

CIVILITY IN TIMES OF DURESS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape # 58, Yom Tov in Yerushalayim. Good Shabbos!

Legacy from Yaakov Avinu: Maintaining Civility In Times of Duress

There is an interesting Medrash on this week's Parsha: When G-d said to Moshe Rabbeinu, "Make them 'Flags' as they desire", Moshe began to complain. Moshe said, "Now there will be divisions and disputes between the tribes".

In other words, Moshe reasoned, "Once I start dividing and specifying who travels in the East and who travels in the West, who is in front and who is in back, I know what's going to happen -- people are going to start arguing. If I tell the tribe of Yehudah, they should travel in the East, they will come back and say they want to travel in the South; and so too with the tribe of Reuvain, and the tribe of Ephraim, and so forth with each of the tribes. What am I going to do? I know there's going to be machlokes."

G-d responded to Moshe, "Moshe, what are you worried about? -- They know their proper places by themselves. This has all been previously worked out; there is a system that they received from Yaakov Avinu regarding how to camp by 'flags'."

How did they get this system from Yaakov Avinu -- after all, Yaakov died long before their current travels in the Wilderness?

The answer is that the Tribes were to circle the Mishkan now, in the exact formation in which they circled the coffin of Yaakov when they returned his body from Egypt to the Land of Israel for burial. Yaakov gave this formation to his sons as part of his death-bed instructions: Yehudah, Yissachar, and Zevulun will carry my coffin from the East; Reuvain, Shimeon, and Gad will carry it from the South; Ephraim, Menashe, and Binyamin will carry it from the West; and Dan, Asher, and Naftali will carry the coffin from the North.

Therefore, G-d told Moshe Rabbeinu that the travel formations around the Mishkan are already all

worked out. There is no need to worry about fights or about Machlokes.

Rav Mordechai Rogov, zt"l, a Rosh Yeshiva in Skokie, interpreted this Medrash as follows:

It is the nature of people to act with civility and treat each other with respect when things are all right and secure. However, when people are thrown into conditions of danger and insecurity, into conditions of duress and of pressure, then, those niceties of humanity and civility begin to decline.

Moshe Rabbeinu was worried that he was facing a situation of traveling with Klal Yisroel in the Wilderness; a dessert lurking with danger, with the possibility of attacks from animals and enemies. Even though they were being protected, they still felt themselves to be constantly in a place of danger. Moshe feared that Klal Yisroel would deteriorate in terms of their menschlichkeit and in terms of how they would treat one another.

When people are forced into such a situation they begin to lose the manner of humanity (tsuras haAdam). It is one thing to walk around with a veneer of humanity now, but what of times of war, of famine, of danger? This was Moshe's worry.

G-d's response was they have a heritage from the Patriarch Yaakov, that people under duress and under tough times and in times of danger -- can still act with humanity. Because, at the time when their father was about to die, during the time of the personal tragedy of losing a Yaakov Avinu, he taught them and gave over to them a lesson. Yaakov Avinu taught them a lesson that they would take with them not only on that occasion but for thousands and thousands of years. The lesson that Yaakov taught them is how a Jew should act in times of Tsores; how a Jew should act in times of pressure.

This is what the Medrash is teaching. Not just that Yaakov taught them how to position themselves geographically around his coffin. Yaakov Avinu, knowing that there would be pogroms and inquisitions and concentration camps, knew that he had to teach his sons that Klal Yisroel must know how to act with humanity (tsu zein a mensch) even under the worst of circumstances. This is what G-d reassured Moshe Rabbeinu -- that Klal Yisroel learned from no less a personage than Yaakov Avinu how a Jew has to act in times of tsores.

I am sure we have all heard the stories -- and there are not only hundreds, there are thousands of stories -- about the Holocaust. There are many stories about people who were treated like animals, who were treated worse than animals, yet they did not lose their humanity; they did not lose their civility. When they were treated like animals, they nevertheless acted like Angels.

There are many stories about what Jews did on Yom Kippur and on Chanukah and how they exhibited self-sacrifice. However, one simple story about one simple Jew, seems to me, to tell it all. The story did not take place at Neilah or on Yom Kippur; it was not on Rosh Hashannah, but on an ordinary, regular day.

It is a story about a Jew who writes that bread in the concentration camp was not only a scarce

commodity, it was a commodity that consumed all their thinking hours: Should one eat the bread right away or should one save it and eat it in nibbles? Should one eat it right away or should one eat it at the end of the day when they would be tired and hungry so they could fall asleep. Should the bread be eaten all at once or should it be rationed so it could be eaten all throughout the day? Chakiras and Derishas about a piece of bread! This is what a piece of bread meant -- literally life!

A Jew who survived writes that he was in a camp and was given an order to see the Commandant of the camp, which meant only one thing - - his time was up.

What did a Jew do when he knew his time was up? First of all he recited Vidui and he made peace with his Maker. Then he would exchange his clothes with another person. He would give his shoes to someone else who had tattered shoes, knowing that he would not need his own much longer. He took off his better winter coat and gave it to someone else, because he knew that he would have no need for it. And that precious piece of bread that he had saved the entire day, he gave to another Jew who was weak and half-starved and could so dearly use another piece of bread.

He went to the Commandant and as Providence would have it, he wasn't killed. He came back to his camp. They were all elated to see him and the person who took the piece of bread said, "Here, take back your piece of bread -- you have to eat it; I can't take it anymore - - you are still among the living, not among the dead".

Where does a Jew get the strength, that under such situations, when he is treated worse than an animal, he still acts like an Angel?

This is the tradition that we have from the Patriarch Yaakov. When Yaakov told them how to carry the coffin -- he was giving them guidance how to always conduct themselves even in moments of extreme pain and distress -- not only then, but for all the bitter days of Exile. This is what G-d reassured Moshe Rabbeinu: You don't have to worry about Klal Yisroel -- about how they are going to act in the Wilderness -- because they have a legacy they received from the Patriarch Yaakov.

Glossary

tsores -- troubles

Mishkan -- Tabernacle

machlokes -- arguments

Moshe Rabbeinu -- Moses our teacher

Yaakov Avinu -- the Patriarch Jacob

Klal Yisroel -- the Nation of Israel

menshlichkeit -- civility

Mishkan -- Tabernacle

Chakiras and Derishas -- (idiomatically) careful analysis and consideration;

Vidui -- Confession

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