

In Torah study yesterday, something unusual happened. As we prepared to start looking at the study sheet I had compiled, someone asked a question that was so rich, so provocative, that we wound up spending an hour discussing that question and exploring where it led us, and we never got to the sourcesheet at all.

So credit goes to Gail Harfe, for drawing my attention to the end of the parashah. After the description of what to do upon arriving in the land of Israel, after the blessings – which are beautiful, and the curses – there are more of them, in Chapter 28, the curses abruptly end. Chapter 29 begins with these three verses:

Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: You have seen all that 'ה did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his courtiers and to his whole country: the wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels.

וְלֹא־נָתַן יְהוָה לְכֶם לֵב לְדַעַת וְעֵינַיִם לְרִאֲוֹת וְאָזְנִים לִשְׁמָע עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה :

Yet to this day 'ה has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

Gail was understandably offended at the idea that we might face punishment for something that we don't even understand – all the moreso at the idea that God is deliberately withholding our understanding. To be fair, it wasn't clear *what* we were not yet understanding, and whether the curses that are described as potential consequences for misbehavior have any bearing on understanding. So we decided it was worth exploring further. First, we checked what the traditional commentaries had to say about this.

The medieval commentaries share Gail's discomfort. Ibn Ezra writes: Scripture reads *given* because God is the first cause.⁷ *Man has free will and thus must develop a "knowing heart" on his own. However, our verse implies that it is God who gives man a heart to know..*

And Sforno, the Renaissance humanist says explicitly that this means, “even though [God] had tried by means of teachings and miracles to give the people a knowing heart, as we know from [Exodus 10](#), 20 וידעתם כי אני ה' , 'ולמען תספר. “and in order that you will tell...and be aware that I am the Lord,” the lesson had not taken hold due to your overwhelming quarrelsomeness.”

On the face of it, these commentators are defending God against the potential charge of a double standard that Gail brought and any of us might bring in response to this verse: that a loving deity should not set us up for failure.

But they are also concerned with solving a bigger problem, that is the problem of free-will and free-thought. Who is it who determined what our imaginative capacities are? We do, say the commentators. We can be given everything, and still fail to pay attention, to understand.

The Talmud, in Masechet Avodah Zarah, 5b, teaches that in next verses, it says **And I have led you forty years in the wilderness”** ([Deuteronomy 29:4](#)), which shows that [Moses](#) was speaking forty years after the revelation at Sinai. **And** at that point **it is written: “But the Lord has not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, until this day”** ([Deuteronomy 29:3](#)). **Rabba said: Conclude from here that a person does not understand the opinion of his teacher until after forty years,** as [Moses](#) said this to the [Jewish people](#) only after forty years of learning Torah.

There may be something here. I pointed out yesterday that we need to be capable of cultivating habits that we are as yet incapable of fully understanding. Now that one of my children has started kindergarten and is biking to school on her own steam each morning, I am witnessing this daily.

She has not yet internalized the connection between eating her breakfast and having the energy to bike herself to school, but she is capable of developing the

habit of eating her breakfast, nonetheless. She has not internalized *why* it is so important that she stay on the right side of the street or bike path. She may not understand that *why* fully without getting into an accident, God forbid, but in the path week and a half, Baruch Hashem, she has gotten vastly more consistent at staying on the right.

Which makes me realize how important it is sometimes *not* to fully understand our lives. I wouldn't want me daughter to always have the risk of an accident, the dangers of bicycling, always present in her consciousness. I'd rather she cultivate habits that will help keep her safe, and let her mind and heart focus on other things.

The verses in the parashah go on to describe how the Israelites have been traveling through the wilderness in a state of constant miracle: with food coming from heaven, with clothes that don't wear out. So perhaps what they don't understand is how extraordinary their situation is, and how much work the day-to-day business of life is. It makes the parent/child metaphor all the more apt.

As for the Israelites in the wilderness and my for my child, so, too for many of us. As our parashah noted, the world is full of curses, of collective disasters as well of individual perils. The world is full of blessings and miracles, moments of impossible that most of the time, we take for granted, or fail to notice entirely. Only the most enlightened among us can hold a constant awareness of how fragile, how miraculous, how tenuous our well-being is, and still move through the world with purpose and joy. Most of the time, we push away our knowledge of death and danger, and focus on only a fraction of what is. Most of the time, we push away our knowledge of how improbable and miraculous life is, and focus only on a fraction of what is.

So maybe it is not so terrible to imagine the Creator designing our minds and hearts in such a way that they open slowly, taking only as much as we need to know in order to learn, just as many good parents and teachers offer information geared to the capacities of a growing heart and mind. We are all growing hearts and mind. We understand more today than we did yesterday, and, b'ezrat Hashem, we will understand more tomorrow than we did today.