

WHAT THE JEWISH PEOPLE ARE ALL ABOUT

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 # 141, Using a Mikveh for Conversion. Good Shabbos!

Striking At the Heart of What the Jewish People are All About

In this week's portion we have the tragic event of the death of Aharon's two oldest sons. At the height of the joy of the dedication of the Tabernacle, Nadav and Avihu were consumed by a 'foreign fire' which came down from Hashem and killed them.

The Talmud tells us [Eruvin 63a] "Aharon's sons did not die until they issued a halachic ruling before Moshe their teacher". There are different interpretations among the Sages exactly what Nadav and Avihu did to warrant this terrible punishment. One of the opinions expressed in the Medrash and the Talmud was this teaching that they issued their own ruling in front of their teacher.

A student is not allowed, by Halacha, to issue a ruling in the presence of his teacher. One who does so is deserving of the death penalty. This is the interpretation given to the Biblical expression "they offered a foreign fire". The crime was not the offering of the sacrifice per say; the crime was that they took independent action without consulting with Moshe their teacher.

The Gemara in Eruvin further relates that R. Eliezer had a student who issued a halachic ruling in R. Eliezer's presence and R. Eliezer announced that this student would not live out the year -- which is exactly what happened.

If we think about this, it is very difficult to comprehend. What is so terrible about ruling on a halachic question in front of one's teacher? We understand that there is a matter of honoring a Rabbi (Kavod haRav) or of a Torah scholar. But that this should be a capital offense, is difficult to comprehend. Moreover, we also know the rule that a Rabbi has a right to "forgive his honor" (Rav she'machal al k'vodo, k'vodo machul). A teacher can say "You don't have to stand up for me". We would think that any time a student rules in front of his teacher, the teacher should forgive. Why was R. Eliezer not more compassionate? Why did he say with certitude that this student would die within the year?

Apparently, in these situations forgiving (mechila) doesn't help. The teacher does not have the ability to forgive. Why not?

The Mir Rosh Yeshiva, zt"l, explains that the sin of issuing a halachic ruling in one's teacher's presence is a much more basic sin than merely not showing this teacher the proper respect.

The Talmud relates in tractate Chagiga (14a) that the prophet Isaiah came to the Jewish people before the destruction of the Temple and he gave them 18 curses. He told them of the terrible things that would befall them. Included in these things was that "there would not be found in Israel one versed in Chumash or in Mishneh, in Talmud or in Aggadah; there would be no Judges and no Prophets and no one capable of sitting in a Yeshiva." But the ultimate curse he told them was that "... they shall behave haughtily, the youth against the elder and the base against the honorable." [Isaiah 3:5].

We can somehow live with ignorance and with the absence of Prophets, but when does Klal Yisroel descend to the deepest of pits? When do they hit rock bottom? When there is no honor given to elders. The reason for that is because the Medrash says that Israel is compared to a bird. Just as a bird cannot fly without wings, the Jewish people cannot exist without their elders. Elephants can exist without wings, cats can exist without wings, all animals can exist without wings -- except a bird.

The rest of the world can exist without their elders. For the Egyptians, the Romans, the French, the Americans, the Italians it is nice to have elders -- but it is not crucial to their very being. But the Jewish people is not a Jewish people without their elders. Just as a bird cannot exist without its wings, that which keeps Klal Yisroel afloat is its elders.

Therefore the curse of curses that Isaiah gave to the Jewish people before the Churban was that they will reach the stage that the young people will be disrespectful to the elders.

This said R. Chaim Shmulevitz is the terrible crime of issuing a ruling in front of one's teacher. When people issue opinions and comment on every aspect of life or Halacha without consulting their elders, they are doing a terrible injustice to all of us. They are stripping us of our Gedolim. That is the crime of Moreh Halacha lifnei Rabo, making a ruling in front of one's teacher. It is not an affront to the Rebbe per se, it is something that strikes at the heart of what the Jewish people are all about.

We are a nation of tradition. "Ask your father and he will tell you; your elders and they will say to you" [Devorim 32:7]. Without that tradition of consulting the elders, the Talmidei Chachomim, the older generation, we will not exist. Therefore when a student teaches the law in front of his teacher, he is stripping the Jewish people of something that is essential to their whole being. For this reason, there is no forgiving on the teacher's part of this terrible sin.

And for this reason the joy at the erection of the Tabernacle had to be dampened with the death of Aharon's two sons -- because this lesson had to be learnt. We are not a nation without our elders.

Glossary

Moreh Halacha lifne Rabo -- Teaching a law in front of his teacher

Churban -- Destruction (of the Temple)

Klal Yisroel -- Nation of Israel

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