

MEN OF TRUTH RECOGNIZE THE FALSENESS OF HONOR

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 # 492, Eating Before Kiddush. Good Shabbos!

Men of Truth Recognize the Falseness of Honor

Upon seeing the long lines and inefficient method of adjudication that was transpiring on a daily basis while the people waited for Moshe Rabbeinu to hear their disputes, Yisro recommended the institution of a judicial system -- not unlike what we have today -- to streamline the process and allow for disputes to be resolved in an appropriate and efficient manner. Yisro suggested a type of appellate system whereby more straightforward matters would be handled at a lower level and more difficult matters would be brought to the higher level courts, ultimately reaching the ears of Moshe Rabbeinu himself.

The judges were to be G-d fearing, men of valor, and men of truth who despise corruption. There were to be judges for a thousand people, judges for a hundred people, judges for fifty people, and judges for ten people. [Shemos 18:21]

It is interesting to contemplate how Moshe went about picking the various categories of judges. We can well imagine the potential rivalry and stress that there might be between different categories of judges. A judge who was to represent only 10 people might well resent the fact that his brother or cousin was picked to represent fifty or one hundred people.

The Kotzker Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk [1797-1859]) says that the Torah was well aware of the potential for resentment and therefore took measures to nip the problem in the bud. The way the Torah addressed this issue was by making one of the requirements be that the judges must be "anshei emes" [men of truth]. When a person is a man of truth, he is aware of the falseness of kavod [honor]. Kavod is really an ephemeral, non-existent type of matter. The trappings of kavod - - I am more important than you or you are more important than me -- are irrelevant for a man of truth. It does not mean anything to him.

Since being a man of truth was a prerequisite for being a judge, there could not be a problem of resentment that someone else got a "better position than I did." Such calculations are only matters of

vanity and honor-seeking. An 'ish emes' will not be upset because he received 'less kavod.'

It would seem that this is obvious. If we look at the matter rationally, it is clear that not being given honor or prestige is nothing to be upset about. Unfortunately, this issue is often not viewed rationally.

On one particular occasion a number of years ago, I spent Shabbos in a community outside of Baltimore that shall remain nameless. After becoming accustomed to davening in a Yeshiva, it is sometimes an eye-opener to daven in a 'shul'. The standards are typically not the same. However, I found it to be particularly peculiar when after the Rabbi went through an entire listing of birthdays, mazal tovs, naming all the parents and grandparents, etc. (a process that literally took ten minutes on the clock), the president went through virtually the same list of people in his announcements at the end of davening.

I asked the host with whom I was staying about this. I assumed that people in this congregation were at least as impatient as I am and I could not understand why they tolerate this. He explained to me that if G-d forbid the Rabbi would neglect to mention that someone's great-grandson became a chosson or something, the people would be mortally offended and would not speak to the Rabbi. Therefore they have to have a fail-safe double system lest anybody be forgotten.

I always say that I like kavod as much as the next person, but there is such a thing as overdoing it. If we would really be people of truth, we would recognize that this is silliness (shtus). What difference does it make if the Rabbi did mention it or didn't mention it; if the president did mention it or didn't mention it; if he did smile or didn't smile; if he did shake hands or he didn't shake hands? Who cares? Anshei Emes certainly do not care. They don't care if they are the officers of 10 or 50 or 100 or 1000.

Moshe Maintained The Level of The Mountain While Mixing With The People

The pasuk says, "Moshe descended from the mountain to the people. He sanctified the people and they washed their clothing." [Shemos 19:14] Rashi explains that the apparently superfluous expression "to the people" teaches that Moshe did not attend to his own business. Rather, he went directly from the mountain to the people.

This pasuk is in effect saying that when Moshe Rabbeinu came down from the mountain, he did not check his mail, he did not check his phone messages, he did not start his car to see if the battery died while he was 'out of town'. He did not in any way take care of his private business. He went straight to serve the people.

What is the novelty that Rashi feels needs to be pointed out here? Rav Elya Meir Bloch (1894-1955) suggests in the Peninei Daas that the pasuk is highlighting a unique spiritual accomplishment of Moshe Rabbeinu after he descended from Mt. Sinai. When someone has been "on the mountain" and then comes down "to the people", there is invariably a descent in spiritual intensity.

There are those who spend considerable time in "ivory tower" environments. There was certainly never a greater "ivory tower" than Mt. Sinai during the 40 days when Moshe received the Torah. There are two approaches taken by people who have to leave the "ivory tower" and return to the masses.

The natural instinct is to be concerned "how am I going to protect myself; how am I going to maintain the pristine experience I have managed to acquire?" One approach is to insist: "I will never leave the mountain. Even if I need to leave physically, I will not allow myself to be psychologically brought down from that spiritual intensity. I will stay in my own four cubits of space, in my own rarefied atmosphere. I will not be brought down by the mundane needs of the masses." The other approach is to say "I have an obligation to the people. I know that this will cause some degree of spiritual descent on my part, but I must do what I must do and that's the way it is."

Rashi emphasizes that Moshe Rabbeinu was able to have the best of both worlds. He went straight to the people. He did not ignore their needs. He did not try to stay aloof. But nevertheless, "he did not turn to his own needs." The fact that he mixed with the masses did not cause him to descend spiritually. He remained as spiritually focused as when he was on the mountain. He was amongst the people, he became part of the people, but it did not affect his focus, his intensity, or his spirituality.

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