

Light Insight

Easy Street

“Yissachar is a strong-boned donkey; he rests between the boundaries. He saw tranquility that it was good... yet he bent his shoulder to bear...”
(Genesis 49:14-15)

Why are feelings of depression so common amongst Americans?

America is a society predicated on making everything easy. Convenience shopping. TV dinners. Drive-thru banking. These short-term benefits breed a certain attitude: Nothing should cause me effort.

One of the fundamental components of a happy person is a healthy self-esteem. Probably more cases of depression are linked to low self-esteem than any other cause. What builds self-esteem? When we succeed in doing something that's difficult. By making life into easy street, by giving the subliminal message that everything has to be easy, we have unconsciously taken away a major formula for achieving self-esteem: Rising to

a challenge. Overcoming something that's difficult.

What's the difference between fun and happiness?

Mount Whitney in California is the highest peak in the lower 48 United States. It's 14,494 feet high. You could probably fly to the top of Mount Whitney in about 15 minutes. To walk the same distance might take you 15 days.

It could well be that flying to the top of Mount Whitney is a lot more fun than climbing it, but climbing will give you a lot more happiness because you'll have achieved something quite difficult. Fun is something external, and because it's external it's evanescent and fleeting. Happiness is internal. It becomes part of your essence.

Learning Torah is the ultimate in deferred gratification. The Torah is as hard as steel and as difficult to grasp as water. It takes many years of application, of “breaking your teeth” to be able to master its sublime intricacies — and yet there is no happiness in the world like learning Torah.

There is no physical pleasure in this world that can compare

with the ecstasy of cracking a difficult Talmudic idea. It may not be fun in the traditional sense, but it's the greatest happiness that there is.

“Yissachar is a strong-boned donkey; he rests between the boundaries. He saw tranquility that it was good... yet he bent his shoulder to bear and became an indentured laborer.”

Yissachar is the tribe of the Torah scholars. A Torah scholar carries a heavy yoke, but he is a “strong-boned donkey.” G-d gives him the stamina to carry out his task. Even though he labors day and night, he “rests between the boundaries.” He rests between the boundaries of the day and night. How can anything exist between day and night? That's all there is. Day or night. The Torah scholar experiences repose of the soul on a spiritual plane that is beyond the boundaries of day and night. On that plane he has a contentment that is out of this world. He saw “tranquility that it was good” — “yet he bent his shoulder to bear.” He understands that the ultimate achievement comes from hard work and dedication to G-d's Holy Torah.

And he ends up much higher than Mount Whitney.

ETHICS of the FATHERS

“The universe was created with ten statements.’ What lesson does the Torah mean to communicate by telling us that G-d used ten statements to create the world when one would have sufficed? It tell us that the wicked will be punished for destroying a world created with ten statements, while the righteous will be rewarded for preserving a world created with ten statements.”

The fact that G-d created the world with ten statements when he could certainly have created it with one shows us how precious the world and everything in it are to their Creator.

When a person’s sins invoke heavenly retribution that involves the destruction of property, that person is guilty of spoiling something beloved by G-d. He therefore deserves to be punished for this as well.

On the other hand, righteousness not only sustains the world but also serves as a catalyst for blessing and greater prosperity. One who fulfills the will of his Creator and brings blessing to the world, merits additional reward in addition to being rewarded for his righteous deed, since he afforded G-d an opportunity to bestow bounty on His beloved world.

This also offers an explanation of an earlier statement in Ethics of our Fathers: “The reward for a *mitzvah* is itself also a *mitzvah*; the retribution suffered for a sin is itself sinful.”

Response Line

Words from the Heart

Carol Conaway wrote:

While on a plane from Boston to Philadelphia two weeks ago, I happened to look at the back cover of the book the man seated next to me was reading. The following quotation appeared: “Words written from the heart, enter the heart.” As a scholar and professor, I was very moved by the quotation and wrote it down for my own keeping. The quote was attributed to “The Sages.”

Where do these words appear in the vast writings of The Sages? I would be grateful if you could provide me with an exact reference so that I might consult the entire text and see in what context the statement was made.

Dear Dr. Conaway, “Words which emanate from the heart, enter the heart” is sometimes quoted in the name of “the Sages,” meaning that it is from the Mishnah, Talmud or Midrash. But the truth is that the source for this phrase is a bit of a mystery! Although it has indeed become an accepted Jewish teaching, it does not seem to appear in any of the afore-mentioned sources.

I’ve seen it suggested that “Words which emanate from the heart, enter the heart” is a paraphrase of the statement in the Talmud that “Anyone who has awe of Heaven, his words will be heard and accepted.” I personally don’t accept this as being the correct source, as it doesn’t mention the sincerity of words which “emanate from the heart.”

I would like to propose that the phrase is an application of the princi-

ple taught by King Solomon in Proverbs: “As water (reflecting) the face is to the face, so a man’s heart is to (his fellow) man.” Meaning that the human heart intuits the emotions of others, and thus if one speaks with an open heart, the heart of the listener will be open as well.

In the late 1800’s Poland issued a ban against *shechita* (ritual slaughter of animals). It is told that Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan came before the Polish officials to plead for the rescinding of this decree, which would cause tremendous hardship for Poland’s Jews.

Rabbi Kagan pleaded passionately, in Yiddish. When he’d finished and the translator began translating into Polish, the official said, “Stop. You don’t need to translate.” He was so moved by Rabbi Kagan’s words, even though he hadn’t understood them, that he agreed to do all he could to help rescind the decree.