

STANDING UP TO THE PREVAILING WINDS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Standing Up Against the Prevailing Winds

In this week's parsha, Tzelofchad's daughters came to Moshe Rabbeinu with a Din Torah. According to Jewish law a son inherits from his father to the exclusion of his sisters. Tzelofchad had died without any sons. He only had daughters. The daughters came and argued that they should not be left out. They did not want their father's inheritance in Eretz Yisroel to be lost. Moshe Rabbeinu took this query to G-d who in fact ruled that when there are no sons, the daughters inherit.

The Medrash here comments: "There are times when an individual can take the reward of an entire generation. Noach stood up against his generation and took the reward that was destined for them; Avraham stood up to his generation and merited taking the reward of that whole generation; Lot stood up to the people of Sodom and took the reward that was destined for all of them."

The Medrash concludes that the daughters of Tzelofchad too, took the reward of their entire generation. But what did they do? We know that Noach fought off his generation for 120 years; Avraham jumped into the fiery furnace for his ideals; Lot withstood the decadence of the surroundings of Sodom; but what did the daughters of Tzelofchad do? They went to probate court -- they wanted their inheritance. What is so noble about that?

The Medrash explains -- consider the times. When everyone was yelling "Let's go back to Egypt, this is not going to work, this is no good..." Moshe was taken aback by the request of these women. Their interest in and desire for the Land was totally out of step with the "issues of the day".

They were determined. They said "We don't care what everyone else is saying now, we know that the Land of Israel is where the future of the Jewish People lies." At a time when others are nullifying the Torah, that is the time to stand up and be counted.

This Medrash is telling us an important thing. The activities and deeds of human beings cannot be judged in a vacuum but must be judged in the context of the times. Under normal times, going into court and asking for one's father's inheritance does not constitute a brave and courageous act. There are however times in history where the most innocuous and simple act can be an act of utmost bravery. Tzelofchad's daughters exhibited such an act.

In the climate of widespread criticism of Eretz Yisroel and longing for the wonderful life of Egypt, they stood up against the tide, they swam against the prevailing current and marched to the beat of their own drummer. This was a courageous act.

This is a tremendous lesson for us. Sometimes, even the most mundane of activities, given the atmosphere and climate, can be a most noble act -- to such an extent that the Medrash lists the daughters of Tzelofchad with Avraham Avinu!

Setting The Precedent For Future Generations

The other insight that I would like to share is from the Mikdash Mordechai. The Medrash comments on the juxtaposition of the incident of Tzelofchad's daughters with the appointment of Yehoshua bin Nun (Joshua) to succeed Moshe. The Medrash says that after the daughters of Tzelofchad took care of their matter of inheritance, Moshe began to think about his own "Estate" and reasoned that if Tzelofchad's daughters inherited from their father, it followed that his own children should inherit his position of honor.

He came, as it were, to G-d and said "Master of the Universe, I am getting old. We need a new leader. I want my sons to take over."

The Medrash continues that G-d responded to Moshe that his children were not worthy. Yehoshua, on the other hand, never left Moshe's side. He was Moshe's trusted disciple and he would become the next leader of Israel.

This Medrash always bothered me. It seems to me that the mark of true greatness is the ability for a person to elevate himself above his own personal interests. With the average person, we can readily imagine interests of self, interests for children. But the true adam gadol -- we always imagine -- does not have this kind of agenda.

If any other personality in our history had made such a request of G-d, it would perhaps be understandable. But Moshe Rabbeinu was _the_ Rabbi of Klal Yisroel, the Servant of G-d, the most humble of all men, the accolades are endless... Should he not be able to perceive that his children were not worthy of this position? Did he not realize this? Is this just, Heaven forbid, a case of a father trying to intervene to make sure that his son gets the job?

What does it mean "It is time for me to take care of my own family's needs?"

The Mikdash Mordechai suggests that Moshe knew full well that his sons were not worthy for the job and that G-d would answer him with a flat no. But he wanted to make the point -- he wanted to ask and he wanted to be refused! He wanted the Jewish people to understand that land goes through inheritance, the business goes through inheritance, but Torah does not go through inheritance.

This was like a test case brought to the Supreme Court to issue a ruling, setting a binding precedent. Moshe Rabbeinu knew he was going to hear a 'No' and he wanted to hear a 'No'. But he wanted the precedent to be set. He wanted it on the books, and he wanted that it should be known for all generations: Torah is not passed down through inheritance.

There is no monopoly on Torah. The Ramba"m writes in the Laws of Teaching Torah [3:1] that there are three crowns -- the crown of Monarchy, the crown of Priesthood and the crown of Torah. The crowns of Monarchy and Priesthood can only be acquired through inheritance. But the crown of Torah is available to anyone who wants to come and take it. The son of the biggest ignoramus can go on to the greatest heights of Torah. One need not have yichus; only desire, patience, and perseverance.

Sources and Personalities

Mikdash Mordechai --- Rav Mordechai Ilan; contemporary, Israel.

Ramba"m --- Rav Moshe ben Maimon (1135-1204); Spain, Egypt.

Glossary

Moshe Rabbeinu -- Moses our teacher

Din Torah --- A (monetary case decided based on) Torah Law

Eretz Yisroel --- The Land of Israel

adam gadol --- great individual

Klal Yisroel --- Nation of Israel

yichus --- lineage

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