

NOT JUST ANOTHER JOE

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 # 284, Birchas HaTorah. Good Shabbos!

Dedicated This Year Le'eluy Nishmas Chaya Bracha Bas R. Yissocher Dov - In memory of Mrs. Adele Frand

If Not For This Day, We Would Just Be 'Another Joe'

All brachos [blessings], with the exception of Birchas HaMazon [Grace After Meals], are Rabbinic in origin. However, The Shaagas Aryeh (Rav Aryeh Leib ben Asher Gunzberg; 1695-1785) argues that the bracha [blessing] recited before learning Torah is Biblical in origin. The proof, the Shaagas Aryeh says, is a Talmudic passage in Nedarim [81a], which attributes the destruction of the Land of Israel to the fact that Jews did not recite the blessing before learning Torah. The Shaagas Aryeh argues that if this bracha was not of Biblical origin, it would never have been singled out as the cause of the destruction.

The Ran (1290-1375) in Maseches Nedarim quotes a novel insight into this Gemara in Nedarim, in the name of Rabbeinu Yona (1200-1263). The Gemara in Nedarim is expounding a pasuk [verse] in Yirmiyahu. The pasuk in Yirmiyahu says that the destruction occurred because "they abandoned my Torah" [9:12]. Rabbeinu Yona explains that the reason why the Gemara did not want to interpret the pasuk literally (that people abandoned the Torah and simply did not learn it at all), was because the Gemara previously mentioned that prophets and scholars were consulted regarding the interpretation of this pasuk and none of them had an adequate interpretation. It would not have been difficult to figure out the literal interpretation of the pasuk. Therefore, Rabbeinu Yona explains that "they abandoned my Torah" must not refer to something blatant or overt. The Gemara indicates that it was necessary for G-d Himself to reveal to us the nature of the problem.

Rabbeinu Yona continues by explaining as follows: that generation certainly occupied themselves with constant Torah learning. That was why no one could figure out why the Land was destroyed until G-d, who knows the depths of people's hearts, revealed the real source of the problem: People did not recite the bracha over learning Torah. The Ran explains that this means that they did not consider Torah prestigious enough to be worthy of a bracha. People did learn Torah. Everyone had fixed times for studying Torah. However, they did not consider the Torah learning so important. They did not appreciate what they had. That is why they did not recite the bracha over Torah.

When one studies Chemistry or Accounting or Law, one may find it intellectually challenging. They may be deep and stimulating, but one does not recite a Bracha over them. However, a Sefer Torah, a Chumash, a Medrash - these do require a Bracha to demonstrate that we know the value of what we have been given. The generation of the Destruction apparently lacked this appreciation - to the extent that the Talmud says "they abandoned my Torah" - i.e. - they did not even possess the Torah.

The Izbiter Rebbe (Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbice; died 1854) once quoted an amazing Hagoos Ashrei (13-14th Century glosses on Rabbeinu Asher's Commentary) in Tractate Bava Metziah to explain this idea of having something, without REALLY having it. In the case cited there, Reuven bought a piece of metal, which he believed was made out of lead. Reuven paid the price based on the per pound value of lead. He subsequently sold the piece of metal (presumably lead) to Shimeon. Later, Shimeon discovered that the piece of metal was in fact silver and was worth far more than what he paid for it. Upon hearing this, Reuven wanted to either receive full compensation from Shimon or undo the whole sale.

The Hagoos Ashrei rules that Shimeon can keep the metal and need not make any further payment to Reuven because Reuven never "owned" the silver. Since Reuven never realized what he had - he thought he only had lead - he never legally acquired the value of the silver. Since Reuven did not legally own the silver, Simeon does not have to pay him for it.

The Ishbitzer Rebbe says this is the meaning of "they abandoned my Torah". People can think they have the Torah, they can learn the Torah, and the Torah can even be in their possession. But if they do not appreciate what they have, then they do not have it. The prophet can accurately label this "they have abandoned my Torah". According to Halacha, if one does not appreciate what he has, he does not really have it.

This is one of the tasks that we must work on as we approach the Holiday of Shavuot. We can never take for granted that which Torah does for us. The Talmud relates [Pesachim 68b] that Rav Yosef would make a tremendous party on Shavuot. He would say, "If not for this special day (on which the Torah was given), look how many Yosefs there are in the market place". If not for the fact that I as a Jew have that precious gift of Torah, I would literally be 'just another Joe'.

Sometimes we forget the meaning of a world without Torah. A world without Torah is just a matter of the thickness of the veneer. It is literally a situation of "each man is prepared to swallow up his fellow

man" [Pirkei Avos 3:2]. The line between a human being and a wild animal - without the guiding moral force of Torah - is indeed very thin. However, the Torah makes us different and elevates us. The Torah makes us Godly instead of beastly. Where would we be without this Torah? This is the essence of Shavuot.

On Shavuot we read the story of Rus and Orpah. Rus and Orpah were sisters, daughters of Eglon King of Moab. They were from royalty. They had to choose between going back to a strange land with a woman who was an old widow without a possession in the world or returning to their father's palace. Who really made the rational decision?

Rav Leib Chassman (1869-1935) once commented that if we look at the situation with a cold calculating eye, Orpah clearly was the one who made the logical decision. Rus made an irrational decision. Why follow Naomi? It does not add up.

Rav Leib Chassman says that the only answer is that Rus realized the difference between a life with Torah and a life without Torah. When the dilemma was put into those stark terms, Rus had a relatively easy decision. Life without Torah is not worth living. This is the essence of Shavuot.

Every Yom Tov has its own message - that idea which we are supposed to appreciate about the holiday. The main idea that Shavuot must inculcate into our psyches is "If not for this day, where would we be? What would we look like without this Torah?" The scary thing is that if we fail to properly appreciate that which Torah does for our lives, we are left with what the Talmud calls "they have abandoned my Torah". This is our challenge as we approach the Yom Tov of Shavuot. Everyone should have a good and meaningful holiday.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yisrocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (# 284). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: Birchas HaTorah? The complete list of halachic portions for parshas Bamidbar from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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