

Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason

Parshas Vayeira October 18, 2013

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates

Six months ago, 55-year-old Billy Ray Harris was homeless. He lived on a street corner in Kansas City, holding out a cup and asking passers-by for spare change. But then one day, his life changed. In February, Sarah Darling passed Billy Ray at his usual spot and dropped some change into his cup. But, unbeknownst to Sarah, she also accidentally dropped in her engagement ring. Though Billy Ray considered selling the ring -- he got it appraised for \$4,000 -- he ultimately couldn't go through with it, and the next day he returned the ring to Sarah.

Today, six months after returning a stranger's ring, Billy Ray Harris is no longer homeless. As a way to say thank you, Sarah Darling and her husband started a fund to help Billy Ray get his life back on track. "We set a goal for a thousand dollars," Sarah said. But the fund raised far more than any of them expected -- in just three months, people donated more than \$190,000. Sarah and her husband have formed a lifelong friendship with Billy Ray. A lawyer set up a trust for the money; since then, Billy Ray has been able to buy a car and even a house, which he's fixing up himself. And that's not all: After Billy Ray appeared on TV, his family members, who had been unable to find him for 16 years and had heard rumors he was dead, were able to track him down. They were happily reunited and Billy Ray now keeps in touch with his relatives, including nieces and nephews he hadn't even known existed. "When I think of the past, I think, thank G-d that it's over. I mean, I feel human now."

Quid pro quo is a Latin term meaning 'something for something' or 'this for that'. The idea is more commonly expressed in English as 'one good turn deserves another'. King Solomon expressed this in a slightly different fashion: "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days." (Ecclesiastes 11:1)

A kind word or good deed never goes unnoticed by the Almighty. Sooner or later -- in Billy Ray Harris' case, sooner -- a kindness we do for others returns to our own door.

Parshas Vayeira Genesis 18:1 -- 21:24

The parsha begins with Abraham's incredible display of *chesed* (kindness) to three angels who appear as men. This, despite extreme discomfort from his recent *bris milah* (circumcision). The angels declare that Sarah will give birth to her first child at the age of 90 when Abraham would be 100. Later, Abraham pleads to G-d on behalf of the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah. However, the cities are soon destroyed, but not before the angels save Abraham's nephew Lot and his family from destruction.

Later, the parsha describes how Sarah is abducted by Avimelech, the king of Gerar, who did not realize she was married. G-d responds by striking him with a plague which prevents him from touching her. Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac, and Abraham makes a huge celebration. Sarah sees Ishmael (Abraham's son from Hagar) as a menace to her own son's spiritual well-being and asks Abraham to expel Ishmael and Hagar. The Torah portion concludes with the *akeidah*, Abraham's tenth and final test, in which he shows his willingness to comply with G-d's command to bring his beloved son Isaac as an offering.

Rabbinic Ruminations

At some point in our lives most of us have shouted 'hello' into a cave or canyon, and then delighted in receiving an echoed 'hello' in return. Echoes are used by bats and other animals to avoid obstacles and identify food. This is called 'echolocation.' The internal radar system of bats -- many of which are blind -- emits high-pitched sounds that are sent out at a rate of 200 per second; the harmonic composition, call duration and pulse interval of the emitted sounds vary according to conditions. These sounds then hit the objects in front of the bat and then bounce back. The bat's brain, with supersonic speed, is able to analyze the returned high-pitched sounds and can tell exactly where and what that object is. All in about half a second!

The development of a sophisticated echolocation system in one species would be extremely difficult to attribute to naturalistic explanations. However, we find many Toothed whales (including dolphins, porpoises, killer and sperm whales) also have the same type of system and whales are completely unrelated to bats. And believe it or not, there are scientists who say that seals, a completely different species from whales, also use echolocation. How did a complex sonar system develop, independently, in three separate species?

All creation, with its complexity and wonder, was designed to inspire and lead us to love G-d. On Thursdays we recite Chapter 81 of Psalms, "*Sing out to the G-d of our strength,*" for on this day birds and fish were created to praise G-d's Name. It is not the birds and fish themselves which sing G-d's praises; rather when people observe the birds and fish, they give praise to the One Who created them. Careful contemplation of the sonar system of animals will lead one to proclaim, "Mah Rabu Ma'asecha, HaShem -- G-d, how great are your works!"

Quote of the Week

A house without books is like a room without windows. No man has a right to bring up his children without surrounding them with books, if he has the means to buy them. -- **Horace Mann** (US educator, the first great American advocate of public education, 1796-1859)

Joke of the Week

Morris Schwartz is dying and is on his deathbed. He is with his nurse, his wife, his daughter and two sons, and knows the end is near. So he says to them:

"Bernie, I want you to take the Beverly Hills houses."

"Sybil, take the apartments over in Los Angeles Plaza."

"Hymie, I want you to take the offices over in Century City."

"Sarah, my dear wife, please take all the residential buildings downtown"

The nurse, listening to the conversations, is astounded. As Morris slips away, she says to the wife, "Mrs. Schwartz, your husband must have been such a hard-working man to have owned all this property!"

Sarah replies, "*Owned?* My husband had a lawn care business!"