

PHAROAH WAS WICKED, BUT ASTUTE

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 # 83, The Burning Issue of Smoking. Good Shabbos!

Pharoah Was Wicked and Cynical, but Astute

The pasuk [verse] says that Moshe Rabbeinu told Pharoah *"With our youngsters and with our elders we will go..."* [Shemos 10:9]. In other words, "We want to go out with everyone -- no exceptions!" Pharoah responds [10:11] *"Not so, let the men go..."* In other words, "that's not the way it's going to be, I only want to let the men go out."

The Baal HaTurim suggests that when Pharoah says "men" in this pasuk, his intention is males between the ages of 20 and 60. Pharoah refused to allow those under 20 or over 60 to leave. On the other hand, this is precisely what Moshe Rabbeinu had asked for -- permission for the youth and the elders to leave as well!

If one thinks about it, Pharoah was being very astute. It was cynical and wicked, but it was astute, nevertheless. Pharoah understood something about the Jewish people. In order for there to be a Jewish people, there has to be a past and there has to be a future.

Klal Yisroel must have a past. We are a religion with a concept of "Mesorah," a concept of "Tradition" that we get from our fathers and from our fathers' fathers. This concept is vital to what Judaism is all about. But we are also a religion that believes that unless we have someone to give over this heritage to, we have no future.

When Pharoah said, "Let the men go" he was, in effect, saying, "I don't want the young to go and I don't want the elderly to go. I'm taking away your past and your future."

Moshe Rabbeinu responds that this is obviously unacceptable. The only way in which we can go forward as a Nation, is with our youth and with our elders.

The Yalkut says "Four individuals minted coins..." The first person to mint a coin was our Patriarch Avraham. What was on Avraham's coin? Our Sages tell us that on one side of the coin was an elderly

man and woman (zaken u'zekana) and on the other side of the coin was a young man and young woman (bachur u'besulah). Avraham Avinu was the founder of the Jewish Nation. He "minted the coin" of Klal Yisroel. He understood that in order for there to be a Jewish People there has to be an old man and old woman on one side -- representing the generation that provides us with guidance, and that transmits to us instruction of what we should and should not do. But, there also has to be the young man and young woman on the other side -- representing the future.

This is what Pharoah wanted to take away from us. And this is why Moshe Rabbeinu responded, "No. We must also take our youngsters and our elders."

A Letter From The Alter of Kelm to Baron Rothschild

At the end of the Parsha we have a Mitzvah to *"Sanctify for Me (G-d) all the first born..."* [13:2] The first born of human beings and animals are holy to G-d. Why? Because G-d passed over Egypt on the night of Pesach and killed the first born of the Egyptians while sparing the first born of Israel. Is that a reason for the first born to be invested with a holiness which lasts until today?

There is an interesting letter, about which I do not know the historical context, but this letter is from Rav Simcha Zissel of Kelm to Baron Rothschild.

Baron Rothschild, as we all know, was a fantastically wealthy person who put his money to good use. He helped thousands and thousands of Jews.

The Alter from Kelm writes the following to Baron Rothschild:

I want to express my gratitude to you for all the generous and kind acts, which you have done for the entire Jewish people. Do not suspect, Heaven forbid, that I am coming with my own request for funds. However, in my humble opinion, I have to express my sense of gratitude for all that you have done to help the Jewish people. You are a person who stands before Kings and nevertheless you do not forget from where you came, and therefore maintain your support for Jewish needs. This is a great Sanctification of G-d's Name and your reward is very great. Based on legal obligation (al pi din), I feel I have to express my thanks, honor, and appreciation to such an individual and to such a Sanctification of G-d's name.

Then the Alter from Kelm continues...

Think for a minute. The Halacha was to have been that the First Born were to have done the Service in the Temple. Had it not been for the sin of the Golden Calf, the Bechorim [first born] would have served G-d in the Beis HaMikdash, instead of the Kohanim. Why? Because they were passed over on that night of Pesach. As a result, until this very day there is a sanctity of the first born. Not only does this sanctity apply to the first born of a human, but even to the first born of an animal.

Rav Simcha Zissel asks, "Why? What did the Bechorim do, that made them holy?" They were merely passive. They were born first and therefore were saved by G-d, when He killed the first born. So what? What did the first born do that would have made them holier than a regular person, and fit for the Temple Service until this very day?

Rav Simcha Zissel answers, that they participated -- albeit passively -- in a Sanctification of G-d's Name. When G-d, in his Own Glory came into Egypt and killed the Egyptian first born while sparing the Jewish first born, that was a tremendous Kiddush HaShem. That may have been the greatest manifestation of G-d's power, up to that point in history.

The first born, passively aided and abetted this great Kiddush HaShem. A person who even passively helps to create a Sanctification of G-d's name, has a very great reward... to the extent that even today a first born is holy. Why? Because thousands of years ago the Bechorim 'helped' make a Kiddush HaShem.

If this is the reward for a person who passively helps in a Kiddush Hashem, how can we begin to contemplate, says the Alter from Kelm, what the reward is of a person that actively goes and makes a Kiddush Hashem?

"Therefore, you, Baron Rothschild, considering who you are and what you have done, have actively and publicly Sanctified G-d's Name. Therefore, the greatest honor, respect and sense of Hakarat HaTov is due to you, merely by virtue of this fact."

This is the lesson of the parsha of Bechor. Even passively helping create a Kiddush HaShem is a tremendous zechus [merit]. How much more of a Kiddush HaShem are we creating, when, in our daily lives, the way we act, the way we talk, the way we negotiate, the way we deal in business and the way we act among people -- Jew and non-Jew alike -- Sanctifies G-d's Name?

If we use opportunities to go out of our way to make that Kiddush HaShem; if we say that extra "Good Morning," if we are assiduously honest; if we go the extra mile to make that Kiddush Hashem so that they can say about us "You are my Servant, Israel, through whom I will be Glorified" [Yeshaya 49:3]; that they can say upon us "How pleasant are his ways" [Talmud Yoma 86a]; how beautiful are the ways of a religious Jew; then, as the Alter from Kelm writes, our reward will be very great.

Glossary

Klal Yisroel -- Jewish Nation

Kohanim -- Priests

Bechor(im) -- First Born (plural)

Beis HaMikdash -- Temple (literally, 'Sanctified House')

Kiddush HaShem -- Sanctification of the Name (of G-d)

HaKarat HaTov -- Gratitude (literally, 'Recognition of the Good')

Personalities & Sources:

Ba'al HaTurim -- Torah commentary by R. Yaakov ben Asher (1268-1340), author of the Tur. First published in 1514 in Constantinople.

Yalkut (Shimoni) -- early collection of Midrashic material compiled by Rav Shimon Ashkenazi HaDarshan of Frankfort (circa 1260). First published in Salonika 1521-27.

Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv of Kelm -- (1824-1898), known as the "Alter (old one) from Kelm. One of the early "Ba'ale Mussar" (Masters of Ethics).

Baron Edmond James De Rothschild -- (1845-1934) philanthropist, patron of Jewish causes and Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel. Known as the "Father of the Yishuv" and "the well-known benefactor" (haNadiv haYadua).

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