

Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason
Parshas Mishpatim February 14, 2015

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates ~

Spanish runner Ivan Fernandez Anaya is still receiving attention for a race he lost on Dec. 2, 2012. Here's why: Ivan was competing in a cross-country race in Spain, running second at some distance behind race leader Abel Mutai. As they entered the finishing straight, he saw the Kenyan runner -- the certain winner of the race -- mistakenly pull up about 10 meters before the finish, thinking he had already crossed the line. Ivan quickly caught up with him, but instead of exploiting Mutai's mistake to speed past and claim an unlikely victory, he stayed behind and, using gestures, guided the Kenyan to the line and let him cross first. (*watch here:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tAjxs__nkk)

Ivan, 24 years-old, said after the race: "But even if they had told me that winning would have earned me a place in the Spanish team for the European championships, I wouldn't have done it either. I didn't deserve to win it. I did what I had to do. He was the rightful winner. He created a gap that I couldn't have closed if he hadn't made a mistake. As soon as I saw he was stopping, I knew I wasn't going to pass him."

In many areas of life, like in sports, keeping score is a legitimate and valuable way of motivating people and inducing them to give their best. But just as sportsmanship in games reminds us that winning is not what's ultimately important, the values of the Torah remind us that to ultimately "win the game of life" by doing the most good with our G-d-given talents. "*Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing*" is a well-known quotation in sports. But thanks to Spanish runner Ivan Fernandez Anaya, the world saw that sometimes, just sometimes, winning *isn't* everything.

Parshas Mishpatim Exodus 21:1 -- 24:18

Following on the heels of the Ten Commandments, this week's Torah portion deals primarily with civil law. Like the realm of the ceremonial, our worldly and common activities must be infused with holiness and observed carefully. Included among the civil laws discussed in the portion are: penalties for causing bodily injury to another person and damaging his property; laws regarding borrowers; the mitzvah to show sensitivity to the poor and to offer them free loans; and laws relating to the honest dispensation of justice. After mentioning the mitzvos of Shabbos and Shemittah (the Sabbatical year), the portion continues with a brief discussion of the three pilgrimage festivals -- Passover, Shavuot and Sukkos. The Torah then returns to the revelation at Mt. Sinai. The Jewish people declare their commitment to do whatever G-d commands with the famous phrase "Everything G-d has said, we will do and we will listen." The portion concludes with Moses' ascending the mountain, where he will remain for forty days and forty nights to receive the rest of the Torah.

Rabbinic Ruminations

Most of us have traveled in a plane, admiring the beauty of the ground below from thousands of feet up in the air. But few of us will ever be able to experience what it's like to soar as high as the Ruppell's Griffon Vulture; the highest flying bird ever recorded. A Ruppell's vulture was confirmed to have been ingested by a jet engine of an airplane flying over the Ivory Coast in 1973 at an altitude of 37,000 feet. In 2010 a Ruppell's vulture escaped a bird of prey site in Scotland, prompting warnings to pilots in the area to watch carefully due to the danger of collision. The average commercial airline plane travels at about 30,000-40,000 ft. How do birds such as the Ruppell's vulture fly so high?

Birds have some natural advantages for getting oxygen at high altitudes, in particular an arrangement of air sacs that allows them to circulate inhaled air twice through the lungs with each breath -- much more efficient than the in-and-out system used by mammals. Since the Ruppell's vulture can fly so high, it has been found to have a specialized variant of a blood protein (hemoglobin alpha^D subunit), enabling the species to absorb oxygen with great efficiency, despite the low air pressure five to six miles above the ground. And it's a bit chilly at the heights where this high-flying bird soars: The air temperature at 37,000 feet is about -60 F. The Ruppell's vulture has an average cruising speed of 22 mph and stays in

the air from 6-7 hours every day in search of its next meal. Other fascinating features of the amazing Ruppell's Griffon Vulture: After the most attractive soft parts of a carcass have been consumed, they will continue with the hide, and even the bones, gorging themselves until they can barely fly. And they have backward-pointing spines on their tongue to help remove meat from bone.

In Exodus 19:4, G-d expresses His affectionate care for the Jewish people in the passage, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on the wings of *nesharim*, and brought you to Myself." Although some translate *nesher* as 'eagle', the Talmud (Chulin 63a) identifies the *nesher* as the high-flying Griffon Vulture, once abundant in Israel and constantly seen there circling in the air.

Quote of the Week

All children are born geniuses. 999 out of every 1,000 are swiftly and inadvertently degeniused by adults.
- **Buckminster Fuller**, (1895-1983) *Author, Inventor, Architect, Designer, Engineer*

Joke of the Week

In the middle of his sermon the Rabbi notices that one of his congregants stands up and walks out. Upset by this, the Rabbi calls him after Shabbos and asks him, "Yankel, why did you walk out in the middle of my sermon?:"

Yankel replies, "Rabbi, I went to get a haircut."

Rabbi: "Yankel, you couldn't get it before my sermon?"

Yankel: "Rabbi, I didn't need it then."