

WE WILL NOT KNOW HOW TO SERVE HASHEM UNTIL WE GET THERE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bo

We Will Not Know How To Serve Hashem Until We Get There

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #578, Tefillin on Chol HaMoed. Good Shabbos!

During the period that Pharaoh thought he could negotiate the exact terms of Jewish people's exit from Egypt, he told Moshe: "Go - serve Hashem, only your flock and your cattle shall stay put; even your children may go with you." Moshe responded: "You, too, will give into our hands feast-offerings and elevation-offerings, and we shall offer them to Hashem, our G-d. And our livestock, as well, will go with us -- not a hoof will be left -- for from it we shall take to serve Hashem, our G-d; and we will not know how we shall serve Hashem until we get there." [Shemos 10:24-26]

The Chiddushei Harim (the 1st Gerer Rebbe) once commented that the words "we will not know how we shall serve Hashem until we get there" were not only meant for Egypt. These words are meant for every Jew in every generation until the end of time.

We will not know how successful we were in our worship of the Master of the Universe until we arrive in the next world (after 120 years). These words are a charge! Until we get "there" we will never know if we did what we were supposed to do in this world.

Rav Shrage Feivel Medelowitz, zt"l, used to cry every Rosh HaShanna during the Mussaf prayer when he came to the words "ma'aseh ish u'fekudoso" (G-d will take into account) the actions of man and his mission. [Fekudoso comes from the word "tafkid" - mission]. Every person has a mission. We are judged according to how close we came to accomplishing our designated mission in life. This mere thought -- did we accomplish it or not -- is something we are not going to know until we come to the next world.

The Shemen HaTov interprets a well known Gemara [Bava Basra 10b]. One of the Amoraim had a peek into Heaven as to what transpires there. When he "returned" his colleagues asked him what he saw. He responded: "I saw an inverted world. The ones who are the high ones there are the low ones here and the ones who are the high ones here are the low ones there. "

The terms "elyonim" [the high ones] and "tachtonim" [the low ones] used by the Gemara are ambiguous. Many interpretations have been given. The Shemen HaTov interprets as follows:

Down in this world, we see people who are extremely talented, people who are extremely successful, people who are very gifted and occupy -- rightly so -- a place of honor in society. But for some reason "up there," they are lowly. Why? It is because given the fact that they have such great talents, Heaven correspondingly has great expectations of them. Despite their distinguished talents, who says that they have reached all that they could have accomplished? They are "lowly" up there because due to their talents, they could have and should have done so much more.

Conversely, there are people who we look at -- down here -- as people who don't have much to offer, as lowly individuals. "Up there", perhaps, because of their limited talents, they will be given prestigious positions for what they did manage to accomplish. Their accomplishments came despite the need to overcome great hurdles and handicaps. For accomplishing what they were supposed to accomplish given the "cards that they were dealt," they will be "elyonim" [high ones] in Heaven.

Sometimes a person may be born with very limited mental capacity, have a significantly shortened lifespan and very limited capabilities. And yet within his potential he came to shul, he always answered Amen Yehey shmei Rabbah, he always responded to Barchu and Kedusha, and he always had a smile on his face. He did the best he could. He faithfully fulfilled the mission he was given on this earth. In the next world, such a person may very well be among the "elyonim".

Prodigious talents are wonderful, but they come with tremendous responsibility. The responsibility is to do and accomplish all that can be accomplished with such talents. If one fails to fulfill "the actions of man and his mission" then he will not achieve the same place of honor achieved in the next world by a perhaps less talented and less accomplished individual.

Rav Chaim Did Not Mix Emotion With Halacha

The end of the parsha contains the law that an uncircumcised male may not eat the Paschal offering. The Sefer Toras Chaim relates the following incident told over by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik about his grandfather, Rav Chaim.

A Rabbinic conference took place in St. Petersburg. A certain group of "free-thinking" Jews had decided not to circumcise their children. The question on the agenda of the Rabbinic conference was whether the Jewish communities should register in their local Jewish registries of vital statistics (the "pinkas ha'ir") the name of a Jewish baby boy whose parents refuse to have him circumcised. The question was -- can such a child be recorded as being of the Jewish faith or not?

The overwhelming opinion of the rabbis present at the conference was that such a child should not be registered as Jewish. "An uncircumcised Jew is not a Jew." Therefore he will not be recorded in the "pinkas" and he will have no way of verifying his Jewishness.

In classic fashion, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik disagreed with the majority opinion and argued that the baby should be recorded in the Jewish registry. He argued that the law is that an uncircumcised Jew ("arel") cannot eat the Korban Pessach and cannot eat sacrificial meat (kodshim) and cannot eat Terumah. Nowhere does it say, however, that an "arel" is not a Jew, argued Rav Chaim.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in telling over the story, explained that the other Rabbis' intent was to make a "fence" which would be a strategic attempt to stop this anti-milah movement cold in its tracks. However, Rav Chaim insisted: "a Din (law) is a Din". One is not allowed to invent a new law for strategic motivations. No matter how noble one's reason, it would be a perversion of halacha to, based on emotion, invent a law that does not exist.

Similarly there was a Jew in Warsaw who did not circumcise his child and the child died as a young boy. The people in the city did not want to bury him in a Jewish cemetery. They said, "His father did not circumcise him, so he is not Jewish and is therefore not entitled to be buried in a Jewish cemetery." Rav Chaim argued the same thing. Nowhere does it say that a non-circumcised person is not a Jew. In spite of the fact that emotion might argue: "How can a person nullify the commandment of circumcision!" It is indeed a terrible thing. But to therefore pasken (rule based on halacha) that the child does not have Jewish status is erroneous. A Jew is a Jew whether he has been circumcised or not.

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 Bo are provided below:

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