

DREAM THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

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 # 119, Conversion for Ulterior Motives. Good Shabbos!

Go Out and Count the Stars: Two Interpretations

This In this week's Parsha, Avraham questions G-d: "What can you give me, I am childless?" G-d answers by promising Avraham that he will have children. G-d directs Avraham outside and asks him to look up and count the stars, saying "Thus will be your descendants" [Bereishis 15:2-5].

I would like to share two insights on this verse, one from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and one from the Lubliner Rav, Rabbi Meir Shapiro.

Rav S. R. Hirsch: Look Beyond the Course of Nature

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says there is significance in the fact that G-d told Avraham, the first Jew, to go out and look at the stars.

If a person is accustomed only to looking at "our world", at earth, he gets into a mode of thinking that everything is "nature". The sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening. There are laws of physics. Everything is a set pattern that is never broken.

This natural order of things is perhaps appropriate for the nations of the world, but it is not appropriate for Klal Yisroel [The Jews].

"You, Avraham, have to go out and look at the stars."

Amidst the vast constellations, one has a clearer view of the Hand of G-d. One becomes more aware that there is a concept of Hashgocha Protis -- that there is a G-d out there who directs and takes interest in a person's life.

"Therefore, maybe Avraham, it appears to you that you are childless. Maybe by looking merely at

this earth and this world, you get into the mind set that 'I am childless -- I never have had children; I never will have children.' But look up into the HHeaven, into the realm of the stars where that Hand of G-d is more apparent. That is your lot Avraham, and the lot of your children. Yours is not a destiny and a future of 'Nature' (teva), it is a 'super-natural' (L'ma-ala min haTeva) destiny and future."

When one looks at history, where are the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Babylonians? Where are all these great powers that ruled the world? There is only one nation that is still around for the last 4,000 years. That is Klal Yisroel. This is 'above the course of nature'. This is what G-d wanted Avraham to see by looking at the stars.

To Dream the Impossible Dream, To Count the Impossible Count

Rav Meir Shapiro asks, "What would be our reaction if someone told us to go out and count the stars?"

Our reaction would be to simply ignore the request. We would say, "I know this is an impossible task. I know it is beyond the realm of possibility. Why even bother?"

What did Avraham do? He went out and counted the stars! He attempted to do the impossible. G-d responded "This is the way your descendants will be" (Koh Yihehye zarecha).

"This attribute that you are showing here now -- when it looks impossible, when it looks beyond the reach of human beings, nevertheless to try; nevertheless to give it one's best -- Koh Yiheyeh Zarecha. That is the characteristic of Klal Yisrael. That is what a Jew is going to be like. Even though the task seems Herculean, it seems almost impossible, we still must try."

The least we can do is try. And when we try, we sometimes see that amazing things can happen. We think that we don't have such strengths and such abilities to withstand that which life deals us. We think it is beyond our capability. But we try and we are gifted and granted with 'kochos' - 'strengths' that we never dreamt we possessed.

That is the Blessing of "Thus shall be your descendants." Klal Yisroel has the attribute of looking at something which seems impossible, but nevertheless trying, never giving up... and being rewarded with powers that they never thought they had.

A blind Jew once came in to Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer. The Jew put down, in front of Rav Isser Zalman, two volumes of 'chidushei Torah' - 'novel insights into Torah' that he had written before he became blind. The Jew told Rav Isser Zalman to look at a certain place in the book and said, "This piece was my last chiddush and then I went blind."

Rav Isser Zalman asked the Jew what he meant by saying that it was his 'last chiddush'.

The blind man explained that when he wrote that particular insight he was already an older man. He

had worked for years on these volumes. When reached that piece he said to himself, "I've had enough. It is difficult to come up with new Torah insights. I am calling it quits. From now on I will learn, but not with the same intensity and thoroughness -- I just don't have the strength anymore." The man told Rav Isser Zalman that immediately after that decision, he became blind.

The man went to the doctors and specialists of the day, seeking a cure. They examined him and told him, "With the way your eyes are now, you should have been blind 10 years ago. We can't understand why you weren't blind, long ago."

But we can. Because as long as that Jew felt compelled to write those 'chidushei Torah', that he dipped down to reach for strength that he never knew he possessed, he received super-natural strengths. He saw things with eyes that perhaps a normal human being could not see out of - because he tried, because he reached, because he sought the impossible. When he stopped and said 'enough', he lost those strengths.

It is that quality of 'Thus will be your children' that Avraham exhibited by trying to count the stars. That is the quality of Klal Yisroel.

The Haftorah for this week's Parsha is from Chapters 40-41 in Isaiah. Sometimes it is a challenge to find the connection between the Haftorah and the weekly Parsha. If one looks at this Haftorah, the only apparent connection to the Parsha (and sometimes connections are as tenuous as this one) is the verse "But you, Israel, My Servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the offspring of **Abraham**, My friend." [Yeshaya 41:8].

However, perhaps there is another connection between the Haftorah and the Parsha. The Prophet refers [40:31] to the 'kovei Hashem' -- those that place their trust in G-d -- and says about them 'yachlifu Koach' -- they will be endowed with new strengths. Because of their faith and efforts, those Trusters in G-d will get new strengths that they never thought they had.

This perhaps is the connection between the Haftorah and the Parsha. Klal Yisrael will follow the attribute of Avraham. They will attempt the impossible and will be blessed with the blessing of "v'kovai Hashem yaclifu Koach." (Those who trust in Hashem will be granted new strengths.)

Personalities & Sources:

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch -- (1808-1888) Author of monumental commentary on Chumash first published in German in five volumes (1867-78) and translated into English (1952-1962); Frankfurt am Main.

Rav Meir Shapiro -- (1887-1934) head of the Lubliner yeshivah and founder of the 7 year Daf Yomi curriculum; Lublin, Poland.

Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer -- (1870-1953) Author of Even Ha'Azal; Disciple of Netziv, Rav Chaim

Soloveitchik, and the Chofetz Chaim; Father-in-law of Rav Aharon Kotler, founder of the Lakewood Yeshiva. Slutzk; Eretz Yisroel.

Glossary:

Klal Yisrael -- The nation of Israel

Hashgocha Protis -- Personal Divine Providence

kochos -- strengths

chidushei Torah -- novel insights into Torah

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

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

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