

RABBI FRAND ON PARSHAS BEREISHIS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bereishis

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 652, The Tefilah of Asher Yatzar. Good Shabbos!

The Grass Is Always Greener When You Pray For Rain

The beginning of the second perek [chapter] of the Chumash says: "These are the products of the heavens and the earth, when they were created on the day of Hashem G-d's making of earth and heavens. [Bereishis 2:4] This summary of creation is followed by a difficult pasuk [verse] to interpret and even to translate: The presumed translation is "Now any tree of the field was not yet on the earth and any herb of the field had not yet sprouted, for Hashem G-d had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to work the soil."

Rashi interprets that even after the 6 days of creation, there was still no grass. Despite the fact that the Torah stated on the third day of creation "and the earth brought forth vegetation, herbage yielding seed" [Bereishis 1:12], Rashi explains that they did not emerge from the earth on that day but they stood on the surface of the ground until the sixth day.

The Torah explains in perek 2 pasuk 5 why the grass did not come out - "because there was no man to work the soil". Rashi interprets this to mean that there was no one who could recognize the goodness of rains. In other words, there was no human being around to appreciate the rain and to ask for it. When Adam was created and he understood that the world had a need for rain, he prayed that rain should fall. In answer to man's prayer, rain fell and the grass, trees, and all the vegetation of the earth then began to grow.

We learn a couple of interesting things from this Rashi. First, we see that the first prayer in the history of the world was Adam, the first man, asking for rain, shortly after his creation. We also learn that G-d was not merely waiting, as it were, for man to recognize the need for rain before bringing the rain, but G-d was waiting for man to pray for rain. Rav Aharon Kotler in Mishnas Aharon says that from here we learn that if a person does not pray for that which he needs, it can be there waiting and ready for him, but if he does not pray to G-d for it, it will not come.

This year could be the most financially successful year in one's career. The deal may just be waiting and ready. But if the person does not pray for it, it will not come. This is the way the Almighty set up the world. He set up the world in such a way that we must pray for things from Him. In this way, we will come to an appreciation that everything comes from Him.

The commentaries ask a very basic question: Why do we recite the same Shmoneh Esrei ('18 benediction' Amidah) day in and day out, 3 times a day, every weekday of the year? The point is to drive home through our thick skulls the lesson that we need the Almighty. We recite this prayer 1000 times a year and we still do not get it!

This Rashi is teaching us a very basic lesson regarding man's existence in the world. Blessings may be waiting right around the corner, waiting to come to us, but they won't come until we pray for them and thereby acknowledge that these blessings come from the Almighty.

The Bloods Of Hevel Were Crying Out From The Ground

After Kayin killed Hevel, G-d inquired of him: "What have you done? The sound of your brother's bloods (demei achicah) cry out to Me from the ground." [Bereishis 4:10] Rashi comments on the plural form of the word dam [blood] used in this pasuk. The Almighty was alluding to the fact that Kayin not only killed his brother but he also killed all the potential descendants that might have come from him.

Every person on this planet descends from Adam. The Rabbis tell us that man was created as an individual to teach that one who preserves a single life is as if he preserved the entire world. When Kayin killed Hevel, it wasn't only a matter of killing a single individual. The "loss of life" he caused - when projected into the future amounted to the loss of billions of individuals! When we look at a person, we cannot just look at him "as he is there". We must look at the vast future potential that every person has.

Perhaps this can help explain the following Talmudic passage [Berachos 28b]: When Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai was on his death bed, his students came in to visit him. When he saw them, he began to cry. The disciples asked him, "Candle of Israel, the right hand pillar, the mighty hammer, why are you crying?" Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai responded, "If I were being taken before an earthly king who is here today and tomorrow in the grave, whose anger is not a permanent anger and who if he imprisons me it will not be a permanent imprisonment, and I might be able to appease him with words or bribe him with money - would I not anyhow cry in fear? Now I am being taken before the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed is He who is eternal. If He is angry with me, it will be an eternal anger and if He imprisons me, it will be an eternal imprisonment. If He kills me, it will be an eternal death. I cannot appease Him or bribe Him. Not only that, but I have two paths before me - one leading to Gan Eden and one leading to Gehinnom and I do not know on which path they are taking me. Should I not cry?"

The Baalei Mussar ask two questions on this Gemara. First - did Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai, the great

Candle of Israel and the right hand pillar, have any doubt about whether he was headed for Gan Eden or Gehinnom? More to the point, he was initially sitting on his death bed and apparently not showing any emotion. It is only "when he saw his students approaching" that he began to cry.

Rav Elya Lopian explains that if Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai only had to worry about himself, he would have been confident that he was destined for the World to Come and for residence in Gan Eden. But when he saw his students he thought to himself, "Did I do justice with each of my students? Did I treat each student properly? Did I give enough attention to each student? Was I perhaps too harsh with one student and too lenient with another?" Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai said to himself, if I wasn't good enough with even one of my disciples, it will affect not only him but his children and his grandchildren and his great grandchildren until the end of all time. When Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai saw all his students come visit him, he realized "the voice of the bloods of your brother are crying out to Me". One lapse regarding a single individual can have a negative impact on all future generations!

All too often, we hear from people who are not religious today because 50, 60, or 70 years ago they had teachers who "turned them off". There were some teachers in Europe and America at the beginning of the last century who used to beat their students. It was not just the students who were lost to Judaism, but in many cases all future generations were lost as well.

Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai, upon seeing his disciples, realized that his Heavenly Judgment was not something that was unilateral, depending solely on his relationship with the Almighty. Rather, his Heavenly judgement was also dependant on the affect he did or didn't have on all his students. This caused him to cry and be sincerely afraid. He was no longer so sure of where he was headed after his passing.

One does not have to be a Rebbe or have students to draw personal lessons from this Talmudic passage. In the course of our lives, we deal with our children, our neighbors, and our co-workers. When we affect them, it affects not only them, but their children and their children's children for all generations. This is something a person must ponder throughout his life. Have I done justice and am I doing justice to the people with whom I interact during the course of my daily activities?

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 Bereishis are provided below:

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