

THE WICKED DEAL IN THE MOMENTARY PLEASURE OF TEMPORARY RELIEF

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vaera

The Wicked Deal In The Momentary Pleasure of Temporary Relief

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 753, Making Hamotzei - Not As Simple As It Seems. Good Shabbos!

Moshe threatens Pharaoh that if he refuses to send the Jewish people out from Egypt, Hashem will smite the country with a pestilence ("dever") that will wipe out the entire livestock population. However, Moshe warned Pharaoh, "G-d will distinguish between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt such that no animal would die from the Jewish livestock population." This is exactly what happened. [Shemos 9:6-7] Pharaoh sent a personal delegation to investigate. They witnessed that not a single Jewish animal died during this plague.

Would this not be sufficient to soften up a normal person? Would it not be reasonable, after witnessing this miraculous phenomenon, for Pharaoh to give up and give in? Lo and behold, the Master of the Universe called this one ahead of time "exactly right!" Yet what is Pharaoh's reaction? "And Pharaoh strengthened his heart and he did not send out the people." [Shemos 9:7] This is an illogical reaction. It does not make any sense! What does this mean?

Rav Simcha Zissel Bordie explains: If all the cattle would have died, Pharaoh would have been nervous. Now, however, that the Jewish cattle did not die, Pharaoh said to himself: "So what if the Egyptian cattle died, I can always use the Jews' cattle. I have wiggle room. I am not up against the wall. Since I have somewhat of an out (I can get horses and cattle from the Jews) why sweat it?"

Ironically, we see the same thing in an earlier pasuk [verse] regarding the plague of the frogs. The frogs died and Egypt was left with a billion dead frogs stinking up the country side. The pasuk states "And Pharaoh saw that there was relief (harvacha) and he strengthened his heart." [Shemos 8:11] What kind of relief was there? The simple interpretation is that Pharaoh saw that the plague was over.

The Kli Yakar points out that we do not find the expression "and Pharaoh saw that there was relief (harvacha)" by any of the other plagues. The Kli Yakar explains that the interpretation is not that Pharaoh saw that there was relief. The Kli Yakar says that by every one of the other plagues, the plague ended and the problem was solved. The one plague that "continued" after the plague ended was Tzefardeah, because even after it "ended," the country was dealing with mountains and mountains and piles and piles of smelly dead frogs. Here too, Pharaoh said "we have 'harvacha'" -- meaning Egypt is a 'wide' country. We have plenty of land people can escape to get away from the smell of the dead frogs.

What kind of person acts like that? After the Dever, he says "No problem, I can always get Jewish horses". After the Tzefardeah, he says "No problem, I can always escape to the parts of the country where there are no frogs."

Rav Simcha Zissel notes a pattern that we find with wicked people. They have a myopia of judging matters strictly by the here and now without viewing the larger implications of what has happened. If right now, the determination is made that I can get out of the immediate problem, then I am prepared to ignore the broader implication that ultimately this is leading to a disastrous conclusion. Such a person ignores the future and ignores the context of matters. The only question he focuses in on is: Can I get out of this particular problem at this particular moment. This, Rav Simcha Zissel says, was Pharaoh's outlook on life and it is a trait he shares with many wicked people.

We see this outlook on life from the prototype of all wicked people -- the evil Eisav. Eisav came in from the field tired and hungry. He said to Yaakov, 'Pour into me now some of that very red stuff for I am exhausted.' Yaakov offered it to him in exchange for the birthright. Eisav said, 'Look, I am going to die, so of what use to me is a birthright? Yaakov responded "Swear to me as this day" (ka'yom) [Bereishis 25:29-33]

What is the meaning of the phrase "ka'yom" in Yaakov's request that Eisav swear to him "as this day"? The Soforno points out that Yaakov was telling him: "Eisav, you are the type of person who is only interested in 'today' -- the here and now." Someone who cannot distinguish between the pleasures derived from a bowl of soup (which he can only identify by its color, and by its ingredients) and who does not appreciate the long term value of the birthright, is a person who lives strictly "Ka'yom" for the here and now.

This is the life philosophy of Eisav. It is the life philosophy of Pharaoh. As the Ramban states in Parshas Toldos, "Fools are only interested in eating and drinking and the fleeting temporal pleasures of the moment, without paying attention to what will occur on the next day." In contemporary terms we say, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you may die." This type of philosophy is the philosophy of "today" (ka'yom). As Yaakov told his brother, "Sell to me ka'yom; ... Swear to me ka'yom"

What Am "I" Doing Wrong?

During the start of the Gulf War in 1991, on one Friday night there was a scud attack on Ramat Gan, which is not all that far from Bnei Brak. A relative of Rav Schach came into him the next day quite smug that the scuds hit the less religious city of Ramat Gan but did not hit the "holy city" of Bnei Brak. The relative told Rav Schach, "We have witnessed fulfillment of the pasuk, "And I will separate the Land of Goshen... so that the plague of Arov will not be there so that you will know that I am Hashem in the midst of the land." [Shemos 8:18]

Rav Schach told this relative that his own reaction was just the opposite. "My reaction," he said, "was that of the prophet Yonah." When Yonah was on the boat and the boat hit a storm, each of the sailors took out their little idol and started praying to it. Yonah announced, "Because of me has this great storm come." [Yonah 1:12] Why did Yonah think that? The boat was full of idolaters. Why did he assume the storm was a message to him?

Rav Schach asked him, "Why do you think the scuds fell Friday night?" The scuds fell around 7:00 pm Friday night. At 7:00 pm in January on Friday night people should be sitting and learning -- they should be reviewing the Torah portion of the week. Instead, they are sitting around schmoozing. The fact that the scuds started falling Friday night was a Divine message that Bnei Brak is not doing what they are supposed to be doing. "Because of me has this great storm come." It is always easy to point a finger at others as the cause of our problems. "It is happening because of the irreligious. It is happening because of the secular Jews. It is because of the idolaters. It is their problem. It is their fault."

No. A Torah philosophy demands that one first judge himself before judging others. "It is OUR fault. It is MY fault."

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 Va'eyra are provided below:

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