

WE TRY HARDER WHEN WE HAVE TAKEN AN OATH

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayechi

We Try Harder When We Have Taken An Oath

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 795 - Hatoras Nedorim - How Specific Must You Be? Good Shabbos!

The last request the patriarch Yaakov makes from Yosef is "Bury me in the Land of Israel." Yosef responds, "I will do according to your words". Yaakov requests that Yosef take an oath to that effect and Yosef swore accordingly.

The Ramba"n is bothered by a very obvious question. Did Yaakov Avinu not trust his beloved son Yosef? Why was it necessary for him to make Yosef take an oath? It seems insulting on Yaakov's part to have asked Yosef to swear when Yosef already told Yaakov that he would fulfill his last request.

The Ramba"n emphasizes that Yaakov did not request an oath to force Yosef's hand because he suspected that his trusted and beloved son would be negligent in carrying out his father's final request. The Ramba"n suggests that Yaakov insisted upon imposing the oath on Yosef to impress Pharaoh (Yosef's boss) of the gravity of the matter. Yaakov feared that Pharaoh would turn down Yosef's request for an exit visa and a leave of absence so that he Yosef would not be able to travel back to the Land of Canaan to bury his father. In fact, until Yosef mentioned to Pharaoh that he swore to his father that he would carry out this request, Pharaoh did not want to let him go. Yaakov had foresight into this matter.

However, the Ramba"n also throws out the following idea: "And Yosef as well would be more diligent in the matter because of the fact that he swore to it." According to this second explanation, Yosef himself, Yaakov felt, would do more than he would have done otherwise by virtue of the fact that he buttressed his initial acquiescence to Yaakov's request with an oath.

What does this mean? The Ramban is in effect saying that without the oath, Yosef haTzadik would do less for his father. As we asked originally, does Yosef need a Shavua [oath] to do more?

The same question may be asked in parshas Chayei Sarah by the incident involving Eliezer, the trusted servant of Avraham Avinu. Avraham trusted Eliezer with all of his possessions and yet when he sent him on a mission to find a wife for his son Yitzchak he insisted "put your hand under my thigh and swear to me that you won't take a wife for my son Yitzchak from the Canaanite daughters in whose midst I dwell." Why did Avraham make Eliezer swear?

The answer again is as the Ramban indicates -- because of the oath under which he was operating he was obliged to make a more diligent effort than he would have otherwise have made. A shavua adds an element of intensity to the actions of even a most trusted and devoted son or servant. What exactly does a shavua add?

The Sefer Imrei Shefer addresses this issue. He suggests that if Reuven pledges to Shimon that he will do something for him, but then runs into difficulty carrying out his intended mission, there may come a point where Reuven says to himself: "I gave it my best effort, but circumstances beyond my control emerged. It is out of my control. (I'm an *Oness*.)"

Had Yosef merely pledged to Yaakov that he would bring him to Canaan for burial and Pharaoh had objected, preventing Yosef from carrying out his promise to his father, Yosef could have rationalized: "I did my best. That's all my father could have expected of me." However, when a person realizes that there is something greater at stake than merely his "word", then a person has the ability to dig down deeper and to tap strengths that he never even knew he had. This is the difference between Yosef's WORD and Yosef's SHAVUA. When something greater is at stake, one does not so readily bring forth the excuse "I tried!" The severity of the sin of violating one's oath brings fear and trembling to a person that far exceeds the emotions one feels he is not able to accomplish what he merely "promised" to accomplish. When we have taken an oath, we try harder because more is at stake.

Such is human nature. People make an effort but when it really counts, they dig down deeper and tap into unknown personality strengths. When speaking about such serious things, I am hesitant to bring in sports analogies but rightly or wrongly, we can all relate to this. We see this in the sports world. I am not that much of a football fan because there was not an NFL team in my hometown when I grew up there so I was not infected with the "girsas d'yankesa" [childhood lessons], but I do have a passing interest. We see a phenomenon that for three quarters of the game, they may accomplish nothing. Then in the fourth quarter, they wake up. Even more acutely - in the last two minutes. For 58 minutes, nothing happens. Then, all of a sudden, they come to life.

What is the meaning of this human dynamic? The interpretation is that in those last two minutes, they see what is on the line. They know that there is no tomorrow. Then they act and play in a way that they did not really know they could because there is more at stake. For some people, that motivating factor is a game, a playoff, or a championship series. For us, it is something else. When Yosef realized that a shavua to G-d was at stake, it motivated him to act greater and to do things that

he did not even knew he could.

The lesson we should take away from this is that if we sometimes try to tell ourselves what is at stake, we act differently. When we truly appreciate the value of Tefillah B'Tzibur, we are motivated to make it to minyan even when we have many valid excuses for davening without a prayer quorum.

The glory of sports victory motivates those on the gridiron. To Eliezer and to Yosef, the awesome seriousness of an Oath to the Almighty motivated them to dig down into the deepest recesses of their personalities to uncover strengths that they would not otherwise demonstrate. We are all motivated by what is important in our lives.

The challenge we all face is to contemplate what is truly important in life and to keep those priorities in our consciousness when we are tempted to make excuses and believe we have "done all we could". Once we recognize these priorities, we will be motivated to do the right thing and will find the inner resources to do so.

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 VaYechi are provided below:

- Tape # 037 - Establishing Time of Death
- Tape # 079 - The Yissocher-Zevulun Partnership
- Tape # 128 - The Sandik
- Tape # 175 - Embalming, Autopsies, and Cremation
- Tape # 221 - Exhumation: When Is it Permitted?
- Tape # 265 - Yahrtzeit
- Tape # 311 - Funerals in Halacha
- Tape # 355 - Asarah B'Teves
- Tape # 399 - Baruch Shem K'vod Malchuso L'Olam Voed
- Tape # 443 - Aveilus Issues
- Tape # 487 - Determining Date of Moshiach's Arrival
- Tape # 531 - Burial in Eretz Yisroel
- Tape # 575 - Honoring an Older Brother
- Tape # 619 - Fulfilling the Wishes of the Deceased
- Tape # 663 - Belief in the Coming of Moshiach
- Tape # 707 - Fasting on a Yahrzeit
- Tape # 751 - The Rabbi: Master Or Slave?
- Tape # 795 - Hatoras Nedorim - How Specific Must You Be?
- Tape # 839 - Buying Cemetery Plot - Investing in Real Estate for Long Term
- Tape # 883 - Evil Intentions - Do They Matter?

Tape # 927 - Yissocher - Zevulun Revisited (Available October 20)

Tapes or a complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.

RavFrand, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Yissocher Frand and Torah.org.