

THE ANTIDOTE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Shavuot is upon us. This coming week, b"H, we will recall the single most important event in the history of Creation: the giving of Torah.

More significant than Creation? For sure, as Rashi explains at the beginning of Bereishis, and the Talmud emphasizes (Shabbos 88a). Without Torah the world has no reason to exist. This is remarkable considering how vast the universe is, how many people are living, and how little Torah has been learned throughout the ages.

More important than the Jewish people? Put it this way: the Jewish people cease to have meaning without Torah. Once upon a time we were unique because we descended from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. If last week's parsha reminded us of anything, it is that we can come close to destruction if we stray from Torah.

Bris Avos—Covenant of the Fathers—makes sure that the Jewish people are never COMPLETELY destroyed. The Holocaust, and all the pogroms before that, showed us that, without Torah, we can come disastrously close to it (Bava Basra 60b).

Yet, here we are again, straying from Torah en masse. Out of about 13 million Jews in the world today, only a couple of million are Torah-observant, many of whom could also afford to improve their commitment. How does it happen?

How does it happen? The better question is, how does it not happen more often?

I do not have to look very far to find children who grew up in Torah homes now running in the other direction. Some may still believe in God, many do not. Some may still believe Torah came from God, most don't even care. All of them have embraced secular attitudes, sometimes to an extreme.

Sometimes it has to do with soul nature. Certain souls have a more difficult time with moral adherence than others—in ANY generation, let alone in one as pleasure-oriented as ours. Like iron filings passing a magnet, they are drawn by natures to the source of the "magnetism."

Others aren't so much attracted by a secular lifestyle as they are repulsed by a Torah one. They see inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and spiritual "equations" that just do not work out. They just don't have the luxury of blind faith to skip over their intellectual and emotional "mountains" to retain a devotion to Torah.

Some might be angry at God. They feel that they were dealt a bad hand by God, evident by the

success others around them enjoy. They have struggled for reasons they do not understand and have assumed that either God is unfair or unaware. They believe that they have no reason to be committed to a God Who is not committed to them.

Then there are the millions who are simply the "next generation." It was their ancestors who changed their mind about Torah Judaism lifetimes ago, leaving their descendants to grow up with their spiritual legacy, or lack thereof. They reject Torah because they have no idea what it is, or why Orthodox Jews still follow it.

What a spiritual mess. The trend is only worsening since more Jews tend to leave the fold than return to it. Not only does it take untold resources to help even a single Jew rediscover his ancient but relevant spiritual heritage, it first and foremost takes an open mind and willing heart to even make such an opportunity possible.

This Shabbos I was a guest in another community. On Motzei Shabbos, a young man passed me on the street and as he did, I could see and feel his distance from Torah Judaism. He still wore a kippah, b"H, but he looked and acted like someone for whom that was only a temporary miracle.

For a moment, I was intellectually and emotionally overwhelmed (I still felt it the next day). Automatically, I considered what I could say or do to open his mind to a Torah lifestyle. It made me feel like a "David" fighting a "Goliath."

The "Goliath" is the world to which the young man has been drawn. It is the sense of pleasure to which he is running. It is the promise of fulfillment to which he believes he is fleeing. It is so REAL to him.

How can I fight that?

"Hey young man! Why would you want to leave the religion of your ancient ancestors for one of the modern world of which you are part? Why would you want to belong to a world that promises fame and fortune when you can belong to one that demands humility and satiation with whatever you have?"

"Why would you choose a society," I could ask him, and the millions of other children and adults like him, "in which modesty is the opposite of a virtue, when you can live as part of one in which it is often pursued to an extreme? In a Torah world," I could point out to him, "you get to pray at least three times a day. In a secular world, you don't have to pray at all!"

What was my response to myself at that point when I realized the extent of the uphill battle?

"We need Moshiach, now, badly."

That's what I told myself, about three times in a row. It was my only acceptable answer to the situation. We need a HUGE miracle today to bring back non-Torah Jews, and the Torah Jews who think they have it right, but don't. Me included.

I mean, we tell potential converts that they are attempting to join a people that struggles daily and suffers in every century. Why join? Why stay if you already belong?

No one ever "disproves" Torah. They just choose not to prove it to themselves so they can rationalize ignoring it for a life of spiritual abandon. Few people are intellectually honest enough to check it out regardless of the consequences of finding out that it is actually from God.

That is when I realized what the holiday of Shavuos is truly about. It was not about the giving of Torah as we all say, think, and teach. It was about GOD GIVING US the Torah. It was about three million Jews who could have easily "gone off the derech," and who did, being elevated to the point of, "We will do and we will understand" because of their God experience.

The Leshem explains that the Final Redemption, when it eventually occurs b"H, will only begin on Pesach. It's actualization will only happen on Shavuos. I think I know why: Even though God Himself performed the tenth plague back in Egypt, it was only on Shavuos that He actually SPOKE to the Jewish people.

The Torah warned us in last week's parsha, and will again later in Parashas Vayailech, about hester panim, the hiding of God's face. It tell us that the punishment for not listening to God is that He will stop talking to us, at least on the level He once did. That was the level on which even souls with Torah-opposite natures had a tough time turning their back on.

As that young man kept walking further away from me last night, oblivious to my sizing him up and feeling his position, I realized why my "David" was no match for his "Goliath." When the future king of Israel confronted his Goliath in the Name of God, he really meant it. Everything about him said so.

Had I "fought" this young man's Goliath in the Name of God, looking at and hearing me he would have sarcastically said, "Riggght." He would have heard ME giving the Torah to him, not God through me. My observance just does not project that reality enough to convince him.

I wish I could find that young man once again. I still don't think I have anything to tell him that might open his heart and mind to Torah. As always, God will have to do that. I just want to thank him for the life-altering insight over which he caused me to stumble that fateful Motzei Shabbos.

Thanks to him, I'm going to have a different, a more accurate focus this Shavuos. I'm going to think about how much Torah I'm actually "getting" from God, and how much is only a function of what I want Torah to be, or because of what the society around me wants me to be. Fixing that, I realize now, is the only way to truly celebrate Shavuos and use it as the opportunity it really is.

Chag Samayach. And, have a successful and REAL Kabbalas HaTorah from God Himself.