

PAUSING TO THINK

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 # 267, Secular Names of G-d. Good Shabbos!

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

Pausing To Think

Prior to the Plague of Hail, Pharoah and the people of Egypt were warned. They were told that the land would be smitten with a hail the likes of which they had never witnessed, and that anything left out in the field would be crushed and destroyed by the hail.

The Torah relates that anyone who feared the Word of G-d brought all his cattle and property into his home. Only those who did not heed G-d's word left their servants and cattle out in the field. The Medrash identifies "the one who feared the Word of G-d" as Iyov (Job) and "the one who did not fear the Word of G-d" as Bilaam (the Talmud says that both Iyov and Bilaam were advisors to Pharoah [Sotah 11a]).

If we consider the circumstances, one would have to be quite obtuse (not to say "stupid") to not "get" what was happening. Hail was already the 7th plague. By this time, Moshe had an established track record! How could Bilaam not at least take some precautions, fearing that "perhaps" Moshe would be right again? The answer is that this was the very essence of Bilaam. He exemplified the attribute described by the Torah as "asher lo sam leebo", literally meaning that he never paid attention. He was a person who never stopped to think and consider or ponder. People like that can be banged over the head six times and it will not make an iota of difference, because they have a disease called "he does not stop to think" (asher lo sam leebo).

Later in the Chumash, we see that this attribute did not only plague Bilaam in Egypt. It plagued him throughout his life. When Bilaam was hired to curse the Jews, he initially declined, but when he was offered more money, G-d allowed him to go. He mounted his trusted donkey and began the journey. Then his donkey suddenly stopped in the middle of the road. The donkey refused to budge because an Angel was standing in the middle of the road blocking the way. Bilaam, who did not see the Angel, became angry and hit and cursed the donkey. G-d opened the mouth of the donkey who began to question Bilaam. "Is this my normal pattern of behavior? Have I not been your trusted donkey for all these years? Have I ever stalled on you once or given you a moment of trouble?" In other words, the donkey was telling its master, "Don't you think something extraordinary is happening here? Why don't you wake up and look, Bilaam?" But that was always Bilaam's problem - he did not pay attention to the obvious. He did not open his eyes and pay attention to what was happening around him.

The Chofetz Chaim makes the following fantastic observation: in the entire narrative of the blessings that Bilaam gave to the Children of Israel, there is not one pause in the entire reading. Throughout the entire story of Bilaam, from the beginning of Parshas Balak virtually through Bilaam's departure from the scene at the end, there is not a single pause. There is neither a "full break" [to the end of the line] nor a "closed break" [in the middle of the line]. The parsha is certainly long enough to warrant multiple "paragraphs," as is common throughout the Torah.

The Chofetz Chaim explains as follows: The reason why there are parsha divisions in the Torah is that they were given to allow Moshe Rabbeinu pause to ponder and reflect on the previous set of verses. The purpose of the breaks is to allow for a period of introspection and analysis of what is transpiring. Parshas Balak does not have any breaks, because Bilaam never paused to think or ponder.

We dismiss Bilaam; we think to ourselves "how stupid!" But let us ask ourselves - do we ever stop to ponder and think about what is happening around us? We suffer from the same disease. Our whole life is rushing. Everything is quick -- on to the next thing.

We have an array of conveniences to speed up our lives. We do not need to do laundry by hand any more. We do not need to walk to where we are going anymore. We can cook in less than an hour. Life is so easy. But does anyone feel that his life is slower and more relaxed than his parents' lives? Inevitably, our lives are quicker and more high-pressured than our parents' lives. Everyone is in a rush. It is always so hectic.

Why should it be like that? Dinner takes less time to prepare. We can even buy it ready-made. It takes less time to do everything. The disease is that the more time we are given, the more we feel we are on a treadmill. As a result, we try to rush to try to accomplish more. When one is in a rush, one doesn't stop to think or ponder.

This is a terrible disease. It can become so bad that one can see 6 miracles and it will not make an impression on him.

I once saw an interesting observation from Rabbi Zev Leff. The Talmud [Brochos 43b] relates that a person should not take big steps, for the Master taught that big steps diminish one's eyesight by 1/500th. The remedy, it is taught, is Kiddush and Havdalah. What is the meaning of this Gemara?

The Gemara is allegorical. A person who is continuously taking big steps - i.e. - a person who is in a perennial rush - causes his perspective to be affected. Such a person has no time to stop and ponder. His physical eyesight is not affected, rather his VISION is affected - the way he perceives life -- becomes diminished. What is the remedy? Kiddush and Havdalah. Kiddush and Havdalah represent distinctions in life. People must realize that there are differences between holy and profane. These differences must be thought about, and pondered.

The Gemara says that Rabbi Akiva started out as an ignoramus. When he was 40 years old he decided that he wanted to learn. It was a daunting task to begin study at that age - so what made him do it? The Talmud says that he was at a pond and noticed water dripping on a stone. He observed how the water had made the stone smooth, and reasoned to himself that if water could make even a hard stone smooth, then Torah (which is compared to water) could penetrate his hard head as well.

How many people, in the history of mankind, looked at water falling on a hard stone and making it smooth, and changed their lives? It took a Rabbi Akiva - a person who did pay attention, who did stop to think. Because he was a person who pondered, he became the great Rabbi Akiva.

Sometimes in life we must slow down to think and reflect. Rav Simon Schwab (1908-1995) related how he once spent Shabbos Parshas Be'Shalach in the home of the Chofetz Chaim (1838-1933). They were discussing the Manna. The Medrash relates that the Manna would taste like whatever a person would desire. If you thought fried chicken, it would taste like fried chicken; if you thought macaroni, it would taste like macaroni, etc. So they asked the Chofetz Chaim - what if someone ate the Manna without thinking about anything - then what would it taste like? The Chofetz Chaim responded, if you did not think - then it had no taste! [oib me'tracht nisht; es haat ken ta'am nisht.]

We must "take things to heart". It is necessary to stop and think about what is going on around us - globally, in our community, in our family. When a person goes through life without thinking, then life itself has no "taste". It is just "living" life on a treadmill.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
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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

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