

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates

How hard do you try to find someone to criticize your opinions? If your name is Warren Buffett, the answer is: often and regularly. At Berkshire Hathaway's annual meeting last month, Berkshire's chairman invited someone who placed a bet against the stock -- hedge fund short-seller Doug Kass -- to join the panel of analysts posing questions to Mr. Buffett. To get a sense of how unusual it was for Mr. Buffett to ask a skeptic to ask questions freely, consider results of a survey of more than 500 companies and their quarterly earnings conference calls. Research found that 80% placed limits on who can ask questions and nearly 25% of the companies took questions only from "pre-approved lists" of callers. Only 11% permitted individual investors to ask questions; just 12% said the floor is open to everyone.

Doug Kass described Warren Buffett as "self-confident, but ... not afraid of a challenge. I believe he enjoys challenges." A deliberate, lifelong effort to find people to tell him why he might be wrong is one of the keys to Warren Buffett's success. That attitude doesn't come naturally to most investors -- or to most of us in daily life. Mr. Buffett once said, "... (our mind) works to reject discordant information, much as the body rejects transplants. Man's natural inclination is to cling to his beliefs, particularly if they are reinforced by recent experience."

One of the most effective strategies for successful living is to find people you respect who have opposite, different points of view from yours -- and have an open-minded exchange with them about what's true and what's not. Most people see criticism as a personal attack, which triggers all kinds of defense mechanisms. Ethics of the Fathers (6:6) teaches, "ohev es ha'tocha'chos" -- love criticism. Like Warren Buffett, allow and invite others to challenge your ideas.

Parshas Chukas Numbers 19:1 - 22:1

This week's action-packed portion begins with the paradox of the Red Heifer, a mitzvah we are asked to perform though unable to understand its purpose and reason. The narrative then jumps to the death of the prophetess Miriam. The Jewish people are then left without water, since the miraculous well, which had accompanied them in the desert, existed only in her merit. G-d commands Moses and Aaron to speak to a particular rock so it will miraculously produce water; Moses strikes it with his staff instead, and G-d tells the two leaders they will not enter the Promised Land. What did Moses do wrong?

One classic approach suggests that Moses' sin was that he became angry (he said to the Jewish people, 'Listen now, you rebels'). Although the best among us can occasionally lose our temper, teachers and parents carry a special responsibility to be good role models for their students and children. Little pitchers have big ears! Later in the portion, the king of Edom refuses to let the Jewish people pass through his borders, causing them to take a longer route. Aaron dies and is buried on Mount Hor. The Children of Israel sing a song of praise about the well of Miriam. The portion concludes with the battles and victories over Sichon the king of Emori and Og the king of Bashan.

Rabbinic Ruminations

In the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, by Douglas Adams, a robot named Marvin is going out of his metallic mind. Possessed of a "brain the size of a planet", he is 50,000 times more intelligent than a human, yet he can't solve his persistent boredom. "The first ten million years were the worst," Marvin says. "And the second ten million years, they were the worst, too. The third ten million years I didn't enjoy at all. After that, I went into a bit of a decline." We have all suffered episodes of tedium, though not on the same scale; a lecture that drags on, an unorganized meeting, an endless wait for an appointment.

The nature of boredom has long puzzled thinkers in literature, philosophy and psychology. Humans have likely weathered stretches of tedium for as long as people have had free time. Modern research of the topic uses a 'boredom proneness scale' (BPS) with a variety of questionnaires. The BPS can measure a person's capacity for being satisfied by internal versus external stimulation. An internally stimulated person, for example, would tend to agree with a statement such as "In any situation I can usually find something interesting to do"; an externally stimulated person would tend to agree with the statement "I am often trapped in situations where I do meaningless things." Research by Canadian neuroscientist James Danckert suggests that people who rely heavily on external stimulation and fail to secure sufficient amounts of it are more likely to also report symptoms of depression.

What is the opposite of boredom? Fascination, being absorbed, engrossed, and stimulated. Ever try putting a young child to sleep? Good luck! He or she is afraid of missing the excitement and pleasure of life. To capture this zest for living we need to focus on the deeper purpose and meaning of life. Judaism teaches that we were created for pleasure. The term Gan Eden, usually translated as the 'Garden of Eden', literally means the 'Garden of Pleasure.' In the right way, time and place, the pleasures of this world enable us to experience an exhilarating existence and banish boredom. We were created to enjoy the pleasures of body, and those of the spirit: love, doing good, expressing creativity.... and the ultimate pleasure, having a relationship with G-d.

Quote of the Week

Love doesn't make the world go 'round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile. -- *Franklin P. Jones*

Joke of the Week

A Doctor was addressing a large audience in Tampa .

"The material we put into our stomachs is enough to have killed most of us sitting here, years ago. Red meat is awful. Soft drinks corrode your stomach lining. Chinese food is loaded with MSG. High fat diets can be disastrous, and none of us realizes the long-term harm caused by the germs in our drinking water."

"But there is one thing that is the most dangerous of all, and we all have eaten, or will eat. Would anyone care to guess what food causes the most grief and suffering for years after eating it?"

After several seconds of quiet, a small 75-year-old Jewish man in the front row, raised his hand and said, "Wedding Cake?" (Thanks to Sheryl Levine)