

# THE SCALE OF PIETY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

## Rabbi Frand on Parshas Bamidbar

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*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 330, Rus and Its Halachic Implications.  
Good Shabbos!*

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### The Scale of Piety

The pasuk [verse] at the end of Parshas Bamidbar says, "Do not wipe out the family of the Kehasites from the midst of the Levites" [Bamidbar 4:18]. The Medrash Rabbah comments on this pasuk that it was the job of the members of Kehas to carry the holy vessels when the Tabernacle was transported. They were the movers. Their job included moving the Menorah, the Table, and many of the smaller utensils. But everyone in the family of Kehas knew that their most important task was carrying the Aron Kodesh [Ark].

There was a widespread perception that the greatest reward would go to those who carried the Aron. Therefore the tendency was for everyone to abandon all the other holy vessels and run for the Aron. This led to fights and arguments. "You carried the Aron last time. This time it's my turn to carry the Aron!" The end result was excessive light-headedness (Kalus Rosh) and a departure from the degree of solemnity and reverence that should have surrounded the transport of the holy vessels.

This was a very unfortunate situation, which led to the "Divine Presence afflicting them", and people were killed. This is why the Torah specifically warns not to allow the eradication of the family of Kehat.

Although their zeal to carry the Aron was very worthy and noble, nevertheless, disputes and desecration of G-d's Name emerged out of this desire to do 'the bigger mitzvah'. What was the

source of it all? Seemingly, it was the desire to act "For the Sake of G-d's Name".

The Mesilas Yescharim (Path of the Just by Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto [1707- 1747]) uses this Medrash to explain what he calls a "great and fundamental principle in the matter of piety". Namely, it is impossible to judge whether an act constitutes piety or not, based on first impressions. Rather, it requires great thought and analysis. One must weigh on a "scale of piety" whether or not various acts should be encouraged or discouraged.

This means that a person contemplating "What is a mitzvah?" or "Which good deed should I do?" cannot make snap judgements. Not everything is as it might appear at first glance.

All the Kehasites thought, "I'm doing a big mitzvah! I'm rushing to show my desire to carry the Aron!" However, that which they thought was a mitzvah, turned out to be a terrible sin and a terrible desecration of G-d's Name.

There are countless examples of this phenomenon. Rav Ruderman, zt"l, (1901- 1987) always used to cite the following classic example from his boyhood memories. There is a custom on Hoshana Rabbah, that the Chazzan wears a Kittel for Mussaf. In the village of Dalhiniv, on one particular Hoshanna Rabbah, the Chazzan was about to daven Mussaf and they asked the Shammash [sexton of the synagogue] "Where is the Kittel?" The Shammash had forgotten to bring the Kittel. One of the worshippers started berating and cursing the Shammash. "You fool! You idiot! How could you have forgotten the Kittel on Hoshanna Rabbah?" He humiliated the Shammash in front of the entire congregation. (The Shammash, we must understand, was not the most prestigious position in a synagogue to begin with, to say the least.)

Rav Ruderman commented that he remembered thinking as a child, that this was a big scandal. The Shammash turned red and white. He was utterly humiliated. Why? Because of a custom cited in Shulchan Aruch that a Chazzan should wear a Kittel during this service. But in the big picture, there is certainly no comparison between the loss of the opportunity to fulfill this custom and the sin of humiliating another Jew in public in front of the entire synagogue. All this was in the name of "one must wear a Kittel."

This is the lesson of the Mesilas Yescharim. The determination of whether or not something is an act of piety is not at all trivial. A person must carefully consider what is important and what is not important.

Rav Pam (1913-2001) mentioned other examples of the same idea. A newly married young man, who was learning in Kolel, was accustomed to arrive home at 6:00 p.m. every evening for dinner. His wife prepared dinner. She was waiting anxiously for him to arrive home. It was 6:15. It was 6:30. It was 7:00. By this time, the dinner had dried out. The wife was depressed. Finally at 7:30, her young husband walked through the doorway and told his wife "Someone needed a ride to the airport and and I took him - I performed a chessed [an act of kindness]!"

Rav Pam asked, "Was this really a chessed?" Yes it was a chessed, vis a vis the traveler. But if one knows that his wife is preparing dinner for him, and she will be disappointed and even depressed if, by the time he shows up to eat it, the dinner will be cold and ruined - THAT IS NOT A CHESSED. This is another example of the "scale of piety" - of priorities that must be carefully weighed in determining what truly is a chessed and what is truly not a chessed.

Another classic example of this phenomenon is the incident with the Vizhnetzer Rebbe, zt"l. Some people have the minhag to bake matzahs on Erev Pessach. When baking matzahs on Erev Pessach, one must be exceedingly diligent and careful because the leniency of nullification (bitul) does not apply at that time.

There was a woman in the matza bakery who was working a little slowly. One of the Chassidim yelled at her. When the Rebbe chastised him for becoming angry and making the woman feel badly, the Chassid protested, "But, Rebbe, Chometz is forbidden in the smallest quantity (b'mah-she'hu)!" The Rebbe responded that the smallest quantity of anger (a mah-she'hu ka-as) is even worse than the smallest quantity of Chometz.

This is the "scale of piety". We must carefully weigh what is right and what is wrong and keep everything in its proper perspective. In the zeal to carry the Aron Kodesh, it is possible to shame the Menorah, the Shulchon [Table], and the other holy vessels. In the zeal to carry the Aron, it is possible to cause people to die!

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Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.  
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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (# 330). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: Sefer Rus and Its Halachic Implcations? The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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