

DO IT RIGHT!

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: # 150, Tzitzis: >Must They Be Worn? Good Shabbos!

Seeing It 'My Way'

In this week's parsha we learn about the famous incident of the spies, who were sent to give a report of Eretz Yisroel and came back with a very negative report. They caused the entire nation to sin, by despairing of ever entering the Land. As atonement, the Jewish people had to spend 40 years in the desert. This was a seminal event, an event that changed Jewish history.

One of the ways in which the spies described Israel was "a land that devours its inhabitants" [Bamidbar 13:32]. The Talmud [Sotah 35a] tells us that this refers to the fact that as the spies passed through the land, going from place to place and from city to city, they saw huge funeral processions wherever they went. Having seen death everywhere, they came back with the conclusion, that this must be a land that devours its inhabitants.

The Steipler Rav, zt"l, in his work *Birchas Peretz* offers a beautiful insight: This incident illustrates a time-honored truth -- a person sees what he wants to see, he hears what he wants to hear, and he believes what he wants to believe. One person can see a certain incident and look at it objectively and come out with one conclusion and another person can see the same incident and come to a totally different conclusion.

Our Sages tell us that the spies walked into the Land of Israel with a jaundiced eye. They had their own agenda. The Ba'al HaTurim states they were worried that when they came into Israel there would be a new order and they would lose their positions of prominence. Therefore they went in with a negative approach to the whole idea of entering Eretz Yisroel.

They should have looked at the funerals and said, "Look at this amazing Divine Providence. Look at how G-d is protecting us! Here we are spies and spies are always worried about being detected, so G-d caused the people to be distracted and preoccupied with the funerals so that we won't be

noticed. What Hashgocha protis!"

They should have seen this and recognized that if G-d offers such protection to the expeditionary force, He would certainly offer Divine protection to the entire Jewish nation. That's how they should have seen it objectively, if they didn't have their own agenda. But because of their agenda they looked at these events and said "Amazing- everyone is dying -- it must be a country that devours its inhabitants."

The Steipler observes that their argument was counter-intuitive. If in fact Eretz Yisroel was a country where people were constantly dying and funerals were commonplace, then we would not expect to see large funeral processions. If people would go to a half-dozen funerals a day, they would never get anything else done. People would attend funerals because they were relatively rare events; otherwise just the family members would bury their own dead.

The problem is that people see what they want to see. If one comes in with rose colored glasses then everything looks rosy, but if one comes in with a negative attitude, he will only see the problems.

We once mentioned an unbelievable insight regarding this concept from Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz.

The Talmud [Gittin 45a] tells us that Rav Ilish was captured by Gentiles. He was sitting in jail and was contemplating whether or not to try to escape. A bird came and said to him "Ilish -- flee; Ilish -- flee". Rav Ilish asked his cell-mate what the bird was saying. The cell-mate told him that the bird was telling him to escape. Rav Ilish reasoned that the bird was a raven, and could not be trusted. He discounted the bird's message.

Then another type of bird came along and said "Ilish -- flee; Ilish -- flee". Rav Ilish again asked his cell-mate what the bird was saying. The cell-mate again told him that the bird was telling him to run away. Rav Ilish said that this bird was not a liar and therefore he decided to run away.

Rav Akiva Eiger, in the Gilyon HaShas, cites the Seder Olam, which records that Rav Ilish was an expert in understanding the conversation of birds. However, it seems from our incident in the Talmud that Rav Ilish did not understand the conversation of birds -- since he consulted with his cellmate regarding what the birds were saying.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz explains that Rav Ilish did understand the conversation of birds, and he knew they were telling him to flee, but since that is what he wanted to hear -- he did not trust himself. Since he knew that a person hears what he wants to hear and knew that he wanted to flee, he didn't want to rely on his own hearing to interpret the birds' message.

The spies came into the Land and said, "the cup is half empty" because they came in jaundiced and negative. They took an innocuous event -- indeed they took a positive event that should have showed them Hashgocha protis [Divine supervision] -- and they turned it around and saw only bad. Such is the power of the human being and his partiality to his own agenda.

Once Doing It Already -- Do It Right!

As we mentioned in the halacha portion of this lesson [which is not included in the e-mail version, but is available on audiocassette], the mitzvah of Tzitzis is equal to that of the entire Torah. It is designed to keep us in line and to remind us of G-d. It is a fundamental mitzvah.

But there is an anomaly in this commandment which requires further analysis. Namely, if this command is so important, why is it optional? [The thrust of the halachic portion of the shiur was that the mitzvah of wearing a garment with Tzitzis is optional - the only absolute obligation is that if one wears a four-cornered garment, he must place Tzitzis on that garment. Nevertheless, since it is such a significant Mitzvah, Jews throughout the ages have always chosen to wear a four-cornered garment in order to fulfill this Mitzvah.]

Shabbos is a fundamental mitzvah. Is it optional? Of course not! Pesach is a fundamental mitzvah. Is it optional? Of course not! Milah [Circumcision] is a fundamental mitzvah. Is it optional? Of course not!

Commandments that are fundamental are not optional.

Here we have a quirk. We have a basic, fundamental, mitzvah that is optional. What do we have here?

I once heard from Rav Nochum Lansky, shlit"a, a beautiful insight. It is no coincidence that the mitzvah of Tzitzis is found in the parsha of the spies. If we look at these two chapters we see a lot of similarities...

"And you will see the Land, what is her nature" [13:18]

"And you will see it (the blue thread of Tzitzis)" [15:39]

"They went to spy (lasur) the Land " [13:21]

"And you shall not go astray (sasuru) after your hearts and eyes" [15:39].

How many times do we have the root 'lasur' in the Torah -- and here in this parsha we have it twice. Why?

Our Sages tell us that the sending forth of spies was optional. "Shlach LECHA" (_You_ send forth -- meaning at your own discretion). What happened? They took something that was optional and turned it into an unmitigated disaster.

In the portion of the spies, G-d gives us a mitzvah that should serve as atonement. He gives us an optional mitzvah. It is however, more than just atonement -- it is an education. This mitzvah comes to teach us that there are scenarios in life that are optional; but even if things are optional, there is a way to do it right and a way to do it wrong.

One can take the sending of spies which was optional, and turn it into a disaster. G-d says I'm am

going to give you an optional mitzvah, and I will show you how to take this optional mitzvah and to do it correctly and turn it into a beautiful thing rather than a disaster.

That is why, even though this mitzvah is so basic and so fundamental and has so much meaning, G-d wanted to leave it on the optional level so that this would be both an atonement and a lesson. The lesson is that even when things in life are sometimes only in the sphere of the optional -- still there is the right way to go about them and the wrong way.

Tzitzis may be optional, but there are 11 or 12 chapters in Shulchan Aruch telling us the intricacies of the laws of Tzitzis -- the right way to do it and the wrong way. This is a lesson for life. It always must be done the right way, whether we are obligated to do it in the first place or not.

Glossary

Hashgocha protis -- (Divine) supervision over (my) personal (affairs)

Milah -- circumcision

Shulchan Aruch-- Code of Jewish Law

Sources and Personalities

Steipler Rav -- Rav Yaakov Yisroel Kaniefsky (1899-1985); Bnei Brak

Ba'al HaTurim -- Rav Yaakov ben Asher (1268-1340); Torah commentary.

Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz -- (1902-1978) Mir Rosh Yeshiva, Jerusalem.

Rav Akiva Eiger -- (1761-1837); Rabbi of Posen; wrote comments on Talmud and Shulchan Aruch; father-in-law of Chassam Sofer.

Seder Olam -- Ancient chronological work quoted by Talmud, attributed to the Tanna Rav Yosei ben Chalafta.

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