

POSITIVE PEER PRESSURE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Behar - Bechukosai

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape# 145 - Kidney Donations: Endangering Oneself to Save Another. . Good Shabbos!

The Shofar of the Jubilee Year: Positive Peer Pressure

In this week's parsha we learn of the mitzvah of Shmitah and Yovel - the Biblical command that every seventh year the land in Eretz Yisroel [Israel] must lie fallow and after every seven Shmitah cycles the Jubilee year begins in which all servants go free. To signify this, the Torah commands (Vayikra 25:9) "You shall sound the Shofar throughout the land", a mitzvah performed on Yom Kippur of the Yovel year -- the point in time at which time all slaves went free.

The Sefer HaChinuch in this week's parsha analyzes the significance of the Shofar. He points out that the matter of sending away one's servants is very difficult for a slave-owner to carry out. Slave owners sustained a very substantial financial loss.

In general, owning slaves was a financial bonanza. Just imagine -- for anyone who has a business -- what it would be like not to have to pay workers. There was no salary, no social security taxes, no pension, no Blue Cross, nothing. It was almost like having free labor (other than cost of food and basic care).

Now, all of a sudden, they must wave good-bye to the slaves. Slave owners incurred major financial losses. The Chinuch says that in order to give the people the strength and the encouragement to fulfill this very difficult command, the Torah requires the sounding of the Shofar throughout Eretz Yisroel, to give everyone the sense that they are not alone in making this sacrifice: It is a phenomenon that transpired throughout the land.

When the Shofar sounded throughout Eretz Yisroel, the slave owner recognized "I'm not the only one taking a financial killing; everyone is taking a financial bath. Everybody has to send out their slaves today."

The Chinuch emphasizes that nothing strengthens the spirit of mankind like universal public action. The fact that "everybody is doing it" is the greatest source of encouragement. That, according to the Chinuch, is why the Shofar was blown. If everyone else has to do it, it is easier for me to do it as well.

This is a tremendous insight. Nonetheless, we still might ask, "So what if everybody is doing it -- I will still to take a beating!" Why does this help?

All we have to do to answer this question is to read the newspaper or listen to the radio. The whole country is bombarded with the slogan "Just Say No to Drugs". Thank G-d that in our society, for the most part, we are insulated from this, but it is a plague that is smiting the entire country (makas medinah)! It is destroying all of society. There is not a kid in all of America that does not know that drugs are bad for him. So are they all idiots? They know it is going to hook them, they know it is going to kill them, and yet they all start? The answer is "Everybody is doing it". Peer pressure, social pressure is such that it can make a person do something that he does not want to do.

One can know something is bad for him, but as the Chinuch says, there is no greater encouragement to human activity than the fact that everyone is doing it.

That is why even though I know I have to send away my slave and it will cost me a fortune, I am strengthened by the fact that I know everyone is doing it as well. That is human nature. We are tremendously influenced by our peer and social pressure... to the extent that we will do something that is inherently bad for us, but we will be able to do it because everyone else is doing it.

The lesson to be learned from this is the importance of community. A person needs to understand that not only is one's spouse and immediate family a tremendous influence, but the type of community that one chooses to live in is as well. If everyone does something in one way, a person will feel obliged to conform -- for good or for bad. A person will act better than he would usually act, because of community standards, and on the other hand a person will act worse than he would otherwise act, because "listen, this is what everyone is doing".

We do not outgrow this. When we were teenagers there was peer pressure, but even as adults we have peer pressure, social pressure. Therefore it is imperative, no matter how old a person is, that he find a community that wants the right things out of life. He must put himself in such a community and put his children in such a community.

Children will not be able to withstand the forces of peer pressure. They are human beings and whatever their peers do, they will do. One should not fool himself. We are all influenced, especially children and teenagers who are so dependent on what their friends say. This is what the Torah is reminding us through the blowing of the Shofar throughout the Land.

The Martyrdom of Giving Up One's Money

The Beis Av, Rav Schlesinger, picks up at this point on the words of the Sefer HaChinuch. He says the words of the Chinuch are correct, but they don't solve the whole problem.

The Talmud relates [Rosh HaShannah 34b] that the Yom Kippur blowing on Yovel actually consisted of the exact same sequence of sounds with the exact same prayer ritual as performed ten days earlier on Rosh HaShannah [every year].

If the whole purpose -- the Beis Av argues -- of Shofar blowing on Yovel was to remind each slave owner that "everyone was doing it", there would be no need for the specific blowing of Malchiyus - Zichronos - Shofaros. There would be no need for exactly Tekiah- Teruah-Tekiah. There would be no need for the whole ritual of Rosh HaShannah all over again.

Why did the Yovel ritual replicate Rosh HaShannah all over again? Rav Schlesinger offers the following answer: One of the main factors of Shofar blowing on Rosh HaShannah is that we should remember Akeidas Yitzchak. When we hear the ram's horn on the New Year, we remind ourselves of the dedication and self-sacrifice of our Patriarchs and we decide mentally that we are also ready to sacrifice for G-d's sake. We accept the Yoke of Heaven and we say to ourselves that even though it will require martyrdom, we are ready to do it. This is what we think about when we hear the Shofar blowing on Rosh HaShannah and remember the Akeidas Yitzchak.

On Yovel, we are also asked for Mesiras Nefesh ["giving the soul"]. On Yovel we also have to think about the Binding of Yitzchak. We also have to think about willingness to sacrifice. But what type of sacrifice? The sacrifice of "With all your heart and with all your soul" (bechol levavcha u'vchol nafshecha), was on Rosh HaShannah. The sacrifice of Yovel - Yom Kippur is "With all your wealth" (bechol me'odecha).

Let's not kid ourselves - we love our money. We are attached to it. It is difficult to give away our money. When the Torah tells us to give away our slaves, it is telling us that we have to make a mesiras nefesh of money. This requires almost as much mesiras nefesh as giving away one's life. Therefore it becomes necessary to once again conjure up in our minds the image of the Binding of Yitzchak. We have to picture what it means to be a Jew. What it means to be a Jew is not only to serve G-d with our very lives, but even with our money.

The Gemara in Sanhedrin [74a] tells us there are certain people for whom parting with their money is a greater sacrifice than parting with their lives. Who is this odd ball who loves his money more than his life? We ask ourselves incredulously, "Do such people really exist?"

The answer is absolutely yes. This is why people work 14, 16, 18 hours a day. Why do people have coronaries as a result of their businesses?

I know of a man who, during the race riots that occurred in Baltimore 30 years ago, went down to his liquor store in West Baltimore with his shot gun to fend off the rioters. We say, "Gee, he's crazy!" But in truth he is just a little crazier than many of us. We also give our sweat and our tears and our energy and the best years of our life to financial gain.

The Gemara of "there is a person whose money is more dear to him..." is not the "one in a million" case. Therefore, the Torah asks us for a mesiras nefesh to send away our slaves on the year of Yovel and asks us to "kiss our money good-bye". This is exceedingly difficult for a human being.

We have to go through Rosh HaShannah all over again. We have to hear Kingship! We have to hear Remembrances! We have to hear Shofar Sounds! We have to remember the Binding of Yitzchak. Because we are asked to give up something that is extremely precious to us... that is our wealth (bechol me'odecha, "with all your wealth" in the Shema), which is nothing less than mesiras nefesh.

Rav Pam, shlit"a, once said that the trial of the generation which preceded us and lived through the Holocaust was the trial of "with all your hearts and with all your souls". They had to pay the price of being a Jew with their own lives. Our trial, the nissayon [test] of Jews in America in the 1990s is "with all your wealth". Give your money. Give your money to Yeshivas, give your money to the Mikveh, give your money to settle the Russian Jews, give your money. It is hard; it is mesiras nefesh; but that is what we must do. It is the trial of our generation.

Glossary

Shmitah / Yovel -- Sabbatical / Jubilee (years)

Akeidas Yitzchak -- binding of Isaac

Mesiras Nefesh -- dedication of soul

bechol me'odecha -- expression from the first chapter of Shema interpreted Rabbincally to mean "with all your wealth"

Sources and Personalities

Sefer HaChinuch -- Book of Education, a catalog of the 613 commandments, organized in the order of the weekly Torah portions. Published by Rav Aharon HaLevi of Barcelona in 13th century Spain

Rav Elyakim Schlesinger -- Author of Sefer Bais Av, Rosh Yeshiva in London.

Rav Avrohom Pam -- Contemporary Rosh Yeshivah of Mesivta Torah Vodaath, New York.

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