

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason
Parshas Shelach June 13, 2015

"Fear: A Darkroom Where Negatives Develop!"

Traversing Southern California, Southwest Arizona, and Mexico is one of the largest deserts in North America -- the Sonoran Desert. It spans over 100,000 miles and has one of the harshest climates on earth. Temperatures reach into the 100s in the summer, and there is occasional snowfall in the winter. Meet a prominent local Sonoran resident: The Saguaro cactus, a defining plant of the Sonoran Desert. The Saguaro can reach up to 60 feet tall and weigh around 4,000 pounds, with multiple upward-bending arms. This cactus is synonymous with Southwest America, often used as an emblem in commercials and logos that attempt to convey a sense of the Southwest. The Saguaro was given its scientific name, *Carnegiea gigantea*, in honor of industrialist Andrew Carnegie, whose Carnegie Institution established the Desert Botanical Laboratory in Tucson, Arizona, in 1903.

Saguaro cacti survive their harsh desert climate by having a huge appetite for water. During the summer season, the Saguaro can absorb up to 200 gallons of water in one rainfall. Throughout the season, this could amount to thousands of gallons sucked up into its branches. However, despite its immense height and weight, the Saguaro has a surprisingly shallow root system. Its roots travel no more than several inches into the soil, with the tap root reaching about two to three feet deep. What does this mean for the hardy Saguaro? Despite all of its efforts at self-preservation, it occasionally meets its doom; filled with thousands of gallons of water, the Saguaro can become so top-heavy that it cannot hold itself up any longer and it falls to the ground.

G-d teaches us through our surroundings. Like the ant teaches us great lessons about productivity, the Saguaro cactus teaches us an important lesson for living: Just as a heavy tree with many branches but few roots can easily fall over, a person, not rooted with a solid foundation of good deeds and character, can easily topple from the blowing winds of life's challenges. This idea is expressed in Ethics of the Fathers: *Anyone whose wisdom exceeds his good deeds -- to what is he similar? To a tree whose branches are many and whose roots are few; then the wind will come and uproot it and turn it over.* If we develop deeply "rooted" beliefs and act on our convictions --our faith will remain steadfast come the fiercest winds of ill-will and tribulation.

Parshas Shelach Numbers 13:1 - 15:41

Moses is pressed by the Jewish people to send twelve spies to the Land of Canaan (later to be called the Land of Israel). Forty days later they return carrying a gigantic cluster of grapes and two other large fruits. Ten of the spies warn that the inhabitants of the land are enormous in size and that the land 'consumes its inhabitants'. They convince the people that the land can't be conquered. Caleb and Joshua retain their faith in G-d, insisting that the Jewish people can, indeed, conquer the land.

The people weep and proclaim that they'd rather return to Egypt. This tenth expression of a profound lack of faith in G-d prompts a Divine decree that entry into the Land should be delayed forty years. This decree was made on the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av -- known as Tisha B'Av. Numerous other tragedies occurred on Tisha B'Av, including the destruction of the first and second Temples and the expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492.

Parshas Shelach concludes with the command to place fringes (tzitzis) on the corners of a four-cornered garment. Tzitzis help us to remember to fulfill all of the Divine commandments. This reminds me of the story of the rabbi who asked his synagogue's Board of Directors if they would supply him with a new talis once every six months. They told him, "We're sorry, Rabbi. We can't afford the fringe benefits."

Rabbinical Ruminations

Do we relate differently to fear as we age? Whether it's hesitancy to ride a roller coaster or the tendency to drive in the slow lane, we may have a sense that people tend to become more cautious as they age. Until now, conventional wisdom in the field has been that these mechanisms operate in a similar way in young people and adults. However, a University of Haifa study found that young people's brains cope

with stress and fear in a completely different way to adults. Professor Mouna Maroun, head of the Sagol Department of Neurobiology, who conducted the study, explains that she instinctively felt that this assumption was problematic. "It all began when I knocked my head while I was in a swimming pool – a mild form of trauma, but enough to persuade me not to go back into a swimming pool for a long time. But children who were in the pool, and who knocked themselves much more badly than I did, didn't think twice about jumping straight back into the water. When I saw this, I realized that this was something I needed to examine in the laboratory."

In the study, young and adult rats were exposed to a mild traumatic event. Some of them were then placed on an elevated platform, creating exposure to stress, while the control groups were not exposed to stress. The findings showed that the adult animals reacted as expected: Strong fear responses were seen by comparison to the rats that were not exposed to trauma. The group that was not exposed to stress extinguished fear more rapidly than the group that was exposed to stress. But among the young rats the picture was completely reversed. Professor Maroun said that the study, ". . . implies that it's wrong to claim that the mechanism in adults and young people is identical. . . . The mechanism is actually completely different. . . . The immediate significance of this finding is that we really cannot continue treating child trauma victims with the same methods and drugs we use to treat adult victims."

It has been said that "fear is a darkroom where negatives develop." Regardless of age, fear can paralyze us and rob us of the joy of living. Realistically, there are few monsters who warrant the fear we have of them. And while there are many things in the world that can make us afraid, there is much more in faith in G-d that can make us unafraid. It would be wise to remember the words of Isaiah (41:13), "For I am the Lord your G-d who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear. I will help you."

Quote of the Week

Depend on the rabbit's foot if you will, but remember it didn't work for the rabbit." - **R. E. Shay**, *Humorist*

Joke of the Week

The Shabbat morning service had ended, and the rabbi was greeting congregants as they were leaving. Everyone was friendly as they greeted him, but no one said anything about the sermon.

The rabbi was getting a little concerned about that until someone said, "Oh, rabbi, your sermon reminded me of the love of G-d."

A little puzzled, the rabbi asked him to explain what he meant.

The congregant explained. "Well, rabbi, that sermon reminded me the love of G-d because . . . it endured forever!"