

TIME TO EMPATHIZE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

However, though they afflicted them, they [nevertheless] increased and grew, which made the Children of Israel disgusting to them. (Shemos 1:12)

LET'S SAY YOU'RE 60 years old, and you're able to go back in time to your 10th birthday. What would it be like? Would you be able to relate to who you were, or to anyone from that era? It's one thing to look at pictures from a previous period of life, but something altogether different to actually be back there.

What about the people from 100 years ago, or 200 years ago? Wouldn't you feel like an alien compared to them? If you wanted to stay back then, wouldn't you have to re-orient yourself and learn their ways, as if you went to live in another country altogether? It probably would not take much time before you'd become "homesick."

When you look at a picture from the past, you view it with your mind, not your emotions, especially if you weren't there at the time, or even if you were. In order to understand the picture, your mind will use its own database to create a relationship to the image, which amounts to INACCURATELY superimposing current experience onto past events.

People mistakenly think that if they can still remember something from years ago, then they can still feel what they did at the time. It's possible, but only if the person was really aware at the time of what they were feeling, and it is still close enough in time to access the emotional memory. Otherwise, once we move on, we move on for good.

When we moved to a street behind the shul in which I had gone to Cheder as child, I tried to see the area as I had as that child. I thoroughly remembered it, but though little had changed since that time, I could not recover the emotional memory. I could "see" it in my mind's eye, but I could not experience it, as hard as I tried, as I once had.

And yet, we read about history from thousands of years ago as if it just happened last year. We assume that what we feel about it is accurate enough, and continue reading as if we're getting it. We take for granted, or possibly don't even consider, how monstrous the gap is between what we are learning and what we are feeling about it, and how inaccurate that gap makes our overall perception.

The Seder tries to change that a little. Unlike the weekly reading of the parsha that can cover

hundreds of years in just 20 minutes using an emotion-less narrative, the Haggadah tries to put us back into Egyptian slavery—a little. But, we're usually too busy enjoying the fun and freedom to notice or complete the mission.

Sympathy is a POWERFUL ability, but empathy is MORE powerful, a LOT more powerful. Sympathy never really changed anyone that much, but empathy does. Sympathy doesn't mean you necessarily relate to an experience beyond your own. It just means that you can recognize what someone else is feeling, and pick a supportive response. Empathy means that you are THEM as they go through what they go through.

That's life changing.

Actually, it's MORE than that. A LOT more.

Because, one of the faultiest assumptions we live with is that "today" is so very different from "yesterday." Of course in many ways it is, but in some VERY fundamental ways it's not, and the assumptions we have made are the reason why we have not only made tragic historic mistakes over the millennia, but the SAME ONES.

And we're doing it again today.

We're beginning, with this week's parsha, our descent into the worst slavery ever known to mankind. Yet, at the same time, this was the place where we became a nation for the first time. We didn't multiply much back in Canaan like we did in Egypt, which only increased the more the enemy tried to stop it, thanks to Divine Providence.

That's right, DIVINE PROVIDENCE. But, if God was with us all that time, through all that torturous slavery that last 116 years in total, why did He not step in and end it much earlier? We see what He EVENTUALLY did to Pharaoh and Egypt. Why didn't He just do it a lot earlier? We started off on such a high with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. Why did we have to reach such a low before getting back there again?

This is not a question that SYMPATHY can answer. It's not something you can relate to by standing emotionally in 2018 and looking back in time to Egyptian slavery. It's a question that only EMPATHY can answer, by transporting us back in time EMOTIONALLY, while fulfilling the Haggadah's direction of looking at ourselves as if we too left Egypt. If we don't, then we're not going to have a good time leaving exile again, today, one last time on our way to Yemos HaMoshiach.

This is the time to think about it. The next six weeks are called "Shovevim," a word comprised of the first letters of the names of the next six parshios, from "Shemos" to "Mishpatim," in order. The word itself means "wayward people," turning this period into a special one of teshuvah. But the teshuvah of this time is not the Yom Kippur type, but another kind of teshuvah. And THAT will be the theme of PERCEPTIONS over the next six weeks, b"H.