

SEEING AN INTOLERABLE SITUATION FOR WHAT IT IS

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 # 221, Exhumation: When Is it Permitted? Good Shabbos!

Ephraim and Menashe: Role Models For The Jews Of Sioux City

In this week's parsha, Yosef brings his two children to his father Yaakov for a bracha [blessing]. Yaakov gave Yosef's children a tremendous bracha: "By you shall Israel bless saying, 'May G-d make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh'" [Bereishis 48:20]. What a bracha! In the future, whenever the Jewish people would bless their sons, they would invoke the prayer that they should be like Yosef's two sons: Ephraim and Menashe.

A very obvious question is asked. Yaakov had twelve illustrious sons. Why didn't Yaakov say, for example, that the perennial Jewish blessing would be "May you be like Yehudah and Yosef" or "like Yissachor and Zevulun"? Why did Yaakov single out these two grandchildren to be the prototypes of blessing?

Several meforshim [commentators] offer the following explanation, which I saw most recently from Rabbi Eliyahu Munk, zt"l. Yaakov saw a special quality in Ephraim and Menashe that he did not have the opportunity to see in his own children. Yaakov's own children were raised in the best of environments. They lived in the Land of Israel, in the house of the patriarch Yaakov, insulated from any bad environment. Granted, it is not trivial to raise good children even in the best of circumstances. However there is nothing novel in the fact that Yaakov's own children turned out well. It is no surprise if a child who is raised in Bnei Brak or Meah Shearim grows up as an observant Jew. However if people raise a child in a city such as Sioux City, Iowa -- where their family is, perhaps, the only observant Jewish family in town -- and the child is subject to foreign influences from all of his surroundings -- and nonetheless, the child turns out a faithful Jew, that is truly a great accomplishment.

The Patriarch Yaakov, perceiving that generations of Jews would spend so much of their time in Exile, formulated the greatest blessing that the Jewish people could give over to their children. "May

they be like Ephraim and Menashe". Ephraim and Menashe were raised in the Sioux City, Iowa of their time. They were the only Jews in the entire country! They had to grow up knowing that many things that they saw around them were not right, not the way things should be. Despite this, they turned out just like Yaakov's own children. This is the special blessing that the Jewish people would need -- the ability to be raised in a non-Jewish environment and yet turn out to be good and honest Jews.

Chushim Ben Dan: Seeing An Intolerable Situation For What It Is

The Talmud tells us [Sotah 13a] that when the brothers arrived at the Me'aras HaMachpela [Cave of Machpela] in Chevron to bury Yaakov, Eisav came and protested. There was one remaining plot in the burial cave. The previous burial plots were used for Adam, Chava, Avraham, Sarah, Yitzchak, Rivkah and Leah. Eisav claimed that the remaining plot belonged to him.

The sons of Yaakov responded that Eisav forfeited his right to the plot when he sold the birthright. Eisav counter-claimed, however, that he only sold the "double-portion" to which a first born was entitled. However nowhere in the sale was it implicit that he was selling his own burial plot! The brothers responded that it was included in the sale. Eisav demanded that they produce the document of sale.

The brothers claimed that they did have the document, but that they had left it in Egypt. Eisav insisted on delaying the burial until the brothers produced this deed of sale.

Who were the brothers going to send back to Egypt? This was before the days of Federal Express. They sent Naftali, who was well known as the speediest runner among the brothers.

Chushim ben [the son of] Dan, who was deaf, inquired from someone about the delay and argument in the midst of the burial of his grandfather. Chushim was astounded when he was told what was happening. "Until Naftali returns from Egypt, my grandfather should lie over there in disgrace?" Chushim took a club and hit Eisav over the head and killed him. The Talmud concludes that this was in fulfillment of Rivka's question, "Why should I lose both of you on one day?" [Bereishis 27:45].

This is an amazing passage. Out of Yaakov's twelve fine and upstanding children and out of all the wonderful grandchildren, why was it that only Chushim ben Dan was sensitive to the intolerable nature of the situation? And why did the Talmud emphasize the fact that Chushim was deaf?

The Mir Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz zt"l, explains that this Gemara teaches us a remarkable fact of life. The difference between Chushim and the other children and grandchildren was that the others, unfortunately, became accustomed to the idea that their father would lie there in disgrace until Naftali returned from Egypt. Why?

The answer is that it started gradually. First there was a claim. Then there was a counter-claim. Next came another counter-argument, etc. Everyone else became accustomed to the idea of the negotiations, without stopping to think that the scene was a world class offense to the honor of

Yaakov.

Since they all had time to adjust to this slowly developing situation, they gradually became used to the idea. However, Chushim was deaf and was not involved in the whole dialogue. When Chushim asked what was happening, he had not had the time to adjust. All of a sudden, he was hit by the whole terrible travesty of the situation in a single instant, as if he was hit by a load of bricks. Chushim, thank G-d, did not have time to adjust.

We learn from here a powerful insight into human nature. Human beings can become accustomed to anything. This phenomenon is both a blessing and a curse. People could not live without the ability to adjust. Sometimes we find ourselves in terrible situations and we can not imagine how we will survive. But, thank G-d, people are adaptable and resilient.

However, the terrible downside of this phenomenon is that we can become accustomed to anything -- to murder, to violence, to anything. The first time a soldier kills in war he is terribly distraught. But when one kills for long enough and sees death so often -- even that can be accommodated.

The lesson is that there are times when a person must say, "I'm not supposed to become accustomed to this. I should always react with disgust and revulsion to certain situations."

Many students attend my shiur [class] as their 'last stop' in the Yeshiva. After my shiur, they often go out into the worlds of their professions. I often meet former students, a year or two later, and inquire, "So, how are things going?" They sometimes respond, "Terrible. I can't take the office. I can't take the dirt. I can't take the lewd language. I can't take the innuendoes, I can't take any of it."

I respond to them with a blessing -- "You should always feel like that, because if you become accustomed to it, that is bad." There are some situations in life to which we must always react with disgust. The acceptance of an intolerable situation is itself, the start of the problem.

[Editor's note: Last year, several subscribers asked why Chushim was justified in his act of killing Eisav. No one even criticized Chushim after he killed Eisav and he did not have to stand trial for murder. Chushim was right, although from a superficial glance we may not understand why. In response to this question, Rabbi Frand offered an explanation of why Chushim was right:

The Ramban on Parshas Vayishlach states that it was permitted for Shimon and Levi to kill the people of Shechem because they certainly were in violation of at least some of the Sheva Mitzvohs Bnei Noach [The seven laws commanded to Noach and his descendants] - Avodah Zarah [Idol Worship], Gezel [Stealing], and perhaps Giluy Arayos. As such, they were all chayav misah [deserving of death].

Perhaps this was the case by Chushim and Eisav. We know from Chazal that Eisav was in violation of several of the Sheva Mitzvohs, including murder. As such, Eisav was chayav misah and could have been convicted by Chushim himself. Also it could be that the very fact that Eisav did not let them bury Yaakov in a plot that he had sold constituted an act of gezel and as such Eisav was chayav for

that alone.]

Sources and Personalities

Rav Eliyahu Munk (1900-1978) Germany, England.

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz (1902-1978); Mir Rosh Yeshiva; Lithuania; Kobe; Jerusalem.

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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 VaYechi are provided below:

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