

SENSITIVITY TO THE NEEDS OF THE POOR

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 # 294, Geirim And Davening: Some Unique Problems. Good Shabbos!

The Torah Displays Sensitivity -- Not Insensitivity -- To Needs of the Poor

This week's Parsha contains the Mitzvah of Bikkurim - the Mitzvah of bringing the first produce from one's crops to Jerusalem. As described in the Mishneh and the Rambam, this was a very elaborate ceremony.

The Talmud [Bava Kama 92a] comments regarding this ceremony that (The rich get richer and) "the poor get poorer". Why? When the wealthy brought their first fruits on silver and golden trays, the Kohanim [Priests] would return the trays to the owners. However, when the poor brought their fruit in reed baskets, the Kohanim would not return the baskets to them. This appears to be one of life's typical inequities -- the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

What is the reason for this? There might be certain political parties that advocate such a philosophy, but that is not the Torah philosophy!

I saw an interpretation from Rav Aharon Boxt (a great genius in pre-war Lithuania). Rav Aharon Boxt said that the Torah was not demonstrating insensitivity to the needs of the poor. Rather, just the opposite -- the Torah was demonstrating tremendous sensitivity. When the wealthy brought their fruits on gold and silver trays, not only was their offering distinguished by the containing vessel, but also by its quantity. The rich had an abundance of "first fruits". When the Kohain would remove the fruits from the basket or tray, the donor would truly have something to be proud of.

But why is the poor person poor? The poor person has a miserable crop. His "first fruits" consist of a few grapes and a couple of other fruits. For the Kohain to remove this little clump of grapes from the basket would have been a humiliating experience for the donor. On top of not having the gold and silver and not having the abundance of fruit in the first place, the removal of the fruit from the basket

would entail adding insult to injury by emphasizing his poverty.

The Torah feels that a person's dignity is worth more than a few dollars. Let us keep the fruit in the basket. Let it at least have the appearance of being something significant. Even if it will cost him the price of the basket, let the man walk out with his dignity. A person can always make a little more money. It is much harder to recoup one's dignity.

We find the same idea concerning the korban [sacrifice/offering] of a poor person. Many times a poor person's offering will consist of a bird. The Torah instructs [Vayikra 1:17] that the bird should be burnt on the Mizbayach [Altar] together with all its feathers. Rash"i comments that the odor of burnt feathers is very repulsive. Rash"i asks -- why would the Torah not require that the feathers be removed before burning the bird on the Mizbayach?

Rash"i answers "in order that the Mizbayach be full and beautified with the offering of a poor man." Here too, the idea is the same. The rich man's korban was an ox. He brought the offering and it would roast on the Mizbayach for hours. He would feel real satisfaction with the magnitude of his offering. However, if we remove the feathers from the poor man's korban, the skinny little bird would be totally consumed in 30 seconds. After he waited on line behind the rich man for an hour, the poor man would walk out the door after only 2 minutes! Therefore, the Torah says to ignore the odor because we cannot ignore the psychological suffering of the poor. They must be given the dignity of offering a korban of substance to be burnt on the Mizbayach.

Where Does The Torah Say I Must Be Happy?

In this week's Parsha we have the infamous "tochacha" (curses). We are threatened that if we do not keep the Torah, then all of the horrible things that we have seen in Jewish history would in fact happen. Everything has been predicted and everything has come true!

At the end of the "tochacha" the Torah says that the reason for the curses is "because of the fact that you did not serve the L-rd your G-d with joy and gladness of heart, when you had plenty of everything" [Devorim 28:47].

The apparent reason for the tragedies was not so much that we failed to observe the Torah but that we did not keep the commandments with joy. We were not thrilled to be a Jew; we were not happy to put on our Tefillin; we were not happy to celebrate Pesach. That is the whole crime that brought on the "tochacha".

I once heard a comment from Rav Yochanan Zweig (a Rosh Yeshiva in Florida). Where does it say in the Torah that there is a command to be happy? If all the curses come because we failed to observe the Torah "with joy", observing the Torah with joy must be a fundamental command. What is the source for this? Not one of the enumerators of the 613 commandments included a command called "Be happy".

We only have a limited command of "You shall be most happy" [Devorim 16:15] on the holiday of

Succoth. The verse "Serve G-d with joy" is a verse from Psalms [100:2], which cannot be used as the basis for a Biblical command. So where in the Torah does it say to be happy?

Rabbi Zweig suggested the following answer. We know from experience that there are two types of people in the world. Some people are always happy and some people are never happy. What is it that distinguishes these two types? The people who are never happy always feel that they deserve more. "I'm healthy? Of course, I am supposed to be healthy! I'm wealthy? Of course, I am supposed to be wealthy! I have children? That's expected! It is a birthright!" When a person goes through life thinking that everything is coming to him, that he deserves everything, then he is never happy -- because he will never have enough.

The person who is always happy and always satisfied is the type of personality who feels "G-d owes me nothing. Everything is a gift." When a person realizes that everything is a gift, he will always be happy.

This point can be demonstrated by two different possible reasons why a person may receive money. When a person receives repayment of a debt, it does not make him happy -- the debtor owed him the money. However, when someone receives a check as a present, he is happy -- the money was not necessary or expected.

A person who believes that everything -- his health, his wife, his children, his eyesight, everything -- is a gift, will be a person who walks around thrilled.

A person who views everything as the collection of a debt believes that he is the center of the universe. The world revolves around him. That is why the "tochacha" views this phenomenon as a fundamental of the Torah. People living in a world in which they are the center of the universe are not living in a G-d centered world. That is the antithesis to all of Torah and Mitzvos. All of Torah teaches us that this is a G-d centered world. We are his children; we are his servants. He is IT, not us.

That is why the Torah can make the statement "Because you did not serve G-d with joy and gladness of heart." Happiness is a tremendous commentary on a person's perspective of life.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#); Yerushalayim.

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