



Ohr Somayach Light Lines

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Light Insight

Imagine

“And they had faith in G-d and in Moses His servant...” (Exodus 14:31)

To conceive and to imagine. We know that we cannot picture the infinite. We understand that our brain, a finite machine, can not imagine infinity. But if we cannot imagine the infinite, maybe we could, at least, conceive of it. Maybe we could probe the borders of the finite with the power of conceptualization, transcending the limit of synapses and neurons, blood and tissue that lie within our heads to conceive of infinity.

By the time they left Egypt, the Jewish People had experienced

the most earth-shaking miracles in the history of the world. They had witnessed the entire natural order turned on its head. Water becoming blood. Plagues of frogs, lice, dangerous animals, an epidemic, boils, hail, locusts. Darkness engulfing their enemies. And finally the death of all of Egypt's first-born. Could it be that only now, with the splitting of the sea and the total destruction of the Egyptian army — only now — “they had faith in G-d”? Didn't they have faith in G-d until now?

The verse is clearly telling us that the experience at the parting of the sea elevated Israel to some new level of faith in G-d. What was this new dimension of faith

that they reached after crossing the sea?

When Israel saw the power of G-d revealed in Egypt, they thought they had seen the extent of G-d's dominion. They thought that even if they could not imagine the infinite power of the Creator, then, at least, they could conceive of it. However, when they saw the even greater miracles at the sea, they realized that not only was G-d's power far greater than they had previously conceived, but even what they were witnessing now was not the total extent of G-d's dominion. It was this realization which led to a new level of faith in G-d, a faith unlimited by what they could imagine, or even what they could conceive.

LOVE of the LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel

By Any Other Name

Mount Hermon, known today as “the Israeli Alps,” which lies on Israel's historical border with the Amorites and the Tzidonites, is called by several other names in the Torah: Siryon, Senir, and

Sion. These names were given to it by these neighboring nations: The T z i d o n i t e s

called it Siryon, and the Amorites called it Senir. (*Deuteronomy 3:9*)

The Torah relates this to show how beloved the Land of Israel was even to the other nations. The names Siryon and Senir were originally names of other mountains within the borders of the

Land of Israel. The nations loved Israel so much that when they built cities on Mount Hermon, they graced those cities with names of mountains in the Land of Israel.

This appreciation takes on a special dimension when we note that Senir means “a snow-capped mountain.” Even the uninhabitable mountain peaks of the Land of Israel were so beloved by the nations that they called their great mountain-top cities by that name.

The Other SIDE of the Story

GIVING PEOPLE THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

Learning to judge favorably sometimes requires serious change. So, next time your head tells you that someone is telling you a tale, remember this story...

Heads or Tales?

A few months ago a very embarrassing incident taught me not to be so quick to judge people unfavorably,

even if the situation may really look bad.

I was standing in the middle of a shop in Jerusalem, trying to extract a five shekel coin from my change purse. My hands were full of bags, and the coin slipped from my fingers and disappeared. I took one step toward the counter and then heard and saw a five shekel coin fall before me onto the floor. A woman standing next to me asked her son to retrieve the coin for her. Well, I reasoned, what are the chances that the same kind of coin

could fall in the same small space within the same minute? A five shekel coin appeared in the boy's hand, and the unpleasant smirk on the woman's face told me she was taking advantage of the situation. After some verbal wrangling she decided to give up on the coin and walked out in a huff. I gave the storekeeper the coin to put into a tzedaka box and that was the end of that. The next day the five shekel coin turned up at the bottom of one of the large plastic bags I'd been carrying! I had thought she was lying. It was worse. She also thought I was lying.

Response Line

Eytan M. Rodin wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

What is the significance behind the fact that we put stones on graves that we visit? I've always done it, but never understood what this represents. I know that rather than flowers, we are supposed to give money to tzedaka (charity), which makes sense. It's the stones that puzzle me.

Dear Eytan,

A very early reference to this custom is found in a commentary to the Shulchan Aruch (the Code of Jewish Law) written by Rabbi Yehuda Ashkenazi in the early 1700s. He quotes an earlier source who explains that the custom of placing stones or tufts of grass on the grave is for the honor of the deceased person by marking the fact that his grave has been visited.

Once, when I was touring the Mount of Olives cemetery, my Yerushalmi tour guide told me the

following story, a story that purports to explain this custom:

Sometime during the Turkish occupation of Israel, on a Shabbat, an Arab was murdered in Jerusalem. Quickly, the rumor spread that he was killed by a Jew, and an immediate expulsion order was declared. The Jews of Jerusalem had to pick themselves up and leave or be killed. A noted *kabbalist* (mystic) came upon the scene of the crime, which was crowded with Arab onlookers. Even though it was Shabbat, the *kabbalist* wrote one of G-d's names on a piece of paper and placed it upon the body of the dead man. The dead man rose and pointed to one of the Arabs standing in the crowd who became violently afraid and admitted that he had done the killing. The expulsion order was rescinded.

Shortly afterwards the *kabbalist*, who was an elderly man, approached the

chevra kadisha (burial society) and asked that his tombstone be pelted with stones after his death because he had written during Shabbat. He understood that due to the danger to life he had been permitted to desecrate the Shabbat, but he felt that some form of repentance was in order nevertheless. Stoning his grave would symbolize the biblical stoning penalty meted out to Shabbat desecraters. At first the burial society refused because of the implied dishonor the stoning would represent to so righteous a Jew, but the *kabbalist* persisted. Finally, they agreed to place stones on his grave, but only if they would institute the custom that all graves would have stones placed on them in the future. If stones were placed on everyone's grave, it would not be a dishonor to the *kabbalist*. From then on, stones were placed on the graves of all Jews buried in Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem the custom spread, and today Jews all over the world place stones on tombstones when visiting a grave.

This may not be the actual source of the custom, but it's an interesting story.