

RABBI FRAND ON PARSHAS BO

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The First Mitzvah Teaches Us A Lesson Regarding All Mitzvos

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 666, Dishwashers on Shabbos. Good Shabbos!

The first mitzvah given to the Jewish people as a national entity is found in this week's parsha. (The mitzvos that are mentioned earlier in Berieshes, such as Pru U'Rvu [having children] and Milah [circumcision] are mentioned before there was actually a nation of Israel.) This first mitzvah is establishing the months of the year based on the determination of the Beis Din [Jewish Court] [Shemos 12:11].

Witnesses are to come before the court and testify that they saw the new moon. On the basis of such corroborated testimony, the court will proclaim a new month which in turn determines the dates of the Jewish holidays. In fact, the very first Rashi in Chumash mentions this idea that the Torah should properly have begun with chapter 12 of Shemos, because that is where we find the first mitzvah to the Jewish people.

In several places, including the Book of Mishlei, the Vilna Gaon writes that the introductory pasuk [verse] of a sefer encompasses in microcosm the entire contents of that sefer. If we take this maxim one step further, we might say that given the fact that (according to Rashi) the Torah should have begun with the pasuk "This month is for you the start of all months" the pasuk is in fact telling us that there is something fundamental about this pasuk and this mitzvah which serves as a common denominator for the entire set of 613 mitzvos! What is that common denominator?

There is nothing more predictable in this world than the astronomical calculations of the cycles of the sun and the moon. We know that sunrise will be exactly the same time it was today on this date 5 years from now and 10 years from now and 100 years from now. Likewise we know that a Jewish month is comprised of 29 days, 12 hours, and 793 parts of an hour (chalakim). Therefore, what is the point of having witnesses coming to testify that they saw a new moon? Why is this a Biblical mitzvah? It is science! It is clockwork! What does this have to do with religion?

Clearly, the purpose (tachlis) of this mitzvah is not for its informative value. Rather, its purpose is to do it for the sake of doing it. This means that we should not perform mitzvos for utilitarian purposes. We are not "accomplishing" anything in terms of concrete physical accomplishments of a utilitarian

value. The major reason of doing any mitzvah is because first and foremost this is the Will of the Creator.

The mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon, as is the case with all mitzvahs, is primarily done because G-d told us to do it. By doing it, we are obeying the Almighty and subjugating our minds and our bodies to His Will. As the first mitzvah in the Torah, this mitzvah is instructive regarding all mitzvot. We should not assume that there is necessarily a "practical application" to what we are doing other than to train us to fulfill the Will of the Creator.

The Redemption Comes When Things Seem Bleakest

This week's parsha contains a "famous pasuk": "They baked the dough that they took out of Egypt into unleavened cakes, for they could not be leavened, for they were driven from Egypt for they could not delay nor had they made provisions for themselves." [Shemos 12:39]. I refer to this pasuk as a "famous pasuk" because aside from the fact that we read it in the Torah on Parshas Bo every year, we say it every year at the Pesach Seder, as one of the most essential parts of the Hagaddah. This is the proof text cited by Rabban Gamliel's teaching "Whoever has not said these 3 things has not fulfilled his obligation" of eating Matzah on Seder night.

If we think about it, this seems like a rather minor side point to the whole story of the Exodus. The fact that they were driven out quickly and had no time to bake bread that night would hardly seem to rate as a crucial factor in the miraculous deliverance! And yet because of this seemingly insignificant event we eat Matzo. We eat Maror because we suffered a bitter slavery for 210 years. This fact easily qualifies for a significant ritual symbol of the holiday of Passover. Eating the Korban Pessach each year symbolizes our bravery in slaughtering the G-d of the Egyptians and eating it in our homes on the night of the Exodus in accordance with G-d's mitzvah. This too is a significant occurrence. But where is the fundamental significance in the fact that we did not have time to bake bread when we were chased out of Egypt?

Furthermore, we might ask, why did not they have a little foresight? We spend weeks preparing for Pessach. They didn't have any cleaning to worry about. Moshe told them ahead of time they were leaving Egypt the next day. They should have packed up and prepared provisions. Why were they so rushed at the last minute that they did not have time to let their dough rise? What is the meaning of this?

The answer is the following: The Jews expected to leave Egypt right after the plague of blood. They were packed, they had their provisions, and they were ready to go. The plague of blood came and went and there was no movement. Nothing happened. Again with the frogs, there was a "false alarm" that they were about to leave. However the status quo persisted after frogs and after each of the first nine plagues. By the time of the Plague of the First Born, people already did not believe that the end was imminent. They took a "I've been there, done that" attitude and were not going to get caught yet again making provisions and having to unpack and unwrap the meals that they had

prepared for the road.

They did not pack. They did not prepare. They did not bake. They did not believe. They were so depressed and so helpless as a result of the rollercoaster of emotions they had been through during the previous 9 plagues that they did not expect to leave when they did.

The lesson of the Exodus is that the salvation of G-d can come in the blink of an eye. It could be that yesterday the odds against it happening appeared astronomical, but today it might yet happen. This is the way redemption works. The Exodus is the paradigm for all future redemptions. It is always darkest before the dawn. Geulah [redemption] comes Precisely at the point of hopelessness.

This is why it is most significant for all generations to celebrate the Exodus by eating matzah. Which matzah? The matzah that symbolized the fact that they gave up hope of ever leaving to the extent that no one prepared an iota of food ahead of time.

When we look at the situation in Eretz Yisrael today, we get depressed. Everyone asks - what is going to be? The lesson of the Exodus and the lesson of all Jewish redemption is that G-d's salvation can come in the blink of an eye. If we merit it, things can turn around in the time it takes to snap one's fingers!

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:

- Tape # 040 - Amirah L'Akum: The "Shabbos Goy"
- Tape # 083 - The Burning Issue of Smoking
- Tape # 131 - Ivris or Ivrit -- Is There a Correct Pronunciation?
- Tape # 178 - Tefillin and Long Hair
- Tape # 224 - Kiddush Levana
- Tape # 268 - Consequence of Dropping Tefillin or Sefer Torah
- Tape # 314 - Chumros in Halacha
- Tape # 358 - Mezzuzah-What is a Door?
- Tape # 402 - Doing Work on Rosh Chodesh
- Tape # 446 - The Dog in Halacha
- Tape # 490 - The Lefty and Tefillin
- Tape # 534 - Rash"i & Rabbeinu Ta'am's Tefillin
- Tape # 578 - Tephillin on Chol HaMoed
- Tape # 622 - Ya'ale V'Yovo
- Tape # 666 - Dishwashers on Shabbos
- Tape # 710 - Checking Tefillin by Computer
- Tape # 754 - Cholent on Pesach - Why Not?

Tape # 798 - Kiddush Lavanah - Moonshine on Purim

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