

ONE FOR THE BIRDS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 211, Animal Experimentation. Good Shabbos!

Rash"i's Comment About the Raven Is Not 'One for the Birds'

Towards the end of the flood Noach sent out a raven to see whether the waters had subsided. However, the raven circled the ark and did not fulfill his mission of seeking dry land [Bereishis 8:7]. Rash"i informs us (based on Sanhedrin 108b) that the raven suspected Noach of having "improper intentions" towards its mate. The raven felt it had to keep an eye on the situation and therefore just circled the ark so that Noach would not steal his wife.

I heard a true story on a tape from Rav Wolfson, who is a faculty member at the Ohr Somayach Yeshiva in Israel. Rav Wolfson met a student who had just started learning in Ohr Somayach and was a Chozer B'Teshuvah [a recent returnee to studying and practicing Judaism]. Rav Wolfson asked the student what material he was learning and how he was doing. The student replied that he was learning Chumash with Rash"i and everything was fine -- except for one Rash"i that he found to be 'ridiculous'.

Rav Wolfson asked, "which Rash"i is that?" The student pointed to the Rash"i quoted above and labeled Rash"i's comment "patently ridiculous!"

At best, this seems to be a strange Rash"i. Rav Wolfson, however, gave the student a beautiful answer:

The trouble is that we fail to appreciate the distinction between Halacha [legal texts] and Aggadah [homiletic texts]. The latter are written in a different style. The words may be the same words, but, in fact, they are written in code. In order to understand what our Rabbis mean in Aggadah, one requires the 'keys' to interpret the code. Chazal [Our Sages] are not teaching us something about ravens here. Chazal are teaching us about human beings. In the context of the world of Aggadah, they used the raven.

Of course the raven's fear was ridiculous! But why did the raven have such a ridiculous thought? Because the raven was paranoid! When one is paranoid, one thinks the most ludicrous and ridiculous things in the world. Certainly the raven was crazy. But, when a general picks a soldier to go on a risky spy mission, the soldier can think one of two things: (A) The general picked me because I am the bravest, the smartest, the fastest; or (B) The general picked me because he wants to get rid of me. Someone who is paranoid can come up with the most unbelievable theories in the world.

This is not only true with ravens. Has it ever happened that we are attending a wedding or other occasion and we see two people talking to each other at the side of the room -- and as we approach, they stop talking? What is our reaction? "They must have been talking about me. That is why they stopped. I wonder what they were saying. What did I ever do to them?"

These are paranoid thoughts. Really they were just gossiping about someone else. They were embarrassed to have someone hear them gossiping, so when the person came over, they stopped. This is the logical explanation. But one who is paranoid can come up with the most ludicrous of theories.

People are paranoid and think in these terms because they are egocentric. They think that everybody is talking about them, as if those people have nothing better to do with their time. A person whose world revolves only around himself is bound to think like that. Such a person can only view the world in his own terms.

We tend to analyze the actions or reactions of other people in terms of ourselves. (Why did that person in the supermarket answer me so coldly? Why is he angry with me? What did I do to him?) In fact, the reactions of others are best explained in terms that are related solely to themselves. (He is upset because he just had a fight with his wife or boss or any of fifty other reasons. The most unlikely reason in the world is related to the person who he answered coldly.)

Someone once told me that until age 20 (for any of us who have teenage children, we know this to be the honest truth,) one is totally preoccupied with what others think of him or her. From age 20 to 40, when one's ego is more developed, one's attitude becomes "I don't care what they say about me. Let them say whatever they want about me. I am my own person -- I'll dress the way I want, I'll drive the way I want, I'll look the way I want, I am going to do what I want."

Sometime after age 40 -- I do not know exactly when -- a person realizes that people are not thinking about him at all. "I don't occupy such an important place in everyone else's world. People don't even care how I dress or look or what I drive or what I say."

If we can take the focus off ourselves, we will be less paranoid and less compulsive and less concerned about what others say. We can then become more interested in improving our own world.

Sources and Personalities

Rash"i (1040-1105) [Rav Shlomo ben Yitzchak]; Troyes and Worms, France.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Noach are provided below:

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