

GRANDFATHER AT THE TABLE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Shemos

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 312, The Do's Don'ts of Naming Babies Laws.
Good Shabbos!*

Grandfather At The Table

"And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Yaakov, each man and his family came" [Shemos 1:1]. The Chofetz Chaim (1838- 1933) asks why the Jewish people took the spiritual risks of going en masse to Egypt. Egypt was known as being an amoral society and an amoral land. One would have thought that, given such a reputation, it was not the type of place where one would want to raise a nice Jewish family.

There were many noteworthy Rabbis in Europe who, for this very reason, told people that they should not emigrate from Europe to go to America. Going to America circa 1920, circa 1930, was to go to a "treife medina" [a 'non- Kosher' country]. Any person who went to America in that era was taking his spiritual life into his own hands. Observing the Sabbath meant having no job on Monday.

So, what was the rationale and justification for the Jewish nation's descent to Egypt? The Chofetz Chaim says that the verse answers this question with two words - "with Yaakov". Since they went down with the presence of the Patriarch Jacob, they had an anchor and an antidote to guarantee that nothing detrimental would happen to them spiritually. Yaakov would be a shield in the face of the influences of Egypt.

The importance of the presence of Yaakov can be illustrated with the following story: The Chofetz Chaim wanted to live out his final days in Eretz Yisroel, and decided that he wanted to move to the

Land of Israel several years before he died (in 1933). However, Rav Chaim Ozer (1863-1940) told him that he was not permitted to leave Europe. Rav Chaim Ozer asked, "What will happen to all the Jews in Europe without you?" The Chofetz Chaim responded that he was already an old man who was no longer able to go around and speak to people and have an impact. "I can no longer do any good for anybody in Europe."

Rav Chaim Ozer answered with a parable from Rav Yisroel Salanter (1809- 1883). Rav Yisroel said: "when the grandfather sits at the head of the table, everyone seated at the table acts and behaves differently." The grandfather does not need to raise his voice or threaten "I'm going to send you to your room." The mere presence of the grandfather at the head of the table has an effect on everyone. Rav Chaim Ozer told the Chofetz Chaim, "we need you in Europe -- not to speak, not to write, not to give classes, but we need you to sit at the head of the table." As long as the grandfather is seated at the head of the table, everyone is kept in line.

This is the import of the words "with Jacob". The Jews were only able to contemplate going down to Egypt, despite its negative influences, because their grandfather, Yaakov, accompanied them.

Moshe's Curiosity About The Burning Bush

Upon encountering the burning bush, Moshe said, "Let me please come close (Asura Nah) to investigate this amazing sight - why is the bush not consumed?" [Shemos 3:3]. There is an interesting Yalkut on this pasuk: "Rabbi Yochanan said that Moshe took a total of three steps. Reish Lakish said that Moshe did not need to walk any steps, he merely turned his head. G-d responded, "'You troubled yourself to investigate, I will reveal Myself to you' and He called out 'Moshe, Moshe.'" What is the message of this Medrash?

First of all, how was it that Moshe's 'effort' to investigate made him worthy of Divine prophecy? Furthermore, our Sages say that Moshe was tested for his future role as the leader of Israel with the sheep. G-d observed both the way in which Moshe handled Yisro's flocks and later the way in which King David handled Yishai's flocks to verify that they were worthy to be the 'shepherds' of the Jewish nation. So clearly, Moshe did not become worthy to be the future leader overnight or by taking a few steps. It took years of training as a shepherd to qualify for the job.

Rav Simcha Zissel (1824-1898), who was the head of the Chevron Yeshiva, offered the following explanation of this Medrash. The Medrash is teaching us that Moshe merited receiving Divine prophecy because he had a life long thirst for spiritual growth and for seeking out knowledge of G-d. He never sat on his laurels. He never thought to himself "I've already seen enough." The constant striving to always learn more and grow more and be more was Moshe's essence.

After Moshe descended from Mt. Sinai, he had Karnei Or [beams of light] that shone from his forehead. Our Sages say that these Karnei Or came from the last drop of ink that remained on the quill, which Moshe smeared against his forehead. This is clearly an allegorical teaching. G-d knows how to properly measure the amount of ink necessary to write a Torah so that there need not be any

ink left over. The Medrash is teaching us that after Moshe Rabbeinu transcribed the entire Torah, there was a little ink left -- representing a little more to be gained, a little more to learn. Moshe insisted that the ink remain with him and smeared it on his forehead. The drop of ink represents the unceasing thirst to know more and to move closer to G-d.

Rav Simcha Zissel relates this teaching regarding the Karnei Or to the Yalkut's teaching by the Burning Bush. Even if it is only three steps, even if it is only a matter of turning the head, it represented Moshe Rabbeinu's unending striving to grow and to become closer to G-d. To which G-d responded, "Moshe, if that is your attitude, now I will reveal Myself to you."

This is a lesson for all of us, whether we are 35 or 45 or 65 or 85. We should not say "Learning is for a 15 year old or a 20 year old; perhaps at 25 there is still room for growth." By middle age, many people assume "I am who I am, I've reached what I am going to reach. This is me. I cannot go any higher!"

We must always seek out that last drop of ink that is left over. There is always room to grow. G-d appreciates people who are not satisfied spiritually. If there is a demonstration of desire for growth - even if it is merely a few steps or a turning of the head - G-d rewards that demonstrated desire for holiness.

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