

IF THE SHOE FITS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Pharaoh's heart was steadfast, and he did not heed them, as the Lord had spoken. (Shemos 7:22)

Recently I read an article that contained a profile of Adolf Hitler, ysv"z. It was compiled during World War II by a top psychologist for the U.S. Military, to get a handle on who the Allies were dealing with. It was the most comprehensive analysis of one of the most evil men of all history that I had read, and I have to say, I was taken aback. I knew the man was incredibly insane but I did not know to what extent, or ALL the factors that contributed to his mental un-wellness.

The amazing thing is how such an insane person could rise to the top of the German people. It is beyond comprehension how he was able to have such power and control, and for so many years, especially since it was hard for him to hide many of his symptoms of insanity. Just read the profile. It is very detailed and revealing, and it leaves you wondering, "How, how, how?"

The answer of course is in these parshios. Hitler's profile probably could have easily been Pharaoh's as well. The Midrash speaks about Pharaoh's delusions and weird habits. In those days however it was easier to be a leader of a nation, even if crazy, just as long as a person had the right family background and connections. In those days, being crazy while in power was probably somewhat of an asset.

It was to God. History, at the time, needed a Pharaoh. It needed someone who could be foolish enough to stand up to God and be cruel to God's people. It required someone who could go the full distance so that God could bring 10 plagues against the Egyptian ruler's people.

Pharaoh was just the man. Unbeknownst to him, he had molded himself over the years into the perfect "vessel," through which God could free the Jewish people with much fanfare. "The bigger they are, the harder they fall," and God wanted an enemy leader at that time who could fall very hard. Pharaoh's bloated ego and life decisions made him into just such leader.

Achashveros too, in his time. We laugh at Achashveros and call him a fool. We are amused and even entertained by his antics, now that the story had a happy ending. It is much easier to go that route than to explain how a clever person could act so dumb.

Well, many say that is exactly what happened. He wasn't such a fool, at least not in terms of stupidity. Rather, he was a smart person with a bad personality. He was narcissistic, and that robbed him of the opportunity to use his brain for survival. Psychology books are filled with examples of

such people, and we are guilty of the same thing at different points in our lives.

"Can't he see what he is doing?" many an astonished onlooker has asked. "Doesn't she hear what she sounds like," many a shocked listener has thought to themselves. One of the most difficult puzzles to resolve is, how intelligent people blissfully make mistakes that even less intelligent people would never commit.

A lot has to do with something called self-awareness. Another article I recently read (I enjoy reading psychology articles), addressed this very topic:

Self-awareness is the ability to look inside yourself, read your own behavior and feelings, and rationally consider the implications of those actions and thoughts. To be self-aware is to understand that what you say and do affects people — and to have that fact matter to you.

The only problem is, that there are many people who are self-aware but to a fault. They are so self-aware that they tend to "choke" when doing anything in front of other people. That can't be a good thing. The article continues.

People who know themselves have an air of confidence that comes from a place of comfort, not desperation. They don't need to lie to you, belittle you, or strike on your insecurities. They're not threatened or jealous. They know their limitations, and freely own up to them.

Just as "it is what it is" is a true expression, "we are what we are" is equally true. Obviously there are things about ourselves that can and should improved. Life is for tikun—of those things we are in a position to rectify. What we cannot change we have to accept, even if it means being less important in the eyes of others. Unwarranted personal dislike can never lead to anything good.

Self-awareness is the basis for every other valuable quality we hold dear in people we love most — and the people we find most interesting and sincere. You know who you are, and are confident in who that person is. It's easy to be kind, because your empathy allows you to understand the feelings of others. You can be emotionally available because you take the time to process your feelings in order to deal with them and foster fruitful relationships.

If you don't, this paragraph is telling you where to start. Some people are naturally self-aware. Some became that way through upbringing. The rest have to follow the steps to become self-aware, if they don't want to become a tyrant or simply just a foolish person.

The depth of personality and true sincerity that self-aware people have makes human relationships infinitely more interesting and rewarding. The key to understanding another person and connecting with them on a whole new level of clarity starts from within — and will allow a couple to enjoy a closeness so many other people never have.

Though it is the heart that keeps us physically alive, it is our relationships that keep us spiritually alive. There is our relationship with God, with other people, and finally with ourselves. The greater

the quality of relationship, the more alive a person feels, especially if he or she has a good relationship with themselves.

Interestingly enough, self awareness doesn't just enhance the serious aspects of life, but the more relaxed ones as well:

A self-aware partner can be funny because they understand what makes something funny. They can be self-deprecating, not because they're profoundly insecure, but as a way to share their understood shortcomings.

Perhaps, though, one of the most important aspects of self-awareness is this:

Self-aware people are honest. A person who possesses self-awareness will not lie to you. They will not mosey around the truth to "spare your feelings." You need to trust your friends and partners to be straight with you. If you don't have that, how can you trust them with anything at all?

Finally, at least for now, self-aware people:

... have the most profound understanding of empathy. It is only through the internalization of each other's emotions that we can understand the pain and suffering inherent in the world around us. A self-aware person is cognizant of his or her surroundings to such a profound degree that their empathy becomes next-level.

This is why people who are not self-aware can be so cruel to others without blinking an eye. Wrapped up in their own emotions and situations, they have little or no capacity to feel anything else, or for anyone else. They make "good" enemies.

But:

Self-aware people make better friends and partners because they have this respect and awe of everyone's human experience happening around them. This creates a sense of meaning and connection that most people just don't have.

To the extent that a person lives by the "rules" of self-awareness is the extent to which a person will be a worthy human being. Otherwise, at the "right" time or moment, a person can find themselves being a Pharaoh in their own right, and working against God and Creation, not with it. Nothing is more enslaving than this.