

Reb Bunim used to tell this story to his followers the first time they visited him:

There was once an impoverished man named Reb Isaac ben Yakil of Krakow. He lived in poverty for many years, not knowing where his next bread crust would come from.

One night, he dreamed that there was precious buried treasure under a specific bridge in Prague. At first, he paid no attention to the dream, assuming it was mere wishful thinking. After all, who doesn't dream of riches? But he began to reconsider when the dream repeated itself night after night. Perhaps there was something to it? Could it possibly be true?

So, he set off for Prague—a long and tiring journey. There, he discovered that the bridge from his dream was real, but it was right near the royal palace and thus heavily guarded at all hours. Soldiers marched up and down, alert and ready, looking for signs of danger or unusual activity. Digging under the bridge was clearly out of the question. Oh, how disappointing.

But Reb Isaac was not going to give up that easily. He returned to the bridge day after day until the guards began to recognize him. Soon, they became curious. "Why do you come to the bridge every day?" one of the guards asked him. "Are you waiting for someone?"

Reb Isaac knew they wouldn't believe some half-hearted excuse, so he told them about his dream. The guard listened, threw back his head, and laughed heartily. "You can all this way because of a silly dream? You fool! I had a dream that a certain Jew, Reb Isaac Ben Yakil, has buried treasure under his stove, but do you see me going on a wild good chase? Of course not!" and he laughed uproariously.

At that, Reb Isaac hurried off to buy a ticket for the first train back to Krakow. Now he knew where to look. Sure enough, when Reb Isaac arrived at his home, he immediately shoved the iron stove out of the way and began digging on the hard dirt floor. And, to his great joy and astonishment, after some effort, he uncovered a chest of gold coins!

He used the money to build a magnificent synagogue that bore his name, and with the rest of the money, he built himself a comfortable home and furnished it well.

In one of Agatha Christie's tales, her detective hero Hercule Poirot (hur-kyool pwaa-row) says to his good friend Captain Hastings: It is your destiny to stand beside me and prevent me from committing the unforgivable error."

"What do you call the unforgivable error?" The captain asks. Poirot answers: "Overlooking the obvious."

When we stop to reflect on the detective's answer, we realize that overlooking the obvious is indeed a human error—perhaps not an unforgivable error, but an opportunity nonetheless. We have explored the furthest reaches of space and investigated the deepest regions of the

oceans, but our attention has been focused far from us instead of what is so crucial close at hand.

The unforgivable error of overlooking the obvious is not a result of our unquenchable desire to know our world and universe more intimately or our excitement about discovering discoveries. Instead, it has been a human practice as far back as we can remember. In our Torah portion, we have two compelling examples.

The first concerns Abraham, and the second concerns Hagar. Both offer similar depictions of humans who temporarily overlook the obvious and then face a meaningful change in their lives.

At the beginning of the Parsha, the Torah teaches:

*God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men were standing over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent entrance, and bowed down to the earth...*

In other words, Abraham was sitting at one of the four entrances of his tent, ready to greet anyone who passed by. And yet, he doesn't realize that three strangers are standing on top of him (see Rashi's comment) until he looks up. When he realizes they are close, he gets up and runs to greet them. We later learn that the three men were, in fact, three angels on a mission to change Abraham's life. Despite their proximity, Abraham was not aware of their presence. And once he saw them, he changed his life forever.

Our second example of overlooking the obvious is related to Hagar, Sarah's handmaid and the mother of Abraham's child, Ishmael.

Hagar and her son Ishmael are dying of thirst after being sent away from Abraham's and Sarah's camp in the wilderness of Ber Sheva. In despair, she places the child under a shrub for protection from the sun and sits a distance away.

According to the parsha, Hagar thought: "I cannot look on as the child suffers. And sitting at a distance, she wept loudly - then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She filled the bottle with water and gave the lad a drink."

If we carefully read the narrative and language used, we find something unique about the interaction between Hagar and God. The text does not say that God miraculously made a well appear before Hagar and Ishmael. What was absent was now divinely transported to sustain the two figures.

Instead, God "opened Hagar's eyes" to a well that had been there all along—the obvious she had overlooked. Hagar's salvation had always been close at hand.

Could we imagine for a moment that a similar occurrence could happen to us? Somehow, without effort, our eyes could be opened to the obvious. What could that accomplish? Rabbi Sidney Greenberg taught that if our eyes were indeed opened: “what an effective antidote that would be to our gnawing discontent, our insatiable ambitions, our quiet desperation, our restless nights, our parched days.”

When we overlook the obvious, we lose sight of the unforgettable grandeur of our world, relationships, and blessings and are also distracted from our infinite potential. “If only,” we say. If only I lived elsewhere. If only I had a different position. If only other people surrounded me.

When we’re in that mindset, we might be well helped by focusing on the obvious and not making the unforgivable error.