

NEVER DISCOUNT THE MINORITY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

This dvar Torah was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 220, Host Mothers in Halacha. Good Shabbos!

The Identity of a Jew

The Torah tells us that Yosef sent wagons (Agalos) laden with food to Yaakov, in order to provide proof that he was still alive [Bereishis 45:21]. There is a famous Medrash which explains that the reason Yaakov was convinced that Yosef was still alive was that this gift was really a play on words. The word Agalah [wagon] was symbolic of the word Eglah [calf]. Eglah was reminiscent of the halachic subject of Eglah Arufah [the decapitated Calf]. [Devorim 21:1-9; Sotah Chapter 9] Yaakov and Yosef were in the middle of studying this subject, Eglah Arufah, when they were separated.

As soon as Yaakov saw the wagons, he realized that Yosef was alive, and had not even a shadow of a doubt [45:27]. Yaakov immediately associated the Agalos with the Eglah Arufah, the last halachic section they had studied.

I would like to relate a very interesting incident that happened in the time of the Gaon of Vilna. Apparently, a couple had gotten married, and immediately after the wedding the husband vanished. He was never heard from again. The wife was an Agunah [a 'chained' wife]; she was unable to remarry because she was still married to her vacant husband, and the Beis Din had no way to know whether her husband was not, in fact, still alive.

Thirty years later, a fellow walked into town, went to this woman and announced, "I'm home". The halachic question was -- do we believe this fellow who claims to be the husband, or not? People change a tremendous amount in thirty years, but still, no one recognized the man. This was a very serious matter, involving an Eishes Ish [a married woman].

On the other hand, the fellow did not come unprepared. The man told the woman things that only the husband could conceivably have known. He told her all about the wedding. He even knew intimate information about her. The man provided seemingly undeniable proof that he must be the husband. The details that he presented were all things which ostensibly only the husband could

have known.

The Vilna Gaon was consulted regarding whether or not the man could be believed. The Vilna Gaon told them to take the man into the shul [synagogue] and ask him to identify his makom kavuah [regular seat] where he used to pray. They took the man into the shul and asked him to identify his regular seat. The man was unable to identify his makom kavuah. The Gaon then identified the person as a fraud and a liar. Why?

This person wanted to trick the poor woman... He obviously had spoken to the real husband and bothered to find out many "important" details, but since he was not an honest, God-fearing, Jew, he did not bother to find out about matters of spirituality (Devorim she'b'Kedusha). The man could identify the color of his suit on the wedding day, the color of the flowers, the name of the band, all the 'foolish' matters. But there is one thing that a person who does not take his Judaism seriously will not think about finding out: the Devorim she'b'Kedusha, the holy matters in the life of a Jew.

The important thing in our lives is not what color our car is. The important thing in our lives is where we pray in synagogue, what tractate of Talmud we are studying, etc. Therefore the Gaon knew that this person was a con artist and was not the real husband.

We learn this lesson from Yosef and Yaakov. When Yosef wanted to give undeniable proof to his father Yaakov that he was indeed Yosef, the incontrovertible piece of evidence he presented was the halachic portion that they were studying. On the day that Yosef left, what was the 'Daf' [folio of Talmud] that they studied? What was the 'sugyah' [Talmudic subject] that they were studying? That is the way serious Jews identify themselves. Not by where they went fishing together, nor by where they played ball together, nor by all the other foolish aspects of life. Yosef identified himself to Yaakov by the essence of Jewish identity -- the Torah topic that they last discussed.

The Vilna Gaon was not engaged in miraculous revelation. This was just common sense. A Jew knows where he prays and where he learns -- because those are the key aspects of his life.

Sources and Personalities

Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797) [Rav Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman]; Vilna.

Rambam (1135-1204) [Rav Moshen ben Maimon]; Spain, Egypt.

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