

TAKEN FOR GRANTED

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Mattan Torah - Revelation was the most significant event in history. It was the one and only time that G-d, through prophecy, revealed Himself to an entire nation. All other instances of recorded prophecies were to individuals or to smaller groups of people. (eg. The 70 Elders - Bamid. 11.:17 and Shaul before he became king - Shmuel 1.10:10). In fact, it is the single most telling difference between Judaism and all other religions. All other religions allege that their religions began with an individual claiming to have personally experienced a divine revelation. The individual then shared his personal experience with others. If they believed him, they would join him in promoting his agenda and help him gather a following. Judaism, on the other hand, references the verse in this week's Parsha which clearly states that the entire nation of 3,000,000 collectively experienced hearing G-d speak to them. (20.19) "G-d said to Moshe, So shall you say to the Children of Israel, You have seen that I have spoken to you."

G-d's introduction to the Bnai Yisroel at the time of Revelation was His opening line, "I am the G-d Who brought you out of Egypt" Rabbi Yehudah Halevi in the Kuzari points out that we learn a basic educational truth from this introduction. In order for people to accept direction from a teacher, parent, or anyone else, they must first trust that person. Trust occurs when there is a personal and beneficial relationship between the two parties. Once trust has been established, the one is able to accept direction and criticism from the other. That is why G-d introduced Himself as the architect of the Exodus rather than the Creator of the universe. The Exodus was a personal experience that benefited each and every Jew. It was a clear expression of G-d's love and concern and it generated within the nation a sense of trust and gratitude. On the other hand, introducing Himself as the Creator would have required of the Jews a much greater degree of sophistication. It would have demanded that the Jews recognize the constancy of G-d's caring in the ongoing maintenance of nature, and accept that caring as a personal display of His love. However, accepting the G-d who created and maintains nature as a G-d Who personally cares for the individual is more difficult than one might think.

Let us consider the difficulties of G-d establishing a personal relationship with 3,000,000 people. Using the example of a family, consider the following. Parents cook, clean, and care for their children. How many children consider the clean clothes, hot meals, years of education, medical attention, and general caring as indicative of their parent's personal attention? I would think very few. The norms of family life are taken for granted by most of us as our due. "Of course my parents feed

and clothe me. That is their responsibility. Not only that, but they do it for all of my siblings no differently than they do it for me!" It is the special occasions such as birthdays, etc. that show a child that he or she is unique and special to the parents. However, in truth, the constant caring is a far greater indication of the parent's love and caring than the occasional present. The irony of it is that a child will more readily feel and express appreciation for the occasional present given to him by a relative or stranger than say thank you to a parent for a hot meal or a clean pair of socks. Furthermore, it is unfortunate that we often do not recognize the profundity of our parent's caring until it is too late. Then, the void left by the parent's absence forces us to recognize and appreciate what had been the constancy of their presence in our lives.

Aside from the death of a parent, there is another instance when a child realizes that he should not be taking the norms of parental love and caring for granted. That is when he is faced by a contrasting relationship that does not have those same norms and expectations. For example, if a person spends time with children or adults who have been abused. Observing what the absence of the norm does challenges the individual to realize how very lucky he or she is to have loving and caring parents, regardless of how many other siblings he must share that love with. All of a sudden the clean socks and warm bowl of soup enjoyed by every member of the family is a magnificent testimony to the trusting and personal relationship he enjoys with his parents.

When the Jews left Egypt it was clear to them that G-d loved them. The miracles of the Exodus were like the occasional present that focuses the child on his unique place in the hearts of his parents. On the other hand, the Creator of the universe loves all of His children, Jew and non-Jew alike. The world that G-d maintains and that we take for granted benefits every living creature. Therefore, it is difficult for us to see and feel the expression of G-d's personal love for us in the normal functioning of nature. All the miracles which are with us "morning, afternoon, and evening" should be for us the greatest expression of G-d's personal love. However, because all living things share nature, we do not acknowledge it as such.

The times that we do acknowledge the norms of nature as the most majestic expression of G-d's love is unfortunately when we can no longer enjoy the expected norms of health and life due to illness or accident. Therefore, when G-d introduced Himself to the Jews at Revelation, He specifically chose that moment when we had recognized His personal love, rather than His more general caring and concern as the Creator.

The miracles of the Exodus still required another factor for the Jews to acknowledge and feel G-d's personal love. Let us remember that G-d's display of affection and caring benefited 3,000,000 people. That is one very large family! How was the individual Jew supposed to feel that G-d loved him personally?

The most surface analysis of the Exodus focuses us on the contrast between the Jew and the Egyptian. It was the Egyptian who suffered each of the plagues while the Jew was untouched. It was

the death of Egypt's first born and not our own that made each of our homes safe. It was the dead Egyptian washed up on the shores of the sea in contrast to the Jew singing the praises of G-d that awed the people. It was in contrast to the Egyptian that we were able to see the consequences of a life lived for or against G-d.

At the time of the splitting of the sea, each and every Jew felt a personal connection to G-d. "This is my G-d and I will glorify Him!" The spectacle of G-d's justice clearly brought home to the Jews, "There but for the grace of G-d go I." It forced each and every Jew to wonder why he was being saved and why the Egyptian was being punished. As the Medresh says, "These (the Jews) serve idols and these (the Egyptians) serve idols! Why save the Jew and punish the Egyptian?" As we say in the Hagadah, "If G-d had not taken us out of Egypt, I and my children would still be slaves to Pharaoh." Why then were the Jews saved? The answer is that we were the chosen ones and therefore G-d had a special interest in each and every one of us. In contrast to the Egyptian, the Jew might not have known why he was special, but he certainly knew that he didn't want to be treated like the Egyptian! By contrast to the Egyptian, the Jew knew that G-d loved him.

However, G-d's love and caring is far more profound and personal than that. At the same time that He is caring for the entire nation, He also loves each and every single member of the nation. At the same time that He is caring for the entire universe, He also loves each and every human being. The experiences following Kriyas Yam Suf, as well as the giving of the Torah, were designed to reveal G-d's personal caring within the magnificence of the entire universe.

- 1.** The Incident at Marah. The Ramban explains that the bitter water turning sweet was not an overt miracle. It did not require any change in the laws of nature. It was simply G-d revealing to Moshe the laws of chemistry. It was no more than the miracle of nature itself.
- 2.** The Manna, and Moshe hitting the rock. G-d showed the Jews that He could care for them in the wilderness with the same ease that He cares for all living creatures. "He gives sustenance to all beings, because He is abundantly kind." (Birkat Hamazon).
- 3.** Protecting the Jews from Amalek. The G-d of nature is the same G-d who saves us from our enemies. G-d not only maintains the universe but is also directly involved in the affairs of nations.
- 4.** The Ten Commandments. Eg. The Mitzvos of Shabbos and Honoring Parents. a. Shabbos reminds us of both Creation and the Exodus. As the Creator, G-d is the G-d of nature. As the architect of the Exodus G-d is the personal G-d Who controls nature for our sake. After a week of taking G-d for granted, Shabbos refocuses us on seeing and appreciating G-d.
b. The Mitzvah of Honoring Parents. Parents, like G-d, are always taken for granted. The commandment to honor and revere our parents challenges that tendency and refocuses us on not taking them, or G-d, for granted.

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