to infuse a man-made creation with Divine light, giving it a life of its own. Whether it is only a single idea, or the profoundest vision of the inner workings of all of Existence, it can only "live," that is, impact Creation positively with its full potential, if it is a vessel for Divine light. And that is only possible through Torah.

This is why, even though so many truths are "out there," countless people miss the point of life. This is why, though there is so much knowledge to the contrary, so much evil still exists on many levels. The concepts are all there, but they lack the necessary impact on the world described here in reference to the Messianic Era:

[God says,] "I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. I will take away the heart of stone out of your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh." (Yechezkel 36:26)

This is what ideas can do: transform a heart of stone into a heart of flesh, the very basis of inspiration and motivation. This is what Torah can do, but only once a person has entered it, and with the best of intentions.