

Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason

Parshas Bo January 4, 2014

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates

A Vancouver man was shocked two weeks ago when a supposedly "homeless" man helped him pay his rent. Yogi Omar, 30, said that he saw a "scruffy panhandler" one evening and initially chose to ignore him, explaining that he had financial problems of his own. But he still felt he had to do something. Yogi turned around, approached the supposedly homeless man and offered to buy him dinner. Then, things took an odd turn: Yogi soon learned that the man was not homeless but was really an undercover benefactor looking to reward those who try to help the homeless. "He said, 'I do this with my family every year,'" Yogi told a local paper. "They just want to see who cares about the homeless."

The wealthy benefactor reportedly waits on a street corner for three hours every year during December, his family sneaking him warm drinks, and rewards people who try to offer him comfort. The "homeless" man offered to pay for a substantial expense Yogi had recently incurred, an offer Yogi couldn't accept.

So the "homeless" man asked Yogi how much he pays for rent. "I said \$469," Yogi said. "I was joking but that's what I pay. He just whipped out his fanny pack and gave me \$469 in cash. I was like, 'Is this serious?' I was really stunned at this point. The homeless man, who was described as a 50-year-old man, refused to give Yogi his name.

The Torah begins with an act of kindness: G-d clothed Adam and Eve. And the Torah ends with an act of kindness: G-d personally carried Moses to his final resting place and buried him there. *Chesed*, the Hebrew word for loving-kindness, is a central Torah value and a foundation of a meaningful Jewish life. The quality of our *chesed* increases exponentially when performed anonymously. Wherever there is a human being, there is an opportunity for kindness. Kindness, like a boomerang, always returns -- particularly in the form of the pleasure we receive when we give to others.

Parshas Bo Exodus 10:1 -- 13:16

This week's portion begins with the eighth plague that G-d brings upon the Egyptians as the land is covered by locusts, destroying all the remaining crops. After the plague is removed at Pharaoh's behest, he once again refuses to set free the Jewish people, and the ninth plague of darkness encompasses the land. When that plague ends, Pharaoh becomes even more defiant about not freeing the slaves, at which point Moses warns Pharaoh about the upcoming tenth plague, the death of the firstborn. The Torah then interrupts the narrative with the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people as a nation -- the sanctification of *Rosh Chodesh* (the new month), beginning with the month of Nisan. G-d teaches Moses about the *Korban Pesach* (Passover offering) and the remainder of the laws of the Passover holiday, which Moses then transmits to the Jewish people.

At midnight of the appointed night the plague strikes, with every non-Jewish first-born dying, including Pharaoh's own son. Pharaoh awakes, running through the streets (presumably while still in his pajamas) to tell Moses that he now consents to send the Jewish people from his country. The children of Israel travel forth in a hurry with the great wealth they have just been given by the Egyptians. The Torah portion concludes with various mitzvos relating to the Exodus.

Rabbinic Ruminations

Imagine that when you see a city's skyline, you taste blackberries. Or maybe when you hear a violin, you feel a tickle on your left knee. Perhaps you are completely convinced that the word 'Wednesday' is light red. If you have experiences like these, you might have synesthesia. Synesthesia is a condition in which one sense (for example, hearing) is simultaneously perceived at the same time as engaging another sense, such as sight. The word synesthesia comes from two Greek words, literally meaning "joined perception." Synesthesia can involve any of the senses. The most common form, **colored letters and numbers**, occurs when someone always sees a certain color in response to a certain letter of the alphabet or number. For example, a synesthete (a person with synesthesia) might see the word "plane"

as mint green or the number "4" as dark brown.

Synesthetes often report that they were unaware their experiences were unusual until they realized other people did not have them. Writer and synesthete Patricia Lynne Duffy remembers one early experience: "One day, I said to my father, 'I realized that to make an 'R' all I had to do was first write a 'P' and then draw a line down from its loop. And I was so surprised that I could turn a yellow letter into an orange letter just by adding a line.'" Filmmaker Stephanie Morgenstern said, "A few years ago, I mentioned to a friend that I remembered phone numbers by their color. He said "So you're a synesthete!" I hadn't heard of synesthesia – I only knew that numbers seemed naturally to have colors: five is blue, two is green, three is red... And music has colors too: the key of C# minor is a sharp, tangy yellow, F major is a warm brown..."

Estimates for the number of people with synesthesia range from 1 in 200 to 1 in 100,000. There are probably many people who have the condition but do not realize what it is. Judaism has abundant sensory reminders. The *Havdalah* ("Separation") ceremony is a multi-sensory mitzvah employing our faculties of speech and hearing, sight, smell and taste to define the boundaries that G-d set in creation "between the sacred and the everyday." When it comes to living a Jewishly committed life, it makes 'sense' (pun intended!) to give it everything you've got -- as King David said, "All my bones will say, G-d, who is like You?..." (Psalm 35:10).

Quote of the Week

Warmth, kindness and friendship are the most yearned for commodities in the world. The person who can provide them will never be lonely -- *Ann Landers*

Joke of the Week

During the recent snowstorm in Jerusalem the principal of a yeshiva placed a call to his teachers, telling most of them that they didn't need to come to work because of the snow.

Principal: "Hello, Rabbi Moshe, with today's big snowstorm, I think you can stay home. Only 6 kids in your class have showed up for class."

Rabbi Moshe: "I'm coming in to school. Here at home I have 15 kids!" (With thanks to C. Rosenbaum)