

# POTENTIAL IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE

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 # 131, Sephardic vs. Ashkenazik Pronunciation: Is There a Correct Way? Good Shabbos!*

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## Bechor -- Reminding Us That It Is A Miracle When Things Go Smoothly

The end of this week's parsha contains the reading, "And it will be when He will bring you..." (v'haya ki yeviacha... [Shemos 13:11-16]), which is one of the four portions contained in the Tefillin. This portion contains the mitzvah of the sanctification of the first-born -- including both first-born humans and first-born Kosher animals.

Immediately following the mention of the mitzvah of sanctifying the first-born, we find the verse, "And it will be, when your son will inquire of you and ask 'What is this?' you will say to him 'With a Mighty Hand our G-d took us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage... and He killed the first born in Egypt, from humans and animals; therefore I offer to G-d the first of the womb...'"

The Talmud relates that in Egypt all first-born sons died - whether they were paternal (from the father's side) or maternal (from the mother's side). Why then, it can be asked, is the command to redeem the first-born only applicable to maternal first-born sons? If the reason for the mitzvah is based on what happened in Egypt, the mitzvah should apply equally to all first-born sons.

The Avnei Shoham answers this question based on an analogy to the laws of first fruits. When a person plants a crop, he is required to sanctify the first fruits to G-d. The explanation given for this command of 'Bikkurim' is that it counteracts the normal human emotion that one confronts when he harvests his first crop of the season: "My own strength and the power of my own hand have made me this great wealth" [Devorim 8:17].

One plants a seed in the ground. The tree grows. He picks the fruit and eats. This is all very natural. The Torah has to stop us, and teach us that what appears to happen "naturally" is not so simple -- it still requires 'miraculous intervention' by G-d.

People get married. Nine months or ten months later they have a baby. They think -- it's simple! The

Torah teaches us that having a baby is not so simple -- it is a miracle. That is why the first child has special sanctity.

[Some Biblical commentaries also point out that Jericho was made holy ('cherem') for the same reason. Jericho was the first city that Yehoshua conquered when he entered Canaan. G-d did not want the Jews to think that it is so simple and natural that upon entering a new country, one simply begins to conquer city after city. The 'first conquering' needed to be designated as holy; to make them conscious of the inherent miracle involved in conquest.]

If this is the case, says the Avnei Shoham, then we can understand why Kedushas Bechor only applies to a first born from the mother. That is the natural way that things happen. There is a marriage, the wife becomes pregnant, she gives birth to her first child -- everything goes perfectly naturally. That is why the child must be made holy.

When one has a first-born (only) from the father's side, something has happened which is already outside the normal order of events. Either this is a second marriage, or the child has been born by Cesarean [Only children born naturally are considered the "first-born" of the mother for purposes of these laws.] -- something has happened which is irregular, "unnatural."

The Torah only needs to remind us not to think 'My strength and the power of my own hand...' when life goes perfectly naturally. When there has been a hitch in life, when the first marriage did not work out, perhaps, when the first baby was not born naturally, then we do not need the reminder of 'Bechor'. Then we are already well aware of the tribulations and valleys that can occur in life. We then realize quite well on our own that we desperately need the help of the Ribbono shel Olam (Master of the World).

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### **The Donkey's Lesson: Potential Is A Terrible Thing to Waste**

We find in the above-mentioned parsha, three types of Bechor -- the first-born of humans, the first-born of Kosher animals, and the first-born of donkeys. Donkeys are the only animal that are unfit to be offered as a sacrifice which nonetheless have a 'first-born sanctity'. The donkey has a special status. It is redeemed with a lamb, which is given to the Kohanim in place of the donkey.

The Torah specifies that if the donkey is not redeemed, it must be decapitated. What is the significance of chopping off the donkey's head when it is not redeemed?

The Netziv says this shows us that a First-Born which loses its potential and loses its chance (via redemption by the lamb) to indirectly bring benefit to 'men of distinction' (the Kohanim), forfeits its right to life. One who has the capacity for great things and chooses not to use that potential, is worse than one who never had such power in the first place.

The Talmud states [Yoma 29a] that the contemplation of sin (hirhurei aveirah) can be worse than sin

itself. Ramba"m in Moreh Nevuchim explains why thinking about an evil act can be worse than doing the act: Hirhurei Aveirah take man's most precious gift -- his capacity to think, his intellect -- and corrupts it.

When a person sins with his body, he sins with his animal part. Sinning with one's physical being is understandable. But when one is engaged in thinking about sin, when one takes the potential for all the good things that one could think about and one allows that intellect to become corrupted by thoughts of sin -- that is worse than sin. Potential loss is the worse thing.

In Koheles we find "Do not ask why were the earlier days better than now, for not out of wisdom do you inquire about this" [7:10]. Don't ask about the 'good old days'.

The Rebbe Reb Bunim interprets as follows: One looks at his youth and says "I had so much promise and so much potential back then -- what happened to it all?" Solomon responds "not out of wisdom; it was lent to you" (interpreting 'shalta al zeh' not as 'you inquire about this' but 'it was lent to you').

That potential was not acquired or bought -- it was a gift! It was supposed to be developed and turned from potential into reality. But if that potential was left to just evaporate, it will never return.

Potential is lent to us. If we work and strive we can make something of it, but if we look back and can't find the potential -- it is because it is in fact lost. It was merely a 'shaylah' -- a loan.

Our most precious possession is the potential G-d gives us. As the Netziv said, lost potential is a terrible thing, much worse than absence of potential in the first place. This is the teaching of the decapitated donkey.

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### Personalities & Sources:

**Avnei Shoham** -- Rav Moshe Leib Shachor, Israel.

**Netziv** -- Rav Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (1817-1893); Ha'Amek Davar on Chumash; Rosh Yeshiva in Volozhin.

**Rambam** -- Rav Moshe ben Maimon (1135-1204); Moreh Nevuchim is the Rambam's philosophical work, "Guide to the Perplexed".

**Reb Simcha Bunim of Pshis'cha** -- (1765-1827); Polish Chassidic leader.

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### Glossary

**(Kedushas) Bechor** -- (sanctity of) first born

**Bikkurim** -- command to give the first fruits to G-d

**shidduch** -- marriage

**Ribbono shel Olam** -- Master of the World

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