

THE DECLINE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshios Acharei Mos & Kedoshim

The Decline

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #414 -- Giving An Injection to one's father. Good Shabbos!

The Prosperity of Egypt and Canaan Contributed To Their Moral Decline

The end of Parshas Achrei Mos contains the section of the Parsha that deals with forbidden relationships (Arayos). This Torah portion, which is also read during the Mincha service of Yom Kippur, is introduced with the exhortation "Like the deeds of the land of Egypt wherein you have dwelt, you shall not do; and like deeds of the land of Canaan where I am bringing you thereto, you shall not do. You shall not walk in the ways of their practices." [Vayikra 18:3]

The Jews were going "from the frying pan into the fire" in terms of the moral depravity of the surrounding population. Both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan were known for their despicable and nauseating forms of immorality. G-d therefore warned the Jewish people not to mimic the activities or mores of the societies that they have witnessed or will be witnessing. The Torah then listed the different forbidden relationships.

Rav Dovid Feinstein notes an apparent anomaly in the Torah's language. The Torah does not warn against mimicking the deeds of the Egyptians or the Canaanites. It rather warns against mimicking the deeds of the LAND of Egypt and the LAND of Canaan. Rav Dovid Feinstein deduces that the activities of the people of Egypt and the people of Canaan must have had something to do with the LAND of Egypt and the LAND of Canaan. The land added some facet that enabled the people to be engaged in such moral depravity. What facet did the land add to the moral depravity?

We know from several sources that these two lands were exceptionally fertile and affluent. For thousands of years, Egypt prospered by virtue of the fact that the Nile would overflow every year,

flooding its banks, causing the surrounding land to be extremely fertile. Egypt was an extremely prosperous country.

We learn from the spies' visit to the Land of Canaan that the fruits of the land were so huge that it took eight people just to carry back a cluster of grapes [Sotah 34a]. The land of Canaan was blessed with tremendous agricultural success, and that brought affluence to the entire country.

This is the reason why the people were so disgustingly immoral. There is an inverse connection, unfortunately, between prosperity and the level of a nation's morals. One does not have to be a social scientist to come to the conclusion that western society in general and America in particular is very prosperous and very affluent. But at the same time, we are witness to a society that has lost its moral compass.

We are experiencing a replay of "the actions of the LAND of Egypt." When things are so abundant and society has it so well, people tend to lose their moral standing. Unfortunately, we, the inhabitants of such a society, get caught up in this. It has been said that Jews over the centuries have learned to cope with the trials and tribulations ("nisoyonos") of poverty. But we have not learned to deal with the "nisoyon" of affluence. The morals of society rub off on us. The Torah is hinting at this idea through the unique formulation of its warning concerning the actions of the LAND of Egypt and the LAND of Canaan.

Rabbis Safeguard Against Assimilation, As It Leads To Inter-marriage

The last pasuk [verse] of Parshas Achrei Mos states: "You shall safeguard My charge that these abominable traditions that were done before you not be done, and not make yourselves impure through them. I am Hashem, your G-d." [Vayikra 18:30]. The Talmud derives the idea of making a fence around the Torah from this exhortation to "safeguard" the commandments (Mishmeres l'mishmarti) [Moed Katan 5a; Yevamos 21a].

If people would only observe the strict Biblical commandments and not observe the Rabbinical safeguards that were added later, we would not recognize what we now call "observant" Judaism. Shabbos observance is a totally different experience because of the Rabbinical enactments that "safeguard" the basic prohibitions of labor. The scope of virtually every area of halachic restriction that we practice has been greatly expanded by virtue of the principle of "make a safeguard for My charge."

Sometimes one could question the extent of "Rabbinical fences" and wonder whether the rabbis didn't go "too far." We look at some "D'Rabbanans" and say, "this is a little too far fetched; we'd never make a mistake over here." But we need to understand that the Rabbis were extremely wise, and knew exactly what they were doing. Their basic intent many times was not so much concern with stopping a specific violation, as with creating a certain atmosphere. They were interested in establishing a pervasive attitude.

I recently taught my Yeshiva class about the laws of consuming food prepared by non-Jews, which are in the Talmud, in Tractate Avodah Zarah. There are prohibitions against eating food prepared (under certain circumstances) by a non-Jew; of drinking wine that is so much as touched (under certain circumstances) by a non-Jew. The rationale behind all of these Rabbinic prohibitions is "lest we come to intermarry with them" (mi'shum chasrus).

One can ask, if the food only contains Kosher ingredients and I take it into the confines of my own home, why should the fact that it happened to have been cooked by a non-Jew be any cause for concern that I might come to marry a non-Jewish woman? Isn't that far-fetched?

The Rabbis were not worried that if someone ate something cooked by a non-Jew, they would immediately go out and marry that person. Rather, they were interested in creating an atmosphere that shouts to us "we've got to remain separate." Once we start breaking down the little things and start tampering with the atmosphere, we are quickly left with what we have today in the United States of America: over fifty percent intermarriage. We no longer have an atmosphere of separation.

The following is excerpted from a column by the rabbi of a Reform congregation in Miami, Florida:

"We think that intermarriage leads to assimilation, but it is the other way around. We marry people like ourselves. The average middle-class Jew is as different from the average middle class Gentile as your average Hutu is different from your average Tutsi. I know Rabbis aren't supposed to say things like this. We are supposed to fight assimilation tooth and nail. But to be honest I am about as assimilated as you can get. Put me in a lineup of the average middle class goy [sic] and the only way you could tell us apart is to play a Jackie Mason tape and see who laughs. The truth is our kids don't intermarry. They marry people just like themselves. People who eat stone crabs marry people who eat stone crabs."

The rabbi has it exactly right. People are not intermarrying. They are marrying people exactly like themselves. The reason why a strictly religious person would not contemplate marrying a non-Jew (or vice-versa) is because they are so different. Those who follow the Rabbis' safeguards live in an environment nearly as different from that of the average middle class American non-Jew, as either of those environments are different from that of the average Tutsi. The cross-cultural divide is too great. The groups are too different from each other, so they do not intermarry. It would be like marrying someone from a different planet. But if someone eats like them and talks like them and dresses like them, then it is not intermarriage at all. It is marrying within one's own kind.

He wrote further: "As far as religion goes they both have the same fake sense of spirituality. They both believe in a G-d without being able to define either belief or G-d. They both hold goodness above theology and righteousness above tradition. Religion does not matter to most of our kids. We tried to make it matter and we failed. They don't intermarry. They marry the same kind."

This all started because of an attitude that said, "so what if I go ahead and eat food cooked by non-Jews? So what if I drink a cup of wine with them? It's kosher food! It's kosher wine!" Once one breaks

down the "safeguard of My charge" then anything can happen.

Therefore, when we see Rabbinic decrees that sometimes strike us as being far-fetched or even absurd -- we need to step back and acknowledge that the Rabbis knew exactly what they were talking about. They wished to create an attitude and an atmosphere, as the Torah instructs: "Make a safeguard for My charge."

Those who mock the concept of making a safeguard for the Biblical laws should go out and look at what is happening in the world. The alternative is all too readily present for us to painfully witness. People who eat stone crabs marry people who eat stone crabs.

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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