

# SENSITIVITY TRAINING

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Imagine a gourmet's culinary delight composed from the finest ingredients. Prime cuts of meat, fresh herbs and spices, perfectly ripened fruits and vegetables, newly milled grains and the perfect complement of wines. Imagine the finest linens appointed with beautifully wrought sterling and the most delicate bone china. Completing the picture perfect display are crystal goblets and pitchers mixing their faceted rainbows among the colorful explosions of fresh flowers and decorations. Imagine all of it presented on the veranda of a beautifully aged villa perched on a cliff overlooking the tranquil sea at sun set.

Take the same food and menu and present it on paper dishes with plastic cutlery and Styrofoam cups served on a cardboard tray in the basement cafeteria of the local JCC.

Tell me, are details important?

The Parsha begins with an emphasis on details. (Rashi 25:1) "Why does the Torah associate the laws of Shemitah (Sabbatical year) with Har Sinai. To teach us that just as the laws of Shemitah were presented to the Bnai Yisroel with all its details and particulars so too all the Mitzvos in the Torah were taught to Moshe and transmitted to the Bnai Yisroel with all their details and particulars."

The just quoted Rashi is among the most famous in the Torah. It is the foundation of our faith and the fundamental construct of our practice. It mandates our acceptance of the Oral Law no differently than our belief in the divinity of the Written. It underscores what I have always said, "We are not the People of the Book. We are the People of the Non-Book." Many religions and ideologies believe in the divinity of the Written Torah. It is only the observant Jew who believes equally in the divinity of the Oral Law.

There is a famous Medresh that describes the non-Jewish reaction to the uniqueness of the Torah. Honoring parents is fifth of the Ten Commandments. The Medresh states, (liberal translation) "The non-Jewish world will review the Ten Commandments and when they see that G-d included "Honor your Father and Mother" they will proclaim, "What a sensitive and generous G-d He is!"

The Medresh is presenting us with a contrast between the basic tenets of Yahadus (Judaism) and those of other religions. Most other religions present detailed manifestos of their deity's religious and devotional expectations. The concern and instructions for human relationships and interactions are relegated to the back burner until all religious functions have been well established. That is why it was common throughout history for the local religious institution and its functionaries to live in

relative luxury while their constituency lived in squalor and poverty. Not so with the Torah. The Torah is different. It is as if G-d has enough self-confidence to share center stage with His humans.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch points out that the end of last week's Parsha, the story of the Blasphemer, and the beginning of this week's Parsha, the laws of Shemitah, are intentionally juxtaposed to make the following contrast. The Laws of Shemitah are presented in great detail. The laws of the Blasphemer were not presented at all! So much so that when the incident occurred the verse states (24:12) "They placed him into custody until they were told what G-d wanted them to do!" They went to Moshe and Moshe turned to G-d for the answer. Moshe himself did not know what to do with the Blasphemer! G-d then instructed Moshe what to do.

Rabbi Hirsch writes, "For that incident involved a law which had been given on Mt. Sinai only in general outlines; the generalizations and details for its implementation were so obviously lacking that when it first became necessary to invoke this law in practice, inquiry had to be made of G-d concerning the procedure to be followed."

Imagine, regarding His own honor G-d did not present elaborate instructions and expectations; yet, regarding the honor due to parents G-d gave instructions as well as stating the reward for doing so! What a sensitive and generous G-d we have!

I believe that it all has to do with details. A Torah lifestyle is detail oriented. There are laws and procedures to address most every situation and circumstance. From birth to death there are questions that should be asked and answers that are available to give. However, asking questions in search of answers takes great conviction and humility. A person who believes that he or she should know, or does know everything will not seek outside help. The only person who seeks answers from others is the person who recognizes his personal limitations and subjectivity. Such a person may have the courage to be vulnerable. Such a person may have the conviction to do what is right, to do what he or she is told.

If a person desires to know the word of G-d he will search out teachers who are able to teach him the word of G-d. He will desire to know the details and minutia of G-d's expectations.

In this regard G-d is certainly the best role model. He pays close attention to details. He never neglects the honor and concern due to others. His law addresses all situations, and if sensitivity can be defined as attention to detail, He is certainly sensitive as only He can be.

All of us have heard time and again "It's the thought that counts." Unquestionably, I agree; however, it presumes that the thought has substance; the thought reveals attention and detail. It's one thing not to have given a gift due to time or financial restrictions; however, the replacement card had better show concern and attention. More often than not a creatively presented card has far greater meaning to the recipient than a desired but poorly presented (e.g. unwrapped) gift.

By contrasting the story of the Blasphemer with the laws of the Sabbatical year and this week's

double Torah portions we are presented with another important lesson. Do not skip on the details when it concerns the respect and needs of others. The Shemitah year involved a social recalibration regarding The Eved Ivri (Jewish slave) as well as attending to the needs of the Levites and the poor. Therefore, the laws are extensive and detailed. However, when it concerns ourselves our personal honor and needs, be sure to minimize our expectations and demands.

Parshas B'Har further contrasts G-d's concern and sensitivity for us with His demands for our behavior toward Himself. The Parsha begins with Shemitah. Although Shemitah is not necessarily a legal or ethical concept that we would have undertaken on our own had G-d not commanded us to do so; nevertheless, the entire focus of Shemitah is us! The redistribution of economic wealth and station; the freeing and redeeming of Jewish slaves; the sale and redemption of ancestral properties; caring for the destitute and the needy; the prohibition against charging interest; and the proper treatment of a day laborer and stranger. It's only at the very end of the Parsha that G-d redirects our attention to Himself and concludes, "Do not make gods for yourself; Keep my Shabbos."

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