

ENCOURAGING NEWS BEFORE ROSH HASHANA

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

"RavFrand" - Rabbi Frand on Parshas Netzavim - Vayeilech

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #205, Kiddush Before T'kiyas Shofar. Good Shabbos!

*This week's class is dedicated in loving memory of Mrs. Anne K. Goldberg
L'zaycher nishmas Chana Tie'bul bas Yisroel*

Encouraging News Before Rosh HaShannah

In this week's Parsha, Moshe Rabbeinu tells the Jewish People that he has given them a clear choice: "*Behold I have placed before you today that which is life and that which is good; that which is death and that which is evil... And you shall choose Life, in order that you and your children shall live*" [Devorim 30:15-19].

The Medrash comments on this verse: "And Rav Chagai says, 'Not only this, but I have given you two paths and have gone above the requirements of the law by telling you which path to take.'"

What is the meaning of this Medrash? Why is G-d telling the Jews to choose Life, considered "Lifnim m'shuras Hadin" [over and beyond the call of duty]? It seems that G-d was merely placing the two options on the table, so to speak, and giving good advice -- to choose Life. How is G-d saying "*And you shall choose Life,*" considered 'above and beyond the call of duty?'

I saw an answer from the son of Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld. There is a verse in Parshas Bechukosai [Vayikra 26:3] which says, "*If you will walk in my statutes and keep my commandments and do them.*" Our Rabbis comment, "if you will keep (u'smartem) the commandments, I will

consider it as if you have done them (v'asisem)."

What is this verse teaching us? Is it not obvious that if we keep the mitzvos, we are doing them?

We see an amazing thing from this. The words "*es Mitzvosai Tishmoru*" do not mean "if you keep my Mitzvos." The root "tishmoru" comes from the etymology of "*And his father kept the matter*" (v'Aviv shamar es hadavar) [Bereishis 37:11]. In other words, according to the Medrash, the verse is saying, "If you make the mental note to keep my commandments, if you accept in principle to keep them, then I will consider it as if you **have** kept them."

Where do we see that the Torah considers a person to have kept the Torah, even if the person has only agreed in **principle** to keep the Mitzvos?

Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld says that this is what we learn from the verse "*And you shall choose Life*" [Devorim 30:19]. The "above and beyond the call of duty" to which the Medrash refers is that G-d promised, "if you **choose** Life," then I will consider it as if it has already been done. If you merely accept in principle to observe, then it will be considered as if you already observe.

G-d is not asking for action here. G-d is asking for commitment: "Just raise your hands and I will consider it as if you are already on My 'team.'" The Medrash is alluding to this great kindness that G-d provided for us.

This is perhaps one of the most encouraging things to hear before Rosh HaShannah. When we go into the Day of Judgment and reflect back on this year, knowing that we are not up to par, we wonder "how can we make a deal, what can we do to improve our balance sheet?" We wonder, "How can we get an infusion of spiritual capital right before the Yom HaDin [Day of Judgment]?"

This Chazal is telling us is that a sincere acceptance to become better, to do specific things, gives one credit as if he has already done them. That is the wondrous novelty of the verse, "*And you shall choose Life.*"

If, perhaps, the amount that one learns Torah has slipped, and one would really like to learn every day rather than a couple of times a week... If he sincerely commits to learning every day, then he can go into the Yom HaDin in the Eyes of HaShem as if he learns every day.

As long as that acceptance is sincere, and is more specific than merely, "I'm going to be better," and as long as it can be quantified and identified in one's mind and sincerely accepted, then the 'chiddush' of "*And you shall choose Life*" teaches us that, as of today -- Erev Rosh HaShannah -- one is viewed in the eyes of G-d as if he has already become better.

Who doesn't need to improve his appearance before G-d, only days before Rosh HaShannah? All G-d wants is "*And you shall choose*" -- a vote, a sincere commitment to improve in specific, quantifiable areas. Then "I will account it for you, as if it were done."

Have A Kesivah V'Chasima Tova!

Personalities & Sources:

Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld -- (1848-1932), Rav of the Old City of Jerusalem (Yishuv HaYashan).

Glossary:

Lifnim m'shuras HaDin -- literally, before the line of Judgment (over and beyond the call of duty)

Yom HaDin -- Day of Judgment (Rosh Hashannah)

daven (Ma'ariv) b'Tzibbur -- pray (evening service) with a prayer quorum [minyan].

chiddush -- novel interpretation

Ribbono shel Olam -- Master of the World.

Erev Rosh HaShannah -- the eve of the Jewish New Year

Kesiva v'Chasima Tova -- (traditional blessing to be) written and inscribed (by G-d for) good (during the High Holiday period).

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