

MESSAGE TO MANOACH AND HIS WIFE: GO BEYOND THE LETTER OF THE LAW

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Message to Manoach and His Wife: Go Beyond The Letter of the Law

The Haftorah for Parshas Nasso is the famous story of the birth of the mighty Shimshon. There is a difficulty in this story that troubles all the commentaries. The Angel announced to the barren wife of Manoach that she would have a child and instructed her to abstain from wine and strong drink and from coming into contact with tumah [impurity]. The Angel further instructed her that the child to be born would be a Nazir from birth. No razor would ever be allowed to pass over his head. This child, the Angel informed Manoach's wife, would become the savior of Israel. After delivering this information and these instructions, the Angel departed from the woman.

Manoach's wife related the incident to her husband and Manoach prayed to G-d that he may be able

to hear the Angel directly: "Please, my L-rd, may the man of G-d whom you sent come now again to us and teach us what we should do with the lad who is to be born." [Shoftim 13:8]

G-d responded to Manoach's plea and sent the Angel back. Manoach asked him "What should be the conduct of the lad and his behavior?" [Shoftim 13:12]

The Angel responded: "Of everything that I spoke to the woman, she should beware. Of anything that comes from the grapevine, she shall not eat. Wine or strong beverage, she shall not drink. Anything contaminated she shall not eat. Everything that I commanded her, she shall observe." [Shoftim 13:13]

This is virtually a verbatim restatement of what the Angel already told Manoach's wife. The commentaries ask two questions. First - the Angel did not answer Manoach's question. Manoach asked about the "conduct of the lad and his behavior". The Angel spoke about the conduct and behavior of Manoach's wife! Second - what new piece of information did the Angel convey to Manoach that the Angel had not already told to his wife? It appears to be a totally redundant statement of something Manoach already knew!

Rav Elya Meir Bloch offers a beautiful insight. There is only one slight difference between what the Angel said the first time and what he said the second time. The first time the Angel said she should not drink wine and strong drink. The second time the Angel said "anything that comes from the grapevine she shall not eat." This would include grapes, grape-flavored lollipops -- anything that is remotely related to grapes. In addition he adds, do not drink wine and strong beverage.

This, Rav Elya Meir says, was the answer to Manoach's question. Manoach's question was how to raise a child who would grow up to be the savior of Israel. It is hard enough to raise any child. However, the challenges of raising a child who is called upon to be a 'nazir from the womb' are infinitely harder. Manoach wanted to know "How should I raise such a child? What techniques in child rearing should I utilize to insure his spiritual purity and to guarantee the success of his Divine mission?"

The Angel responded that the way to successfully raise a 'nazir from the womb' is through the meticulousness and the zealousness of accepting "fences" (har-chokos), above and beyond the letter of the law (lifnim m'shuras hadin). The secret to raising the future leader of the Jewish Nation involved taking the extra step and going the extra mile. Your wife should not only refrain from drinking wine -- which is the basic requirement for a nazir -- but she should not even go near grapes! Such meticulous observance on her part will make an impression on the child.

The way to instill Fear of G-d into any child is to allow the child to see Fear of G-d in his or her parents. I believe it was Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, and perhaps others as well, who commented on the difference between European Jews and American Jews. He said that both in Europe and in America there were (and are) Sabbath observant Jews. However, the difference was that in Europe there were Jews who observed "Erev Shabbas" [the eve of the Sabbath]. In other words, these Jews

would already abstain from all forbidden forms of work at noon on Friday. This image of an "Erev Shabbos Jew" was a European phenomenon, which is not observed in America.

In America, if Candle Lighting is 4:18 on Friday afternoon, the husband might walk in the door from work at 4:12. He has enough time to remove his wallet and his keys and his change. He says "Good Shabbos" and so begins his Shabbos. This is not "forbidden". Such a person is most definitely a "Sabbath observer". But there is no way to compare the impact of the "European Erev Shabbos" on impressionable young children, as compared to the "American Erev Shabbos."

This was the lesson that the Angel taught Manoach. If the child sees the extra 'Fear of Heaven' in the parent that leads him or her to abstain even from that which is permitted -- such an upbringing will have impact on the spiritual growth of the child and allow him to potentially grow up to become a savior of Israel. When a parent cuts corners and tries to get by with the "letter of the law", the child will in no way have the same appreciation for the lesson or values the parents are ostensibly trying to convey to their progeny.

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. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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