

SPIRITUALLY PRODUCTIVE

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 # 355 - Asarah B'Teves. Good Shabbos!

Time Flies When You're Spiritually Productive

The parsha begins, "And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt for 17 years and the days of Yaakov were the years of his life (yemei Yaakov sh'nei chayav) one hundred and forty seven years" [Bereishis 47:28]. The author of "VaYaged Moshe" comments on the peculiar language of this pasuk [verse] - "the days of Yaakov, the years of his life." The VaYaged Moshe explains that the years do not drag on for a person who leads a busy and meaningful spiritual life, filled with Torah and Mitzvos and kindness -- the years fly by, almost seeming like days. This is the message of our pasuk. The years of Yaakov's life were like days in his eyes.

The author cites an incident involving the Bnei Yissaschar who once went to the marketplace in Munkatch. The Bnei Yissaschar saw people in the market standing around talking idly, and not doing anything productive. He asked them what they were doing. They answered, "we're killing time." He told them, "do me a favor, don't kill the time, give some of it to me because I don't have enough time."

This is the lesson of the opening pasuk of the parsha. When one is productive in the Service of G-d, time literally flies. Only when a person sits and stares and does nothing, does life become boring and time seem like an eternity.

Reciting The Blessing Over Torah First

Yaakov blessed Yosef's children and told them "Through you will Israel bless their children saying 'may they be like Ephraim and Menashe'" [48:20]. Many parents give this blessing to their children every Friday night and before Yom Kippur.

Many commentaries explain that Ephraim and Menashe led two very distinct lifestyles. Both lifestyles were necessary, but they were very different. There are a number of indications that

Menashe was more a man of the world than Ephraim. Menashe served as an assistant to Yosef -- the Viceroy of Egypt. His job was to ensure that the government bureaucracy ran smoothly. He could be considered Yosef's 'Chief of Staff.' Ephraim, on the other hand, sat and learned Torah from his grandfather, Yaakov. This is the classic dichotomy between the man of the world, of diplomacy, and of business on the one hand (Menashe), and the individual who devotes his time and his efforts to learning Torah (Ephraim).

The truth of the matter is that for a Jew to be successful in this world he must balance both these attributes. A person must occupy himself with Torah and Mitzvos, and realize that this is the main function of his life. At the same time, everyone cannot necessarily sit back and assume that manna will fall from heaven. People must have a viable means of earning a livelihood. People must deal with the world, with their community, and with their surrounding environment.

The blessing that Yaakov gave to every Jew -- that they should see in their children the attributes of Ephraim and Menashe -- was that every child should be able to balance this tension between spirituality and "real-world" considerations. Thus we will have well balanced children who will be able to maintain this tension with a proper equilibrium.

Included in this observation is the concept that every Jew must impress upon his son that it is the 'Ephraim' attribute that must precede the 'Menashe' attribute. Despite the fact that Menashe was the older son, and despite the fact that Menashe represents a necessary and vital attribute, we must impress upon our children that the priority must be a life of Torah and Mitzvos. This is what every child has to see in his parents.

The Gemara [Nedarim 81a] asks, "Over what cause was the Land (of Israel) lost?" The Gemara answers with an enigmatic statement "because they did not recite the blessing over Torah first." The simple interpretation of this Gemara is that they did not recite the blessing over Torah (despite the fact that they learned Torah).

I saw a beautiful drush [homiletic teaching], which interprets the Gemara as not referring to the blessing over Torah, but to the blessing one gives to his children. When one blesses his children, he is supposed to say, "May G-d make you like Ephraim (representing success in Torah) and like Menashe (representing success in worldly matters)." However they did not bless their children by placing Torah first, they blessed them by placing their emphasis on success in worldly matters. If it is not clear that Ephraim comes before Menashe, that Torah must be the focus of our lives - then that is a cause for the destruction of the Land.

Ethical Wills

Our Sages teach that Yaakov our Patriarch was the first person in the world to get sick before his death. Until that time, people would be healthy right up until the time of their death. Yaakov asked G-d that he should become weak before his death. The reason for this request was so that he would have the opportunity to give his children final instructions prior to his departure from this world.

Rav Pam (1913-2001) cites a number of ethical wills that great men of Israel wrote for their children before they died. He says that a number of great men of Israel specifically commanded their children not to eulogize them.

Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, though, the head of the Yeshiva in Volozhin, told his children that he did want them to eulogize him. He writes that there is no reason for us to try to be 'more religious' than the Amoraim of the Talmud who allowed themselves to eulogize one another.

Rather, the Netzi"v stipulated as follows to his son, Rav Chaim Berlin: "I know that you are an eloquent speaker and that you will want to honor me and try to give me an elaborate and lengthy eulogy. You will no doubt want to spend much time preparing it and much time saying it. You should know, my son, if you would choose to spend that same learning over several pages of Talmud, I would receive far more spiritual satisfaction in the upper worlds than I would receive from you spending that same time preparing and delivering the eulogy." In other words, "Cut the hesped to ten minutes, and spend the rest of the time learning Torah!"

This was the message that the Netzi"v left for his son Rav Chaim Berlin before he died: It is better to learn a few pages of Gemara - that is the best thing you can do for me.

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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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- Tape # 079 - The Yissocher-Zevulun Partnership
- Tape # 128 - The Sandik
- Tape # 175 - Embalming, Autopsies, and Cremation
- Tape # 221 - Exhumation: When Is it Permitted?
- Tape # 265 - Yahrtzeit
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- Tape # 355 - Asarah B'Teves
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