

WONDROUS IN YOUR EYES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

... His brothers could not answer him because they were startled by his presence. (Bereishis 45:3)

Familiarity breeds contempt. When it comes to Torah, it means that we become so familiar with the stories that we cease to appreciate them for what they are. What at first raised eyebrows and prompted questions eventually will blend in with the rest of the "normal" narrative.

We say in Tehillim:

This is from God, that which is wondrous in our eyes. (Tehillim 118:23)

Often, we have explained this verse to mean: This is OVERTLY from God, that which is wondrous in our eyes. Everything is from God, the wondrous and the not-so-wondrous. The only difference is whether God makes something occur in a "natural" manner, one with which we are already very familiar, or in a super-natural manner.

The verse has a corollary, though:

If you want to see how something is from God, see how wondrous it really is.

Take birth, for example. It remains to be one of the most incredible miracles in all of existence. Yet, many people, especially doctors who delivered many babies already, find it extremely commonplace. Delivering a baby may be far more complicated than deciding what to have for lunch, but for some, it has become far less important.

The problem is not birth. The problem is familiarity. It is also the fact that new and exciting things happen in life everyday, especially in our time of cutting edge technology and social media. The newness of something relatively inconsequential, like a new smartphone, can usurp the importance of something far more meaningful, like the delivery of a baby for the umpteenth time.

The trick and challenge in life is to keep the truly exciting, exciting, and to keep out that which is really not that important no matter how exciting it seems to be. It is to maintain a high level of appreciation of the important things in life, even as life and human nature work against this.

Having said this, we can now look at this week's parsha in a more insightful manner. There are strange things happening in these parshios, and to understand what, how, and why, will yield insight into past, present, and future.

Imagine if a Jew ran for President of the United States today. I don't mean one who has divorced himself from all things Jewish, and turned against his own people. I mean a Jew who not only scrupulously keeps the Torah, but who also has his own people's best interest as top priority. How far would he get in his run for office?

Even if such a Jew had much to offer regarding the future of the United States, he wouldn't become President or Vice-President. He might be a behind-the-scenes advisor to the President, but you could be sure that someone would question his loyalty, and try to have him removed or severely limited. The United States may still be one of the best places outside of Israel to be a religious Jew, but it is also full of anti-Semitism that is getting worse each day.

Yet, Yosef HATZADDIK, a devout and loyal Jew whose way of life contradicted the Egyptian lifestyle in just about every way, became its leader. Pharaoh had more authority than Yosef, but Yosef exercised tremendous power with Pharaoh's blessing. He was even able to impose Bris Milah on all Egyptians in exchange for food during the famine. Talk about religious duress.

Then came his father and brothers down to Egypt. As Rashi points out, the Egyptians found it detestable to eat with Jews. How unpolitically correct can you get? The Nazis felt the same way, but they didn't allow a Jew to lead them, or give the best of their land to them in order to build a Jewish community. They instead destroyed each one they could reach.

It is hard to say what is more remarkable, how all of this occurred in Yosef's time, or how indifferent we have become over time from reading it each year. Equally amazing is how, if a person takes a moment to focus on the events and appreciate what happened, like the wine steward risking his future as a royal servant by mentioning Yosef to Pharaoh, the wondrousness returns. It's easy to do. It's just hard to remember to do it.

I recently attended a wedding beyond any I have ever gone to. Needless to say, it was VERY fancy. Clearly somebody was interested in making a very impressive wedding, and they succeeded. In fact, I was so overwhelmed that I actually sought out quiet space in which to "hide." My respite was short-lived when 800 people entered the room for the Chupah not too long after.

It was a lovely wedding, and I was very happy for the families and new couple. I was also very distracted away from all of them. The flower arrangements on each table alone constantly drew my attention, as did the formality of the tables themselves. The food was not just good catering, it was gourmet cooking. The bar, just off to my right, was a place of action and that too kept pulling my eye away from the main event.

The band was first class, and there were times that I felt as if I had come to a free concert. The songs were beautiful by the Chupah, which is why people kept looking at the "choir" to see them perform. In many respects, they stole the show from the main event—the chasan and kallah—even though they stopped performing for each brochah. Whatever the intention of the families involved, it was a show and very captivating.

I can't say the same for all of the other weddings I have attended. Most of the time, the only show going on is the Chupah and the merriment to make sure the chasan and kallah have a great time. The food is good, but not so good as to become a main event, and the table arrangements . . . let's just say that they lack imagination.

Thank God, because when I go to a chasanah, I go for the chasan and kallah and their respective families. Don't get me wrong. I love being pampered sometimes, but at the right time. I thoroughly enjoyed the fancy wedding as a special treat. At the same time I missed the sense of Shechinah that can only come from spiritual simplicity, from a beauty that emerges naturally from the spiritual reality. It rarely comes from a materially-enhanced physical one.

The only exception is when such material enhancement is purely for the sake of the service of God, as in the Temple, or for the sake of a holiday. Then the materialism not only does not distract away from the Divine Presence, it focuses one on the spiritual experience even more so.

This is also why we lose sight of the wondrousness of life. We're too distracted by temporal physical beauty to appreciate eternal spiritual beauty. There is just so much to entertain us today, to grab our attention and to make us say, "Wowwwwwww." We tend to overlook the true beauty of life that exists in even the minutest, and sometimes, even the simplest details of everyday life.

Human appreciation is based upon need. The more we know we need something, the more we appreciate its existence. The more we take something for granted, the more we lose sight of its importance and cease to be grateful for it. In poorer countries, people make "feasts" out of things that Westerners wouldn't be caught dead eating.

If "absence makes the heart grow fonder," then desperation makes it lovesick. But, you don't have to become desperate to gain an appreciation of life on the most basic of levels. You just have to care enough to take the time to first recognize and then to count your blessings. The rest, whatever it includes, will take care of itself. Life will once again become wondrous, and God will appear everywhere.

This was part of Yosef's lesson to his brothers. They were as cruel to Yosef as they had been, by their own admission, because they had failed to appreciate what they were doing to him. It was only after they were denied their own freedom did they finally realize what they had taken away from Yosef and their father. They came to truly regret their actions.

It was to the brothers' benefit. Insensitivity to the blessings of life deny a person life itself. Simple life is simply exciting, at least for the person who can see and appreciate this. For those who cannot, it becomes a vicious cycle of wanting more and having more, something marketing and advertising relies upon to make manufacturers rich.

Furthermore, such insensitivity tends to make people careless in life, perhaps even abusive. The fact that the word today implies something extreme shows us just how insensitive we have become.

Abuse has many forms, and even skimming the parsha and taking its details for granted is a level of abuse. We abuse the opportunity to become enriched by its hidden wisdom.

Although empaths are usually born that way, everyone has the ability to become more sensitive to the wondrousness of life. The starting point, as the verse first mentioned implies, is the questions: Am I amazed at life itself, and if not, why not? This turning point of consciousness will open the portal to a higher level of appreciation, and with it, a whole new world of insight, wisdom, and relationship with God.