

RAV CHAIM'S REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Acharei Mos

Rav Chaim's Request For Forgiveness

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 590 Sofaik Be'racha. Good Shabbos!

Achrei Mos is the parsha of the Yom Kippur service. The pasuk [verse] says, "For on this day, He shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you, from all your sins before HaShem shall you be cleansed" [Vayikra 16:30]. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria (in the last Mishneh of tractate Yoma [8:9]) derives the following lesson from that pasuk: Sins between man and G-d Yom Kippur atones for, however Yom Kippur does not atone for sins against one's fellow man, until he first appeases his fellow man.

The Gemara [Yoma 87a] states in the name of Rav Yitzchak "Whoever angers his friend needs to appease him." Rav Yitzchak cites as a proof a series of pasukim in Mishlei [6:1-3]: "My son, if you have been a guarantor for your friend, if you have given your handshake for a stranger, you have been trapped by the words of your mouth, snared by the words of your mouth, do this, therefore, my child and be rescued; for you have come into your fellow's hand. Go humble yourself before him and placate your fellow."

At first glance, this teaching of the Amora Rav Yitzchak seems very strange. Why do we need his exegesis from the pasukim in Mishlei to teach us the fact that one needs to appease his friend, if we have an explicit pasuk from Chumash -- cited by the Tanna Rav Elazar ben Azaria -- that teaches us the same thing?

Rav Chaim Soloveitchik explained the novelty of Rav Yitzchak's teaching to his son, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, in the course of an incident that happened in Brisk. A certain butcher came to the Beis Din of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik (Rav of Brisk) and Rav Simcha Zelig (Dayan of Brisk) asking them to adjudicate a din Torah involving a sum of 3,000 rubles. Rav Chaim suggested they make a compromise (peshara), but the butcher refused. The Beis Din then heard the case and decided

against the butcher. The butcher reacted angrily to this, and started yelling at Rav Chaim, calling him a thief and a murderer.

Rav Chaim answered back: When you came to this court, I suggested that you compromise with your disputant, but you refused. Since it was you who refused the compromise, it is not my fault that you have now lost 3,000 rubles. It is your own fault. The butcher yelled even louder at Rav Chaim. Rav Chaim then said, "You disrespectful one, get out of here!"

On Erev Yom Kippur, Rav Chaim told his 3 sons that he must go to the butcher and ask for his forgiveness for the harsh words they exchanged that day in court. The Rav of Brisk accompanied by his 3 sons went to the shul where the butcher davened. Everyone was davening with their tallitim over their heads so it was impossible to tell who was who. Rav Chaim went around from person to person until he finally found the butcher. Rav Chaim then said, "I want to ask your forgiveness for calling you disrespectful and sending you out of my court." The butcher turned to Rav Chaim -- right before Kol Nidre -- and said, "I do not forgive you. You are a thief and a murderer!"

Rav Chaim responded: "The halacha is that I must ask you three times in front of three people for forgiveness. I have brought my three sons here with me. Will you forgive me?" Again the response was "No!" The exchange was repeated three times and then Rav Chaim said "I have discharged my duty and am ready to leave." Before leaving he turned once more to the butcher and said, "You should know that at this point I am no longer obligated to ask for your forgiveness. In fact, you were the one who insulted me in the first place, and I had a right to respond in kind to your insolence. The only reason I came to appease you is because it is meritorious to overlook one's honor and accept embarrassment rather than cause embarrassment to others. I was not obligated to ask your forgiveness, but I did it anyway, three times in front of three people. I am leaving. Now it is your problem!"

When they left the synagogue, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik asked his father why he went in the first place, when he never did anything wrong and it was the butcher who should have been asking for forgiveness all along.

Rav Chaim explained to his son that this was in fact the novelty in the ruling of Rav Yitzchak in Yoma. The pasuk in Achrei Mos cited by Rav Elazar ben Azaria in the Mishneh teaches that if one WRONGS his fellow man, he must ask forgiveness. The pasukim in Mishlei expounded by Rav Yitzchak teach that if one angers his fellow man -- even justifiably so -- he still needs to try to make peace and ask for forgiveness.

This was not the type of "mechila request" which would have held back the effectiveness of Rav Chaim's Teshuva vis a vis sins between man and G-d. Those are only for sins where you in fact harmed someone or insulted him inappropriately. Rav Yitzchak is saying a stronger teaching: Even when I am 100% right, if I utter harsh words against my fellow man, it is still appropriate for me to beg forgiveness and attempt to restore friendship between us.

This, Rav Chaim, said is the meaning of the Shulchan Aruch when it states that on Erev Yom Kippur, every person needs to ask for forgiveness from his fellow man. This halacha is difficult -- if I wronged someone, why should I wait until Erev Yom Kippur to make amends? The answer is that this law is not speaking about a case where I've wronged someone. Nevertheless, on Erev Yom Kippur there is a special obligation to make peace even when, strictly speaking, no amends are called for.

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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