

ONE CAN RECOGNIZE HIS OWN GREATNESS WITHOUT BEING ARROGANT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Shlach

One Can Recognize His Own Greatness Without Being Arrogant

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 773, Kavanah When Wearing Tzitzis. Good Shabbos

The final statement the Meraglim [Spies] made concerning their report regarding what they saw in the Land of Israel was: "There we saw the Nephillim, the sons of a giant from among the Nephillim; we in our eyes like grasshoppers; and so too were we in their eyes." [Bamidbar 13:33] We have commented in past years - how did the spies know how they looked to the Canaanites? They were, after all, not mind readers. The answer we have given is that if one perceives himself as a grasshopper then that will be how others perceive him as well! To put it colloquially, "if you think you are a shmoteh [rag], then that is how others will look at you as well."

This is an important lesson in life. We must have a certain level of confidence in who we are. No one should make the mistake to think (as some people do) that if I think I am not a grasshopper then I am being haughty. This is not a matter of arrogance. The definition of modesty is not to go around saying "I am nothing. I know nothing. I am a zero." The definition of appropriate modesty is to recognize who I am and what talents I have, but not to be proud about it because I realize that it is all a gift from the Master of the World.

If a person has a beautiful voice and they ask him to daven as the Shliach Tzibur, he should not say "I cannot carry a tune." That would be patently untrue. But when he gets up to daven he should not think that he is deserving of great honor because he can sing so beautifully. The ability to sing is a gift from G-d and that is true of all the human abilities that a person may possess. We are charged to use the gifts G-d gives us appropriately in His service.

Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt"l, was the picture of humility. He was an extremely humble person. I am told that he was once getting into a car on the Lower East Side and someone on the street called out in a loud voice "Moshe!" (to someone else entirely), but the Gadol Hador assumed it was he who was

being addressed and calmly asked "What can I do for you?" And yet the same Rav Moshe Feinstein was once at a wedding and a young man approached him and asked him a question to which Rav Moshe gave him an answer. The young man raised his voice and asked a question on the answer Rav Moshe gave him and again received another answer from Rav Moshe. This continued several more rounds with the young man raising his voice higher and higher with each successive exchange. Until, finally Rav Moshe Feinstein took him by the arm, led him aside and said to him, "Young man, I don't believe you understand who you are talking to!" Meaning, I am Rav Moshe Feinstein and you don't talk to me like that.

What about the humble Rav Moshe Feinstein on the Lower East Side who responded to someone who yelled out "Moshe"? This is not a contradiction. Rav Moshe Feinstein knew who he was.

I recently heard another story where a young man asked Rav Moshe a question at a wedding and Rav Moshe gave him an answer. The young man asked, "Does the Rosh Yeshiva know that the Pri Megadim rules just the opposite?" To which Rav Moshe answered, "Yes. I have learned that Pri Megadim 296 times." How could he talk like that if he was so modest? The same answer: He knew who he was.

I heard a story many years ago regarding the Chasam Sofer. I have never verified it. There was a certain question regarding an Agunah [woman whose husband's death was doubtful] that became a cause célèbre and involved great Rabbinic opinions on both sides of the issue. The matter came to the Chasam Sofer. He thought about it, took out his pen and in a half hour wrote a responsa to permit the woman to remarry. They asked him, how he could be so bold and confident when it was such a controversial matter. He answered "I have the pen of authority in these matters in this generation." In others words, he could say about himself that he was the final word, and what he said about the matter was the definitive psak halacha. Finished.

These people were tremendously humble people but they knew who they were and they knew what the psak was and they were not afraid to exercise their authority. This is not haughtiness.

The Custom of Praising A Choson At A Sheva Brochos

I saw a Sefer by a Rav Eliyahu Mann who records vignettes from the life of Rav Chaim Kanievsky. He writes that the widespread custom is that at a Sheva Brochos celebrating a couple's recent marriage, one who is asked to give a Dvar Torah speaks about the praises of the Choson. Sometimes the speaker goes a bit overboard and makes the groom sound like the next Chasam Sofer, which in most cases he is not. Our Sages say that a Choson is comparable to a King. Just as it is customary to say praises about a King, so too it is customary to say praises about a Choson. The purpose of this is that a Choson is now starting his married life. It is important for him to realize who he is and what potential he has so that he recognizes who he can become. For this reason, it is appropriate to tell the Choson "You are gifted with many talents. It is your obligation to use them."

The story of Rabbi Akiva is well known: When he returned home with his 24,000 students after having been separated from his wife Rachel for 24 years, his wife tried to approach him through the crowd and the students - not knowing who she was -- tried to shoo her away. He told them "Leave her, for what's mine and what's yours belongs to her." The simple interpretation of this Gemara is that what Rabbi Akiva was saying was that what he accomplished and what his students accomplished belongs to his wife is because she let him learn undisturbed for 24 years.

However, Rav Mann quotes a novel interpretation: Rachel, the daughter of Kalba Savua - the wealthiest man in town - could have married anyone she wanted. She could have had the "best guy in any Yeshiva". She took Akiva ben Yosef the shepherd, who at that stage in his life was an ignoramus. She believed in him and that gave him the confidence to become the great Rabbi Akiva. It is for that reason that he credited her for all that he had accomplished and all his students had accomplished. It is important to know that someone believes in you and thinks highly of you as a source of motivation to encourage oneself to live up to those expectations. This is the source of the custom of praising a Choson at the Sheva Brochos.

The Wood Chopper's Motivation Was Good, But...

At the end of the Parsha, the Torah tells us the incident of the "mekoshesh eitzim" [the cutter/collector of wood on Shabbos]. There is a Talmudic dispute exactly what forbidden labor was involved, but the bottom line is that this individual desecrated the Shabbos. Moshe Rabbeinu did not know yet what the proper punishment was for Shabbos desecration. He inquired of the Almighty and was told the punishment was stoning and this punishment was carried out.

It is the opinion of Rabbi Akiva [Shabbos 96b] that this "wood cutter" was none other than Tzelafchad, whose 5 daughters later inquired of Moshe Rabbeinu concerning their rights to their father's inheritance.

The Medrash states that the mekoshesh eitzim carried out his act "for the sake of Heaven". He desecrated the Shabbos "for the best of reasons". His purpose, according to the Medrash, was to demonstrate the severity of Shabbos desecration. He felt he needed to dramatically demonstrate to the nation that laboring on Shabbos was a capital offense. This same idea is brought in the Targum of Yonasan ben Uziel.

Assuming the interpretation of Rabbi Akiva and the Targum Yonasan ben Uziel - we may ask: was Tzelafchad righteous or wicked? There are several proofs that may be brought that Tzelafchad was indeed a tzaddik [righteous]. [Shabbos 96b; Bava Basra 118b]

Although the Talmud does call Tzelafchad righteous for what he did, Tosfos writes in Shabbos that had the Jews kept that second Shabbos (which was violated by the wood chopper), no nation would have ever been able to rule over them. Klal Yisrael would have been unconquerable. There would

not have been a "Churbun Bayis Rishon" [Destruction of the first Bais HaMikdash], a "Churbun Bayis Shayni" [Destruction of the Second Bays HaMikdash], a Babylonia exile, a Roman exile, an Inquisition, a Tach v'Tat, or a Holocaust. But because of this action our future was infinitely worse.

What is the lesson? Here is a person who intended to act for the sake of Heaven. In fact, he was a righteous person. But look what he caused! He caused all the destruction we have known as the Jewish people. Rav Simcha Zissel Brodie says the lesson is that one is never allowed to take the law into one's own hands. One should follow the Shulachan Aruch and not say that there is a greater good or a higher purpose or that the "ends justify the means". This is exactly what the woodchopper did. He claimed that the ends - to get the message of the severity of Chilul Shabbos across - justified the means of Chilul Shabbos. But this is not the way Judaism works! One is not allowed to play fast and loose with the law, even for the best of reasons.

The Gemara [Shabbos 150b] speaks of a certain pious person who noticed a breach in his fence on Shabbos. When he saw what happened, he made plans to fix it immediately because of the great financial loss the breach would cause him. A few moments later, he remembered that it was Shabbos and decided to leave the breach open. The Talmud relates that a miracle occurred and a fast growing bush (Tzelaf tree) appeared in the breach and restored the protection of his property so that he suffered no loss.

The Ben Yehoyada writes in the name of the Ari z"l that this "certain pious individual" was a Gilgul of Tzelafchad. The soul of Tzelafchad, who made an error in desecrating the Shabbas with the incident of the wood chopping, was given the opportunity to come back to earth in another body and correct the mistake he had once made. When he corrected the error by abstaining from repairing the fence, it was most appropriate that the vegetation which (miraculously) grew there was named Tzef-chad (one Tzelaf tree).

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