

ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES OF AN ISH CHOCHOM V'NAVON

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 705, Chanukah Candles, Hotels and Chashunas. Good Shabbos!

When Pharaoh's could not find a satisfactory interpretation for his dreams, Yosef was called from prison to interpret them. Not only was Yosef able to interpret the dreams, but he gave Pharaoh advice as well: "Now let Pharaoh seek out a discerning and wise man and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed and let him appoint overseers in the land, and he shall prepare the land of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. And let them gather all the food of those approaching good years; let them amass grain under Pharaoh's custody for food in the cities, and safeguard it. The food will be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine which will come to pass in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish in the famine." [Bereishis 41:33-36]. Pharaoh and all his servants were very pleased with Yosef's advice and Pharaoh appointed Yosef to fill the role of the "discerning and wise man" in his advice scenario. He became the second most powerful person in Egypt ("Only by the throne shall I outrank you.")

In effect, Pharaoh created a new department of government (Food supply security) at that time. Normally, to run such a major government agency, one looks for an extremely organized person with bureaucratic skills. One would think that one would look for a person who has experience in agriculture, food storage, and food distribution. However, there is no indication that Pharaoh took any of these qualifications into consideration - either in Yosef's advice or in Pharaoh's appointment. The primary quality emphasized in the Torah's description of this new cabinet position is that it required a person who was extremely wise -- ish navon v'chochom.

In Biblical and Rabbinic vocabulary, the words navon and chochom have specific implications. A chochom is not only one with a high IQ, but is one who foresees the future [Tamid 32b]. Likewise, a navon is not only a wise person but is specifically one who understands one thing from another (mayvin davar m'toch davar) [Chagiga 14a]. Yosef called for a person who had tremendous insight and tremendous foresight. Why was such a person necessary?

In times of plenty, it is extremely difficult for people to begin imagining what it is like not to have food. Thank G-d, in this country we have never experienced famine. I recently read a memoir of someone who lived in Vilna who recalled a famine that claimed the lives of 50 people a day. We cannot imagine such a thing!

The truth is that we do not need to experience famine to relate to this concept. At the end of the nineteen nineties, there was a tremendous economic boom. All of these high tech industries and "dot coms" sprouted up. Everyone thought that this was "the new economy" and that there would be no end to this prosperity. People were making so much money that they did not know what to do with it. The luxury car dealers in New York City could not wait until December because that was when Wall Street gave out their bonuses and people were receiving seven figure bonuses. What happens to a 27-year-old person working on Wall Street who gets a million dollar bonus (on top of the good salary that he has been making all year)? What does he do? He goes down to his Lexus dealer or his BMW dealer and he puts down 90 or 100 thousand dollars on a car. It means nothing to him. People thought that there would be no end to the dot com boom and to the soaring stock market. People could simply not relate to what it would be like to be out of work. Last year he received a million dollar bonus and this year he should be concerned about having a job?

When the 7 years of plenty were occurring, with bounty crops year after year, people could not imagine that a famine would ever occur. During those years of plenty, the most important thing was for a leader to get people to pick up the scraps of grain that would have been discarded. Just as the person who receives the million-dollar bonus does not concern himself regarding the following year's livelihood, the farmers laughed at Yosef's government collectors, who were busy picking up the scraps of those bumper crops.

The Chacham - who foresaw the future - was able to imagine that a time would come when there would be no crops and the Navon saw the implications of that future situation such that every little stalk of grain would become valuable. They needed a person who would inspire the people and foster a mentality within them that the good times WOULD eventually end and that the bad times were just around the corner.

We can view this phenomenon as a parable for the dichotomy between this world and the next. As long as we are here and can fulfill mitzvos with very little cost or effort, people do not appreciate the time that they have in this world. Especially when people are young, it is hard for them to imagine that there will come a time when they will not be able to do this.

There is a famous story told of the Gaon of Vilna. On his deathbed, he picked up his tzitsis and noted that in this world, for a few rubles one could buy a garment with fringes and fulfill a great Biblical commandment. "I am soon going to a place now where this will no longer be possible."

We are living in the "years of plenty" in terms of spiritual opportunities. We do not realize that there will come "years of famine" as well, regarding opportunities to do mitzvos and earn spiritual reward. Putting this into more of a micro-context -- I teach boys in Yeshiva in their late teens and early twenties. They often treat their opportunity to learn and study Torah very casually. "We have plenty of time to learn all that we want to learn." These years pass by all too soon. That golden opportunity to learn a whole day will not return. It quickly slips away. One must be an "ish chochom v'navon" to

appreciate what one has -- what one has while he is in Yeshiva and what he has while living in this world.

Rav Eliyahu Lopian gave a parable of a king who fought an extended war. He was unable to win the war until finally he appointed a new general who was able to turn the tide of battle and won the war. The king was extremely appreciative and in recognition of the accomplishment of the general, he offered to allow the general to go into the king's treasury house and spend an hour there taking out whatever he wanted for himself.

The general was thrilled. He prepared a large sack and waited anxiously for the day when the king would allow him to enter the vault where the king's wealth was stored. In the meantime, the king regretted his decision. While the king did not want to renege on his promise, on the other hand, he did not want to sit by and let the general clean out his most valued possessions. The king's advisors gave him a plan. The general had a passion for good music. The advisors told the king to place the greatest musicians in the country in the vault and have them play the world's most beautiful compositions. This would distract the general from despoiling the king's treasury.

Sure enough the plan worked. The music of the orchestra so mesmerized the general that each time the general told himself that he should be filling his bag instead of listening to the music, the musicians began a more dramatic composition. The general became paralyzed and fixated with the music. By the time the general realized that he was losing the opportunity of a lifetime, the hour of opportunity had passed. He wound up with a few small items, but lost all that potential for riches because of his distraction with the orchestra.

Rav Eliyahu Lopian said this parable refers to this world. HaShem [G-d] puts us in this world and tells us to "grab the jewels", i.e. - do the mitzvos. However, at the same time, HaShem gives us all of the familiar distractions of life - both valid and invalid distractions. We become fixated with these distractions. There are times when we wake up and say, "Hey, life is passing us by" and then we are once again distracted with something else! One day, someone taps us on the shoulder and says, "It is time to leave this world." We look back and bemoan the fact that we have missed our opportunity of mining this world for the spiritual treasures that were available to us. We leave the world empty handed or at best, we leave with our sacks half full.

When we have it so good, when the mitzvos are just there for our taking, it is hard to imagine that there will come a time that they will not be there anymore. That is why we need to have the attributes of ish chochom v'navon. We need to foresee the future and take the proper implications from that vision.

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 Miketz are provided below:

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