

ANTONYM OR SYNONYM?

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 # 181, Medicine, Shabbos, and the Non-Jew.
Good Shabbos!*

Were The Sages Using an Antonym or a Synonym?

At the end of six years of work, all Jewish servants go free from their masters. (A Jew becomes a servant either by selling himself because he is destitute or through being sold by Bais Din [the Court] as a punishment for stealing and being unable to repay what he stole.) If a Jewish servant does not want to leave his master at the end of the six years, he is taken to the door post and his master bores a hole through his ear. He then remains in servitude [Shemos 21: 5-6]. The Gemara [Kiddushin 22b] tells us the significance of the fact that it is specifically his ear that is pierced: "The ear that heard on Sinai 'you are to be slaves to Me' and nevertheless chose to sell himself into slavery (acquiring a different master for himself) and then chose to remain in servitude when he had the opportunity to go free is deserving of punishment."

The Talmud tells us [Megilla 9a] that King Ptolemy wanted the Torah translated. He took 72 elders of the Jewish people, placed them in 72 different rooms, and commanded each of them to translate the Torah from Hebrew to Greek. A miracle happened and when they translated the Torah, they all made the exact same changes in the text, without any prior consultation.

One of the changes that they made was in this verse in Parshas Mishpatim. They translated the word na'arei in "And Moshe sent forth the youth [na'areil] of the children of Israel" [Shemos 24:5] to the word za'tutei, meaning the important ones. The Sages made this change because they felt that the Greeks would think it improper that Moshe sent children to offer sacrifices to G-d. Therefore, the Sages changed the reading to za'tutei (the important ones).

The simple understanding of this Gemara is that the Sages used an antonym. Instead of 'youth' they wrote the opposite, 'the noble ones'. The Mikdash Mordechai, however, writes that this is an incorrect understanding. The Sages did not use an antonym. They used a synonym. The synonym for

the youth of the Jewish people is the important ones amongst the Jewish people. The importance of the Jewish people rests with our youth. That is our future. The Sages replaced 'important' with 'important'. They simply used another word for important. Instead of Na'arei, they used za'atutei. The purpose of the change was to prevent the Greeks from misunderstanding and ridiculing the Torah, but to us the meaning is the same.

In the previous parsha when Pharoah said "Let the elders go", Moshe Rabbeinu responded, "No, we will go with our youth and our elders." Pharoah said, "Let the older generation go. They are a bunch of old fogies, they will not have much success; but let me keep the youth." Moshe Rabbeinu refused. The Jewish people do not just consist of the old people, but also of the youth. That is where our future lies.

The Medrash relates that the coin of Avraham Avinu had an old couple on one side and a young boy and girl on the other side. These are the components of the Jewish people. It is made up of two contingents -- the tradition from the past, represented by our elders, and the importance of the future, represented by our youth.

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