

DEFINING REALITY AND ILLUSION

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Picture if you will, the Jewish encampment in the desert. Influenced by the many artistic renditions we have all seen, you can just imagine a plethora of tents surrounding a central structure. The central structure is of course the Mishkan (Tabernacle) easily identified by a pillar of smoke rising from the Mizbeach, (altar) and the surrounding tents are usually arranged in tribal groupings around the Mishkan structure. The setting is often a stark forbidding desert landscape with barren mountains towering in the background.

Allow me to give you a insiders tour of a Medrashik (Talmudic) setting far different than any you would imagine on your own.

"The Sinai desert is a forbidding lifeless landscape of rock and sand bordered by craggy towering peaks. In the distance we notice what appears to be a thick cloud-cover dominating the middle of the horizon. This attracts our attention because it is very unusual for there to be any clouds in the expanse of the blue desert sky, let alone having clouds lying so close to the ground. Furthermore, some kind of light can be discerned behind the veil of the cloud-cover illuminating whatever lies hidden behind. Outside of the cloud cover an immense conglomeration of tents can be seen with people of mixed nationality and dress moving among the tents. They do not seem well organized; although, some attempt at order is noticeable.

As we draw near, we see that the clouds are not moving. Regardless of the desert wind the clouds remain stationary and unaffected. As we draw even closer, we can see people making their way in and out of the cloud cover. No gateway is yet obvious and it seems as if the individuals are being swallowed by the clouds. Soon enough we get close enough to see a wide pathway cutting into the cloud cover along which the people come and go.

Approaching the clouds with some apprehension, we decide to follow the traffic and discover what lay behind the cloud-cover. Walking through the thick clouds, we are overcome by an eerie sense of disassociation and dejavue. The disassociation is a sense of transitioning from one dimension to another, from one reality to another reality. The dejavue has the distinct overtones of a time when we crossed the sea flanked by towering walls of water; however, nothing could have prepared us for what we were about to see.

Leaving behind the cloud cover, we emerged on a scene of spectacular beauty, richness and order. Somehow, in a seemingly miraculous manner, there existed within the confines of the clouds a

veritable Garden of Eden. Unfolded before us is a massive oasis of spectacularly colored flowering plants, lush vegetation, streaming waterways, warm sunshine and cool breezes. The size of the clouded enclosure is spectacular. Stretching to the horizon for maybe 8 to 10 miles, there appears to be at least a million tents arranged around a center building that is covered in beautifully colored tapestries. The tents are arranged in orderly rows and there are clearly delineated camps separated from each other by rushing streams of water. Flying in the breeze high above the "tribal" divisions are banners and flags of various designs and colors clearly intended to identify the different camps. Wherever we look there are people, young and old, engaged in discussions and various camp and home chores. What is most spectacular is the tangible sense of calm order and purpose permeating the entire scene. Where did this sanctuary come from? How could it possibly exist amidst the towering severity of the desert landscape?

Rav Dessler, in an elaborate essay on the illusion of reality, explained that what we perceive as real is in truth an illusion intended to hide the absolute presence of G-d. Rav Dessler does not mean that we are some virtual computer program designed to perpetuate its own illusionary existence! Such fanciful plots are best left to the screen writers of Tinsel-town and the silver-screen. What Rav Dessler means is that our existence is as real as we make it. The notion that there can be an independent existence removed from the ongoing ministrations and control of the Creator is the illusion. Yes, our bodies are real and not ethereal. The physical world does exist and it challenges our souls and consciences to discover who we are and why we were created. However, that challenge is complicated by the human drive to seek a physical and materialistic existence independent of G-d and His expectations. Therein lies the great illusion and challenge of independent existence.

Following Exodus and Matan Torah (giving of the Torah), the Jews were transformed from seekers of who and why to knowing who they were and why they were created. Having heard G-d speak and learning His commandments from the mouth of Moshe, they knew what to do.

They were the descendents of the Avos (patriarchs) and Imahos (matriarchs) who had been gifted with G-d's Torah and the means for assigning Kedushah (sanctity and purpose) to the existence of the universe. Literally, the world was created for them to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." In that capacity, they were first responsible to learn G-d's intentions for the universe and all of humanity and then infuse the universe with an understanding of G-d. The outcome was to be that everyone would know their personal reasons for having been created.

In essence, their job was to learn and teach in both theory and practice the intent of G-d for creating everything. That is the meaning of the verse, "and G-d placed them (Adam and Chava) in Gan Eden to work and to serve. The work was to know what G-d wanted for the universe and the service was to share that knowledge with the rest of the world. Infusing the world with Kedushah (sanctity and purpose) means revealing G-d's purpose for creating the universe. This can only be done by learning His commandments, doing them, and teaching others to do the same. Learning and teaching bridge

the illusion of independent reality with the actuality of knowing Hashem (G-d) and His purpose.

The original Gan Eden was the physical manifestation of purpose and design. It was a setting wherein which G-d's presence was easily perceived. All Adam and Chava had to do was not transgress the single commandment "not to partake of the trees in the center of the garden." It was a single Mitzvah (commandment) which declared to Adam and Chava that existence had a purpose transcending the illusion of physical independence. It only took one Mitzvah to accomplish that understanding. Had their existence been independent of G-d's direct intentions, they would not have been compelled to listen or follow; however, because they were the creations of G-d He had the right to impose restrictions and limits.

Every time Adam and Chava looked at the "trees in the center of the garden" and did not give into their curiosity or desire, they loudly proclaimed that the universe and their existence had intent and purpose. The moment they transgressed the one commandment and ate from the tree, they entered the world of self-imposed illusionary independence. Once they engaged the illusion, they were unable to see G-d as clearly as before. The world of sanctity and reality became a world barren and empty. Instead of lush gardens and fields, the land gave forth thistle and thorns. By virtue of its being there, fruit proclaims purpose. Thorns and thistles require much greater study and sophistication to realize and understand the divine purpose hidden behind the illusion of nature. "And behold the bush burned mightily but the bush was not consumed!"

Within the illusion of the burning bush resided the presence of G-d. Within the illusion of the physical was the actuality of G-d's intended purpose. To see G-d's presence, to hear His words, Moshe first had to look. Sensing the sanctity that was there, Moshe had to take off his sandals because the "earth upon which he was standing was holy." Not just the actual place where Moshe was standing but the entire earth was holy. Revealing that sanctity was to be his job and the work of his people. "The proof of your mission will be when you bring the nation to serve Me on this mountain!" "At that time I will give the nation my Torah and reveal to them the who and why of their existence. I will give them the means of recreating a world otherwise ignorant of My intent and purpose, divorced from Kedushah, and mired in the illusions of their own independence. I will give them the knowledge of how to infuse that ignorant world with sanctity and turn the thorns and thistles back into flowers and fruit.

The Israeli encampment in the desert was a reenactment of Gan Eden. Placed in the barren inhospitable wilderness of Sinai, G-d showed them that we are responsible for making the reality of illusion or the reality of Kedushah.

Outside the cloud-cover was the illusionary world of the Eruv Rav - (mixed multitude of nationalities who elected to join the Jewish exodus from Egypt) who existed side by side with the inner magnificence and sanctuary of the Jewish encampment. The only thing dividing the two realities was walls of clouds. Outside the cloud-cover, the human creature struggled to attain a glimmer of

understanding and to survive. Within the cloud-cover, the human creature did not have to struggle to see purpose and intent. Within the camp, Kedushah was self evident.

Situated in the middle of the camp / garden was the Mishkan. Glowing with an inner Kedushah were the Aron (Holy Ark) and the Luchos (tablets) - the "Tree of Life to all who wish to learn from it." (the tree that was in the center of the garden) The Jewish nation was commanded to work and to serve within that garden. They were given the jobs of learning and teaching the intent and purpose of G-d. They were given the opportunity of living within Gan Eden and seeing the purpose of existence. They were given the opportunity of understanding and accepting their own absolute dependency on G-d.

Before we address the Miraglim (Spies), it is important to note that the experience of the desert camp had an added dimension that had not been revealed in Gan Eden. Different than Adam and Chava, the generation of the desert knew that it was possible to do Teshuvah (repentance) and stay in Gan Eden! It was possible to fail, learn from the failure, and yet continue learning and teaching!

According to many commentaries, the intent of the Spies was noble, although wrong. They returned from their mission with a negative report about the promised land of Israel, intending to force G-d into keeping them in the desert. They wanted to stay in Gan Eden! Having experienced Teshuvah in the aftermath of the Eigel (Golden Calf) and knowing that Hashem desires to forgive, they counted on the Jews losing faith in G-d and Hashem deciding that they were not yet ready to enter Israel! Why leave Gan Eden? Why leave the perfect world of dependency and knowledge? Why return to the world of illusion and challenge when they could continue to live in the reality of G-d's intent and purpose?!

However, they were tragically wrong. They assumed that living in Gan Eden was the goal and the purpose. It wasn't. The goal and the purpose was to return the rest of the world to a Gan Eden. The purpose was to work and serve all of humanity in understanding why they were created. Living behind a cloud-cover was self-serving rather than a service to humanity. To best serve humanity, they needed the experience of Gan Eden and the desert encampment. They needed the contrast between the barren illusion of the Eruv Rav and their own lush reality. They needed to know that they defined their own reality by either the virtue of their dependency on Hashem or the illusion of their independence from Him. However, the goal was to only remain behind the cloud-cover long enough to be certain of their own reality. Once certain of the totality of their dependency on G-d they were supposed to emerge from behind the cloud-cover and teach the Eruv Rav the reality of who they were and why they were created. Then they would be ready to do the same for the rest of the world.

The Miraglim accomplished what they set out to do. They forced G-d to keep the nation in Gan Eden (the desert camp) for an additional 38 years. During that time, the Jews continued to experience the totality of their dependency on Hashem but at two terrible costs. The most obvious of the two was

the death of that entire generation. It was decreed that they would both live and die in Gan Eden. Their purpose would be to teach and train their children to accomplish what they failed to do - to emerge from behind the cloud-cover and return the entire world to the pristine dependency of Gan Eden.

The second consequence was far more subtle and far more devastating. The second generation in the desert grew up in a Gan Eden that they thought was the real world. They did not know that the manifestation of G-d in the camp was unique rather than the norm. They did not perceive food from heaven and water from rock as miraculous or unusual (as I was taught by my Father Shlit'a). Instead, over the course of 40 years, the miraculous revelation of G-d's absolute dominion became the reality they knew and took for granted. Instead of the daily wonderment and excitement that should have accompanied their perception of G-d's majestic grandeur, they were challenged with an illusion of their own independence. Had they entered the Promised Land still amazed and humbled by the revelation of G-d's care and love, they would have applied the same acceptance of dependency to the reality of Eretz Yisroel. Then, they would have been in the position to teach the rest of the world the who and why of their existence. They would have sanctified the entire world and revealed its true intent and purpose. They would have turned the world back into a Gan Eden.

(Note: When the Jews live as they are supposed to live, Eretz Yisroel blossoms like Gan Eden. When the Jews do not do as they are supposed to do and instead they create the illusion of their own independence from G-d, He takes away Eretz Yisroel from us and it reverts back to a rocky wilderness. In the end, we are the ones who define reality and illusion.)

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