

RIGHT THEN AND NOW

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Va'eyra

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape # 82, Astrology: Is It For Us? Good Shabbos!

We Knew It Was Right Then, And It Is Right Now!

In this week's Parsha, we find the posuk [verse], "And G-d spoke to Moshe and Aharon and commanded them regarding the Children of Israel and regarding Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to take the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt" [Shemos 6:13].

There is an interesting Talmud Yerushalmi in tractate Rosh Hashana, which infers from this pasuk that while still in Egypt, G-d commanded Moshe to give over the Mitzvah of Freeing Slaves to the Jewish people [Shemos 21:2-6]. When the pasuk tells us that Moshe and Aharon were to command the Children of Israel, it means that they would be delivering a command for the future: when they live in the land of Israel, and they have Jewish slaves, they should send them out to freedom after 6 years.

The question is obvious. Why is this an appropriate time to tell them about 'shiluach avadim?' They are slaves themselves. They don't own anything. They certainly don't own other slaves. Is it appropriate to give a person a mitzvah when he is years and years away from the ability to ever fulfill that command?

The answer, says the Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva, zt"l, is that there was no more appropriate time to tell them about 'shiluach avadim' than this very moment. Now they are slaves; now they know the feeling of having no freedom; now they know what it was to have a master.

It is a difficult thing to send away a slave. When one has a worker who has worked for him for six

years, it is not easy to send him away. It will be very difficult to fulfill that mitzvah. If G-d would have given them that mitzvah later on, when they already had their own slaves, they would have heard it in a different fashion.

One needs to hear something at a time when he will be most sensitive to it. The Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva said that one has to "seize the moment." There are moments in life which must be grabbed and seized. One has to grab the occasion, because it is fleeting. Now is the time to tell them about sending away poor slaves. Now it will make an impression. Now it will be meaningful.

This lesson of seizing the moment is something that we have to do in our daily lives. There is an unbelievable Gemara in Sanhedrin [20a] which explains the pasuk [Mishlei 31:29] *"Many daughters have acted with valor, but you have exceeded them all."* The Gemara says: 'Many daughters have acted with valor' refers to Yosef, the son of Yaakov, who overcame temptation with the wife of Potifar; but 'you have exceeded them all' refers to Palti ben Layish. The deed of Palti ben Layish far exceeded Yosef HaTzadik's accomplishment.

What did Palti ben Layish do? The Talmud relates that King Saul had a daughter who was married to David, but Saul argued that based on a technicality she was not married to David and she legally had no husband [despite the fact that according to halacha, David was right and King Saul was wrong]. Saul took this daughter and gave her as a wife to Palti ben Layish.

Palti ben Layish was faced with the following situation: He could not refuse King Saul; he had to take her as a wife. Yet, he knew very well that this was a married woman. There he was in the bedroom, the first night, with a woman who was an 'eishes ish.' What does he do in order that he should succeed in withstanding the temptation? The Gemara says that he took a sword and stuck it in the ground and said "Anyone who 'occupies himself with this matter' will be stabbed by the sword." The Gemara goes on to say that because of this tremendous act that he did, he had the help of Heaven and he lived for years with this woman and never once did he touch her. G-d saved him from sin.

What was so magnificent about the act of sticking the sword into the ground? Why did he merit this unbelievable "siyata d'ishmaya" [help from Heaven] that for years he never touched her? What was so significant about sticking a sword in the ground?

The answer is that on that first night, Palti ben Layish knew what was right and what was wrong. On that first night, he had his priorities straight. On that first night, he knew that she was a married woman and that she was off limits. But, he also knew that as time went on, as the days and the months and the years passed, those feelings would dissipate. He would come up with a 'heter' -- he would find an excuse. He would do something.

Therefore, he said to himself, "I need a reminder; I have to seize the moment." There are moments when one does not rationalize, when one can clearly see the truth. Those are the moments to seize as our permanent reminders.

This, says the Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva, is something that we must do so many times in life. There are many occasions when we will be put into situations where in the beginning we will know what's right and what's wrong. But, later on, there will be considerations -- financial considerations, professional considerations, all sorts of rationalizations. How do we know what is right and what is wrong? We have to seize the moment. We have to stick that symbolic sword in the ground and say to ourselves "I know what's right and what's wrong, and I am not going to let my morals slip; I am not going to let my standards slide!"

That is the lesson of Palti ben Layish. And that is the reason why G-d tells the Jews about freeing slaves, right here, when they are still slaves and they are sensitive to what is right and what is wrong.

We have to grab the opportunity so that when the time comes, when we have temptations and questions, we will always be able to look back and say "We knew it was right then -- and we know it is right now!"

Glossary

shiluach avadim -- sending slaves (to freedom)

eishes ish -- married woman

siyata d'ishmaya -- Help from Heaven (Aramaic)

heter -- permissive ruling

Personalities & Sources:

Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva -- Rav Chaim Shmulevitz (1902-1978); Mir, Jerusalem.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.

Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#); Baltimore, Maryland.

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