

KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A COMPLAINER AND A TRUTH-SEEKER

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 # 536, Newspapers on Shabbos. Good Shabbos!

Knowing The Difference Between A Complainer and A Truth-Seeker

Our Sages tell us that Moshe's father-in-law was called Yisro (which comes from the Hebrew root "Yeser" meaning extra) because Yisro caused an extra section was added to the Torah [Shemos Chapter 18]. Rav Yeruchem Levovitz in his work on Chumash in this week's parsha points out that Yisro's uniqueness was that he was an extremely critical person. To quote Rav Yeruchem, "he had the power of criticism (koach ha'bikores)."

When Yisro looked at a situation, he could immediately size up whether the situation was appropriate or inappropriate. Moshe Rabbeinu was judging the people. A system was in place that was accepted by hundreds of thousands of people. Yisro suddenly came along and criticized his son-in-law saying: "This is not right." As a result of this criticism, Moshe Rabbeinu changed the whole system, and totally revamped the methodology for administering justice in Klal Yisrael. From where did Yisro obtain this "power of criticism"?

We know something else about Yisro. Our Sages say that Yisro had personally investigated all existing world religions. He himself was a Priest of Avodah Zarah [idolatry]. Yisro tried and tasted every Avodah Zarah in the world and they all left him spiritually unsatisfied, until he finally came to Judaism. He recognized the truth, converted, and became a Jew.

This biographical insight dovetails exactly with Yisro's "power of criticism." By nature, he was a seeker of truth. He was a highly critical person. He tried every Avodah Zarah because he was looking for the truth. If he did not find the truth in one Avodah Zarah, he would abandon it in favor of another. He was not satisfied until he reached the truth.

An individual who can examine every religion in the world and say "I am not satisfied" is the same type of person who will look at a situation and say: "This is not right."

Is this a good character trait or a bad character trait? Is it good to be critical or is it not good to be critical? The answer is -- as it is with so many other human character traits -- it depends. The line between Gehinnom [Hell] and Gan Eden [Heaven] is as thin as a hair. A person can be hyper-critical and wind up in Gehinnom.

The litmus test for whether a person is too critical is how he conducts himself. If one applies the same rigorous standards to himself, it is evident that he is not merely interested in complaining and destroying, but in the truth. To use the Talmudic expression, if one "first judges oneself and then judges others" [Sanhedrin 18a], then his "power of criticism" may be praised. Only after subjecting oneself to the same rigorous standard, may a person criticize others.

Yisro criticized himself. He sought out, he searched, and he abandoned religions and philosophies that he had earlier embraced, when he found them lacking. Such honest self-criticism gave him the authority and credibility to offer constructive criticism towards others and to justify the addition of an extra portion in the Torah.

Diametrically Opposed Interpretations of The Thrust of Yisro's Criticism

Yisro's specific criticism to Moshe's system was as follows: "The thing that you do is not good. You will surely become worn out (navol tibol) - you, as well as the people that are with you - for this matter is too hard for you, you will not be able to do it alone." [Shemos 18:17-18]. The words "navol tibol" literally mean you will wither away.

I saw two divergent interpretations of what Yisro was actually telling Moshe Rabbeinu. One interpretation -- and this is an extremely modern concept -- is that he told his son-in-law, "Moshe, you are headed for burn-out! If you sit the entire day and take it upon yourself that you should be the sole dispenser of justice, you might be successful for a while -- maybe for a year, maybe for two years, maybe for five years -- but eventually it will drain you of everything you have. Navol tibol -- you will ultimately wither away!"

A person can have the best of intentions. He can have noble desires -- that he wants to do for others and wants to give to others. But even the greatest of people has to be on guard and remember that he is not "Superman." If one gives too much and depletes too much of self, eventually he won't be able to continue. In Moshe Rabbeinu's devotion to his people, perhaps he did not recognize this. He thought he could do it. He needed a Yisro to tell him, "No, you can't go on like this."

I hear this all the time from people: "Where do you draw the line between one's devotion and commitment to community, to family, and to others and the needs of one's self?" "Is a person allowed to say, 'Enough'? I want to give and give as much as possible, but there are limits." In effect, this is what Yisro was telling Moshe Rabbeinu. Navol tibol -- you can only give so much.

Someone came to the Chazon Ish seeking advice. He inquired what he should do "if such and such a thing will happen." The Chazon Ish advised that the question was currently not relevant so there was

no need to respond at present. "If such a situation will arise, come back and I will advise you what to do at that time."

The person persisted, "But theoretically speaking, what should I do under such and such circumstances?" The Chazon Ish responded, "Do you think that when I give advice to people, it just rolls off the tip of my tongue? When I give advice, I think about it, I carefully analyze the situation, I invest my time and energy in the problem, I use my intelligence and common sense to come up with appropriate advice. If I do not need to make the withdrawal of energies and talents from my limited warehouse of such resources, I do not want to. Working for the Tzibur [community] is a noble thing, but it takes a toll. If those strengths are needed, I am happy to make that effort. If they are not really needed, I must conserve my strength."

Rav Dovid Feinstein in his work "Kol Dodi" takes the exact opposite approach. He totally rejects the interpretation that Yisro was warning his son-in-law against "burn-out." Rav Dovid Feinstein focuses on the words of the earlier pasuk: "The father-in-law of Moshe saw everything that he was doing TO THE PEOPLE, and he said 'what is this thing that you do TO THE PEOPLE? Why do you sit alone with all the people standing by you from morning to evening?'" [Shemos 18:14]. According to Rav Dovid Feinstein, Yisro was complaining about this disservice that Moshe was doing to the people.

According to this interpretation, by Moshe Rabbeinu being the sole dispenser of Torah judgment, he was giving the misimpression that unless one has learned directly from the Almighty, he cannot be a judge or posek. The implication was that for all future time, only Moshe Rabbeinu could be the leader of Klal Yisrael. Only he could teach. Only he could dispense justice. In the long run, this would be a terrible disservice to the people and a terrible disservice to future leaders and teachers of the Jewish nation.

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 Yisro are provided below:

- Tape # 042 - Kiddush: To Sit or Not to Sit
- Tape # 085 - Christianity in Halacha
- Tape # 133 - Honoring In Laws
- Tape # 180 - The Mitzvah of Kiddush for Men and Women
- Tape # 226 - The Fearless Judge: A Difficult Task
- Tape # 270 - Paternal Wishes vs. Staying in Israel
- Tape # 316 - The Reading of the "Aseres Hadibros"
- Tape # 360 - Dolls and Statues: Problem of Avodah Zarah?
- Tape # 404 - Making a Brocho on a Makom Neis
- Tape # 448 - Lo Sachmod

Tape # 492 - Eating Before Kiddush
Tape # 536 - Newspapers on Shabbos
Tape # 580 - Women and Havdalah
Tape # 624 - Resting Your Animal on Shabbos
Tape # 668 - Kiddush B'Makom Seudah
Tape # 712 - The Kiddush Club
Tape # 756 - The Kosel Video Camera
Tape # 800 - Avoda Zara and The Jewish Jeweler

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 © 2006 by Rabbi Yissocher Frand and **Torah.org**.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington.

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Yerushalayim.