

INSIGHT INTO AN AGE OLD DILEMMA

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 # 179, Female Vocalists: The Problem of Kol Isha. Good Shabbos!

Insight Into An Age Old Dilemma

"And it came to pass when Pharo sent out the people the L-rd did not lead them by way of the land of the Plishtim, because it was near" [Shemos 13:17].

When the Jews came out of Egypt there were two possible paths to Eretz Yisroel, each of which had an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage of the route by way of the land of the Plishtim was that the Jews would be travelling in civilized territory. They would travel among people in a place where food and water would be readily available. On the other hand, they would be travelling through a society of Plishtim, whose moral level was as bad or worse than that of the Egyptians. Choosing this path would run the risk of exposing the nation to great spiritual danger. In Egypt they had already been on the verge of falling into a spiritual black hole. The nation was on the "49th level of impurity", the last step before total spiritual doom.

The other alternative was the way of the wilderness. This route presented no spiritual challenges. It was desolate and unoccupied land. There would be nothing to worry about in terms of people or society having a bad impact on Klal Yisroel [The Jewish Nation]. But the problem with this route was -- how does one take a nation of 2-3 million people through a desert and feed them? Where would the food come from? Where would the water come from? This was the dilemma when the Jewish people left Egypt.

What does the verse tell us? G-d caused the people to circle away from the land of the Plishtim, by way of the Red Sea. G-d preferred the desert and all of its associated problems rather than sending the Jews through the land of the Plishtim.

The Chofetz Chaim, zt"l, says that this verse teaches us a lesson in life. This section resolves an age-old question. If one has a choice between a situation where sustenance will come easily but be

accompanied by spiritual danger, or a situation where earning a livelihood will be difficult but there would be relative freedom from bad spiritual influences, the Torah tells us to pick spirituality over livelihood. One should opt for the less spiritually dangerous environment, even though livelihood will come with greater difficulty.

The reason for this is that as difficult as the yoke of earning a living is -- and we all know that it is a curse and it is a major problem -- it is the easier problem to solve. Furthermore, only the effort involved in earning a living is truly our worry. Providing the actual livelihood is G-d's worry. He will solve that problem. Our spirituality however, is our own problem. Therefore, we must choose the path that will allow us to best resolve that problem.

"Providing for man's livelihood is as difficult as the Splitting of the Red Sea" [Pesachim 118a]. The commentaries all comment on the analogy between providing for man's livelihood and the Splitting of the Sea. The reason for the analogy is that concerning the Yam Suf [Red Sea] it says "Speak to the children of Israel and let them travel forward" [Shemos 14:15]. This means that all we need to do is make an effort, even in the face of a hopeless situation, and G-d will take care of the rest. This is in fact what happened. The Children of Israel went into the water up to their necks, and then the miracle occurred. That is the way it is with a livelihood. Make the effort. That is all that we are required to do. If we make that effort, G-d will provide.

This is a lesson that we must review over and over again. If there is an option of uncertain livelihood and confident spirituality versus confident livelihood and uncertain spirituality, we must always opt for the confident spirituality.

Glossary

Eretz Yisroel -- The Land of Israel

Plishtim -- (Land of the) Philistines

Sources and Personalities

Chofetz Chaim -- Rav Yisroel Meir HaKohen of Radin, Poland (1838-1933).

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#179). The corresponding halachic portion for

this tape is: Female Vocalists: The Problem of Kol Isha. The other halachic portions for Parshas Bo from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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