



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

Connecting the Dots

Only a few of the games that I played during my childhood are still popular today. One of them is "connect the dots." Nowadays, it comes in some very sophisticated and complex versions. But I remember it from the days in which we were given coloring books and instructed to connect several dozen numbered dots in sequence. We were delighted to discover that what initially appeared to be just randomly scattered spots on the page eventually emerged as coherent images.

Although the game was simple enough for even the very young, the idea behind it is a very profound one. The ability to make order out of chaos is by no means child's play. It is a necessary feature of life and, as I hope to demonstrate in this week's column, it is an important aspect of Torah study.

I first learned of the power of the metaphor of "connecting the dots" from a gentleman who has since become one of my dearest friends. He was a newcomer to my synagogue. I soon noticed that he regularly sat in one of the front pews and listened very attentively to my sermons. Eventually, he approached me and gave me one of the most cherished compliments I have ever received. He said, "Many rabbis

give excellent sermons and fill their presentations with dazzling and inspiring ideas. But they fail to connect the dots between those ideas. They rarely explain how those ideas relate to each other and to real life. You, however, connect the dots. Yasher koach."

I am thankful to that gentleman to this day, for now when I prepare a sermon, I ask myself one question before I deliver it: "Did you connect the dots?"

One of the ways in which I personally continue to play "connect the dots" to this day is by attempting to connect some of the words and thoughts we have during the sacred day of Yom Kippur to events that occur during the ensuing calendar year. For example, on Yom Kippur we recite a prayer in which we wonder aloud, "Who will live, and who will die... Who will have a tranquil year, and who will have a year of suffering?" As the year progresses, we indeed discover for whom death was destined, and for whom a year of suffering lays in store. By the year's conclusion, we learn who lived and who experienced good fortune. But seldom do we "connect the dots" between the words we uttered somberly on Yom Kippur and the events which occurred months, sometimes many months, later.

Permit me to present a different sort of "dot" upon which I pondered this past Yom Kippur, when we read the book of Jonah

in the late afternoon of that day. My question was one which has been asked even by casual readers of the fascinating story of this Jewish prophet who was sent by the Lord to prophesize to the city of Nineveh, the capital of Ashur, or Assyria. Jonah, to say the least, does everything he can to resist the Lord's command that he grant prophecy to a city populated by a nation that is a historic enemy of the Jewish people. Jonah eventually delivers his message to Nineveh, informing them that their great city will be overturned unless they repent. Jonah's worst fear comes true—they do indeed repent, sincerely and totally.

Who were these people of Nineveh that they took a stranger's word as a signal to change their entire society and reform their system of justice? This audience, to Jonah's chagrin, was exceptionally and immediately obedient. What was it in their history and background that readied them to hear Jonah's message and to take it seriously?

The answer lies in a brief phrase in this week's Torah portion, Parshat Noach (Genesis, 6:9-11:32), as explicated by Rashi. The verse occurs toward the end of the parsha, where the Torah enumerates the progeny of Noah. We learn that he had a grandson named Cush, and that "Cush also begot Nimrod, who was the first man of might on earth. He was a mighty hunter... The mainstays of his kingdom were Babylon... and Calneh in the land of Shinar. From that land Ashur, went forth, and built Nineveh..." (Genesis 10:8-11).

It is fair to assume that most readers of these verses pass them over and consider them mere chronological details. But Rashi characteristically teaches us to read each

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verse very carefully, however trivial it may seem. He wonders not only about why the Torah mentions Ashur's departure from mighty Nimrod's territory, but also about the motive Ashur had for doing so.

Mindful of the fact that our Sages viewed Nimrod as the quintessential tyrant who instigated the construction of the Tower of Babel (of which we read in chapter 11 of this week's Torah portion), Rashi writes, "Ashur noticed that his children were listening to Nimrod's teachings and were ready to join the rebellion against God which the Tower of Babel signified." When Ashur realized that his children were falling sway to the malicious influence of the first tyrant in history, he decided to swiftly flee to another land.

One must admire Ashur's courage. He was ready to abandon his family and his society because he discerned the direction in which they were heading. We know how difficult it would be for any of us to uproot ourselves from our community just because we fear the negative influence that community would have upon our children. Ashur did so and remains a hero, albeit a relatively unsung hero.

Now, let us "connect the dots." Many centuries after Ashur courageously escaped Nimrod's evil empire and laid the foundations of his own city of Nineveh, that city degenerated into corruption. Over the generations, they forgot the lesson of their founder and ancestor Ashur.

But our tradition teaches us that the noble teachings of ancestors are never totally forgotten. Even when we intentionally try to suppress the lessons of our forebears, they lie dormant within us, just

beneath the surface.

One can presume that the Almighty had Ashur's heroic precedent in mind when, as He observed the moral deterioration of the Nineveh of Jonah's time, He decided to grant them the favor of Jonah's prophecy and to give them the opportunity to mend their ways.

One can further presume that it was Ashur's lesson to his descendants that endured for centuries (which eventually resurfaced in their consciences) and that motivated them to repent so rapidly and with such ease.

There are many lessons to be learned from Ashur's behavior and from the impact it had upon his children's children. One is the need to remove oneself, however possible, from the negative influences which surround him. Another lesson is to appreciate the power that the actions one performs in his lifetime has upon his offspring.

There is a lesson also to be learned about the "dots" that are scattered, mostly unnoticed, all over our holy Torah. We have just connected the "dot" in this week's Torah portion in the book of Genesis with the "dot" in the much later biblical book of Jonah. We connected a Torah portion read early in the month of November with a text we read about a month prior on Yom Kippur. It is incumbent upon us to be such careful students of the entire Torah that we can learn to connect many other such "dots."

As the Talmud says, "The words of the Torah are 'poor' in one place but 'rich' in another." It is by connecting the "poor" dots to the "rich" ones that we can begin to fully appreciate the perfection of our tradition. ■