

BOOTY IS RISKY

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 # 225, Music In Halacha. Good Shabbos!

Moshe's Wisdom: Booty Is Risky

The Torah tells us that Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him. The Talmud [Sotah 13a] comments, "How dear the Mitzvos were to Moshe -- for all of Israel was busy taking the booty out of Egypt, and he occupied himself with Mitzvos". The Gemara cites this as a personification of the pasuk [verse] "Chacham Lev Yikach Mitzvos" (The wise man chooses mitzvos) [Mishlei 10:8].

The Gemara contrasts the nation's preoccupation with the Mitzvah of collecting booty to Moshe's preoccupation with the Mitzvah of retrieving Yosef's remains. What is the connection?

The Jewish people received two instructions regarding taking things from Egypt. They were commanded to take out gold and silver utensils [Shemos 11:2]. (The reason for this command is because G-d foretold to Avrohom that his children would be enslaved for 400 years and eventually they would leave with great wealth [Brachos 9b].) In addition, they had sworn to Yosef that when they would be redeemed, they would take his remains with them [Shemos 13:19].

This means that each Jew had a dual obligation upon leaving Egypt. They were commanded to take something out. They needed to choose whether they would occupy themselves with the first obligation (taking out booty) or the second obligation (taking out the remains of Yosef).

The Talmud tells us that virtually the entire Jewish nation chose the first option and went for the booty. Moshe Rabbeinu opted for the second option -- Yosef's remains. The Talmud commented concerning Moshe's choice, "The wise- hearted man will take Mitzvos". Furthermore the Medrash elaborates, "Look at the piety and the wisdom of Moshe -- he took the bones and everyone else took the money."

I can understand why this should be considered an act of "piety" on Moshe's part. But why is this action repeatedly referred to as an act of "wisdom" on his part? What does taking the bones rather

than the money have to do with wisdom?

We see from this Medrash that Moshe's decision was indeed wise. For who is the wise man? A wise man is the one who sees the future [Tamid 32a]. Moshe Rabbeinu was a wise man because he knew what money could do to a person. He knew not only what money could potentially do, but he foresaw what money would in fact do to the Jewish people.

For what, ultimately, did the Jews do with the booty that they took out of Egypt? They made it into a Golden Calf.

This was Moshe's wisdom. He knew something that we all know in theory but which is very difficult for us to act on in practice. Namely, that money is one of the root causes of all evil. Affluence is one of the greatest tests of religiosity. Moshe Rabbeinu said, "I don't want the money, because I know it's hard to handle." Moshe's wisdom was this firm knowledge of what too much money can lead to.

The Gaon Changed The Text of The Motzai Shabbos Song

At the conclusion of the Sabbath, we recite a song (z'meyra), which according to the popularly accepted text reads: "may our children and our money (zareinu v'kaspeinu) be multiplied like the sand". The Vilna Gaon changes the text of the song to read "may our children and our merits (zareinu u'zechyoseinu) be multiplied like the sand". The Gaon rejected the popular version because he said it was wrong for a Jew to ask for an abundance of money. "This is not a Jewish prayer," the Gaon said. "We may ask for a livelihood (parnassah), but not for wealth."

Now, one may ask, why didn't the Vilna Gaon object to the text of Birchas HaChodesh [the prayer recited on the Sabbath prior to Rosh Chodesh] where we ask for a "Life of wealth and honor?" Doesn't that prayer contradict the Gaon's axiom that asking for wealth is not a Jewish prayer?

I once heard what I believe is the true interpretation of the text in Birchas HaChodesh. Many years ago, there was a Jew who visited a small apartment in Jerusalem, which was home to two parents and eleven children. He saw that the parents and the eleven children lived in a one-room house. But he saw the exceptional respect with which the children treated their parents and the exceptional respect with which they treated each other. The house was neat and clean and full of dignity. The style of life was one of "wealth and honor," as if they lived in a mansion.

That family lived "a life of wealth and honor". A person can have millions of dollars without having a life of wealth and honor. Perhaps his wife drives him crazy, his kids drive him crazy and everyone is fighting. Is that a life of wealth and honor? What difference does it make that he has a million dollars if everyone is constantly bickering and nothing is ever good enough? On the other hand, one can have 11 kids in a one-room apartment and live "a life of wealth and honor". It is possible to have the _life_ of a rich man without being rich, the _life_ of a King without being a King.

Thus, the text of the Rosh Chodesh prayer is no contradiction to the Vilna Gaon's principle: The Jew does not ask for wealth, and the trials that come with wealth. The Jew asks only for an adequate

livelihood and for a _life_ of wealth, rather than for wealth itself.

I related the Vilna Gaon's axiom to a nephew of mine. This young man is also a nephew of Rav Aharon Soloveitchik (he should be healthy and well) from the other side of his family. My nephew told me that he heard from Rav Aharon the following frightening -- but true -- story.

A Jew came to the Vilna Gaon and asked for a way to ensure that his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren should all remain Torah observant and learned Jews. Is there anything that a person can do to ensure pious offspring? He asked the Gaon, "Is there a 'Segulah'? Which chapter of Tehillim should I recite daily to guarantee it? Which folio of Talmud should I memorize? Just give me the trick!"

The Gaon told him that the best way of helping to ensure that he will have righteous children is to recite the following petition every day in Shma Koleinu (the 16th blessing of the daily Shmoneh Esrei where we can insert personal requests):

"May it be Thy Will before Thee, G-d and G-d of my fathers, that my children should not be rich." (Not to pray they should be poor; not to pray that they should not have means of earning a living; just to pray that they not be rich.)

This, according to the Vilna Gaon, was the 'Segulah' to see pious and upstanding Jewish children. This is not because, Heaven Forbid, anyone who is rich is by definition not a pious Jew. But wealth is a tremendous temptation. If one wishes to have pious children, the Gaon said, he should pray for the removal of that temptation from before his children.

The Gaon, thus follows his own opinion that the correct reading of the Motzai Shabbos song should not be "our children and our money should be as numerous as the sand" but rather "our children and our merit should be as numerous as the sand."

Sources and Personalities

Vilna Gaon -- Rav Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman of Vilna (1720-1797), Vilna; Torah Genius; author of numerous scholarly works and commentaries.

Rav Aharon Soloveitchik -- Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva of Brisk, Chicago.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter

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