

Vayishlach : In the Land of Curiosity

Moshe Taragin

He looked out at a city of lights and searched for its unseen designer. Noticing that a human being finally discerned Him, the divine architect of this grand city looked back and revealed Himself to Avraham. For thousands of years people were too engrossed in survival mode to probe their world and pursue its Creator. By following his spirit of curiosity Avraham was first to discover a supreme being.

Four hundred years later that divine architect had receded from view and, once again, needed to be discovered by a human. The chosen and favored children of Hashem had been enslaved in a dark Egyptian exile. Who would liberate them from slavery, march them to the mountain of Hashem, and deliver the divine will? Only someone whose imagination was ignited by curiosity. This shepherd, named Moshe, passed a blazing bush which was not incinerated by the red-hot flames. Halting to examine this strange marvel, Moshe heard the voice of Hashem dispatching him to a historical mission. Many had passed that bush before Moshe, but few had paused or taken interest of this abnormal spectacle. Most were either too intellectually lazy or too preoccupied to notice this physics-defying bush. Once again, it was human curiosity which brought Hashem into our dark world.

About nineteen hundred years later, curiosity once again revolutionized religious history. The Beit Hamikdash had been demolished and dark clouds of exile were swirling over Yerushalayim. In a dreary world without miracles or prophecy, we needed a great sage who could master the entire sweep of Torah and transmit it to future generations. We desperately needed Torah to be distilled for the torturous exile which awaited our people.

An uneducated but curious farmer passed by a waterway, whose soft rushing stream carved out rock formations. His curiosity was piqued by watching soft water sculpt solid rock so he reasoned that Torah study, which is exhausting and difficult, could powerfully forge religious

identity. Convinced of the strength of Torah study, he altered his own life in mid-stream becoming Rabbi Akiva, one of our greatest Torah sages.

Three times in history Hashem was discovered through human curiosity, a basic trait which Hashem Himself imbued within us. We possess a thirst and a desire for knowledge and we utilize our curiosity to better study our world, engage new information, and find Him. We possess both instinctive curiosity as well as analytical curiosity. When we encounter something new, we instinctively approach it, explore it and try to better understand it. Additionally after we are familiar with an idea but we sense inconsistency or a gap in our knowledge, we feel compelled to explore resolve that gap.

Without intellectual curiosity human progress would be stalled. During the scientific revolution between 1500-1700 humanity exhibited uncommon curiosity in analyzing, organizing and dramatically transforming our world. Curiosity allows us imagine a better world, rather than the fallen one we currently inhabit. As George Bernard Shaw remarked 'Some men see things as they are and say why, I dream things that never were and say, why not'

We idolize curiosity but don't always pay enough attention its perils. What are the religious risks of unhealthy or excessive curiosity?

Adam, Eve and Pandora

Man's original sin was caused by Adam and Eve's uncontrollable curiosity. The glistening tree at the center of the garden was too enchanting and even though consuming the fruit would incite divine punishment, they could not contain their curiosity and their catastrophic decision wrecked human history.

Drawing in part upon the Torah, Greek mythology describes a similar fall caused by uncontrollable curiosity. Pandora, the first woman created by the gods, could not contain her own curiosity, opened a sparkly box which she knew contained pernicious contents, and unleashed misery upon humanity. Based upon this myth we refer to our own curiosity-driven miscues as opening a Pandora's box.

Like all human desires, curiosity overwhelms our better judgement compelling foolish behavior even when we are aware of its unfortunate consequences. Like any uncontrolled desire, curiosity counters our better moral judgement causing moral weakness or even actual sin.

Vertical thinking and horizontal thinking

Curiosity also distracts our focus, causing our minds to wander and lose concentration. Our modern, noisy, and overstimulated world fascinates our curiosity, making it almost impossible to "live in the moment" and bring our full presence to our relationships. "Distracted thought" muddles our prayer, as we struggle to concentrate our wandering minds upon our dialogue with Hashem.

Mental distraction obstructs our ability to deeply concentrate upon a single-minded issue. In the late 18th century, the great mussar school of Chelm emphasized mental focus as the source of moral development. Thinking deeply about life and values would, they contended, lead Man to a religiously directed lifestyle. Students actively worked to condition mental discipline and to avoid mental distraction. Mental exercises included thinking uninterruptedly about one particular item for lengthy periods of time. As curiosity always opens new mental pathways, it constantly shifts our focus to new ideas, thereby preventing more penetrating analysis of any one idea. Curiosity induces horizontal thought, but depth demands vertical thinking. When we think wide, we don't always think deep.

The addiction

Curiosity is also addictive. Content providers in the media are skilled at tapping into our curiosity, tempting us with clickbait and leading us down endless internet trails of nothingness. We innocently click on a curious story and slowly wander off into hours of meaningless content. Curiosity only excites greater curiosity leading us on a journey which often feels like Alice in Wonderland. We awaken hours later realizing how much time we have wasted on nothingness.

Curiosity, though initially innocent, ensnares us into the realm of the forbidden. It begins harmlessly enough, but we quickly discover that we

have “innocuously” entered forbidden territory. This was precisely the pathology of Eve, who began by innocently touching the tree, but soon found herself innocently consuming prohibited fruit. Curiosity always poses the danger of "one thing leading to another ".

Social curiosity

We crave relationships and we desire to learn more about our surroundings and about the lives of other people. Social curiosity helps us build healthy interpersonal relationships, but it can also be morally destructive. Too much social curiosity about people's lives leads to shameful gossip and slanderous badmouthing. Even if conversation about people's lives isn't slanderous it is still inelegant. As Eleanor Roosevelt commented " great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events and small minds discuss people." The more we speak about people and their lives the more our minds contract. Unhealthy Social curiosity consumes discussion about people in place of more meaningful discussion about ideas. It provides a constant menu of mental junk-food.

Worse, unbridled social curiosity can lead to voyeurism and delighting in viewing private matters of people's lives. The popularity of reality-shows brings out our worst voyeuristic tendencies

Finally, our social curiosity takes us to ‘places’ we should not be visiting. It was Dinah's curiosity which led to her assault and eventually to the murder of an entire city. Her family had just faced a terribly tense encounter with Esav and, looking to release that tension, she tours the neighboring city of Shechem, looking for some adventure or distraction. The midrash asserts that Dinah was physically hidden from Esav for her own protection. When our access to the world is stifled and our horizons are diminished, we become even more curious about the world around us. She passes through Shechem visiting her new neighbors but exposing herself to uncouth elements. Her social curiosity takes her places she shouldn't be visiting, and leads to her abduction.

Curiosity is Hashem's gift to human and the trait we use to decipher our world and to disclose its Creator. Yet, as with every gift, it must be delicately balanced, especially in a world filled with shiny metal objects and a highway of distraction known as the internet.