

DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape# 147, Sefiras HaOmer, Shavuos & the International Dateline. Good Shabbos!

The Double-Edged Sword of Opportunity and Responsibility

In this week's parsha we learn of the mitzvah of counting the Jewish people: "Count the entire congregation of Israel by their families, by their fathers' house." [Bamidbar 1:2]. We find this command twice in the book of Bamidbar, once here and once in parshas Pinchas. That is why Bamidbar is called Chumash HaPekudim -- the Book of the Countings or the Book of Numbers.

In expressing the idea of counting, the Torah uses the expression "Lift up the heads" (se-oo es rosh). The Medrash comments on this peculiar language: The expression "Nesius Rosh" employed here by the Torah can connote either the greatest heights or the lowest depths. Yosef tells the Butler that Pharoah will reinstate him to his position of glory with the expression "Yisa Pharoah es Roshcha" [Bereshis 40:13]. On the other hand, Yosef uses a similar expression in telling the Baker that Pharoah would behead him [Bereshis 40:19].

According to the Medrash, use of this particular language in the census indicates that every Jew has a very special opportunity, coupled with a very special responsibility.

We all know by now the name of Oliver North. Who was Oliver North? He was a member of the United States Marines, who was appointed to the National Security Council. He had a tremendous opportunity. He became a mover and shaker on issues of national security. However, he made terrible judgment calls and will probably be a person whose name is more closely associated with infamy than fame. This is an example of the double-edged sword of opportunity and responsibility.

People can have tremendous opportunity thrust upon them, and with that opportunity they can rise to the greatest heights. But if they don't treat it correctly and squander the opportunity, it can lead to tremendous downfall. That is why the Torah employs the language "Se- oo es Rosh" (lift the head). We must know that there is opportunity associated with being a part of the Chosen People. But responsibility comes together with privilege. Therefore, if a person squanders that privilege, the

person will not be the same as before -- but worse off.

Rav Dessler relates that when he was a boy, there were two beautiful glass dishes in his home. One day he broke one of the dishes. When his mother found out, she yelled at him terribly. A couple of weeks later, one of the chickens that were running around the house (late nineteenth century Europe) broke the other glass dish. Rav Dessler's mother picked up the broken pieces and put the chicken back into its cage. Rav Dessler, as a little boy, said, "It's better to be a chicken."

He relates that upon reflection -- even as a little boy -- he recognized his error. He could eat at the table and get real food, the chicken was kicked around and got fed dry corn, etc. He concluded that it was in fact better to be a person.

The moral of the story is that - yes, a chicken has less responsibility and less to worry about, but it remains a chicken, nothing more. A person has tremendous responsibility, but also tremendous privilege and opportunity. It is only when we squander and ruin this opportunity that we may ask, "why do I need this?"

That is why the Torah uses the language of "Se-oo es Rosh", which can mean Pharoah will raise you up or it can mean Pharoah will lift off your head.

Comment on Yom Tov of Shavuot

At the time of Matan Torah - the giving of the Torah, the pasuk [verse] uses the language "And Israel camped ('vayeechan' -- singular) at the foot of the mountain" [Shmos 19:2]. Our Sages tell us that the singular usage of the word 'vayeechan' implies that they were united in purpose like one man with one heart.

The language of Derech Eretz Zuta is "since they loved each other and despised divisiveness and camped as one individual, G-d said 'Now is the appropriate time to give the Torah to My children.'"

This concept of unity is an idea we have spoken of many times. I would like at this time to share an experience I had. A number of weeks ago I went to the Siyum HaShas [in 1990]. The experience of seeing over 20,000 G-d fearing Jews together in -- of all places -- Madison Square Garden is something which I hope I will carry with me for the rest of my life. It was an amazing sight.

At that time and place I received a new appreciation of what it means to be "like one man, with one heart". Unfortunately, as a result of our multitude of sins, there are not many things that 20,000 Jews can come together for. There are not many things that 20,000 Jews agree about. If one looked over the crowd, one could see such a beautiful diversity of people. I was sitting next to a Chassidische fellow -- round hat, Kappata, peyos, the works. Next to him was a fellow in a business suit, with a starched white shirt and a bow-tie. One looked around and saw Sephardim, Ashkenazim, Litvaks, Chassidim, Misnagdim. I saw people there that if I would have seen them on the street I wouldn't

have even suspected they knew there was such a thing as "Daf Yomi."

There is only one thing that we have today that could bring all these people together.

"You want to daven together?" "I daven a different nusach [order of prayers]."

"You want to talk about Eretz Yisrael?" "No." We can't agree about Israel, especially the politics.

There are so many things that we unfortunately disagree about. But there is one common denominator. There is one thing that cuts across and transcends everything. That is Torah. It is the same Torah for me, for the Chassid, for the Sephardi, for the lawyer with the bowtie and the Rabbi with the long coat. It is Torah. The "like one man, with one heart" accomplished that.

My heart tells me that this is an application of the principle that "the actions of the forefathers foreshadowed the actions of their descendants". 4000 years ago we were all there at Har Sinai, without divisiveness, without disputes, and without hatred, for one common goal -- to receive the Torah. That event in history made it possible for 22,000 people to come together from different backgrounds, but with one thing in common -- the study of Torah.

When we celebrate the Yom Tov of Shavuos and think about what Shavuos represents, we should keep in mind that Shavuos is the most amazing of Yomim Tovim [Jewish Holidays]. It gave us our national purpose, our national soul. That is what Rav Yosef meant, "If not for the day of Shavuos, I am just another Joe" [Pesachim 68b].

One of the most personally moving prayers of Yom Kippur is the prayer that reads "...We no longer have the Kohen, we no longer have the Duchan, Jerusalem is in shambles, the only thing that remains for us is this Torah..."

The Torah is all that is left to unite us. We argue about every little thing. But we can still agree on one thing. The Torah remains to unite us. This is a most powerful thing to celebrate. That is why Shavuos is such a special Yom Tov. It is what we are all about, because it is all that we have left.

When I sit at a Pesach Seder and I say "Next year in Jerusalem", I am saying hopefully I will not make the Seder like I made this year. Every year Yom Kippur, I conclude by saying "Next year it will be better -- I will be in Jerusalem and see how the Kohen Gadol does the Avodah [Service in the Temple]".

There are very few things in life that we can anticipate will be the same seven years from now. But one thing, I do look forward to with confidence, that it will be the same 7 years from now... "Hadran Alach Tinokes, u'sleekah lan maseches Nidah". G-d willing, Moshiach will come. But there is one thing that will be the same. It will be the same daf and the same Siyum and the same words. It is going to be exactly the same 7 years from now -- 2,711 days from now; it is going to be the same!

[And so it was! A few days before the arrival of Rosh HaShana 5758 (1998), over 70,000 Jews, - men, women and children - gathered and participated in a unified celebration of the "Tenth Siyum HaShas

of Daf Yomi".]

I ask, about how many things in life can we say it is going to be exactly the same 7 years from now? That is what Torah is all about. It is the bedrock of our life. Our nation is not a nation except through the Torah. Therefore the Yom Tov of Shavuos is the most wonderful of all holidays. If not for this glorious day, where would we all be? Good Yom Tov!

Glossary

Matan Torah -- Giving of the Torah (on Sinai)

Siyum HaShas -- Completion of the Talmud (based on learning Daf Yomi - a folio of Talmud per day for 7 years).

Kappata -- long black coat customarily worn in certain religious circles

peyos -- (dangling) side locks

Sources and Personalities

Rav Eliyahu Dessler -- (1892-1953) noted Baal Mussar; Lithuania, England, Israel; teachings recorded in multi-volume set Michtav M'Eliyahu.

Derech Eretz Zuta -- One of the fourteen so-called "Minor Tractates".

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