



February 3, 2024



Parshas Yisro

24th of Shevat 5784

The Non-Obvious Obvious

Imagine the following: a sweet nine-year-old orphan who has been living at an orphanage his entire life, waiting earnestly for someone to adopt him. After years of waiting, he finally hears word that his biological parents decided to take him back. They decided to take him in again and raise him. He awaits the day when he will go to their house to meet them. The day finally arrives and he takes a bath, dons his finest clothing and walks up to the door.

Before he even knocks, smoke begins billowing out from underneath the door. Lightning begins bolting out of the windows. The doors viciously open and his father is standing there in a dark robe, looking down at him. The first utterance he says in a deep, scary voice is, "I am your father who brought you into this world. You will not be able to open the fridge by yourself to take food; you will be served and must eat what is served. Your bedtime will be tightly enforced. Punishable by death. You must honor me and you must do as I say."

Imagine such a greeting. The little boy would be scared out of his wits. He would run away as fast as his feet could carry him. It is not exactly the hello he was expecting.

Well, it would seem that Hashem greeted us the same way. Why was Hashem's ice-breaker with the Jewish people a scary meeting atop a mountain with fire and thunder and lightning? Why couldn't we have a more pleasant welcome to His home? Why not a nice cup of coffee near a calm brook on a sunny day with the birds pleasantly chirping in the background?

And when Hashem finally speaks, what He says seems puzzling. He starts off by famously declaring, "I am your G-d," meaning to say we should believe in Him. The question is that if we do in fact believe in G-d, then we don't need a commandment to believe in Him. And if we don't believe in G-d, then what good is His commandment to believe in Him?

If Aristotle Can't

Rav Elchonon Wasserman, the author of the sefer *Kovetz Haaros*, writes in the back of his sefer a truly fascinating understanding of this topic. He begins by asking the following question: How is it expected of twelve-year-old girls and thirteen-year-old boys to attain a belief that philosophers and astrologers have debated for millennia? How is a teenager expected to come to the intellectual conclusion that there is a God, when minds such as Aristotle, whom the

Rambam called one degree lower than a prophet, couldn't come to that conclusion? How is it expected of a simple child to climb "philosophical mountains" when men far smarter than he couldn't climb them?

Reb Elchonon explained that belief in Hashem requires no degree in theology. Belief in G-d requires zero philosophical mountain climbing. Merely looking out into the dazzling world should direct one to Hashem. Merely seeing the miracles of nature should lead one to the unequivocal conclusion that this world has a Creator. Merely seeing the wonders of the planet should propel one to sing the praises of God. To think it could all come about randomly, to think it could all be happenstance, says Reb Elchonon, is preposterous.

According to Professor Robert Shapiro (New York University: Summit Books, 1986), the mathematical probability of the world coming into existence by evolving from spontaneous generation is $\frac{1}{10^{1.25} \text{Trillion}}$. In simple terms, that is the same probability as rolling a double-six with dice 100 trillion times in a row!

So, the question now becomes reversed. How could gigantic philosophers, some of the smartest men to ever walk this planet, possibly think this world is random? How could they possibly take such a stance when there are oceans and mountains of reason to think otherwise?

The Bribed Judge

Reb Elchonon explains based on the following: There is a *halacha* that states that a presiding judge is not allowed to accept a bribe even of the smallest amount, for we are afraid that the bribe will sway his reasoning and he will judge inaccurately. This means that even if Moshe *Rabbeinu*, whom we know to be indisputably righteous and fair, would take so much as a penny's worth of a bribe from a defendant in his courtroom, he would be disqualified from judging. The Torah is laying down an ironclad rule in human psychology: we are all swayed by money. We are swayed by material pursuits. The desire to live in materialistic comfort will blur the reasoning of even the greatest minds. No mind is too great. No degree of materialism is too insignificant. It is fundamental human nature.

Recognizing G-d in the world, continues Reb Elchonon, would bring along with it much responsibility. It would require humbling oneself to the will of the Creator. It would bring with it laws that could potentially prevent the pursuit of materialistic bliss. Hence, minds were swayed. Great minds were bought with a "penny." The overwhelming evidence the world offers in support of Hashem's existence was not accepted by men who viewed that reality as a hindrance to the conveniences of their lifestyle. The extreme desire to do whatever one wants in life will literally blind even the greatest philosophers from seeing what any thirteen-year-old boy should see with ease.

A non-Jewish philosopher once approached Reb Yosef Shteif, the Teumim, and asked him, "If your Torah says that you should always follow the majority, why do you believe in your God when the majority of the world thinks otherwise?"

The Teumim responded, "The Torah commands us to go with the majority only if both opinions are viable. Lack of belief in G-d is an opinion so outlandish, it doesn't make it to the debate floor."

Continues Reb Elchonon, when Hashem commands us in the first of the *Aseres Hadibros* to believe in Him, the commandment is not to venture out on a philosophical exploration in search of G-d. It is a commandment to remove

those things in life that prevent one from seeing the obvious. It is a commandment to make room in our hearts for spirituality to live. To prevent the gross physicality of the world from blinding us of what is laughably evident. To live a life pursuing holiness instead of one chasing the mundane.

When Hashem spoke to us from atop Har Sinai, this was not His ice-breaker. This wasn't His first greeting. Hashem has been saying hello to us every time the sun comes up in the morning. We have known Hashem ever since we saw an oak tree come out of an acorn. We saw Hashem in every raindrop and every earthworm. We didn't need any ice-breakers. Har Sinai was not introducing us to Hashem. It was introducing us to His Torah. It was introducing us to our safeguard. It was introducing us to our mission, to our life's work, to our goals in life. That had to come with seriousness. That had to be done with awe, for the Torah must be respected with every fiber of our being. The most significant book ever to grace our earth cannot be handed over while we are sipping coffee.

Lessons From Fruit Flies

We once had a fruit fly problem in our house. After numerous attempts to remove them, I went to a hardware store and asked for a trap. The man behind the counter gave me a trap, which was a small bowl with a clear cover on top of it with little holes in the cover. I was to fill the bowl with fruit juice and place the cover on top.

"I assure you," the man said, "the fruit flies will fly right in."

I asked him, "Well, the same way the fruit flies can fly right in through the holes, can't they fly right out?"

He said, "No. You see, fruit flies have bad vision. When following the smell of fruit juice, they are blindly led directly to what they are looking for. Once they are satisfied, they look up and can't find the hole to get out."

I thought to myself how we are often the very same way. We allow the smell of earthly physical pursuits to lead us along the path in life, often blinding us from seeing the truth.

We know that Avraham rode to the *akeidah* on a donkey. The Midrash says that Moshe rode from Midian to Egypt to save the Jews on that same donkey. And we are told that *Moshiach* will one day arrive on the very same donkey. Now, in our contemporary world, *Moshiach* arriving on a donkey seems a little outdated. We would anticipate such a significant arrival to be heralded in the latest model car. Or a limousine with an entourage of black Cadillacs preceding it. Why is *Moshiach* going to show up riding on a donkey?

I heard the following enlightening answer from Rabbi Chaim Mintz, the *Mashgiach* in Yeshiva of Staten Island. He said that the Hebrew word for donkey is *chamor*. *Chamor* is a derivative of the word *chomrius*, which means materialism. The donkey, more than any other animal, symbolizes brute physicality. It excels at lifting and carrying heavy burdens to and fro. *Moshiach's* arrival atop a donkey is signifying that we only got to that point by remaining **on top** of materialism. We lived life mind over matter. We were able to lift ourselves above the never-ending quest for heightened physical pleasure. We were able to carve out room in our hearts for Hashem to exist. That, says Rabbi Mintz, is what will lead us to *Moshiach*.

Hashem is truly all around us. We just need to open up our hearts to see Him. Once we do, His presence becomes remarkably obvious.