

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

SEPTEMBER 23, 2023 This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Shoshana bas Yechezkel Feivel. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

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8 TISHREI

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS HA'AZINU

A Punishment to Fit the Crime

The Rock, perfect is His work, for all his ways are justice [...] (32:4).

Rashi (ad loc) comments that, although Hashem is very powerful, when He punishes those who transgress His will He does not visit upon them a tsunami of punishment. Rather, Hashem reacts with justice, and only doles out a punishment to fit the transgression – because “*perfect is His work.*”

One must wonder what other option might have been acceptable. How would it be possible for Hashem to give out more punishment than a transgression would actually call for? One would expect a King who built a world on the attribute of absolute justice to abide by the laws of justice as well. How could one even conceive that there was an option to deliver excessive punishment?

There is a fascinating comment made by Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, upon hearing all the wondrous miracles that Hashem performed while taking Bnei Yisroel out of Egypt: “*Now I know that Hashem is greater than all other gods*” (*Shemos* 18:11). Our sages teach us (see Rashi *ibid*) that what Yisro found remarkable was the fact that Hashem punished the Egyptians measure for measure. In exactly the same manner they chose to destroy us, Hashem destroyed them. In fact, even while the Egyptians were being drowned in the Red Sea, their individual punishments differed (see Rashi *Shemos*, 15:5). Each Egyptian was punished in accordance to his individual wickedness (i.e. the most wicked were thrashed around by the waves before drowning, while others sank to the bottom immediately).

Yisro was so moved by this concept – punishment given measure for measure – that this revelation became the catalyst for his conversion to Judaism. Once again we must ask; how is it possible for Hashem to act in any other way than that of absolute justice? What was it that made such a great impression on Yisro?

In this day and age, there are some truly astounding incongruities when it comes assigning a fit punishment for a crime. In many countries, the possession of drugs with an intent to sell is a capital offense. For example, in the Philippines a person who is apprehended with only **1/3 of an ounce** of a drug is put to death. If one connects to another person's Wi-Fi in Singapore (without their permission) it is considered “hacking” and punishable by a \$10,000 fine and three years in jail. Additionally, littering (such as dropping a cigarette butt) will set you back \$1,000. In Singapore, selling gum is a serious crime and smuggling it in is punishable by a fine of \$100,000. There are many examples of this sort of “justice” throughout the world.

The purpose of these “crazy” laws is to have consequences so severe that it totally discourages the outlawed behavior. Amazingly, it turns out that these “crazy” laws aren't so crazy – Singapore is an unbelievably clean city and, as you might imagine, there are very few drug issues in the Philippines. These countries have successfully deterred the unwanted behavior of their citizens. So why doesn't Hashem act in this way as well? It would certainly keep more people on the “straight and narrow!”



Miami Edition

The answer is that Hashem isn't interested in changing people's behavior. He is solely interested in their growth. This is because He cares about them. Therefore, Hashem created a system by which a person is able to choose to behave properly, as opposed to merely acting in fear of a severe punishment. Unfortunately, a person's growth sometimes has to come through pain, but there is a message in each and every one of Hashem's retributions. This is because Hashem doles out punishments measure for measure so that people will learn from their suffering and identify what they did wrong and what specifically they need to do to improve. This is what we must take away from every painful experience: What, specifically, is Hashem trying to teach us?

This is what Yisro observed to be a very empowering message, and obviously different than any other god or religion. Hashem doesn't try to control our actions; He tries to get us to grow by guiding us as to what is the proper path in life for us to follow. He cares about all of His creations, and further cares about each of us as individuals. That was the message of the Red Sea, even the Egyptians only got what they deserved – nothing more, nothing less.

We are Family

Ask your father and he will tell you, [ask] your grandfather and he will relate it to you (32:7).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that “your father” in the verse refers to our prophets, who are called our fathers as we find by Eliyahu Hanavi, and “your grandfather” refers to the sages (see *Vayikra* 19:32 and Rashi there). Why is it that prophets are described as parents and sages likened to grandparents?

The Torah uses two words in this verse to describe the transmission of information: When your father is telling it to you, the Torah uses the word “*veyagedcha*,” whereas when your grandfather is relaying it over to you, the Torah uses the word “*v’yomru*.” Rashi (*Shemos* 19:3) explains that “*hagada*” is a harsher language than “*amira*.” In other words, parents tell their kids what to do because they have a responsibility to influence their behavior. Grandparents, on the other hand, have a responsibility to give their grandchildren a perspective, not to tell them what to do. In fact, when a grandparent begins to tell a grandchild what to do he begins fighting with his own child (the parent of the

grandchild). Obviously, there is a fine line between influencing your child’s behavior and controlling it. Occasionally, when a parent is overly harsh and controlling with his own child, the child begins to resent it (“you’re not the boss of me”). This is the source of most parent-child issues; who’s in control. This also explains why grandparents and grandchildren are natural allies – they share a common “enemy.”

Our prophets are charged with transmitting orders from Hashem and are therefore constantly urging us to change our behavior. They are telling us what to do. This is why they are referred to as our “father.” On the other hand, the sages role is to define the responsibilities that the Torah requires of us and their primary role is to relay the information, not to tell us what to do; which is why our sages are called our “grandfather.” A prophet enjoins the people to do, while the sages inform the people what they should do.



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