

"WEIGHING PIETY"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bamidbar

"Weighing Piety"

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 770, - Let Them Eat Cheesecake. Good Shabbos!

At the end of Parshas Bamidbar, the Torah says, "Do not exterminate the family of Kehas from the family of the Levites. Thus shall you do for them so that they shall live and not die: when they approach the Holy of Holies, Aaron and his sons shall come and assign them, every man to his work and to his burden." [Bamidbar 4:18-19].

The Midrash Rabbah explains that the children of Kehas had the most prestigious job in the wilderness. The Mishkan [Tabernacle] was portable. Between travels, they disassembled it and transported all its component parts from one place to the next along with the people and the rest of their belongings. Whose job was it to transport the Mishkan? It was the job of the Levites. Some families carried the boards, some carried the curtains, but the family of Kehas had the very special job of carrying the keylim [vessels]. They carried the two Mizbayachs [altars], they carried the Menorah, they carried the Shulchan [Table], and they carried the Aron [Holy Ark], which contained within it the Luchos [Two Tablets of the Covenant].

One would think that the fact that they merited to carry the most holy items in the Mishkan would have been made them happy and everything would go smoothly in the carrying out of their duties. But human beings being what they are, the family of Kehas was not content to faithfully carry out their job and things did not go perfectly smoothly. They knew that there was a great reward associated with carrying the Aron and everyone only wanted to have that honor. When the time came to disassemble the Mishkan and gather up the keylim for transporting, fights broke out. Everyone started arguing "I got here first. It's my turn to carry the Aron. You carry the Mizbayachs. You carry the Menorah. You carry the Shulchan. I want to carry the Aron." It got to such a point that the Midrash says they abandoned the Mizbayachs, the Menorah, and the Shulchan and all ran to get the reward for carrying the Aron.

The result of this jockeying to take control of the Aron caused "kalus rosh" [flippancy] regarding their

other duties and it brought shame and disgrace to the holy keylim of the Mishkan. This caused a desecration of G-d's Name. For this sin, they started dying. Therefore, G-d specifically charged Moshe and Aharon with seeing to it that the Children of Kehas not die because of their responsibility to transport the keylim of the Mishkan. A system had to be set up to avoid the conflict: Aharon and his sons will come and assign each member of the family with specific duties and specific items to carry. In this way, they would live and not die. Whatever it would take -- whether it be a lottery, whether it be by alphabetical order, whether it would be by rotation, a system needed to be developed so that there would no longer be these disgraceful fights when it came time to transport the Holy Keylim of the Mishkan.

In the Mesilas Yesharim, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (RaMCha"l) discusses this Midrash in the context of a section on "Mishkal HaChasidus" [literally, weighing of piety]. Classically, Chasidus refers to a category of people who want to do more than the strict letter of the law requires (lifnim m'shuras haDin). The Mesilas Yesharim has two prior chapters on the importance of striving for this level of piety, in which he emphasizes that we should really all attempt to reach such a level of spirituality. In chapter 20, however, he writes an addendum to this advice and discusses the concept of "Mishkal HaChassidus". The RaMCha"l advises weighing when Chasidus of this type is appropriate and when it is not appropriate.

In a person's zeal to fulfill "higher levels of spirituality than absolutely required," he should not do more damage than good by his actions. A person has to ask himself, "Is this the proper time and the proper way to act in such a fashion?" The RaMCha"l cites several examples of people who wish to go beyond the letter of the law, who in the process, ruin things.

Among the examples that the RaMCha"l cites is this story with the Levites. Why did they want to carry the Aron? It was because that was the greatest mitzvah. That act had the greatest reward. However, in their zeal to be the most pious of the group, they caused Chillul Hashem rather than Kiddush Hashem.

Another example he cites is the mitzvah to rebuke our fellow man when we see him sinning. There is no denying that there is such a Biblical commandment [Vayikra 19:17]. However, many times a person will attempt to rebuke his fellow man at a time or in such a way that the efforts will obviously be in vain and will most likely be counter-productive. Many times, a person gives rebuke when it is inappropriate and when silence would be better. Such action is not Chasidus. It can cause desecration of G-d's Name. A person should not be a pious fool, but rather, he must use his intelligence and weigh the appropriateness of extreme piety in each situation. This is the idea of Mishkal haChasidus.

One of the most outstanding teachings of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, was this very point -- to know when to be a Chasid and to know when being a Chasid is inappropriate. There are stories galore, which illustrate Rav Yisrael Salanter's attitude towards this

matter.

In one story, a student invites Rav Yisrael Salanter to his home for a Friday night meal. The student boasted to his Rebbe that in his house, between the food and the zemiros [Sabbath songs] and the words of Torah delivered, the Friday night meal lasted for three hours! The student further boasted that at the same time, he had an added mitzvah because he hired the poor widow of a Torah scholar to be his cook and waitress. She thereby earned a livelihood from this job of serving during the Shabbos meal. When Rav Yisrael Salanter arrived at the house, he requested permission of his student to change the sequence of the normal Shabbos meal routine. Rather than drag out the meal for 3 hours, he requested that they eat quickly and then move on to the Zemiros and to the words of Torah discussion. The meal that night took only 45 minutes instead of the usual 3 hours.

When it was time to say the Birkas HaMazon at the end of the meal, Rav Yisrael went into the cook and "apologized" for rushing the meal. The cook/waitress/widow responded, "I wish you would eat here every Friday night and rush along the meal like that. Do you have any idea how exhausting it is to cook all Erev Shabbos and then wait here until 11 or 12 o'clock to serve a dragged out meal while he sings every single Zemira from Kol Medash Shvii and on? Tonight was a pleasure. I will be able to go home and not feel like I am falling off of my feet!"

This is an example of "weighing piety". There is great piety in conducting a 3 hour Shabbos meal with plenty of Zemiros and Divrei Torah. However, when such piety comes on the shoulders of a poor widow, it is not really such pious behavior after all.

I am told that Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky used to rush through his Seder, the dictum of "Whoever exceeds in the telling of the Exodus is praiseworthy" notwithstanding. Rav Yaakov empathized with the exhaustion of the women who had prepared for Pessach and stayed up late the previous nights cleaning and cooking.

The premiere example of Mishkal HaChasidus is regarding davening for the amud on a Yahrtzeit. In this situation, people lose their entire perspective of what "davening for the amud" is supposed to be all about. The intent is to Sanctify the Name of G-d. When one gets into an argument with someone about who has precedence to lead the congregation, it defeats the entire purpose of what he is supposed to accomplish for the deceased parent by leading the congregation in the service. One wishes to elevate the soul of his father or mother. Instead, he makes a scene and gets into a fight with someone, insulting him and causing a desecration of the Name of G-d.

Once, when I was in a shul for Mincha during the Aseres Y'may Teshuva [Ten Days of Repentance], I heard a tremendous commotion at the back of the shul. Someone was pointing to the fellow davening at the amud and yelling at the Gabbai and reading aloud from a sefer. I could not figure out what the problem was. It seemed to me that the person leading the service was doing an okay job. It turns out that the person at the amud was an Avel [mourner], and according to some opinions, an Avel should not lead the services during the Aseres Y'may Teshuva. However, regardless of such a

concept, I can assure everyone that it was not worth making the fuss and disrupting the davening and talking during the repetition of the Shmoneh Esrei that this apparently "pious person" was doing just to achieve a degree of "Chassidus." It certainly did not fall within the concept of "Mishkal haChassidus" - weighing the appropriateness of piety in each situation.

A person must know when to be a Chassid and when not to be a Chassid... when to demonstrate their piety and when silence is preferable.

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