

Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason
Parshas Tetzaveh February 7, 2014

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates

Would you buy a bridge from George Parker? If so, you wouldn't be the first. George Parker (1870-1936) was one of the most brazen con men in American history. He made his living selling New York's public landmarks to unwary tourists. His favorite object for sale was the Brooklyn Bridge, which he sold twice a week for years. He convinced his 'marks' that they could make a fortune by controlling access to the roadway. More than once police had to roust naive buyers from the bridge as they tried to erect toll barriers.

The versatile Mr. Parker sold a number of other landmarks to unsuspecting suckers, including the original Madison Square Garden, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Grant's Tomb and the Statue of Liberty.

Parker had many different methods for making his sales. When he sold Grant's Tomb, he would often pose as the general's grandson. He even set up a fake "office" to handle his real estate swindles. He produced impressive forged documents as evidence to suggest that he was the legal owner of whatever property he was selling.

Parker is remembered as one of the most successful con men in the history of the United States, as well as one of history's most talented hoaxers. His exploits have passed into popular culture, giving rise to phrases such as "and if you believe that, I have a bridge to sell you." Where does being gullible end, and being trusting begin? The Torah tells us "You should go with innocence before Hashem, your G-d." (Deut. 18:13) Our great sage the Chofetz Chaim would make an inference from this verse; it says that one should act with innocence with G-d, but not with other people. During a person's dealings with others he should use great wisdom and thought, and not let himself be duped by untrustworthy people.

Parshas Tetzaveh Exodus 27:20 -- 30:10

This week's portion is a haberdasher's dream. Following on the heels of the elaborate details of the construction of the Mishkan, G-d describes to Moses the special garments which are to be worn by the Kohanim during their service. The ordinary Kohanim would wear four special garments, while four additional vestments were to be worn exclusively by the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). All of these garments were woven and crafted from materials donated by the people. The Torah portion then shifts its attention to G-d's commandments regarding the inauguration ritual for the newly constructed Mishkan, to be performed exclusively by Moses for seven days. The inauguration included Moses' adorning and anointing the Kohanim, and his bringing offerings. On the eighth day, Aaron and his sons would assume their offices as the Kohanim. After then describing the offering to be brought in the Mishkan every day of the year in the morning and afternoon, the portion concludes with the command to build the last of the Mishkan's structures, the golden altar upon which the incense would be offered every morning and afternoon.

Rabbinic Ruminations

Think you're a wine maven? Think again. A mischievous 2001 experiment led by Frédéric Brochet at the University of Bordeaux demonstrated that many so-called wine connoisseurs aren't all they're made out to be. In the first test, Brochet invited fifty-seven wine experts and asked them to give their impressions of what looked like two glasses of red and white wine. The wines were actually the same white wine, one of which had been tinted red with food coloring. But that didn't stop the experts from describing the "red" wine in language typically used to describe red wines. In a second test, Brochet took a middling Bordeaux and served it in two different bottles. One bottle bore the label of a fancy grand cru, the other of an ordinary vin de table. Although they were being served the exact same wine, the experts gave the bottles nearly opposite descriptions. The grand cru was summarized as being "agreeable," "woody," "complex," "balanced," and "rounded," while the most popular adjectives for the vin de table included "weak," "short," "light," "flat," and "faulty."

In many situations, so-called experts turn out to be a poor source of expertise. In his 2005 book, "Expert Political Judgment," Professor Phillip Tetlock wrote of his experiences based on two decades of tracking some 82,000 predictions by 284 experts. The result? The predictions of experts were, on average, only a tiny bit better than random guesses -- the equivalent of a chimpanzee throwing darts at a board.

According to Prof. Tetlock, "It made virtually no difference whether participants had doctorates, whether they were economists, political scientists, journalists or historians, whether they had policy experience or access to classified information, or whether they had logged many or few years of experience."

As a society, we put an enormous amount of trust into the advice and insight of so-called experts. Expert status does not guarantee infallibility. In many areas of life it is worthwhile to consult experts, but we should remember that we, ourselves, are ultimately responsible for our decisions. Where can we turn for knowledge we can count on? "The Torah of G-d is perfect," says King David in Psalm 19:8, "restoring the soul; the testimony of G-d is trustworthy, making the simple one wise." Let your moral compass and fundamental resource of truth be the Torah.

Quote of the Week

Even if you are on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there! -- *Will Rogers*

Joke of the Week

One day shortly after the birth of their new baby, the mother had to go out to do some errands. So the proud papa stayed home to watch his wonderful new son. Soon after the mother left, the baby started to cry. The father did everything he could think of to do but the baby wouldn't stop crying. Finally, the dad got so worried he decided to take the infant to the doctor.

After the doctor listened to the father tell all he had done to get the baby to stop crying, the doctor began to examine the baby's ears, chest and then down to the diaper area. When he undid the diaper, he found that the diaper was indeed full.

"Here's the problem," the doctor said. "He needs a change."

The father was very perplexed, "But the diaper package says it is good for up to 10 lbs.!"