

Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason

Parshas Vayeshev December 13, 2014

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates ~

Did you ever hear the story of "Lawnchair Larry"? Growing up in Southern California, Larry Walters' boyhood dream was to fly. Unfortunately, poor eyesight disqualified Larry from obtaining a pilot's license, so he had to satisfy himself with watching jets fly over his backyard. One day in July, 1982, Larry had a bright idea. He went to the local Army-Navy surplus store and purchased 41 weather balloons and several tanks of helium. Larry tied the lawn chair to his jeep, strapped the balloons to his sturdy lawn chair, loaded his pellet gun -- figuring he could pop a few balloons when it was time to descend -- and went back to the floating lawn chair. Larry's plan was to lazily float up to a height of about 30 feet above his back yard after untying the chair from his jeep, and in a few hours come back down. But things didn't quite work out that way.

When Larry cut the cord anchoring the lawn chair, he streaked into the Los Angeles sky as if shot from a cannon. He didn't level off at 30 feet, nor did he level off at 100 feet. After climbing and climbing, he leveled off at 16,000 feet. An airline pilot radioed the Los Angeles International Airport tower and described passing a guy in a lawn chair with a gun. After shooting out a few balloons with his pellet gun, Larry and his lawn chair descended -- into the waiting arms of the police who arrested "Lawnchair Larry" for violating aviation airspace. As Larry was led away in handcuffs, a reporter dispatched to cover the daring rescue asked why he had done it. Larry stopped, turned, and replied nonchalantly, *"A man can't just sit around."*

Judaism extols the benefits of a productive life. Our rabbis in Ethics of the Fathers taught, "*Ohev es ha'melacha*" -- love work, and love working hard. A person isn't in this world for rest and relaxation. And while "Lawnchair Larry's" approach to 'not sitting around' clearly isn't recommended, it is worthwhile to adopt as a life philosophy the timeless words of Job (5:7), who said, *"Ki adam l'amal yulad"* -- *"Human beings are born to work."*

Parshas Vayeshev Genesis 37:1-- 40:23

Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph incites his brother's hatred. Their jealousy increases when Joseph tells them about two dreams which indicate that they will one day be subservient to him. Jacob sends Joseph to check up on his brothers, and upon seeing him approaching they plot to kill him. Reuben convinces the brothers not to kill Joseph, but is unable to totally save him as the brothers sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. After dipping Joseph's coat in blood, they return to their father who assumes that his beloved son was torn apart by a savage beast.

The Torah then digresses to relate the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar. The narrative then returns to Joseph in Egypt, where he becomes an extremely successful slave and is placed in charge of his master's household. His master's wife repeatedly tries to seduce Joseph, and when he refuses he is thrown into prison. Ten years later, Pharaoh's chief butler and baker are placed into the same prison. One night they each have a perplexing dream that Joseph accurately interprets, setting the stage for his release from prison.

Rabbinic Ruminations

Did you ever have a nickname? We're all familiar with nicknames, usually understood as names added to or substituted for the proper name of a person. Nicknames are often expressions of affection or familiarity. Nicknames can be ironic; Australian men may call a man with red hair 'Blue' or 'Bluey'. A nickname can refer to a person's occupation, social standing, or title: A surgeon can be called 'Bones', an electrician, 'Sparky', a wealthy person, 'Moneybags'. A nickname can be a shortened or modified variation of a person's name (Len from Leonard, Greta from Margaret), or from the end or middle of a person's name (Drew from Andrew, Liz from Elizabeth). Before the 17th century, most nicknames had the diminutive ending "in" or "Kin", where the ending was attached to the first syllable: Hank (Hen-Kin from Henry), Jack (Jan-kin from John), Colin (Col-in from Nicolas).

Just as informal language is acceptable in certain social situations, different forms of address are appropriate for different situations. Many European languages distinguish between formal and familiar forms of the pronoun "you" (e.g. *usted* and *tu* in Spanish). Since English lost this distinction long ago and Hebrew never had it, one language expert speculates that they compensate by frequently resorting to nicknames. Spanish has nothing like the pairings of William/Bill, Robert/Bob, Richard/Dick, John/Jack, that are common in English. And in Israeli Hebrew, nicknames are common, many of them formed by suffixed endearments that often come from Yiddish. For Yosef, there is Yosi or Yoske; for Avraham, Avi or Avrum; for Moshe, Moishele, Moshke or Moishik; for Ya'akov, Kobi or Yankele; for Sarah, Sarke or Sarale; for Miriam, Miri or Mirele; for Rachel, Rochi or Rochele, etc.

While the use of a nickname can be an expression of affection or familiarity, some nicknames should not be used. A nickname that hurts the feelings of others is considered "*ona'as devarim*", a violation of the Torah prohibition of "affliction with words." The Talmud attributes the blessing of a long life to those who are sensitive about the use of a nickname in referring to other people. Words have meaning and names have power; be careful with the names you use for others.

Quote of the Week

Everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: The last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. -- **Viktor E. Frankl**, M.D., Ph.D. and Holocaust Survivor.

Joke of the Week

CAUSES OF FATAL ACCIDENTS

Do NOT ride in automobiles: they cause 20% of all fatal accidents.

Do NOT stay home: 17% of all accidents do occur in the home.

Do NOT walk on the streets or sidewalks: 14% of all accidents happen to pedestrians.

Do NOT travel by air, rail, or water: 16% of all accidents happen on these.

Only .001% of all deaths occur in worship services in synagogue, and these are related to previous physical disorders.

Hence, the safest place for you to be at any time is at synagogue. Go to shul -- IT COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE!