
parashas YISRO

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LAST WEEK I learned a lesson that I think can be applied to this week’s parsha. It’s a long story, but the punchline will justify its telling.

Two week’s ago I gave my son a check, which I postdated for the following week, so I would have time to deposit the money in my account. Since he lives in Jerusalem I don’t see him often, and it was just easier to give him the postdated check a week earlier when I did see him.

A week later, he asked if I could deposit a new check into his account for him instead, as he was too busy to get

to his bank. I told him, “No problem,” because there is a service at my shul that deposits checks for people learning in Kollel.

We don’t have a bank in Telzstone where I live. So, to save people learning from having to run to the city to do their banking, a chesed organization put a little safe on the wall, with deposit envelopes of all the different banks. Every night someone comes and picks up the envelopes and deposits them the next day, for free, in the respective banks.

Since I barely get to the city, it has been a great service for me, b”H. Every month I have to make a deposit into my pension plan, and this is how I have been doing it. Around the 15th of each month, I just fill out the check and then the envelope, and go online the next day to make sure it was cashed.

As it turned out, I had to deposit my son’s check and my Pension check on the same day. After waiting to the last possible moment (I’m lazy this way), I wrote the checks and filled out their respective deposit envelopes at the same time.

For my son this was a one-time deposit in this account, because he is in the process of opening a new one. One week later, and the account number would have been different. But, in the meantime, I filled out the six-digit number he had sent me, put the check in its envelope, sealed it, and put it aside to work on my pension check.

I looked up the account information for my insurance company as I do each month, and finding it, filled out the back of the envelope. As I filled in the account number, it seemed familiar, but not just because I have used it so many times before. Instinctively, I looked at my son’s envelope, and sure enough, both numbers, from the same

bank, began with the same two digits.

I found that interesting, since my insurance company has been in business a LOT longer than my son has had his account. I would have expected the numbers to be very different from each other. My son's branch must have opened a lot later for his number to start with the same two digits.

But then I noticed that the first two numbers were not the only similar numbers. A couple of others seemed to match as well, albeit it out of order. Curious, I then wrote both six-digit account numbers on a handy scrap piece of paper, and proceeded to draw lines between each of the matching numbers to see how many actually coincided.

ALL OF THEM. Both account numbers had the exact same six digits! I was stunned.

First of all, obviously, there are all the possible permutations generated by a six-digit number. It was already amazing that both numbers began the exact same way, given the time gap between the opening of the accounts. But ALL six digits being in both numbers?

Then there was the incident itself. Had my son deposited the first check as he was supposed to, then this "coincidence" would NEVER have come to light. Had he asked me to deposit his check for him one week earlier or later, I probably would not have noticed the matching account numbers. It was the timing of both events, the writing and depositing of my son's check and that of my insurance company that made the discovery possible, TOTAL Hashgochah Pratis.

I was so impressed by what happened that I immediately called my son to tell him about the "coincidence." He, however, was only mildly amused, and cautioned me to

not mix the numbers up and make the wrong deposit. His check was the larger amount.

Left to appreciate the Divine Providence on my own, I tried to figure out what it meant. Normally, such things happen to me in more meaningful ways, like turning exactly to the page of gemora I need, or seeing the same topic discussed in three areas of learning of mine on the same day. I just look at such events as God saying, “Just to let you know that I’m with you while you learn!”

Matching bank accounts was a tougher one to paint in Hashgochah Pratis terms. It can always be something as simple as God just staying in touch, resulting in excitement that makes one more aware of His Presence. That alone makes any interesting “coincidence” worth the price of admission.

I did tell the story to a couple of people over the next few days, each of whom was truly impressed, or at least acted that way for my benefit. By the time another son called me a few days later to say hello, my enthusiasm had worn away, and I had forgotten about the matter for the time being.

However, as we shmoozed a bit, I looked down in front of me and saw the scrap piece of paper with the two account numbers on it, and the lines connecting the common numbers. My excitement restored, I said to this son, “You want to hear something interesting?” and told him the story.

He was fascinated too, and I told him that though I didn’t know what to make of it, it reminded me of a story I once heard in a shiur about Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, zt”l.

Rav Moshe was known for his encyclopedic Torah knowledge, and was famous for being able to turn right to the page he wanted in every sefer he used. It made his

students wonder if this was because he just knew everything so well, or if Heaven wanted to spare him the trouble of looking for things, since he never wasted a moment of learning time.

One student of his became a rabbi in a distant town, and when his new shul was built, he invited his rebi, Rav Moshe Feinstein, to come to the “Chanukas HaBayis,” which he did. While in his student’s home, Rav Moshe noticed a certain sefer on the kitchen table. He became excited because he had wanted to see this particular sefer for the longest time. He had been told that a certain halachah had been decided differently than he had taught, and he wanted to see why.

Rav Moshe then proceeded to “randomly” open the very THICK and WELL-WORDED sefer for the first time and, of course, turned right to the halachic discussion he was looking for. “That was when,” the student said, “I knew for sure that Heaven helped Rav Moshe save time by having him always open the sefer he was using exactly to the place he needed!”

Well, one good story breeds another. My son, after hearing my account of Rav Moshe’s hashgochah with sefer-opening told me that his Rosh Yeshivah told him one as well. His Rosh Yeshivah had been a student of Rabbi Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinman, zt”l, who just passed away in 2017. He had a similar account of Rav Shteinman and his miraculous sefer-opening.

Then my son added a gem of an idea that really excited me. He had heard it from his Rosh Yeshivah and it was based upon a gemora I had learned about 16 times, but never came to the same conclusion.

The Talmud states that if you put your hand into your pocket to take out three coins, and only two come out, it is

called “suffering” since you have to make an extra effort to find the missing third coin (Arachin 16b). His Rosh Yeshivah learned from this that if a person does NOT require such suffering, then Heaven will make him successful the first time. In the case of Rav Shteinman, zt”l, and Rav Moshe, zt”l, this meant always turning to the right page from the beginning.

I thought this idea was a great corollary and “limud” from the Talmud with a great practical application. The insight really made me happy and I wondered out loud to my son, and all the other people I have since recounted this to, if it was for THIS that the whole episode first began. It has certainly caused me to enthusiastically focus many people on Divine Providence, and to praise Hashem several times for His wonderful Hashgochah Pratis! Who knows? But, it also taught me another important lesson as well about time-delayed results.

Sometimes we can see from the beginning what something might mean in terms of Divine messages. But other times, as I learned through this story, it can take time before the original event leads to its intended final purpose. It is then that everything can make sense RETROACTIVELY.

Now to this week’s parsha. The Torah says, and Rashi comments, as follows:

They journeyed from Refidim, and they arrived in the desert of Sinai, and they encamped in the desert, and the Jewish people encamped there opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:2)

Why did it have to repeat and explain from where they had journeyed? Did it not already state that they

were encamped in Refidim? It is known that they journeyed from there. It is to compare their journey from Refidim to their arrival in the Sinai desert. Just as their arrival in the Sinai desert was with repentance, so was their journey from Refidim with repentance. (Rashi)

Annnnnnd, therefore?

Agreed, the information in the verse seems repetitive and requires explanation. But, what does Rashi's answer tell us? Did it have anything to do with the receiving of Torah that was about to happen, and why connect it to Refidim? Just tell us that before they received the Torah, they did teshuvah, and we would have been satisfied.

Ahhhhh, but that is PRECISELY the point, a really IMPORTANT point, and one that could have been easily overlooked if not for this verse. And that would have been too bad, because it is a REALLY important lesson, definitely one for the ages.

On one hand, the war against Amalek should not have happened. It was the result of a lack of trust in God, and asking, "Is God among us or not?" Rashi even uses an interesting parable to make the connection and the point. If they hadn't asked, Rashi implies, Amalek wouldn't have attacked.

On the other hand, why WERE the Jewish people put into a situation of test like that, causing them to ask about God's involvement in their lives? Like so many times in Jewish history, it almost seems like a setup, as if they were not only tested, but pushed to react as they did so that ... What? So that Amalek WOULD attack? Why?

Because, the Jewish people originally were supposed to be in a foreign land for 400 years. They ended up having

to leave after 210 years, 190 years earlier. That wasn't about just cutting their "trip" short. God designated the 400 years for the sake of accomplishing certain spiritual goals, and leaving early meant speeding up the "program."

Likewise, the Jewish people left Egypt as a former slave nation. Within 50 short days, they had to become a Torah nation. That was not a lot of time to accomplish such a superhuman feat, and that also meant speeding up the "program."

In Egypt, the history-altering event was the absurdly intensified slavery over the six months between Moshe's first shot at redemption and his second. It was those, beyond inhumane, conditions that broke the nation, making them "kotzer ruach," in preparation for their early release.

In the Sinai desert, it was the attack of Amalek that dramatically transformed the nation, tremendously humbling them in preparation for receiving Torah. It gave them someone to hate more than their own brothers, preparing them for reaching the level of "k'ish echad b'leiv echad—like a single person with a single heart" (Rashi, Shemos 19:2), crucial for receiving Torah.

Though this may not have been clear to the Jewish people when they had to fight Amalek, it probably became clear to them when they reached the base of Mt. Sinai. Even if didn't, the Torah in making this reference to Refidim is teaching us, that we should not fret too much over the bad we suffer today, the battles that entangle us now. The time will come, we are being told, when we will see how even "punishments" prepared us for higher levels of spiritual existence.

We just have to be patient. The answers are forthcoming and will, retroactively, even turn seemingly meaningless "coincidences," like identical numbers of bank ac-

counts, into meaningful Heavenly direction.