RABBI FRAND ON PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Parsha Perceptions Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. Good Shabbos & Chag Kosher V'Somayach!

The pasuk [verse] says, "You should keep My statutes and My laws, which if a man obeys, 'v'chai bahem' [he shall live through them], I am Hashem." [Vayikra 18:5] The Gemara [Talmud] learns from this source that if a person is faced with the choice of committing a sin or being murdered [or alternatively, neglecting a mitzva or being murdered], the halacha requires the person to commit the aveira [sin] or neglect the mitzva, and not die. However, there are three exceptions: avoda zarah [idol worship], shfichas damim [murder], and giluy arayus [illicit relations].

Barring these three exceptions, the halacha says that one should eat pork, violate the Shabbos, eat bread on Pesach, and do not die. Why? Because we learn from this pasuk: these are the mitzvos that I gave you, "v'chai bahem," and you should live by them. The Gemara interprets this to mean that "you should live by them, and not die by them." [Sanhedren 74a]

A cursory examination of this pasuk would seem to indicate that the Torah is telling us that human life is more precious than keeping the mitzvos. Therefore, if you have a choice between observing Shabbos or staying alive, your life is more valuable than the mitzva. We would conclude that there is a general rule: life is more important than the mitzvos, with just three exceptions.

Rav Moshe Feinstein Zt"l, in his sefer [book] "Igros Moshe," writes (in the course of answering a query on a different subject) that this common understanding of the pasuk is incorrect. That is not what the pasuk is saying. The true explanation is as basic as a Targum Onkelos. [The Targum Onkelos is a nearly-literal translation to Aramaic of the words in the Torah, with a minimum of interpolated commentary.]

The Targum Onkelos translates this pasuk as: "and you should live through them in the World to Come." In other words, the pasuk is not telling us to stay alive and neglect the mitzvos, because life is more precious than mitzvos. The pasuk is telling us that the most precious thing in life is keeping mitzvos, because they bring us to olam haba, the World to Come.

Therefore, if I have a choice between observing the Shabbos or being murdered, the Torah says,

"live!" Why? Not because life, for its own sake, is more precious than G-d's Commandments. Rather, life is precious because you can do those Commandments! Therefore, perform work on this Shabbos so you can keep so many more Shabbasos in the future. Eat chometz on Pesach. Why? So you can go on and do more mitzvos, and be worthy of life in the world to come.

This is an entirely different perspective. Life is not valuable just for the sake of life itself, without a purpose. Life is not valuable simply in order for a person to work, do errands and go to ball games. That is not what makes life worth living! What does make life worth living? "V'chai bahem" - "l'chayei alma" [in the world to come]. Life that leads to this goal is worth living. The Torah is instructing us to violate the Shabbos and to eat chometz [leaven] on Pesach. Why? The reason is because a human life is valuable because it can do so many more mitzvos in this world. Therefore, violate the Shabbos once so that you can observe Shabbos many more times.

This week's write-up is adapted from the Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Parsha Perceptions Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The halachic portions for Parshas Acharei Mos from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

1. Tape # 008 - Lifnei Ivair (Accessory to an Aveira)
2. Tape # 052 - Prohibition Against Revenge
3. Tape # 095 - The Mezonos Roll: Does It Exist?
4. Tape # 143 - Inviting the Non-Observant to Your Shabbos Table
5. Tape # 190 - The Prohibition of Negiah
6. Tape # 236 - The Do's and Don'ts of Giving Tochacha
7. Tape # 280 - "Lo Sa'amod Al Dam Re'echa"
8. Tape # 326 - Mipnei Seiva Takum: Honoring the Elderly
9. Tape # 370 - Desserts -- Do They Require a Bracha?

Tapes or a complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit http://www.yadyechiel.org/ for further information.

Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Yissocher Frand and **Torah.org**.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington.
Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Yerushalayim.