

THE REWARD OF LEARNING ABOUT THE REBELLIOUS SON

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Ki Seitzei

The Reward of Learning About the Rebellious Son

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #647 - Ramps and Stages - Do They Need a Maakeh? Good Shabbos!

This week's parsha contains within it the very peculiar mitzvah of the wayward and rebellious son. The requirements for achieving the status of a bona fide "ben sorer u'moreh" are staggering. The Talmud [Sanhedrin Chapter 8] teaches that the window of time in which a son can become a ben sorer u'moreh is very short. He has to steal a certain amount of meat and drink a certain amount of wine. The Talmud infers from pasukim [verses] that the parents have to have the same height and appearance and even the same tone of voice.

Because of these myriad requirements, the Gemara states: "Ben sorer u'moreh never happened and never will happen. Why then were the laws given? So that we may expound it and get reward." [Sanhedrin 71a]

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (in the Sefer Or Yisrael) wonders about the meaning of this statement. After all, he argues, is the Torah not big enough without this set of laws to provide enough material to learn, expound upon, and gain the reward of Torah study? Rav Yisrael says that a person could live for 1000 years and still not exhaust the potential for deriving reward from Torah study -- even excluding the four pasukim in Parshas Ki Seitzei and the 7 folios in tractate Sanhedrin dealing with the Wayward and Rebellious son.

He therefore concludes that the chapter of Ben Sorer U'Moreh indeed teaches us a unique and profound lesson: Learning for learning's sake alone, without any application to the "real world" whatsoever, is worthwhile in and of itself. Certainly, the purpose of learning is to bring one to action and there is value in being "results oriented". However Reb Yisrael teaches us that we should not

think that the whole point of learning is to know "what to do". Even if something will never be practically relevant, there is still value in just learning the Word of G-d.

There are other esoteric areas of Halacha that may not be relevant in our time and that may, most likely, not be relevant in any time, for the overwhelming number of people. However, all other areas of Torah are at least at some time theoretically relevant. But the Torah found it necessary to give at least one Halacha where one could be absolutely sure that it would never be relevant. No one will ever tell an Orthodox Rabbi "I have a ben Sorer U'Moreh shaylah (query) for you!" It will never happen!

The point the Torah is trying to make is: Learn it anyway. The lesson to be derived is the lesson of Torah learning. The intrinsic purpose of Torah learning is to study the word of G-d. Its benefit is not dependent on practical application.

Torah Students Get "Paid By The Hour"

The Mishneh [Avos 4:20] states in the name of Elisha ben Avuyah that when one learns as a child, he is like ink written on fresh paper, but when one learns when he is old, it is like ink written on paper that has been erased.

This is a terribly depressing Mishneh. Unfortunately, there comes a time when we start having "senior moments". There comes a time when learning is no longer the same as it was when we were younger. What is Elisha ben Avuyah telling us? Is he saying that it is all over after age 40, 50, or 60?

Rabbeinu Yonah in Avos makes a powerful statement: A person should not say "I am like a dried out tree," since Torah no longer remains fresh in my hand. One should not have the attitude "why should I study?" or "for what purpose should I toil?" Rabbeinu Yona says that people get reward for the effort and toil and should not become depressed whether they remember it or not. The act of Torah study is important, in and of itself, regardless of the ability to recall it later.

This is not to advocate the approach: Just learn, don't even try to remember it; do not even review your lesson. Heaven forbid. We must try to remember what we learn and we need to review what we have learned in the past. But on the other hand, a person should not let himself become depressed or frustrated over the fact that he can no longer learn with the sharpness or the clear recollection that he once had. Even taking that into account, learning Torah is still more valuable than anything else he might ever do.

Rabbeinu Yona cites the parable of a homeowner who hired two workers. He gave them each a bucket instructing them to go to the stream and to fill up the buckets with water and to then fill up a nearby pool from the buckets. The homeowner paid the workers by the hour. The workers however noticed that their buckets had holes in them and that they were not able to retain the water.

One of the workers stopped trying and said - "what am I accomplishing?" The other worker told him

"What do you care? We are getting paid by the hour!" The lesson, Rabbeinu Yona says, is that we are getting paid for our Torah learning "by the hour". True, we might get paid more for remembering, but ultimately, we get reward whether our brain retains what we pass through it or not.

The Sefer Moser Derech notes that in the month of Elul, approaching the High Holidays, our merits are being carefully weighed. People therefore try to "pile on" meritorious actions during this time. He cites the calculation of the Chofetz Chaim that the average person speaks 200 words a minute and therefore claims that a person who learns Torah gets 200 mitzvahs per minute! What else can one do that gives him that kind of reward? In a matter of a few minutes a person can credit himself with hundreds and hundreds of mitzvahs!

The Holy One Validated The Teaching of Rabbi Meir

The Torah teaches: *"If a man shall have committed a sin whose judgment is death, he shall be put to death, and you shall hang him on a gallows. You shall not leave his body overnight on the gallows, rather you shall surely bury him on that day, for a hanging person is a curse of G-d (kilelas Elokim)..."* [Devorim 21:22-23].

The Mishneh teaches in the name of Rabbi Meir [Sanhedrin 46a]: "When man suffers, what expression does the Shechina use? 'My Head is too heavy for Me. My Arm is too heavy for Me.'" In other words, when man (even a sinner) suffers, G-d suffers. This, Rashi explains, is the meaning of the expression "Kilelas Elohim" - as if to say "Kal les" (not 'light', but rather heavy!) Rabbi Meir concludes: "If G-d is so grieved over the blood of the wicked that is shed, how much more so over the blood of the righteous!"

The Gemara elsewhere (Chagiga 15b) relates the following: Rabbah bar Sheilah met Eliyahu. Rabbah bar Sheilah said to Eliyahu: "What is the Holy One doing now?" Eliyahu responded, "He is quoting teachings in the name of all the rabbis, but not in the name of Rabbi Meir." "Why not?" inquired Rabbah bar Sheilah. Eliyahu responded: "Because Rabbi Meir learned his Torah from (the heretic) Acher." "So what?" persisted Rabbah bar Sheilah "Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate and consumed the fruit but threw away the peel." (In other words, he was able to distinguish between the authentic Torah which Acher had to offer and his heretical views which Rabbi Meir rejected.)

The Gemara concludes that after hearing this argument, the Holy One in fact quoted a teaching in the name of Rabbi Meir. The teaching quoted was precisely that cited earlier from the Mishneh in Sanhedrin that when a wicked person suffers the Almighty says "My Head is heavy My Arm is heavy!"

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin asks: Why of all the hundreds of statements in the Mishneh that are stated in the name of Rabbi Meir, was it precisely this teaching that was cited by the Holy One, exactly in response to the argument that Rabbi Meir threw away the shell of the pomegranate and ate its fruit?

Rav Sorotzkin answers with a powerful insight. The Holy One was citing this teaching of Rabbi Meir in order to validate the idea that Rabbi Meir was never influenced by Acher. The Gemara says that one

of the things that drove Acher away from Torah was the fact that he saw the tongue of one of the Tannaim martyred by the Romans, lying on the ground. Upon seeing this, he asked: "Is this the reward one gets for Torah?" He thought that the Almighty -- Heaven forbid - does not care about the suffering of the righteous.

To respond to this, the Almighty cited -- in the name of Rabbi Meir -- a teaching that proves just the opposite: G-d even feels the pain of the wicked, certainly He feels the pain of the righteous.

The fact that Rabbi Meir promulgated such a teaching was proof that Rabbah bar Sheilah was right that Rabbi Meir was NOT influenced by his teacher Acher. Acher believed that Hashem did not even care about the righteous. Rabbi Meir taught that He even cares about the wicked!

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. A listing of the halachic portions for the weekly parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series is provided below:

- Tape # 020 - Non-Halachic Marriage Ceremonies
- Tape # 065 - Polygamy and the Cherem of Rabbeinu Gershom
- Tape # 110 - Mamzeirus: Possible Solutions?
- Tape # 156 - Reconciling Divergent Customs Between Husband and Wife
- Tape # 203 - The Pre-War "Get"
- Tape # 250 - The Mitzvah of Ma'akeh
- Tape # 293 - "Get Me'useh": The Prohibition of the "Forced Get"
- Tape # 339 - Shana Reshona: The First Year of Marriage
- Tape # 383 - The Mitzvah of Burial
- Tape # 427 - Trying on Suits that May Have Shatnes
- Tape # 471 - Autopsies on Non-Jews
- Tape # 515 - Women Wearing Men's Clothing
- Tape # 559 - The Double Portion of the Be'chor
- Tape # 603 - Burying a Rasha Next to a Tzadik
- Tape # 647 - Ramps and Stages - Do They Need a Maakeh?
- Tape # 691 - Chassanah Minhagim
- Tape # 735 - Brachos in a Bathroom?
- Tape # 779 - Shehecheyanu at a Chasuna
- Tape # 823 - Tzar Ba'al Hachayim - Does It Apply to People?

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.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, WA
Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD

RavFrاند, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Yissocher Frand and Torah.org.