

THE BIGGER PICTURE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse. (Devarim 11:26)

We left off last week talking about fear of God, its connection to the trait of chayn, and a question:

"Ruach HaKodesh," which translates as "Holy Spirit," but is more than this . . . is something that Yosef clearly had, making him unique with regard to the plans of God for history. The only question is, didn't the other Talmudic rabbis also fear God? Unquestionably, just as Yosef's brothers' unquestionably feared God like their brother. Then what made the rabbis with Ruach HaKodesh different, and all the Yosefs of history for that matter?

The answer to this question emerges from a different discussion found in the Talmud:

Rav Yosef was "Sinai" and Rabbah was "Oker Harim," "an uprooter of mountains." The time came when they were required [to be head of the yeshivah in Pumbedisa]. They asked: Which has preference, "Sinai" or an "Oker Harim"? They answered: "Sinai," because everyone requires the bearer of wheat. (Brochos 64a)

The Talmud means that Rav Yosef knew all the Mishnayos and Beraysos, the basis of the Oral Law, as if from Sinai. Therefore, he is called "Sinai." Rabbah, on the other hand, "uprooted mountains," that is, he used his sharp power of reasoning to delve deeply into Talmudic discussions to arrive at the halachah.

After Rav Yehudah, the Rosh HaYeshivah of Pumbedisa, died, they needed either Rav Yosef or Rabbah to replace him. Therefore, they sent and asked the Chachamim of Eretz Yisroel which takes precedence. The Chachamim responded, saying that Sinai comes first, because everyone needs the "bearer of wheat." In others, they should appoint Rav Yosef as the new Rosh HaYeshivah in Pumbedisa because of his comprehensive knowledge of Mishnayos and Beraysos, since they are the source of all halachah.

Ideally, a person should have as a global knowledge of Torah as possible, and also be able to delve deeply into Torah ideas. Both are crucial for a more complete Torah education, and will benefit the person and all those whom he teaches.

Not only this, but it is clearly possible for someone to end up understanding through "Iyun," deep investigation, what he may not have seen from a lack of "Bekias," faster, more superficial learning. It is also possible from Bekias to come to question certain ideas that might normally be the result of

lyun.

One fundamental difference between the two approaches can be understood through the story of Yosef and his brothers. In fact, they can represent both approaches to learning, Yosef being more the "Sinai" type and the brothers being more the "Oker Harim" type.

"Ironically," it was Rav Yosef, like Yosef HaTzaddik himself, who was "Sinai." Furthermore, he had to wait 22 years, like Yosef as well, before ascending to his position. Just a historical "coincidence"?

One of the most startling points in the story of Yosef and his brothers is how they could be so wrong about their brother. To be wrong about him was one thing. To be SO wrong about him, thinking that God rejected Yosef when in fact he held him in the highest esteem, is another story. This was the product of a difference between "Sinai" and "Oker Harim."

The difference becomes clearer when referring to "Sinai" by another name: The Big Picture. "Sinai" represents the totality of Torah, albeit not on the most detailed level. It represents the entire framework of Torah, which can be infinitely detailed on the level of "Oker Harim."

Each approach to Torah reveals something that the other does not, and each also has its own shortcoming. "Sinai," though providing a more complete glimpse of all of Torah can come up short on important details, especially when it comes to halachah. "Oker Harim" provides such details, but can leave a person with gaping holes in their overall Torah outlook only because they have yet to learn other areas of Torah. This is why the two approaches complement each other.

It is also true that in some situations, one can be more relevant at the time than the other. The "pilpul," i.e., the dialectics, of a Rosh HaYeshivah whose approach to learning is "Oker Harim" can be highly stimulating, but he may not be focussed enough on the overall direction of the yeshivah. A Rosh HaYeshivah whose approach is "Sinai" may not give the most fascinating classes, but he will have his finger on all aspects of yeshivah learning, and be a great resource for students with questions.

It's more than this, though. What follows may not be a Torah quote, but it articulates the point very well. It is talking about the scientific world, but the same predicament occurs in the Torah realm as well. It says:

In short, the works of modern science, taken one by one, seem enough to dampen a person's hope for higher meaning. If religion's stock-in-trade is the inexplicable, the coming years don't look like boon times. This is half of the giant paradox, and it's one reason why the average scientist today is probably less religious than the average scientist of 50 or 100 years ago. The other half of the paradox comes from stepping back and looking at the big picture: an overarching pattern that encompasses the many feats of 20th century science and transcends them; a pattern suggesting, to some scientists, at least, that there is more to the universe than meets the eye, something authentically divine about how it all fits together." (What Does Science

Teach Us About God?; TIME Magazine, December 28, 1992)

This is the main advantage of the "Sinai" approach, not just with respect to Torah, but to life in general. Patterns. Patterns that reveal things about life that one may only find and understand after a lot of investigation. The only problem is that such investigation may take so long as to lessen the benefit of the insight, and may even result in disaster in the meantime.

Both Yosef and his brothers wanted the same thing. They wanted to continue on with the legacy of their ancestors and give rise to the Jewish nation that was destined to emerge from them. They wanted to create a people who could fulfill the purpose of Creation in the ultimate sense, and please their Creator as much as is humanly possible.

Yosef, with his "Sinai" approach, not only understood the ultimate plan of God, but was creative in ways to fulfill it, not just in his time, but in the future. This transformed him into a partner of God, and therefore someone to whom God shared deep secrets, someone through whom God could reveal the hidden.

The brothers with their "Oker Harim" approach only saw flaw in their brother. They were exacting, so-much-so in fact that they could only see Yosef as a threat to the family tradition, not as a creative extension of it. It was their "Oker Harim" approach that even allowed them to justify the killing of their brother after convening a Bais Din, and the deceiving of their father.

Had they continued with their approach, over time they would have come to see and understand what Yosef did. But, they didn't have that time. In the meantime their father was inconsolable, their food was running out, they were forced down to Egypt, and Shimon was taken captive by the viceroy there. In short, their "mountains" were being "uprooted," but not the way they had planned.

When Yosef finally revealed himself, the brothers were in shock. It wasn't just that Yosef was still alive and was actually second-in-command over Egypt, like his dreams foretold. It was more that with all of their pilpul and learning, that they could not see what was coming. It was then that they recognized all the hints Yosef had given to them along the way until that critical moment, and how they had missed them—completely.

This brings us to this week's parshah. It is called "Re'eh" because Moshe Rabbeinu is trying to get the Jewish people to see something they had yet to envision until that time: the bigger picture. Until then, they had panicked and sinned because they were stuck in the details of the smaller picture. He wanted to elevate their level of perception closer to his own, to give them the wherewithal to survive the challenges of Torah life after his life ended.

The secrets of God go to those who fear Him. More specifically, they go to those who see reality on the level that He does, as much as is humanly possible.