

HOW EASY IT IS TO FORGET LAST YEAR

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshios Behar & Bechukosai

How Easy It Is To Forget Last Year's Blessings

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Weekly Portion Torah Tapes: Tape # 724, The Chazan Who Changes His Mind. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Behar begins with the laws of Shmita [the Sabbatical year]. Observance of the Shmitah year is very difficult, particularly for farmers. Just imagine if the halacha required all of us to take a sabbatical from our jobs, drop what we have been doing, and forfeit our means of income for an entire year, once every 7 years!

The Torah anticipates the difficulty of Shmitah-observance: "And if you will say: What will we eat in the seventh year? Behold! We will not sow and we will not gather our crop! I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for the three years." [Vayikra 25:20-21]

The Medrash calls the people who observe the Shmitah: "Masters of strength (giborei koach) who fulfill My words". In other words, it takes tremendous courage and faith to observe the Shmitah. Those who fulfill it are deserving of great praise for being highly spiritual individuals.

However, the question must be asked: Where is the great strength of faith in observing Shmitah? If the promise of "I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year..." comes true, then the farmer has already put away income for the seventh and eighth years from his bumper crop on the sixth year. He can sit back and draw on his reserves that are already in the bank! Where, then, is there manifestation of the attribute of 'giborei koach' [master of spiritual strength]?

Had the promise been "Do not worry in the seventh year because money will come to you, somehow," we would have understood the appropriateness of the term "giborei koach". However, that is not what the pasuk says. The pasuk seemingly promises that already at the end of the sixth year, the farmer will have three times as much as normal. In those circumstances, seemingly great faith is not required to take a Sabbatical during the upcoming Shmitah year.

The Shemen haTov makes an interesting observation which is really a reality of life. Human beings have an unbelievable capacity to forget. In other words, even though a person might have made

triple his normal income in the sixth year, if in the middle of the seventh year he sees that there will be no income that year, he begins to get nervous. He does not like to have to draw down the reserves, which he has stashed away in the bank from his bumper crop in year six of the cycle! People forget that they made more than usual the previous year. We remember the "bad" but we do not remember the "good" so well. All too easily, we forget all the Kindnesses that the Almighty is always showering upon us.

In fact, it takes strength and faith during the seventh year to not ask "what's going to be?" when the land is lying fallow, regardless of how much money one was able to stash away during the sixth year. Such an attitude is truly worth the accolade of "Masters of strength (giborei koach) who fulfill My words."

King and Prophet Cross Swords on Application of a Biblical Blessing

There is a pasuk in Parshas Bechukosai whose historical import is often not appreciated. A high profile dispute regarding applicability of this pasuk lay at the core of a seminal event in Jewish history during the time of the First Beis HaMikdash. We allude to this pasuk every single year during recitation of the Tisha B'Av Kinot.

The pasuk spells out the promised reward for the Jewish society that walks in the ways of G-d's statutes. It reads: "I will provide peace in the land and you will lie down with none to frighten you, I will cause wild beasts to withdraw from the land, and a sword will not cross your land." [Vayikra 26:6]

The Gemara [Taanis 22b] teaches that the words "a sword will not cross your land" means more than just the fact that war will not come to our land, for that is taught by the words "I will provide peace in the land." Rather, it teaches that even "a sword of peace" will not pass through our land. Meaning, we will not even need to worry about a nation asking us to allow them to pass through our land on their way to do battle with someone else.

Such in fact was a historical incident recalled in both the Book of Melachim as well as in Divrei HaYomim. One of the most wicked kings to rule over the Jewish people was Menashe King of Yehudah. He caused the entire population to turn to idolatry and even installed an idol in the Kodosh Kadoshim [Holy of Holies]. His son Amon was also wicked. However, his grandson, Yoshiyahu, instituted a mass Teshuva movement and was himself a righteous monarch.

However, Yoshiyahu made one serious mistake. Pharaoh-Neco, King of Egypt, wanted to pass through Israel to do battle with Assyria, their northern enemy. He asked permission from the King of Yehudah to pass through his land on his way to battle, however Yoshiyahu turned him down. According to the Medrash, Yoshiyahu cited to Pharaoh-Neco the pasuk in Bechukosai that when the Jews keep the Torah, no sword (even a "peaceful one") will pass through their land. Yoshiyahu was convinced that he had eradicated every vestige of idolatry left over from the reigns of his father

and grandfather and therefore qualified for the blessing of the pasuk in this week's parsha.

The prophet Yirmiyahu warned Yoshiyahu that he did not qualify for this blessing. Things were not perfect. Avodah Zarah had not been totally eradicated from the land. Yirmiyahu advised Yoshiyahu to grant Pharoah-Neco the right of passage for himself and his troops. Yoshiyahu did not believe Yirmiyahu. He sent inspectors throughout the land and they reported back that they could find not a single idol throughout the country. He therefore confidently over-ruled the prophet and forbade the Egyptian King to march his troops through the Land of Judah.

Yoshiyahu did not realize that the people outsmarted his inspectors. Idolatry was not totally eradicated from the land. The idols were painted on the inside of double doors, so that when the doors were opened for the inspectors, they did not see anything. However, as soon as the inspectors left and the doors were closed, the idols were right there in the open.

Not only did Yoshiyahu not let Pharoah Neco pass through his land, he went to war with him. He was massacred in that battle. The Talmud said his body was thrust through with so many arrows that blood flowed out like a sieve. It was a tragic death of a righteous king.

From that time things went downhill and the Bais HaMikdash [Temple] was ultimately destroyed. This event is recalled in the elegy read every year on Tisha B'Av morning: "And Yirmiyahu mourned for Yoshiyahu..."

The moral of this story is "When the Gadol HaDor [the greatest person in the generation] tells you to do something or not to do something, you better listen!" With all the calculations in the world and with the simple reading of Torah pasukim on one's side, it is fool-hardy and suicidal to reject the advice of the likes of the prophet Yirmiyahu or the likes of the great Torah leaders of any generation - the Gedolei HaDor.

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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