

*Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason
Parshas Naso/Shavuos May 30, 2014*

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates

Public transportation riders are bound to lose a few things. But in New York--where the subways are used to haul everything from gym bags to band instruments to pets-- the range of lost items is far beyond just misplaced mittens and scarves. According to an analysis of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's lost and found, New Yorkers lose all sorts of things, from answering machines to wheelchairs. "We get false teeth almost every week," said William Bonner, supervisor of the New York City Transit lost-and-found office. "How do you lose your teeth?" But don't worry. If you ever lose something on the NYC subway, the lost and found office has a 60% return rate. "We are the most successful lost and found in the country and possibly the world," the MTA's Melissa Gissentanner said. The lost and found office located below the 34th Street station has also seen a pet bunny, a prosthetic leg, a car bumper(!), a tuba, and a diamond engagement ring. Much like New York, the subway lost and found is a delightful mix. It's also indicative of trends. Over 28,000 cell phones were lost, compared with 59 pagers. With everything from suits (62) to record players (26), Walkmen (71), and television sets (6?), the subway system's repository is truly an ethnographer's dream. Perhaps only in New York (outside of Israel) would there be a designated 'Jewish' category for lost and found items. What's inside, you ask? For one thing, 10 sets of tefillin, presumably left behind by frenzied riders exiting trains during rush hour. And there's probably a few wayward yarmulkes in there too, forgotten during the daily commute. To return a lost object is a mitzvah, based upon a verse in Deuteronomy: "...you shall surely return them..." (22:1). The reason for this mitzvah is simple enough: It's fairly common for people to lose things. It is therefore a benefit to society to encourage people to get as many lost objects back into their rightful owners' hands as possible.

Parshas Naso Numbers 4:21 - 7: 89

Among the topics appearing in *Naso* is the mitzvah of the 'Sotah'. When compelling circumstantial evidence suggests an act of marital infidelity may have taken place, the Torah provides a means to clarify the hoped-for innocence of the suspect parties. Contained in this mitzvah is dissolving G-d's name that was written on a parchment. We learn from this the supreme importance of *shalom bayis* -- peace in the home. If G-d allows His Holy Name to be erased for the sake of peace between husband and wife, certainly each of us should seek *shalom bayis* with our spouses and other family members. What can each of us do to increase *shalom bayis* with those whom we love? *Parshas Naso* also describes the nazir -- an individual who takes a vow to refrain from drinking wine, cutting his hair, and other restrictions. Remember the story of Samson? Samson -- who was a nazir -- was the great Jewish judge and hero who 'brought down the house.'

Shavuos

The major festival of Shavuos begins on Tuesday evening, June 3, and concludes Thursday evening, June 5. You may remember Cecil B. DeMille's film 'The Ten Commandments', starring Charlton Heston. Good film; however, the book was better than the movie! On Wednesday morning the Torah reading (Exodus 19:1 - 20:23) contains the narrative of the giving of the Torah and the *Aseres HaDibros* - - inaccurately translated as 'The Ten Commandments.' On the second day of Shavuos, Thursday, the Torah reading (Deut.14:22 - 16:17) contains a brief description of the *Shalosh Regalim* (Three Pilgrimage Festivals) - Passover, Shavuos and Succos.

An argument can be made that Shavuos is THE most important holiday of the Jewish year. After all, without the Torah, what is Judaism? The Torah was given to all of the Jewish people. The uniqueness of *Matan Torah* (Revelation) is that every man, woman and child heard G-d speak at Sinai. This fact alone distinguishes Judaism from all other religions and faiths. When the Torah was given, it was to the entirety of the Jewish people.

Rabbinic Ruminations

Humor is infectious. The sound of roaring laughter is far more contagious than any cough, snuffle or sneeze. And according to a great deal of research, humor is extraordinarily therapeutic. Laughing in the face of tragedy seems to shield a person from its effects. A 2013 review of studies found that among elderly patients, laughter significantly alleviated the symptoms of depression. Another study published early this year found that firefighters who used humor as a coping strategy were somewhat protected from PTSD.

Laughter even seems to have a buffering effect against physical pain. A 2012 study found that subjects who were shown a funny video displayed higher pain thresholds than those who saw a serious documentary. In another study, post-surgical patients requested less pain medication after watching a funny movie of their choosing. Other literature identifies even more specific health benefits: Laughing reduced arterial-wall stiffness (which is associated with cardiovascular disease). Women undergoing in vitro fertilization were 16 percent more likely to get pregnant when entertained by a clown dressed as a chef. And a regular old clown improved lung function in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. More generally, a mirthful life is likely to be a long one. A study of Norwegians found that having a sense of humor correlated with a high probability of surviving into retirement.

Jewish sources are replete with instances of humor and good-natured wit being used appropriately. For example, Rabba, a Rabbi during the time of the Talmud, would begin each class with a joke to set the mood. There are further instances where even G-d laughs at the enemies of the Jews, suggesting good-natured wit and light-hearted humor is accepted. *Proverbs* suggests that laughter is the best medicine: *A merry heart is a good medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones. (17:22)* According to the Baal Shem Tov, humor is expansive; it has the capacity to lift one out of depression into a place where the unseen – G-d's constant love and goodness - becomes palpable and real.

Quote of the Week

I have often regretted my speech, never my silence. -- *Publius Syrus (Roman author, 1st century B.C.)*

Joke of the Week

Johnny's teacher asked him if he knew his numbers.

"Yes," he said. "I do. My father taught me."

"Good," his teacher said. "What comes after three?"

"Four," answered the boy.

"What comes after six?"

"Seven."

"Great. Your dad did a good job. What comes after ten?"

"A Jack," he said.