

NEED TO KNOW

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

You have been shown, in order to KNOW that God He is God; there is none else besides Him.
(Devarim 4:35)

IT IS AMAZING the difference that knowledge makes. I realize this is an obvious thing to say, since everything in life depends upon what we know. Nonetheless, there is something not-so-obvious about it, because a PHENOMENAL amount of people choose ignorance instead, seemingly believing that "ignorance IS bliss."

Knowledge is THE game changer of game changers. It constantly saves lives, and the lack of knowledge will constantly cost them. Money can't buy happiness, but knowledge can. Money can't buy love, but knowledge constantly builds it. You can't love someone you don't know.

You can idolize strangers, but you can't LOVE them. That takes knowledge, and the more intimate that knowledge is of something, the more you can love it. Infatuation doesn't require much knowledge, and can happen at "first sight." True love NEVER does. It's just the way the world works.

And this thing about a little knowledge being a dangerous thing, is only to encourage us to go the full distance and get ALL the knowledge we can. There is one thing worse than an ignoramus, and that is a PARTIAL ignoramus. An ignoramus knows he has nothing to offer on what he knows nothing about. A partial ignoramus thinks he knows enough to have an opinion when in fact he usually doesn't.

This is VERY evident from reading Yirmiyahu about the destruction of the First Temple, and the exile that followed. Not only was Yirmiyahu ignored, but he was persecuted by the very people he was trying to save. For a prophet of God, he had a very rough time of it.

He got to say, "I told you so," because everything he had forewarned about had come true. But it wasn't about being right for Yirmiyahu. It was about getting the Jewish people back on track, and avoiding destruction and exile. Being proven right only meant to him that he had failed in his mission.

HOW? How could so many people take a prophet of God for granted, even abuse him? How could they throw caution to the wind, and risk so much terrible Divine retribution? EICHAH? How?

Well, how did Adam HaRishon go against the command of God, and risk death to eat from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra? God had not spoken in riddles or parables. Which part of "Do not eat or you will die" did Adam not get? And yet he ate anyhow, and here we are, almost 6,000 years later and no

closer to returning to Paradise. HOW?

In the Garden of Eden, there was the snake, that crafty little MISinformation deliverer. He spoke in half-truths and outright lies, and took advantage of what Chava DIDN'T know. He turned God into the enemy, made himself out like a hero, and Adam into a naïf.

In Yirmiyahu's time, it was the FALSE prophets. Even though the Torah warns about them, and even threatens them with the death penalty, they were rampant in the time right before the destruction of the Temple. They pumped the nation full of good news and upbeat prophecies, despite the fact they kept sinning in the worst ways possible. People listen more readily to what they WANT to hear, and more easily reject what they don't.

The true enemy of society is stupidity. It's not a nice word, and actually quite insulting. But even Tanach uses it to describe the intellectual state of the people of Yirmiyahu's time. It wasn't saying the people were unintelligent. It was saying that they were STUPID. UNINTELLIGENT means a person lacks knowledge. STUPID means they have the knowledge, but they ignore it, or undervalue it.

For example, when a three year old goes zooming down a hill without wearing a helmet on his little toy, it is usually due to a lack of intelligence. He just hasn't learned enough about road safety, and how an accident can hurt him badly or worse, God forbid.

When a teenager does it on his bicycle, he is acting stupid. He should know better, but chooses to ignore the information that could save his life and those of others. He has STUPIDLY risked lives for the sake of a bodily thrill, HOPING that nothing will go wrong. The Emergency Room is filled with those for whom hope, and their bodies, weren't strong enough.

Likewise, when "adults" take incredible risks while driving cars, putting too much trust in their cars, other people, and their own skills, they are REALLY acting stupid. They definitely should know better, but have chosen, for personal convenience sake, to bypass their wisdom and do the stupid thing.

I'm not just being facetious. I'm standing on this point because it means a lot more than people think, but ought to know. Adam's punishment was more severe than Chava's because he knew better, and she did not. She had not heard the command from God, and what she heard through her husband was somewhat convoluted. She was only punished for what she DID know, and ignored, as was he.

Likewise, Yirmiyahu's generation would have enjoyed more mercy had they only been unintelligent. God never holds a person responsible for what they don't know, unless they CHOOSE not to know it. The Temple was destroyed, and the people were horribly exiled, because they had acted STUPIDLY, not unintelligently.

This discussion has major ramifications, especially today, especially for Jews. We're living in an era that has made being unintelligent next to impossible, at least wherever there is Internet. We have

been called the "Generation of Knowledge," the first one to be called that since the original "Dor HaDayah," the generation that left Egypt and heard God speak.

A big problem today is the quality of knowledge. There is a lot of misinformation. TONS of it. But there are also TONS of ways to overcome it. "Still a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest." And even though people often know this they STUPIDLY disregard it.

Tisha B'Av only becomes Tu B'Av when we realize this, and change. The day can get pushed off, and eventually be over. Life can pick up where it left off before the Three Weeks, and give a person the impression that all the danger is gone, over. Just like the false prophets of Yirmiyahu's time told the people...who later cursed them, and their own stupidity, as they were carted off like cattle to Babylonia.

The Torah, in the parsha of "Shabbos Nachamu," states clearly:

You have been shown, in order to KNOW that God He is God; there is none else besides Him. (Devarim 4:35)

WHO was shown? Not us. Moshe's generation, but not ours. THEY can be held responsible for THEIR unwarranted mistakes, but not us...right?

Jewish history says otherwise, and current history agrees. Once upon a time, there was a great lack of intelligence, which is why God probably had a lot of patience with the world. But our greatest asset is also our greatest liability if we don't appreciate it for what it is. We're a HIGHLY intelligent generation. But that makes the stupid things we do STUPID, and punishable. It's Tisha B'Av all year round when that is the case.

The comfort that these weeks speak about were AFTER the Jewish people had received the shocking news about just how wrong they were, and about just how much damage it had caused. It woke them up to reality, and made them open to comfort, and rebuilding.

But we're still before that point, thanks to God's great patience and mercy. It has bought us time, but not a free pass. If we wake ourselves up to the truth, and help others to do the same, then we can have our comfort and enjoy it too. Let's figure out HOW—eichah—we got "here," and steer ourselves as we were "shown to know."