

JUST SAY "NO"

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 #202, Melech v'lo Malkah: A Jewish Queen? Good Shabbos!

Having the Ability to Just Say "No"

In this week's Parsha (Torah portion), the Torah tells us: "When you come to the Land that HaShem your G-d gives you, you shall not learn to act according to the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you one who causes his son or daughter to pass through the fire, one who practices divinations, an astrologer, one who reads omens, a sorcerer." [Devorim 18:9-10]

Many non-Jews believe in the powers of stars, of astrology, and magic. This is not for you. You have a G-d. You have prophets. You don't need all these things.

One of the fundamental differences between the Torah and other religions is that the Torah believes that a human being has the power to rise above the forces of nature. Non-Jews believe that a person is bound and subject to the forces of nature. "Forces of nature" can include astrology and sorcery and the stars and they can also include human passions -- "I can't control myself."

One of the basic beliefs of our religion is that man is in charge of himself. That is what the verse (pasuk) is telling us here.

The non-Jews are perhaps bound by nature, by what the 'stars say,' but "with you it is not like this (v'Ata Lo ken)" [Devorim 18:14]. You have the ability to say "No."

Even though our instincts would drive us to follow them, but we have the power of "Lo ken" -- of saying, "That is not the way it is going to be!" We have the ability to control ourselves, to say "No", and to overcome nature and even overcome the 'decree of the stars.' Israel has no Mazal [Shabbos 156a] -- we are not bound by that!

Every day in davening (our prayers) we say "U'Mosar haAdam min haBeheima ayin." The standard way of translating this phrase is "And the difference between man and animal is minimal." The Ba'alei Mussar, however, explain it as follows: The difference between man and beast is "ayin" -- the ability

to say "No!"

If an animal is hungry, he has to eat. If an animal is in heat it has to follow its body. The difference between man and animal, is the ability to control oneself and say "No."

This is a fundamental difference between Judaism and other religions. The philosophy that 'I am overpowered by nature,' that 'I have to give in,' is not a Jewish outlook. We believe one IS able to control himself. We can just say "No."

Reading One's Own Biography in the Torah

In this week's parsha, we learn of the king's obligation to write for himself a private "royal copy" of the Sefer Torah. The Talmud tells us that even though every Jew has a Mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah, the king has a separate command over and above this to write a royal Sefer Torah, which was to accompany him wherever he went. "And it shall be with him and he should read it all the days of his life in order that he learn to fear HaShem, to observe all the words of this Torah..." [Devorim 17:19].

The Ba'alei Derush say that the pasuk is telling us more than just the fact that the king has to READ the Torah daily. He has to plot his life each and every day, according to what is written in the Torah. They interpret, homiletically, that he has to read in it (v'kara bo) his entire biography (kol yemei chayav), all the events of his life.

When a king has a question as to what to do, he has to be able to look in the Torah and come up with the answer.

All Israel are sons of kings [Shabbos 67a]. In this respect, all Jews have to be like princes. Happy is the man who can read his life in the Torah.

I once heard a story about Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, zt"l. When he first came to the United States he was a Rav in Seattle, Washington for a short time and then he became Rav in Toronto, Canada.

Someone was once walking with Rav Yaakov in Toronto on the second day of Shavuous, some 40-50 years ago. Having just heard the reading of Megillas Ruth in shul, Rav Yaakov told his companion "I am no better than Elimelech."

"Elimelech left Eretz Yisroel because he was worried about his livelihood. He went from a place where there were Jews, to a place where there were no Jews -- the fields of Moab. He was willing to sacrifice the education and environment of his children, just so he could make a better living (escaping the famine in Israel)."

At that time, Toronto had not much to speak of in terms of a Torah community. Rav Yaakov rhetorically asked his companion "Why am I in Toronto, despite the fact that my children don't have the best environment? Parnosah! Because I have a job in Toronto and I don't have a job anywhere

else. I'm wrong! That is the very reason that Elimelech was punished. One is not supposed to put one's livelihood over the spiritual welfare of his family."

He concluded, "I must move to a more Jewish environment." On that very day he decided to move to New York where he eventually became the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah VoDaath. And the rest is history.

That is the meaning of being able to look into the Torah and read about the events of one's own life. We must strive to be able to read our own biographies in the Torah. That is what Rav Yaakov was capable of and that is what we have to aspire for.

Personalities & Sources:

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky -- (1891-1986)

Glossary

Mazal -- (Pre-destined luck or fate determined by the) constellations

Ba'alei Mussar -- Masters of ethics

Ba'alei Derush -- Masters of homiletics

Parnosah -- livelihood

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