

Sermon/Drasha Parshas Shemini "Solving the Porcupine Dilemma"
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ 2014/5774

In the summer of 1909, Sigmund Freud was preparing for his first and only visit to the United States. Freud was enjoying a cigar in the company of his inner circle, when he suddenly announced:

I am going to America to catch sight of a wild porcupine and to give some lectures.

Freud's declaration was curious; to the best of anyone's knowledge, Freud wasn't such a fan of porcupines that he would travel three thousand miles by steamship to make the acquaintance of the quill-studded rodent in its native woodland habitat.

Presumably explaining his interest in porcupines, Freud said,

Whenever you have some large objective in mind, it's always good to identify a secondary, less demanding goal on which to focus your attentions in order to detract from the anxiety associated with the search for the true grail.

Fair enough. Interesting insight. But still, why, exactly, a porcupine?

In 1851, German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer created a parable about the dilemma faced by porcupines in cold weather. This parable later became famously known as the *Porcupine Dilemma*.

Schopenhauer described a "company of porcupines" who crowded themselves together for warmth on a cold winter day to save themselves from being frozen to death. But soon they began to prick one another with their quills which forced them to move away. However, the cold drove them together again -- but then again, they had to separate. This happened again ...and againand again ...until finally, they came to a solution:

The porcupines discovered they'd be best off by remaining a moderate distance from each other. Close, but not too close. Far, but not too far.

In the same way, Schopenhauer said, the needs of society drives *human porcupines* together, only to be mutually repelled by the many prickly and disagreeable qualities of their nature. The moderate distance which they at last discover is the only tolerable way of getting along. Close enough to get some warmth from your fellow human porcupine; but not so close that you'll get pricked by the quills.

Schopenhauer's tale of the porcupines was later quoted by Freud in an 1921 essay, where it was used to illustrate what Freud called "the sediment of feelings of aversion and hostility" in any long-lasting human relationship. Freud's life and writings were haunted by questions of intimacy, How much intimacy is too much? What degree of intimacy is necessary for our survival?

It's possible that Freud wanted to see an American porcupine because the *Porcupine Dilemma* represents a great challenge in crafting meaningful, close, intimate relationships.

The Torah guides us to focus our mind, heart and energy into creating close relationships with others.

V'Ahavta l'rayecha k'mocha Love your friend as yourself

Concerning this well known verse from Leviticus, Rabbi Akiva described it as a *Klal Gadol b'Torah* -- A fundamental principle of Judaism. As important as mitzvos are between ourselves and Hashem -- mitzvos such as Shabbos, prayer and kashrus -- they take a back seat in importance to *mitzvos bain adam l'chaveiro* -- those mitzvos that govern our relationship with others.

We need each other! Two cows grazing in a pasture saw a milk truck pass. On the side of the truck were the words, "Pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, Vitamin A added." One cow sighed and said to the other, "Makes you feel sort of inadequate, doesn't it?"

We, too, are inadequate without quality, cooperative relationships. People are the supplement that make our life better.

That doesn't mean to say that at times getting along with others isn't challenging. It reminds me of the guy who said that a frog has a wonderful advantage in life -- he can eat everything that bugs him. I knew a fellow who used to wear a tee shirt that said, "Of all my relatives, I like ME the best."

Let's look at three approaches of how to get along better with other, and in process identify the Torah solution for the *Porcupine Dilemma*.

1) Among the list of non-kosher birds in this week's Torah portion *Shemini*, is the interestingly named *chasida*, usually understood to be the stork. The name of the *chasida* (stork) incorporates the word *chesed*, or kindness. In what way does the *chasida* teach us about *chesed*? The Talmud explains that this bird is known for its trait of *chesed* because it shares its food with its friends.

But there's an obvious question: If the stork is endowed with such a favorable character trait, why is it considered non-kosher?

I had my car serviced this past week and had to leave it over night. I made arrangements for a dealer shuttle car to pick me up at home the next day. Tim, a pleasant, older black gentleman came to my door. "Tim, how's the shuttle business?", I asked at the beginning of our 15 minutes together in the car. "How do people treat you?"

Tim proceeded to tell me that while most people are fairly nice to deal with, some of the wealthier customers take out their high bills on him. And shockingly, Tim said that he's experienced some racist comments, including the use of 'slave names.'

Why is the *chasida* a non-kosher bird? Because the *chasida* only shares its fish with its fellow storks! The *chasida* does *chesed* with storks but doesn't show any kindness to other species of birds. This form of *chesed* isn't compatible with the Torah outlook.

The tendency of individuals to associate and bond with similar others is called homiphily ('love of same') by sociologists. More than 100 studies have observed homiphily in some form or another. Similarity breeds connection, or as the familiar aphorism goes, 'birds of a feather flock together.' Be aware of that tendency -- and regardless, bestow *chesed* upon all categories of people.

2) People are different, and different is good! We're all unique, valuable and special. We all have contributions to make to the world. We all have our niche. At the same time, we live in a world of amazing diversity.

Some of us are male, some female. John Gray made a fortune out of a little book, *Men Are From Mars and Women Are From Venus*, that makes broad generalizations about gender differences. Some gender differences in communication are quite striking. For example, Deborah Tannen in her best-selling book, *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*, points out that women tend to suggest,

whereas men command. Women use the word "let's" much more frequently than men. Female nurses will even say to patients, "let's take our medicine." Yuck!

A U. of Pennsylvania study conducted by brain researcher Reuben Gur demonstrated that women were better able to read emotion in facial expressions than men, a trait which may help women to be more empathetic. A survey conducted by *Glamour* magazine showed that sixty percent of conversations between women are on emotional or personal topics, compared with twenty-seven percent of similar conversations between men.

The Torah itself says women were created with *bina*, a preponderance of intuitional understanding. Men have the strength of *day'ah*, a logical connective thought process.

People are different in many other ways. For example, birth order. Does the order of your birth really make that much of a difference? Listen to these statistics: Of the original 23 astronauts in the U.S. space program, 21 were first-born children. All of the original Mercury astronauts were first-borns. More than 50% of all U.S. presidents have been first-born children. Finally, more than 60% of people listed in *Who's Who* in America are first-born children.

The Talmud says that just as every person's face is different, so too does our way of thinking differ. Solving the *Porcupine Dilemma* requires that we take into account the unique differences of each person with whom we interact.

3) At one time, the most famous circus animal in England was an elephant named Bozo. Customers loved Bozo for his gentle manner. Unfortunately, Bozo didn't maintain his pleasant ways. Over time he became mean and violent, so the circus owner decided to have him shot.

On the day of the execution, a man stepped out of the crowd and asked for a chance to prove that Bozo wasn't a threat to anyone. The gentleman entered Bozo's cage and began speaking to him in a foreign tongue. Instantly, the animal's dark mood cleared, and he became gentle again. The gentleman explained to the owner that Bozo was an Indian elephant; his previous trainers had spoken to him in Hindustani. Once Bozo heard the familiar language, he calmed down. The owner, amazed by the elephant's transformation, agreed to spare his life and find him a Hindustani trainer. The man who saved the great elephant that day was the famous author, Rudyard Kipling.

If we're going to solve the *Porcupine Dilemma* we must speak people's language. By that I don't mean the many spoken languages that grace our planet -- English, Hebrew, Spanish, French, German, etc. -- though learning a second language might indeed increase our effectiveness. People are always impressed by someone willing to meet them on common ground. But there are other ways to speak a person's language.

On a jam-packed trip leaving from Boston, Andrew, a Jewish man, was planning to go to Sydney, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Beijing, Vietnam and Melbourne. The trip was built around a conference in Fangshan, China on Saturday. Although not fully observant himself, Andrew's travel agent was an Israeli Orthodox Jew with whom he was friendly. His agent proposed a business class itinerary, slightly altering the Kuala Lumpur-Beijing flight from Saturday to Friday.

Andrew insisted on staying an extra day in Kuala Lumpur, but that would have meant a flight on Saturday. The travel agent responded that he would not be able to book travel for him over the Sabbath, but that Andrew was free to book that flight by himself. Andrew agreed with that and planned to book the flight by himself. But, then he re-considered.

In an email, Andrew wrote to the travel agent: "Greetings from LAX airport. Will board my Delta flight in 55 minutes. I reconsidered, you are right I should be more observant, I'll manage without that day

in Kuala. Since I'll have an extra night in PEK, any recommendations for a good Friday night dinner in Beijing?" The travel agent recommended the Chabad of Beijing for a nice kosher meal and booked him on the original itinerary, flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing on Friday early instead of Saturday.

Two days later, Andrew wrote to the agent:

Holy God, You sure heard what happened to MH370. I cannot stop thinking about this. This is a true miracle for the books. You are a true life saver... I cannot think anymore! We'll talk later this week. Don't know how to thank you enough. Now please change my return. I am not stepping on a Malaysia flight in my life.

The travel agent responded, "I am so happy for you! Not I am the life saver. G-d and Shabbat were your life savers. You owe them something."

Certainly, the fact that Andrew's life was saved by deciding not to fly on Shabbat is a chilling, dramatic part of the story. But no less remarkable is the gentle, non-judgmental manner in which the travel agent encouraged Andrew to change his itinerary. Not once did the travel agent say, "You shouldn't fly on Shabbat!", or "Why are you asking me to do something against Jewish law?".

The agent told Andrew he was free to book the flight himself. And on his own, Andrew said, "I reconsidered, you are right, I should be more more observant." The Torah's true path is the path of pleasantness.

Sometimes, it takes a long time to see another person's virtues

Before introducing him, Sir Winston Churchill's aunt told the following to a man applying for the job of private secretary: "Remember, you will see all of Winston's faults in the first five hours. It will take you a lifetime to discover (all) his virtues."

Remember the 1964 hit by Gene Pitney, "It Hurts to be in Love"? I don't think that was written as an ode to the love life of two porcupines -- but I think you get the idea. Sometimes, it hurts to be in love. That's the *Porcupine Dilemma*.

It takes a long time to bring ourselves to the understanding that everyone is a deserving recipient of chesed, to familiarize ourselves with people's differences, and to learn to speak the language of tolerance and love. But the end result -- becoming closer to others, and a solution to the *Porcupine Dilemma* -- is worth it.

The solution? Becoming a giver.