



Taking Notice

How do we relate to what happens around us? Do we notice the subtle or even the obvious? Do we allow our observations to make us wiser and more thoughtful, or do we ignore inconvenient truths?

Last week's parsha ended with Amalek waging war against the Jewish people. While other nations reacted humbly and wisely to the miracles that Hashem performed for the Jewish People in Egypt, Amalek did not. Instead of accepting the clear divine message in the

miraculous exodus, they chose to push back against it and attack. By contrast, this week's parsha begins with Yitro, who hears the same miraculous stories and is drawn to join the Jewish people, understanding the divine destiny that those miracles implied (see Shemot Rabbah 27:6).

Two very different reactions to the same story. Both noticed; one was guided by the message, and one chose to ignore it.

This same contrast appears in the Jewish experience in Egypt. Our sages taught us to see patterns in the stories of the Torah, *ma'aseh avot siman l'banim*. Thus, we see the story of Avraham's early descent to Egypt due to famine as a forerunner of the future Egyptian exile (Bereishit Rabbah 40:6). Yet there is a great gap between the stories. The Pharaoh of Avraham's time was struck by a plague after taking Sarah. Not a word was shared with him as to why it happened; he did not even realize that Sarah was a married woman. Yet, when he experienced the plague, he immediately considered its message, realized where he went wrong, and let Sarah go back to Avraham (see Ramban to Bereishit 12:18). The Pharaoh of Moshe's time reacted quite differently. Plague upon plague was visited upon him and his nation, accompanied by a clear narrative as to why, but he did not learn or adjust. His hardened heart knew what was happening but pushed back against it. Why the striking contrast?

In each case, Pharaoh responded in the manner of his Jewish guests. Avraham was awake to the world around him. He learned and observed, discovering Hashem's existence

In Loving Memory



ע"ה Jenny Weill

חיה גיטל בת מרדכי ושרה

whose 7th yahrzeit falls on כ"ט שבט

She is very much missed by her children,
 grandchildren, great grandchildren,
 nieces, nephews, and friends

where his family and society had obscured His presence. When Avraham brought G-d to Pharaoh, he noticed.

The Jews of Pharaoh's time had become hardened and deadened by their bondage. They were not searching for and seeing G-d's messages in their lives. In fact, even when presented with redemption they struggled to hear its call *"due to their shrunken spirit and due to the difficult work."* (Shemot 6:9). Moshe was therefore hopeless about the prospects of Pharaoh's listening and learning; *"the Jewish People did not listen to me, and how will Pharaoh listen?"* (6:12). Even when Pharaoh would have no choice but to notice, he would choose not to learn from what he saw.

How did we break free from this willful ignorance? It would come about through the leadership of Moshe. Moshe emerged as the redeemer through his curiosity and concern, his observance of the world around him and his vigilance in reacting to it and learning from it. Whether in leaving the comfort of the palace to take in the suffering of his brethren (2:11), or his turning from the main road to notice the phenomenon of the burning bush (3:3-4), it was this quality of Moshe – this commitment to take notice of reality and to be guided by it - that would ultimately lead to the unlocking of the Jewish People's hearts and subsequently, Pharaoh's.

There is so much happening in the world around us. We can ignore it and allow it to go unnoticed. When it stares us in the face, we may choose to push back against what we see and leave its lessons unlearned. Alternatively, we can follow the paths of Avraham and Moshe, stopping to look, to notice, to learn, to think, and to change course based on our observations.

That is the path to freedom, and it is a path we must take. ■

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