

WHO IS THE MAN WHO WANTS TO PRESERVE LIFE?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshios Tazria & Metzorah

Who Is The Man Who Wants To PRESERVE Life?

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape# 765 - How Many Mitzvos of Sefira Are There. Good Shabbos!

There is a famous Medrash on Parshas Metzorah which tells of a peddler who used to travel around the cities near Tzipori proclaiming that he was selling the "Elixir of Life" (sam Chayim). Crowds used to gather around him to hear more about the product. Rav Yannai also overheard this proclamation and asked the peddler to come over and sell him some of what he was offering.

The peddler told Rav Yannai "You and people like you do not need what I am selling." Rav Yannai persisted and insisted he wanted to know what the peddler was selling. The peddler came over, pulled a book of Psalms out of his pocket and showed Rav Yannai the pasuk, "Who is the man who wants life, who loves days of seeing good?... Guard your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from speaking deceit." [Tehillim 34: 13-14]

Rav Yannai responded, "All my life I read this pasuk and I did not realize how to interpret it until this peddler came along and taught me who the man is who desires life!"

The problem with the Medrash is obvious. One does not need to be Rav Yannai to figure out what this pasuk is saying. One can be a simple Jew who knows basic Hebrew. What was so novel about the peddler's interpretation that Rav Yannai found to be so revolutionary?

The Chida offers a novel interpretation of the Medrash based on a careful analysis of the words of the peddler. The peddler did not say "Who wants life?" Rather, he advertised his wares by saying "Who wants 'Sam Chaim' (the Elixir of Life)? The Chida suggests that the word 'Sam' (literally drugs or medicine) teaches a great novelty. It would not be anything out of the ordinary to teach that if one wants Life, he should observe Torah and mitzvos.

When a person has a tremendous amount of grain, what protects it from being spoiled? There are certain preservatives that may be added to make sure that the grain does not rot. This is the way it is

for all foods. Today we have foods that have long shelf-lives because of preservatives, but the basic concept is an idea that goes back centuries in time. The novelty of the peddler's sales pitch was that he had the secret for PRESERVING life.

The Chovos HaLevovos teaches something that should give us all tremendous pause:

One day we will all go to the Heavenly Court for the great accounting of how we lived our lives. On that frightening day, we will be shown an accounting of all the mitzvos we did during our lives and all the sins we committed. On that day, we will apparently find mistaken entries in the Heavenly Journal. We will find sins that we did not commit attributed to us and we will see mitzvos that we did perform missing from our accounting. Likewise, we will find ourselves receiving credit for mitzvos that we know for a fact we never did!

We will protest. We never did these things! G-d will explain to us why mitzvos we never performed are recorded: "This mitzvah was done by someone who slandered you." The way the Heavenly System works is that a person forfeits his own mitzvos to the person about whom he spoke Lashon Hara.

This is a very difficult concept to understand. Were this idea not cited by the likes of the Chovos HaLevovos, we might question it. The frightening downside of the system is that not only do we get "free mitzvos" done by those who slandered us, but by the same token, we may lose mitzvos that we spent the better part of our life trying to accomplish, when they are transferred to those about whom we spoke Lashon Hara. We will furthermore have their sins transferred to us!

Rav Yosef Karo had - in his lifetime - many detractors (as was the case with many great men in Jewish history). It was said that an Angel came to learn with him on a regular basis and the Angel told him not to worry about his detractors because eventually he would wind up with the mitzvos done by all of his detractors!

The Chovos Levovos writes, "If people were aware of this Heavenly System, they would rejoice when someone spoke Lashon Hara against them, instead of being upset!"

The Chida explains that this very idea is what the peddler taught Rabbi Yannai. Guarding one's tongue from speaking evil is the medicine that PRESERVES life. Rav Yannai had thought the intent of the pasuk was teaching that guarding one's tongue is a way to ACQUIRE life - i.e. - a person gets reward for it like for any other mitzvah. However, the peddler taught him that even someone who has earned great reward stands to lose it by speaking evil. The great novelty of guarding one's lips is that it is a PRESERVATIVE. It is the Elixir which keeps one's reward from being transferred to someone else!

Ethics of The Fathers: Chapter 2, Mishna 5

The Mishna teaches, "Do not have confidence in yourself until the day you die."

Rabbeinu Ovadya Bartenura connects this Mishna with the famous Gemara that states that Yochanan the High Priest served in that office for 80 years and at the end of his life became a Sadducee [Brochos 29a].

However, the Vizhnitzer Rebbe raises a contradiction between this Mishna and the Gemara in Yoma 38b: Rav Yochanan states that if a person passes the midpoint of his life without having sinned, he will no longer sin. (The Gemara implies that if a person has lived the majority of his life and has dealt successfully with all of life's challenges, he may rest assured that he will not stumble spiritually in his later years.)

To reconcile these two sources, the Vizhnitzer Rebbe states that our Mishna in Avos is not speaking about mitzvos and aveiros. Rather, it means that a person should never say "I think I have done enough in my lifetime. It is time to sit back and rest on my laurels."

In the United States of America, a person can retire at 66, but when it comes to Divine Service and to one's obligations as a Jew - in other words, when it comes to the very purpose of our life that we were put here for - we should not be confident in our accomplishments until the day we die. "I have done enough already" is not a Jewish attitude.

I always find a great ethical lesson in the life of Rav Yosef Breuer, zt"l. When Rav Breuer came to the United States at the end of the 1940s, he was already 60 years old. He had lived a very accomplished life until that point. He was the Rav of the community in Frankfurt, Germany. He came to a new country at age 60 and did not know the language or the culture of his new home. He could have had the attitude "I am going to retire early." That must have been a tremendous temptation. Yet, at that age he founded a community that became one of the finest Jewish Kehillos in the entire world.

This is an example of "Do not be confident (in your prior accomplishments) until the day you die." It is scary that if Rav Breuer would have taken the tempting attitude of "I have done enough already" and lived out his life in retirement for the next 30 years, he would have come to the Heavenly Court after 120 years and they would have asked him: Where is the Kehilla in Washington Heights? Where is KAJ? Where is the Samson Rafael Hirsch Yeshiva? Where is the KAJ Kashrus Organization? Where is all of that? He would have said "What are you talking about? I was 60 years old. Give me a break!"

This is the teaching of "Do not be confident in yourself until the day you die." You must continue until they take you away. All other jobs may have mandatory retirement ages, but not Yiddishkeit. Divine Service does not have a retirement age.

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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