

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 16

Don't fly off course

By Rabbi Yehoshua Berman

There was quite a buzz flying around this past week in the world of entomology. A major discovery was made. Are you ready for this? Drumroll please...



Moths are ***not*** attracted to light!

Now, wait! Before you derisively dismiss this discovery as an ivory-tower, lab-controlled piece of ridiculousness that contradicts the plain day-to-day reality that anyone without even two cents can simply observe, listen to the explanation.

The team of researchers – which included scientists from the Imperial College of London, the International University of Florida, and the Council on International Education Exchange of Costa Rica – compiled hundreds of slow-motion, infrared videos which captured the behaviors of butterflies, moths, bees, wasps, dragonflies, and damselflies. What they found upon examining the footage in slow motion is that the flying light-friendlies were not attracted to sources of illumination that were at a significant distance.

Instead, the insects only appeared to be drawn in when passing a light that was nearby.

So far, that doesn't seem even noteworthy. But here's the kicker: consistently, the overwhelming majority of study subjects tilted their backs toward the light, even if doing so prevented sustained flight.

The team further observed three common responses to the light source made by the insects, including orbiting the light, stalling — which caused the insect to steeply climb above the light — and inverting, in which the insect flipped over and crashed into the ground.

In one particularly shrewd experiment, the researchers created a mock night sky by shining a light on a white sheet. In this case, the insects were able to navigate under the light without any significant issues. Had they been inherently seeking the light they would have crashed into the sheet.

Under natural sky light, the researchers suggested, insects tilting their dorsum towards the brightest visual hemisphere helps maintain proper flight altitude and control. Near artificial sources, however, this highly conserved dorsal-light-response can produce continuous steering around the light and trap an insect.

So, bottom line, insects are not attracted to light, per se, rather they are hard-wired to use it as a sort of flight guide; and artificial light basically hijacks that inborn flight-control mechanism, causing the insects to get completely disoriented – trapped essentially – and oftentimes experience a crash-death into the inferno.

There was another study that took place this past week, although in this particular case it was highly informal and included only an $n=1$ (that's scientific code language for "this was a case study of merely one subject"). I was on my way back home from Shaarei Zedek after an endoscopy

when one is not allowed to drive (because of the anesthesia). So I took a taxi home. As I almost always do when riding in a cab, I engaged the driver in conversation.

And what a fascinating – and highly perturbing – conversation it turned out to be!

One of my standard ice-breaker questions is, “Where do you live?” Well, that opened him up to telling me about his life. Turns out, he has been married and divorced three times (!) and the most recent one was from a wedding that took place eighteen years ago when he was 49 and his now ex-wife was 25! He also shared with me that, once upon a time, he had been extremely wealthy – running a business that raked in 30,000 NIS per day! – and “lived the good life”.

He also made a point to emphasize that, “Every time I got married, I made a full-blown wedding party with 700 guests”.

The more he told me, the more I felt as perturbed as I was fascinated. I asked him what led to the breakup of his most recent marriage, and he responded, “My wife was unfaithful. I paid a private detective and caught her red handed.”

Chazal have an expression: “He is busy with big pumpkins and she is busy with small pumpkins.” We might translate that into, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. In the case of this particular taxi driver, he made an unsavory comment at one point that made it clear that he wasn’t the squeaky-clean type either.

Had I been speaking to someone who was totally secular, I probably would not have felt as perturbed (although, admittedly, it shouldn’t be that way), but this particular man repeatedly said things that indicated, quite clearly, that he is

a *maamin*. He knows that there is an Almighty Creator of the universe who runs the show, and he seemed to be very at peace in embracing that reality.

At the same time, he expressed absolute cluelessness as to why he deserved to be “thrown from a high roof down into a deep pit”. Today, he has no money, no wife, and no home that he owns. His situation is abysmal, certainly when compared with the pinnacle of success that he enjoyed a few decades prior.

I asked him the following question, “You are now 67 years old, and you’ve had quite the set of life experiences. If you could talk to a 25-year-old who is just starting out and is in a similar situation that you were in at that age, what would you advise him?”

To my mind, it’s a very important question. Because there are a lot of people out there who think, “If only I could have this, do this, be with such and such type of person (etc. etc. etc.), then I would be happy and fulfilled!” They feel like there is so much out there to experience and try out and they are just missing out, stuck with interminable blah.

As distasteful as it can be to pick the mind of someone like that taxi driver, it can also be very enlightening. If nothing else, the man certainly has a great wealth of experience under his belt, and those who toy with following in his footsteps would do well to sit up and take notice.

So, here was his response: “What would I tell him? I would tell him, stick with your first wife! Nothing can compare to a first wife. She will take care of you. She will take care of your children. She will take care of your property...”

Now, apparently realizing how unintelligent he was making himself sound for having done anything but that, he added for good measure, “I personally had no way whatsoever to stay with my first wife. For me, looking at her is like looking at satan! But if a man has any ability to make it work with his first wife, then that is what he should do!”

Life’s trappings carry a huge allure. Money. Smarts. Social savvy. Looks. You name it. And it’s not as though these things are inherently evil. After all, the Torah makes a point to tell us that the *imahos* were beautiful and that the *avos* attained great wealth.

The desire to aim high and be a big achiever is inherently a good thing. It’s like a light high in the sky that helps us navigate towards the right direction. But it’s not the attractive light itself that we’re meant to be headed towards. That type of light is just a guidepost to help us point in the right direction. But the real aim is much deeper and carries the true significance and meaning of life.

What can sometimes happen, though, is that the system gets hijacked. Like the flying insects that live in urban areas who have essentially lost the reality of night to an overabundance of artificial lights, we live in a day and age wherein there is such a massive, artificially induced overabundance of life’s trappings.

And it can tend to really throw us off.

Instead of using life’s trappings as an effective navigating tool, we can wind up getting sucked into a perpetual, purposeless pattern of endlessly circling them. Trapped, essentially, in a spiraling nosedive towards nothing but an inferno of destruction wherein the end result may wind up

being no money, no wife, and no house – or some other, equally disastrous outcome.

Thankfully, HaKadosh Baruch Hu has given us a prodigious *seichel* that we can use to recognize when our system has been hijacked. We have the ability to compensate for the skew in navigation and right ourselves back onto the course.

I believe that one of the ways that we can do that is by listening to someone who has “been there, done that”.

And what does he have to say? “Stick with your first wife!” In other words, “Don’t get caught up in the insane, artificially-induced overabundance of life’s trappings. Keep your focus on what really counts. Grab hold of it, and never let go!”

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