

THE DIFFERENTIAL BETWEEN POTENTIAL AND REALIZED POTENTIAL

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 # 489, Denying Jewishness. Good Shabbos!

The Differential Between Potential and Realized Potential

This week's parsha contains the first time in the Torah that we are explicitly told the name of Moshe Rabbeinu's father - Amram ben Kehas ben of Levi. The pasuk says that Amram married his aunt Yocheved and together they had two sons - Aharon and Moshe [Shemos 7:18-20].

We first learned about the birth of Moshe in last week's parsha. There the pasuk ambiguously says: "A man went from the House of Levi and took Levi's daughter (and they had a son and called him Moshe)" [Shemos 2:1]. It would have been more logical, it would seem, to tell us about Moshe Rabbeinu's father when initially mentioning his birth. Why does the Torah omit the identity of the parents when first narrating Moshe's birth?

Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that when two people bring a child into the world - at that early stage in the child's life - the parents really have no great "claim to fame." At that stage, we do not know who the baby is or what the baby will become. At that point, the baby is only "a bundle of raw potential" (b'koach, not b'po-al).

Therefore, giving accolades and honors to the parents of Moshe Rabbeinu at the stage of his birth would be premature. He was only a baby!

In this week's parsha, the situation has changed. In Parshas VaEra we already know who Moshe Rabbeinu is. This is a person who could have remained comfortably in the house of Pharaoh, but he grew up and went out amongst his brethren and saw their suffering. Moshe Rabbeinu stuck up for the oppressed Jew. Moshe Rabbeinu had to flee for his life and go to Midian. Moshe Rabbeinu stood up for the oppressed daughters of Yisro at the well. This is only a fraction of what he will yet accomplish. But he is now 80 years old; he has already demonstrated his character.

Now the pasuk can inform us that he is the product of an Amram and a Yocheved. Here the parents

can now proclaim: "See the child that we have raised." They can now stand up and take credit. Let the world know who Moshe Rabbeinu's father was. Let the world know who his mother was. Moshe Rabbeinu is more than just raw potential. The potential has been realized.

The Rabbeinu Bechaye in Parashas Bereishis alludes to the same point. Throughout the days of creation the Torah uses the refrain "The L-rd saw that it was good." At the end of creation the pasuk says "And the L-rd saw everything that he did and behold it was VERY good." [Bereishis 1:31]. Rabbeinu Bechaye notes that we find three distinct expressions: "ki tov", "tov", and "tov me'od". The first expression ("ki tov"), he says, is used when we are looking at the potential of an item or a person or a day. Each day of creation was "ki tov". There was tremendous potential in each and every day. But it was only a part of a much greater sum that was going to yet happen.

However, when G-d reviewed all of creation at the end of six days, the full creation was "tov meod" - potential realized. The sum is greater than all of the parts. The "parts" are merely "ki tov". The sum is "tov meod."

The Rabbeinu Bechaye - back in Parshas Bereishis - references the language used in connection with Moshe Rabbeinu here in Shemos. When Moshe Rabbeinu was born, the parents knew they had something special in their hands. The Medrash says that the room filled with light. His cry was that of a mature child. This was not just any little baby. This was someone special. The Torah uses the expression "ki tov hu" at that point [Shemos 2:2]. He was only potential. Therefore, just like the intermediate stages of creation, he was designated "ki tov". He was potential, unbelievable and unimaginable potential, but only potential, nevertheless.

But, says Rabbeinu Bechaye, later, when Moshe matured and proved himself, he in fact merited the accolade "meod" as it is written "And the man Moshe was 'anav meod' (exceedingly humble)" [Bamidbar 12:3].

Even Moshe Rabbeinu had to reach his potential. Until he did he was merely "ki tov". When he reached that potential he was "tov meod."

At the end of Parshas Bo, we learn the laws of the firstborn. There is the law of the firstborn of man, the firstborn of a kosher animal, and the law of the firstborn of a non-kosher animal. There is a seemingly strange-law called "Petter Chamor." The firstborn of a donkey has to be redeemed with a sheep. If the owner chooses not to redeem the donkey in this way, he must decapitate the animal.

The Netziv of Volozhin says that a firstborn who wastes his potential forfeits his right to remain in the world. The firstborn is special. He has special capabilities and special potential. He must develop that potential and maximize the powers he was given. Failure to do so justifies the harsh fate that befalls the donkey who was not utilized properly to fulfill the mitzah of "petter chamor."

The Netziv generalizes this to be a "klal gadol b'Torah" [over-arching principle of the Torah]: Someone who has the capacity for greatness and is lazy and does not realize his potential is far

worse than someone who never had the potential in the first place. It is a terrible thing to waste potential. It would have been preferable to have never been born into the world than to waste one's potential.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Va'eyra are provided below:

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Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington.

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Yerushalayim.