

Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason
Parshas Vaeira January 17, 2015

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates ~

When the match ups for the first College Football Playoff were announced, #1 Alabama opened as a significant favorite over #4 Ohio State. Considering all the factors going into the game, it's easy to see why Alabama was highly favored. The 'Crimson Tide' had been the dominant college football dynasty of this era, they were the #1 seed, and Ohio State was playing their 3rd string quarterback. And toss in the dominance of Alabama's conference over all of college football and the Big Ten's less-than-stellar reputation, and all signs pointed to 'the Tide rolling.'

Perhaps because of those prevailing story lines, it could have been said that *nobody* gave Ohio State a chance to defeat Alabama. And that's *almost* true, because 42 out of 43 ESPN analysts who picked the game selected Alabama to win. 42 out of 43! (Who even knew ESPN employed that many college football experts?!?) And even further, not a single expert selected Ohio State to win the national championship game. However, *against all odds*, Ohio State not only defeated Alabama in the first playoff game, but this past Monday Ohio State improbably defeated the favored Oregon Ducks to win the college football national championship

Over 300 years ago, King Louis XIV of France asked Blaise Pascal, the renowned Christian philosopher, to provide proof of G-d's existence. Pascal answered, "Why the Jews, your Majesty, the Jews!" *Against all odds*, the Jewish nation has survived millenia of persecution and exile. Pascal wasn't the only one who was amazed by the survival of the Jewish people. Mark Twain, an agnostic and self-acknowledged skeptic, wrote, ".... All things are mortal, but the Jew. All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" *Against all odds*, **Am Yisrael Chai!** -- the Jewish people live.

Parshas Vaeira Exodus 6:2 -- 9:35

G-d assures Moses that He will indeed redeem the Jewish people from slavery and bring them into the land of Israel. After the Torah presents a detailed genealogy of the tribe of Levi (Moses' family), Moses and Aaron go before Pharaoh to request a three-day hiatus from work so that the Jewish people can worship G-d in the desert. Moses' staff is miraculously turned into a snake as a sign of their Divine mission. When the Egyptian sorcerers counter by transforming their staffs into snakes as well, Moses' staff swallows up theirs. Even so, Pharaoh adamantly refuses to free the Jewish people, and the series of ten gruesome plagues begins.

The first seven plagues are described in this week's Torah portion; blood, frogs, lice, a swarm of wild beasts, pestilence, boils and hail. Moses goes down to the river to speak to the Egyptian king -- however, Pharaoh remains in denial ('in d'Nile' -- get it?) continuing to refuse to free the Jewish people as his heart is hardened. The portion comes to a close in the middle of these momentous events.

Rabbinic Ruminations

Social psychology offers abundant theories that take for granted the "fact" that people think. But how mindful are we of our environment? Whether or not we are employed as actors on television or the silver screen, research shows that all of us have pre-programmed "scripts" that guide our actions in many situations. All too often we may find ourselves acting in ways that, if we actually thought about it later on, would seem quite strange.

Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer conducted an experiment demonstrating this principle in action. She approached people who were standing in line to use a library photocopying machine. She asked if she could cut the line using one of the requests listed below:

1. "Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the xerox machine?"
2. "Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the xerox machine, because I'm in a rush?"
3. "Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the xerox machine, because I have to make copies?"

In the first scenario, 60% agreed to let her use the photocopying machine ahead of them. In the second scenario, 94% allowed her to jump ahead. She provided a “legitimate” reason—she was in a rush. What is striking is the result of the third scenario. An astonishing 93% agreed to let her go ahead of them. The request is absurd: “because I have to make copies.” Everyone on the line *needs* to make copies. Simply by providing a reason, even a ridiculous one, people mindlessly allowed her to go ahead. In French playwright Moliere’s play “Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme,” the physician “explains” why opium makes one sleepy: “because it has sleep-inducing properties.” This circular explanation goes unchallenged, as do many of the nonsensical “reasons” for things that we hear every day at work.

In this week's Torah portion it states: *"But Pharaoh remained obstinate and did not pay attention to them (Moses and Aaron), just as G-d had predicted."* (Exodus 7:13) Paying attention is a positive trait not only when applied to our immediate environment: When we pay attention to our spirituality and personal growth, wisdom, and notice the messages G-d constantly sends us, the quality of our lives is greatly enhanced.

Quote of the Week

We tend to forget that words are, themselves, ideas. They might be called ideas in a state of suspended animation. When the words are mastered the ideas tend to come alive again. -- **James Webb Young**, *Ad Man, Professor and Author*

Joke of the Week

Walter realized he needed to purchase a hearing aid, but he felt unwilling to spend much money.

"How much do they cost?" he asked the salesperson.

"That depends," he said. "They run from \$2.00 to \$2,000."

"Let's see the \$2.00 model," said Walter.

The salesperson put the device around Walters' neck. "You just stick this button in your ear and run this little string down to your pocket," he instructed.

"How does it work?" asked Walter.

"For \$2.00 it doesn't work," the salesperson replied. "But when people see it on you, they'll talk louder!"