

NICE GUYS FINISH SECOND

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 # 125 Hamalbin P'nei Chaveiro. Good Shabbos!

Nice Guy's Finish Second -- Second in Command to Pharoah!

(Rabbi Frand quotes both insights this week from the book Shemen HaTov by Rabbi Dov Weinberger.)

This week's parsha contains four words that changed the course of history. We all know the story of Yosef's arrest and imprisonment. Shortly afterwards, two members of Pharoah's Court were also thrown into jail.

We need to understand what it was like to be in jail with two officers of Pharoah's Court. To give an analogy, this would be like having a two-bit drug dealer in jail together with two members of the President's cabinet. We are dealing with 'Cabinet level' positions in the Egyptian government -- the person who brought Pharoah his wine was a trusted individual. He was the wine taster, a person in whom the King had implicit trust. We are dealing here with people who could be compared to the Attorney General and the Secretary of State. They are sitting in jail with a Hebrew slave -- the lowest rung of society, someone who is serving time for a petty crime. We can be sure that there was not a lot of camaraderie and social action between Yosef and Pharoah's officials.

They had their respective dreams, which upset them. Yosef saw that they were depressed and asked them "Why are you depressed?" The "drug dealer" (Yosef) comments to the "Secretary of State" (Wine Butler), "You don't look so good this morning!" Because of that remark, because of those four words, what happens?

The dreams are related to Yosef. Yosef interprets the dreams. The Butler sees that Yosef has special powers. The Butler is eventually released from jail and, in the time-honored tradition, gets put back on the 'Cabinet'. Years later, he remembers Yosef. Yosef is brought out of jail. He interprets the dreams of Pharoah correctly. He becomes the second in command. He feeds the entire world including his own brothers and father. And the rest -- as they say -- is history!

Why? Because of four words: "Madua peneichem ra'im hayom?" (Why are your faces troubled today?)

What is the ethical lesson to be learned here? The lesson is that it is incumbent to be a "nice guy". Yosef was concerned about how they looked and how they felt, even though we have to assume that these were people who did not give Yosef a second look. Merely saying a nice, kind word makes such a difference!

Four words changed history. Two words can change history -- "Good Morning" "How are you?" "How are you doing?" "How was your holiday?" "How is your wife?" "How are your kids?" These are the types of words that can make a difference. They made a vast difference in Yosef's life and for Klal Yisrael's [The Jewish Nation's].

The Significance of 'Eight' -- Outside the Forces of Nature

Earlier in the parsha, we learn about the incident of Yosef with the wife of Potiphar. She tried to seduce Yosef. Yosef refused -- "...How can I do this terribly wicked deed?..." [Bereishis 39:9] Finally, when she cornered him alone and grabbed hold of his garment, rather than accede to her will, he fled and ran out of the house (va'yanos vayetze haChutzah).

There is a very famous Medrash in Tehillim on the verse "The Sea saw and fled..." [Psalms 114:3] The Medrash says that when the Jewish people came to the Red Sea, the Sea saw the coffin of Yosef and fled. In the words of the Medrash, "It fled because of the one who fled." In the merit of the one who withheld and did not succumb to his passions, the Sea split for Israel.

What is the connection between the merit of Yosef and the splitting of the Red Sea? If one looks in the parsha one will notice a peculiar thing. The expression "va'yanos haChutzah" (and he fled outside) is repeated four times in the narrative. What is the significance of this?

We should all be familiar with the term "Vayotze oso ha'Chutzah" (and He took him outside). That terminology was used in Parashas Lech Lecha in the Covenant between the Pieces [Bereishis 15:5]. We find there that G-d took out Avraham -- haChutzah (outside). The Medrash comments that G-d told Avraham, "Go out from your constellation" -- go out from the normal forces of nature. "You, Avraham, are above nature. You are not beholden to the powers of nature. Even if by nature, you shouldn't have children, you will in fact be the father of great nations. You are bigger than nature."

Implicit in the words "Vayotze oso ha'Chutzah" is the power to overcome nature. That ability of a Jew to be superior to nature and nature's dictates was the attribute that Yosef employed over here.

When everything in nature would suggest that he had to succumb to the seductions of Potiphar's wife, Yosef was able to invoke the power of Avraham his great-grandfather, who was outside the power of nature and Yosef too overcame his particular nature and did not succumb.

Therefore, when his coffin came to the Red Sea, whose nature it is to flow, in Yosef's merit, the Red Sea split. Nature was suspended. The sea fled before the one who fled. The one who overcame nature has the power to suspend the nature of the sea.

The Shemen HaTov goes one step further. He brings a Sefer HaPardes who says a fascinating insight. (We are delving here onto the fringes of Kabbalah and we can only speculate what the Sefer HaPardes means.)

The Sefer HaPardes says that there are 112 verses in Parshas VaYeishev. Out of those 112 verses, every single verse begins with a vov, with the exception of 8 verses! **Note:** The count of eight verses begins only after Pasuk 3 where the series of Vov verses actually begin. Do not count from the beginning of the parsha, but rather from Pasuk 3.] The Sefer HaPardes says the 8 verses that do not begin with a vov correspond to the 8 days between the birth of a boy and his circumcision. They allude to Milah, which is done on the 8th day.

The Shemen HaTov suggests that all the incidents of Parshas VaYeishev are one big vov. And this happened, and this happened, and this happened... It is all one big story -- one event emerging from the other. It is all one big cause and effect.

The Torah tells us that this may be the way things work in the outside world. History is one thing leading to another to another. But the life of a Jew is above nature. The 8 verses correspond to Milah.

According to traditional literature, 7 connotes nature -- the number of days in a week; while 8 connotes the property of being above nature. That is why circumcision is on the 8th day, because Milah is l'maaleh min haTeva (above nature). Jews are above nature, because that is what G-d told Avraham Avinu. He took him outside and told him "You are above nature."

The 8 verses that don't have the vov tell us something about the entire remainder of the parsha. None of it is a 'vov'. Nothing is just cause and effect. It is not just a story. It is not just natural happenstance. It is all above nature. There is, in effect, a grand plan. Nothing in history is just coincidence. Israel has no Mazal -- we are above all that!

One does not have to be a genius to make the connection to the 8 days of Chanukah, which are also supra natural. We all understand that the miracle of the jug of oil was a miracle. But we also have to know that the miracle of the oil reveals that the victory in battle is also not nature -- because nothing is nature. The Jewish people live a miraculous existence -- outside the forces of nature.

Personalities & Sources:

Sefer HaPardes -- Halachic compendium, from the school of Rashi, includes some of his legal decisions.

Glossary

Avinu -- Our Patriarch

Mazal -- ('Luck' determined by the) constellations

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