IF YOU HAVE IT, DON'T FLAUNT IT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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If You Have It, Don't Flaunt It

One of the overriding themes of the book of Bereishis is the concept that "the actions of the fathers foreshadow events that will happen to their descendants". In other words, the book of Bereishis is like a blueprint for a building. Our Patriarchs instructed us how to act in future times through their actions and deeds, as described in these parshiyos [weekly portions].

As Yaakov is about to send his sons down to Egypt, he says, "Why should you show yourselves?" (lamah Tis'ra-u) [Bereishis 42:1]. There are a number of interpretations of this expression. Rash"i says that Yaakov was telling them that they should not make themselves appear "full" to the children of Eisav and Ishmael.

The entire world was starving. Yes, Yaakov and his family may have had food, but it was not appropriate to give the appearance that they had more than everyone else. That would not be a smart thing to do.

The Kli Yakar explains the verse [Devorim 2:3] "it is enough for you dwelling by this mountain, begin traveling towards the north (penu lachem TZAFONA)" by teaching us that the word TZAFONA comes from the root TZAFOON (as in Tzafoon by the Afikomen on Passover), meaning hidden. If you achieve some degree of material success, you should hide it from the view of Eisav. In other words, "If you've got it, don't flaunt it!"

The Kli Yakar continues and says that Eisav has a long memory and always believes that if Yaakov achieves wealth -- money, real estate, nice clothing -- it is all because Yaakov stole the blessings from him. That mentality remains with the descendants of Eisav. Eisav has never forgiven Yaakov.

The Kli Yakar concludes that unfortunately in his generation, Jews did not learn this lesson. If they had wealth, they did indeed flaunt it.

This, my friends, is something that we must never forget. Living in the United States people do indeed forget it. We live in a country that is so unbelievably liberal and so unbelievably good to us that sometimes we think that we do not live in the Exile anymore! This is not true. We are living in exile, and it is not worthwhile to flaunt wealth. One doesn't need to listen too intently to hear rumblings about "New York bankers," and more explicit references to a "Jewish conspiracy."

This is a lesson that Jews have failed to learn time and time again in the various countries in which we have found ourselves. Whenever Jews have had a little money they ensured that everyone knew about it. That was a tragic mistake.

This is the "action of the forefathers" that is advice to the children: Yaakov our Patriarch told his children "Why do you show yourselves?" Why should others have to think that we have more than enough? It is not only stupid; it is even dangerous as well.

The Challenge of Deserving Longevity

I just want to add a small comment about Chanukah. Chanukah, like almost every other Jewish holiday, commemorates one simple truth -- that despite overwhelming odds we still exist.

Every year in the Passover Hagaddah we say, "not only one person rose up against us to destroy us. Rather, in every generation they rise up against us to destroy us..."

This story is as old as time itself. First it was the mighty Egyptian Empire; later it was the 'Holy Roman Empire', and so on. There are not many ancient Egyptians or Romans that are still in existence today, but there still are Jews. The Greeks too tried to destroy us. Who does not know about Greek culture and Greek Architecture? But that is all in the history books! We, however, are still here and that is what all these holidays are about.

The Egyptian, Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires are all gone. The Jews are the only nation still on the playing field -- the longest running act in the history of the world.

Why are we still around? Because we are smarter? Because we are survivors? Why are we still around?

The reason we are still around is because, as the Hagaddah concludes there, "and the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from their hands." G-d told us "you will be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation..." [Shemos 19:5-6]. G-d tells us that He will help us survive because He has a special job for us to accomplish. We must be a special people -- a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That is why we are here.

The scary implication of this fact is that when we, Heaven forbid, cease to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, then we are no better than the Egyptians and the Greeks and the Romans, etc., etc., etc. If we are not honest in business, if we gossip, if we do not demonstrate ethical conduct in every aspect of our lives, then "going through the motions" will not preserve us.

Our raison d'etre -- our key to success -- has been our status as a holy nation. This is what Chanukah is about, this is what Purim is about, and this is what Pesach is about. This is what everything is all about! If Heaven forbid, we cease to be that holy nation, then chas v'Sholom [Heaven forbid], "all bets are off".

At the time of Chanukah, at a time of rededication, we must think about such issues. Are we living up to our role in this world?

May it be G-d's will that we do live up to our special role so that He will preserve us for our ultimate goal, which is to be that Kingdom of Priests in our holy land, Eretz Yisroel, and to create the Sanctification of G-d's name that He has in mind for us.

Glossary

Parsha (Parshiyos) -- Biblical portion(s)

Goyim -- Gentiles

Galus -- Exile

chas v'Sholom -- Heaven forbid

Sources and Personalities

Rash"i(1040-1105) -- Rav Shlomo ben Yitzchak; France.

Kli Yakar (1550-1619) -- Rav Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz; Lemberg, Prague.

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