

WE SHOULD APPRECIATE PEOPLE WHEN WE HAVE THEM

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 #555, Women Fasting on 17th of Tamuz, Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur Good Shabbos!

The Multiplier Effect of One Pure Person Sprinkling On Many Impure Ones

There is an interesting comment in Talmud Yerushalmi [the Jerusalem Talmud] on Tractate Demai: Rav Yehoshua ben Kablah stated: All my life I interpreted the pasuk [verse] 'The pure person (tahor) should sprinkle on the impure person (tameh)' [Bamidbar 19:19] to mean that the pure person can only sprinkle the purifying ashes of the Parah Adumah [Red Heifer] onto one person at a time, until I learned in the treasure house of Yavneh that in fact one pure person can purify many impure people.

Rav Eliezer Schach recollected once hearing Rav Meir Shapiro discussing this passage at a Convention (Kenessiah Gedolah) of Agudas Yisrael in Europe. Rav Schach said he could not exactly recall the interpretation given at the time, but he himself understood this Talmud Yerushalmi as follows:

What happened in Yavneh? Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was granted a certain number of wishes by the Romans. He requested -- among other things -- "Yavneh and its Sages." Although Yerushalayim [Jerusalem] was ultimately destroyed, the remnant that was preserved in the Yeshiva in Yavneh allowed Judaism and Torah as we know it today to survive and even flourish during the long years of exile.

Despite the fact that Yavneh itself was a small Yeshiva, those students taught others until Torah was once again brought back to a state of glory.

Rav Schach interpreted that when Rav Yehoshua ben Kablah taught that he used to think that one tahor could only sprinkle on one tameh person, he was saying that the greatest effect one individual could have would be on another single individual. I as a teacher, he reasoned, could only pass on my learning to a single disciple who would be my equal. From Yavneh, I saw the possibility of a geometric effect. A handful of students could influence many more disciples -- each of whom could in turn have many more disciples and so on and so forth. Through this multiplier effect, a whole

generation can become pure again.

If we are looking for a historical proof to this concept, we do not need to look further than what happened here in the United States. It was literally a question of "a single pure individual sprinkling on many impure souls." Consider what happened to the Torah that existed in Europe, where the cream of the crop of Judaism was destroyed. Literally a handful of Rabbanim and Roshei Yeshiva remained -- a remnant of the remnant -- who made it to these shores.

If we look around today and see Yeshivas and Kollelim and Beis Yaakovs and communities that are renowned and laden with glory, this is an example of what Rabbi Yehoshua ben Kablah meant when he said "until I learned from the treasure house of Yavneh that a single tahor can purify many temeim."

This is what happened in America. We can count those original "pure ones" -- if not on one hand, then two hands, maybe four hands at most -- but that is it! Today, Baruch Hashem, we witness the "multiplier effect" -- akin to what was demonstrated in Yavneh of old.

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There is poetic symmetry to the fact that the Jews' sojourn in the Wilderness began with a Song (in Parshas BeShalach) and basically concludes with a Song (here in Parshas Chukas). Although we read Parshas Chukas only a couple of weeks after Parshas Shlach, the historical narrative in Parshas Chukas jumps ahead almost 40 years to the very end of the period of wandering decreed in the aftermath of the episode of the Spies.

This week's Parsha contains the Shiras HaBe'er [Song of the Well]. There are two significant differences between the Song after Kriyas Yam Suf [the splitting of the Red Sea] and the Shiras HaBe'er. The first difference is that the Shiras HaYam begins "Then Moshe and the children of Israel sang this song." [Shmos 15:1] The Shiras HaBe'er begins "Then the children of Israel sang this song" [Bamidbar 21:17] with the notable absence of the name of Moshe Rabbeinu.

The second difference is that this is a song about the miraculous Be'er [Well] that was with them virtually the entire time that they were in the Wilderness, rather than about Kriyas Yam Suf, which was a singular event. The Shiras HaYam was sung spontaneously, in "real time", so to speak. Why did it take them 40 years to first now sing about the Be'er that was with them for these many decades?

I saw an insight that addresses both these issues. This week's parsha contains the death of Miriam. Chazal say that the Be'er was given to the Jewish people in Miriam's merit. When Miriam died, the Be'er disappeared. It required another miracle from Moshe Rabbeinu to restore their water supply.

Klal Yisrael only saw in very real terms what Miriam had done for them after the Be'er Miriam disappeared. It is the tendency of human beings to take things and people for granted. We go to the faucet and we turn on the water. We expect the water to be there. We do not realize that we have

the water because of an entire geological and engineering infrastructure that allows the water to become available to us. We don't think about the "miracle" involved in receiving our water.

Now imagine if we went to a Rock-Well in the middle of the desert and were able to get water whenever we wanted. We would get used to that as well. Certainly our children would think that this is the way it is supposed to be. When Miriam died and they saw the Be'er was gone, they first "got it." They said, "Look what Miriam did for us all these years."

Therefore, the Shiras HaBe'er is not just a tribute to the Be'er. It is a tribute to Miriam. People take people for granted. The only time they begin to appreciate people is in their absence. They think people are just there to turn the water on for them and that the water will always be there. Sometimes, the person leaves and then you finally "get it": It was only because of that person that we ever had the water.

That is the nature of people. In his righteousness and his wisdom, Moshe Rabbeinu appreciated Miriam's role all along. He did not need the absence of the Be'er to realize what she was doing for the Jewish people all these years. It did not take him 40 years to appreciate Miriam. He was not suddenly inspired to sing 40 years later. It was only the rest of us that first sang after the belated recognition - "Then Israel sang this song..." It is very sad when we do not appreciate people while we have them.

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