WHY PICK ON THE EAR?

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 # 227, Taking Medicine on Shabbos. Good Shabbos!*

Why Pick On The Ear?

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 Gerrer Rebbe (Sefas Emes) protests that it is not really the ear's fault; it is the brain's fault! The ear is just a receptacle, a tool for hearing sounds. In fact, it is his brain or perhaps his heart that is at fault. That is the part of him that fails to realize to whom he is supposed to be a slave. Why pick on the ear?

The Sefas Emes answers that it _is_ the ear's fault, because the message remained only in the ear. The trouble with this person is that he heard -- externally; but he did not listen. He did not internalize the message "They shall be slaves to Me; not slaves to other slaves". That was his sin. It remained only in the ear. In one ear, out the other.

I once heard from Rav Michel Twerski, who is a practicing Rabbi and a practicing psychologist, that he has noticed a very interesting phenomenon. Patients who are receiving therapy can often discuss a problem and realize what the solution to the problem is. However, very often, they just can't implement the solution. They hear what needs to be done, but they don't listen. They don't internalize it.

Rav Michel Twerski commented that we have become a spectator society. People, unfortunately, it is sad to say, watch so much theater, so many movies and so much television that their lives become soap operas. People become 'just spectators' to their own lives. Therefore, they cannot act to improve their lives and to change what is going on in their lives anymore than they can act to change what is going on in the movies or the soap operas.

Treatment of Widows And Orphans Determines One's Reward and Punishment

The parsha contains the Biblical prohibition against mistreating orphans and widows. G-d threatens us "If you make an orphan or a widow feel bad, watch out! I hear their cries and I will take revenge against you." [Shemos 22: 21-23]

The Ramba"m writes in Hilchos De'os Chapter 6, "A person must take heed of orphans and widows. Even though one does not get lashes for this offense (because there is no specific action involved), it is (nonetheless) a severe offense because its punishment is spelled out in the Torah. 'My anger will lash out against you... by sword'. G-d made a special covenant with widows and orphans that when ever they cry out as a result of oppression, their cries will be answered."

There are a number of incidents documented from the life of the Chofetz Chaim that seem out of character for him. When the Chofetz Chaim would see that someone was not kind to an orphan or a widow, he would say, "Wait and see -- this person will be punished!" This is surprising. The Chofetz Chaim was not the vindictive type. We do not find that the Chofetz Chaim made statements such as, "This fellow spoke Lashon Hara (gossip), watch it -- he will be punished." He never said "This person desecrated the Sabbath -- watch it, he will get it." Such things are not our business. They are the domain of G-d.

But regarding someone who did an injustice to an orphan or a widow, the Chofetz Chaim would say, "Wait and see -- he is going to get it."

There was an unfortunate practice in Russia that children would be seized and drafted into the Czarist army. Their enlistment was not for 4 years or for 8 years, but for 30 years. Any children that wound up in the Russian army, if they lived to tell the tale, invariably emerged as broken people. This was a living death sentence.

Unfortunately, the practice was that when the Czar's officers would come looking for children, people would arrange for other children to be taken to fill the quota. Particularly, orphans were taken. There was no one to bribe the authorities; the quota had to be met; so who was taken? the orphans.

There was a wealthy Jewish butcher whose son was supposed to be inducted into the army. He bribed an officer to take an orphan rather than his son. When the Chofetz Chaim heard this story, he said, "Wait and see. This man will receive punishment and pay the price." Thirty years later that butcher's son came down with cholera and died. The Chevra Kaddisha refused to touch him

because of the contagious disease. That same butcher had to dig a grave and bury his son with his own hands.

Was the Chofetz Chaim being vindictive? No, the Chofetz Chaim was being a believer. When G-d promises "I will hear his cry" then that becomes a part of belief in Torah -- to believe that the oppressor will receive his punishment.

I heard recently that Reb Chaim Ozer, the Rav in Vilna, said, "For years I thought that my "ticket" to the World to Come will be the Achiezer (his classic multi-volume collection of thousands of Responsa). However, I now (towards the end of his life) believe that my "ticket" to the World to Come will be that I was responsible for the sustenance of widows and orphans throughout Europe." Hundreds of thousands if not millions of rubles passed through his hands. He supported Yeshivos and the impoverished; widows and orphans. That, he believed, was his crowning glory to take to the next world, despite his monumental contribution to the annals of Torah literature.

Sources and Personalities

Gerrer Rebbe -- Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter (1847-1905), the second Gerrer Rebbe and a leader of Polish Jewry.

Rabbi Michel Twerski -- Rabbi Congregation Beth Judah; Milwaukee.

Chofetz Chaim -- (1838-1933) Rav Yisrael Meir HaKohen of Radin. Author of basic works in Jewish Law and Jewish values (halacha, hashkafa, and mussar).

Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski -- (1863-1940) Vilna, Lithuania; a leader of Lithuanian Jewry.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Mishpatim are provided below:

- Tape # 043 - Malpractice
- Tape # 086 - Withholding Medical Treatment
- Tape # 134 - Hashovas Aveida: Returning Lost Objects
- Tape # 181 - Medicine, Shabbos, and the Non-Jew
- Tape # 227 - Taking Medicine on Shabbos
- Tape # 271 - Experimental Medical Treatment

- Tape # 317 - Wrecking a Borrowed Car
- Tape # 361 - Bankruptcy
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