

vayechi

perceptions / eight hundred & seventy-six

Ya'akov called for his sons and said, "Gather yourselves and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days." (Bereishis 49:1)

WELL IT HAD been my plan," Ya'akov told his sons, the 12 Tribes, "to tell you what was going to happen to you at the end of days, but apparently God has other plans."

Talk about disappointment. Who doesn't want to know what is supposed to happen at the End-of-Days, especially WHEN? It's one thing to try and decipher obscure sources. It's something altogether different to hear it from a prophet who got his information directly from God Himself.

"But father," they asked, "why would you lose the prophecy?"

"I'm wondering that myself," Ya'akov told them. "Perhaps, God forbid, there is something unfit from my bed, just as Yishmael was born to Avraham, and Eisav to my

father Yitzchak?”¹

The brothers all looked at each other. Each one was sure that they had done teshuvah for any sin they had committed, especially for the sale of Yosef. So they answered Ya’akov with what would eventually become the first verse of the “Shema” once the Torah was given: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!”²

Ya’akov looked carefully at his sons. He knew what they meant. They were telling him, “Just as [God is] one in your heart, so too there is only one in our hearts.”³ They were saying, “We have learned our lesson about Hash-gochah Pratis after the episode of Yosef, how God works behind the scenes and that He can work in mysterious ways.”

It was the right thing to say, but still, Ya’akov wondered if it was as true as they thought. He became cautious, and answered them with, “Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom forever!”, what would later become the second verse of the “Shema.”

“Hmm,” he thought to himself, over three millennia later. Though he had seen the Gemora about Ya’akov and his sons many times, he had always been left with a question. “So, why DID Ya’akov Avinu lose the prophecy in the end, if everything was as it was supposed to be? Was Ya’akov’s response positive, or negative? Is there something the Gemora is not telling us, or did God just decide not to reveal anything about Acharis HaYomim⁴?”

Year-after-year he read the story, and year-after-year

¹ Pesachim 56a.

² Pesachim 56a.

³ Pesachim 56a.

⁴ End-of-Days.

the same question came up for him. He would never have found his answer had it not been for Hashgochah Pratis.⁵ Though he did not learn Kabbalah very much at the time, he had reason one day to look into the Zohar,⁶ regarding a different topic altogether. That's when he "chanced" upon the following:

Ya'akov wanted to establish the "Mystery of Unity" below, and composed the 24 letters of, "Boruch Shem kevod malchuso l'olam va-ed." He didn't make it 25 letters since the Mishkan had yet to be built. (Zohar 2:139b)

"This says it," he said quietly to himself. "According to this, Ya'akov Avinu's response to his sons WASN'T so positive after all."

Though he liked learning with others, he especially enjoyed learning with himself. Not just BY himself, but WITH himself. He would literally "talk out" his learning with himself as he would with a chavrusa.⁷ It was the way to involve himself in a matter emotionally as well as intellectually, making for much better appreciation and memory retention.

At first, it got him some "interesting" looks from others, who wondered if he was somewhat mentally-imbalanced. Years later, it got him looks of respect and admiration, once people realized how much more learned it made him.

⁵ Divine Providence.

⁶ One of the primary sources of Kabbalah, authored by Rebi Shimon Bar Yochai, one of the greatest Kabbalists ever, around 2 CE. It is written in Aramaic and quite obscure.

⁷ Study partner.

“So,” he said, thinking as he spoke, “perhaps the brothers understood Ya’akov’s reply to be acceptance of their sincerity . . . But, Ya’akov, it seems from the Zohar, sensed that some level of unity was still missing . . . and would remain missing until the Jewish people would later build the Mishkan . . .”

He read more.

Once the Mishkan was built the first word was “completed” . . . and it says, “God spoke to him from the Appointed Tent, saying . . .” (Va-yikra 1:1), which is 25 letters. (Zohar, Teru-mah 139b)

He reached for a Chumash and turned to Parashas Vayikra. He had no reason to doubt the Zohar, but he liked to verify these things for himself. Looking at the first verse of the parsha, he started counting the letters from after, “And He called to Moshe,” “1, 2, 3, 4,” and he kept going to, “24 . . . and, yup, 25 letters!”

He sat back in his chair and wondered what the Zohar meant. “‘The Mystery of Unity’”? he asked out loud to himself. “What’s THAT?! . . . And what does it have to do with the END-OF-DAYS?!”

Without noticing, he got up and began pacing back-and-forth, oblivious to his surroundings and the other people learning around him. The longer he paced, the deeper he went into his mind in search of something, ANYTHING that he might have seen that could help him unravel the mystery about the “Mystery.”

Nope, nothing came to mind—at first. But, just before he mentally “turned around” and returned to the world around him, he recalled seeing one thing, years ago, that sounded just like the idea. Now he just had to remember

where he saw it.

“Where, where, where . . .” he said to himself, pacing again. “Where . . . did . . . I see . . . that? . . . “Where . . . did . . . I see . . . that?” he kept saying, as if doing so would somehow resurrect the memory, which it usually did.

He froze for a moment. He had remembered, AND he had realized: “The unity the Zohar speaks about is not with respect to the Jewish people themselves per se,” he said, as if sharing the insight with someone else. “It is with respect to God’s Name! It’s about the unification of His Name!” he said enthusiastically, hitting the table at the same time and getting unwanted attention.

As he heard himself speak, he felt so silly. It was the most obvious thing in the world to him now. “That’s why the brothers answered Ya’akov’s query with the Shema,” he said animatedly. “It was the ONLY answer that made sense for the question their father had REALLY asked them: If I can’t tell you about the End-of-Days then you aren’t relevant to them. If you aren’t relevant to them, then you have yet to FULLY unify God’s Name. What’s the REAL story here?” (Excerpted from “Insights from the Weekly Torah Reading in Discussion: Bereishis, Parashas Vayechi, available through Amazon, and no Volume 2 on Shemos as well).

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Issue #12: The World-to-Come

First of all, one of the first things Rashi says at the beginning of his Torah commentary is the whole WORLD was made for Torah. He bases himself upon the verse itself and the Midrash. This means that whatever happens

in history, every last detail of it and no matter how distant it seems from ANY Torah purpose, is for the sake of Torah.

How far does this idea go? The Talmud talks about this as well. It portrays how, on the final day of judgment, God will judge ALL the nations. Rome, being the mightiest (at least at the time of the Talmud) will go first.

When God will ask the Romans, “Nu, how did you justify YOUR existence?” they will claim that everything they built was just to allow the Jewish people to learn Torah. God will snap back at them and say, “World-class fools! Everything you built was for your own benefit!” and off they will go, head held low,⁸ as will all the rest of the nations that will try and pull the same shtik.

It is the Brisker Rav who pointed out something very telling. He asked why God only called them fools, and not liars. He answers, because they weren’t liars. Everything they did was for the sake of the Jewish people and Torah, as Rashi explains in Chumash. But, they were FOOLS for thinking that they could convince God that this had been their intention all along.

But, as the Talmud points out, God does not let any kindness go unrewarded, even if it wasn’t intended as a kindness. If it did good anyhow, the person or nation that did it has to be rewarded somewhat,⁹ so that when history comes to an end, God will “owe” them nothing. If they’re not going to the World-to-Come, then they have to get paid off in this world.¹⁰

Even if they ARE going to go to the World-to-Come, they can still get rewarded here. Only the Jewish people

⁸ Avodah Zarah 2b.

⁹ Bava Kamma 38b; Rashi, Pesachim 22a.

¹⁰ Kiddushin 40b; Avodah Zarah 10b.

have to wait until the World-to-Come to receive their reward for mitzvos,¹¹ making what they receive in this world “tzedakah.”¹² Non-Jews can receive reward in this world as well, since not being commanded in mitzvos, they can’t receive as much reward for them as one who IS commanded.¹³

Which brings us back to people like Bill Gates and those like him. Of course they would find all of this silly, ridiculous, perhaps even offensive. THEIR success was for the sake of TORAH? What about their genius . . . self-sacrifice . . . their . . . their . . .

Go ahead. Make a list. But, for every reason you come up with to explain why THEY have been so successful, there are millions of others who have done the exact same thing, but have not even come close financially to people like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Jeff Bizes, etc. This is God’s doing and as the Torah and Talmud state, it is for the sake of Torah.

But did we not just say that a person who is commanded to do a mitzvah and does it is rewarded more than one who does a mitzvah he has no obligation to do? Then why are these unwitting supporters of Torah so incredibly rewarded?

And therein lies the crux of the matter. The only reason why we can even ASK this question is because of how LITTLE we know about the WORTH of a mitzvah. If we knew better, we’d be asking instead, “WHAT?! HE ONLY RECEIVED 137 BILLION DOLLARS FOR INCIDENTALY SUPPORTING TORAH?!”

¹¹ Kiddushin 39b; Avodah Zarah.

¹² Brochos 17a.

¹³ Kiddushin 30a.

It's probably WHY God is giving people who support Torah so much money. We're so in the dark about Olam HaBa that we treat mitzvos EXTREMELY casually. We know it is coming, but having nothing in human experience with which to compare it and say, we're going to get something like that, and more.

When you get up in the morning and wash "Neggel Vasser,"¹⁴ how much reward do you get? What about when you wash your hands before eating bread? How about for praying, or any of the other mitzvos you might do throughout the course of your day, your week, your life? And what about special mitzvos like Shabbos? What's the reward for them?

Who knows? One thing is for certain. Whatever the reward is, it is SO great that there is no way to really receive it in this world. We're not even equipped to enjoy THAT much pleasure. After all, if billions of dollars is what some entrepreneur gets for doing a "mitzvah" he doesn't have to do, without even having any intention to do it, then what kind of reward must a mitzvah like a halachic washing of the hands net if the person is commanded to do it, and intends to do that mitzvah?

Exactly. So if you have difficulty relating to hundreds of billions of dollar as recompense for a mitzvah because it seems SO disproportionate, don't worry, it IS. A single mitzvah is worth a LOT more than billions of dollars, and all the money in the world! In fact, this is what the rabbis are telling us when they say:

¹⁴ "Night Water." This is the special washing of the hands upon waking up in the morning, at least 3 times alternatively on each hand from a cup.

One hour of pleasure in the World-to-Come is better than all the time in this world. (Pirkei Avos 4:16)