

Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason
Parshas Ki Savo September 13, 2014

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates ~

How do ants survive floods? Many species of ants make their homes underground in a complex network of passageways and chambers. During floods or heavy rainstorms (hello, St. Louis and Phoenix!), these passageways will fill up with water and force the ants to evacuate their homes. Instead of scattering individually, some ants have the unique ability to gather together as a colony and form rafts on the surface of the rising waters using their own bodies. A layer of ants on the bottom of the raft serves as a base for the rest of the colony to “comfortably” mill around on. Due to the tightly knit “weave” of the ants, water cannot penetrate the raft allowing the ants to stay dry. This water-tight nature provides the raft with the buoyancy force necessary to float. The ants can remain in the raft formation for weeks if necessary or until the flood waters subside and they are able to establish their colony in a new underground home.

Research on ants living in the floodplains of Switzerland show that some ants work together to protect the queen by strategically placing larvae, pupae and worker ants at the bottom of the 'raft.' Young ants are more buoyant than worker ants, and the team discovered the young insects have a lower risk of dying at the bottom of the boat. The queen is placed in the center of the raft to shield her from water and other danger. “Placing young on the base of the raft is a very efficient means of creating a highly buoyant raft,” said study leader Jessica Purcell, an ecologist at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, “and they achieve all this at minimal cost in terms of mortality.”

Judaism teaches that one can learn good traits from animals. The Talmud says, "Had the Torah not been given, we could have learned modesty from the cat, honest labor and industriousness from the ant, fidelity from the dove, and consideration for ones mate from the rooster." Let's add another trait we can learn from ants: cooperation for mutual benefit.

Parshas Ki Savo Deuteronomy 26:1 -- 29:8

The parsha begins by describing the annual mitzvah for farmers in Israel to bring their *bikurim*, or first fruits, to the Kohen in the Temple. The donor was then to recite a prayer of thanksgiving, recalling how G-d had delivered his ancestors from Egypt and brought the new generation into a land flowing with milk and honey.

Moses then teaches two special mitzvos, which the Jewish people are to perform upon entering the land of Israel. First, they are to inscribe the entire Torah on twelve large stones. Second, the twelve tribes are to ratify their acceptance of the Torah in the following manner; six tribes were to stand on Mt. Gerizim, representing the blessings, while the remaining six tribes were to stand on Mt. Eival, signifying the curses. The Levites were to stand in the valley between, reciting blessings and curses which will apply respectively to those who observe and defy the Torah.

The parsha concludes with a recounting of the wonderful blessings G-d will bestow upon the Jewish people for remaining faithful, and a chilling prophecy of what might happen if the Jewish people do not follow the Torah.

Rabbinic Ruminations

Have you ever wondered how long you might live? Lifestyle choices, particularly diet, exercise and smoking habits, play an undisputed role in determining not only how long one will live, but also how well one ages. Research reveals an equally important and surprising factor that contributes to living a long and good life—having a lot of friends. In fact, studies show that social connections—friends, family, neighbors and colleagues—improve our odds of survival by a staggering 50%.

A recent study put the importance of friendship into perspective. Research shows that having few friends and low social interaction is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, more harmful than not exercising,

equivalent to being an alcoholic, and twice as harmful as obesity. Friendship is a "social vaccine" that enhances both our physical and mental health. According to a study in the American Sociological Review close personal friendships are declining in the United States. The study indicates as many as 25% of Americans have no close personal confidants outside their family and the average number of confidants per citizen has dropped from 4 to 2 since 1985. According to the study: Americans' dependence on family as a safety net went up from 57% to 80%, their dependence on a partner or spouse went up from 5% to 9% and fewer friendships have reduced their psychological well-being.

There are many ways through which friends and family influence health in positive ways. When someone is connected to a group and feels responsibility for other people, that sense of purpose and meaning translates to taking better care of themselves and taking fewer risks. Friends are important for children to develop emotionally and socially. Having a wide circle of friends is the key to midlife well-being and an active social network is critical for older adults too. Bottom line: Cultivate friendships throughout your life. Treasure the ones you have and make new ones, as Ethics of Our Fathers (1:6) teaches, ".....acquire a friend ..."

Quote of the Week

I do not feel obliged to believe that the same G-d who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use. - *Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)*

Joke of the Week

Two friends are in a bank when armed robbers burst in. While several of the robbers take the money from the tellers, others line up the customers, including the friends, and proceed to take their wallets, watches, etc. While this is going on, the first friend jams something into the second friend's hand. Without looking down, the second friend whispers, "What is this?" To which the first friend replies, "It's that \$50 I owe you -- BETTER LATE THAN NEVER!"