

JUST FOLLOW ORDERS: ADVICE FOR THE GABBAI; ADVICE FOR THE JEW

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Yisro

Just Follow Orders: Advice for the Gabbai; Advice for the Jew

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #756, The Kosel Video Camera. Good Shabbos!

When Moshe explained to his father-in-law what took up so much of his time, Moshe says: "When they have a matter they come before me and I adjudicate between a man and his fellow man and I make known to them the statutes of the L-rd 'Chukei Elohim' and His laws 'v-es Torasav'". [Shemos 18:16] The Netziv, in the HaEmek Davar, explains why the Torah is referred to as 'Chukei Elohim'. The Netziv says that the most appropriate word to describe all of Torah is the word 'Chukim'. The Netziv sites as proof the pasuk "If you will walk in my chukos" Vayikra 26:3. In that pasuk, "chukos" refers to keeping the Torah. Chukim is the one word that encompasses all of Torah.

The connotation of the word 'Chukim' is those mitzvos whose reason evades us. We usually relate the term to those commandments where we do not understand why they were given. The classic 'chok' is the mitzvah of the Parah Adumah [Red Heifer]. Shatnez [forbidden mixtures] is another famous example. However, when one thinks of Torah as a whole, the vast majority of mitzvos are not chukim. The Medrash in Bamidbar Rabbah says that there are only really four chukim in all of Torah.

If the chukim occupy such a relatively miniscule proportion of Torah, why is it appropriate to call Torah in general 'chukei Elokim'? It would seem more appropriate to call the Torah 'Mishpetei Elokim' or 'Eidosav shel Elokim'. 'Chukei Elokim' seems to color the whole majority of Torah with a terminology that applies to only a small minority of mitzvos.

Perhaps that which the Netziv had in mind can be derived from the following story involving Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (the famous Or Sameach).

Rav Meir Simcha, as was the custom of many Rabbonim in Europe, had a Gabbai who was his personal assistant. The Gabbai would execute whatever task or errand Rav Meir Simcha asked him to execute. Today, such a position would be called "Chief of Staff". He executed the orders of the

Rav.

After a certain shaila came to the attention of Rav Meir Simcha, he instructed his Gabbai regarding what to do. The Gabbai objected to what he was being asked to do and told Rav Meir Simcha that he did not agree with the Rav regarding this issue. Rav Meir Simcha told him, "You never agree with what I have to say." The Gabbai was startled. The Gabbai said, "What do you mean I never agree with what you have to say? This is the first time that I ever disagreed with you!"

Rav Meir Simcha explained what he meant. "Why is it" he asked, "that you never objected before? It is because every other time you agreed with me. Therefore, you did what I said because you felt I was right. The first time you did not agree with what I had to say, you told me so. That means that you never really agreed with me. The only reason you did what I said in the past was not because you nullified your will to what I have to say. You did it because you felt that it was the right thing to do. That is not the role of a Gabbai. The role of a Gabbai is not a sounding board who is supposed to give the Rav validation. The role of the Gabbai is that I am the Rav, you are the Gabbai. You do what I tell you to do."

This is the same with Torah as well. True, the Torah contains a majority of Mishpatim and mitzvos that we understand. However, that is almost beside the point. We are not supposed to do mitzvos because we happen to agree and think it is right and proper, ethical and moral. The reason we are supposed to do mitzvos is for one reason: Because it is "Chukei haElokim", because that is the Will of the Creator. This is the "Higher Intelligence" (Daas Elyon). Whether we understand the mitzvos or do not understand them is really beside the point.

We do not need to do it because we agree and think it is the right thing. Ultimately, we need to do it because the Ribono shel Olam said so. That is why the appropriate title to address and define what all Torah is about is Chukei haElokim. That is why observance of the Torah in general is expressed as "If you will walk in my Chukim". [Vayikra 26:3] In the final analysis, that is why we keep every mitzvah.

Just as Rav Meir Simcha told his Gabbai about his job -- Our job is not to "sign off" and acquiesce to G-d's commandments. Hashem does not need our approbations. We do it because He said to do it.

A Sense of Embarrassment Kept People In Their Places -- But No Longer

Following the listing of the Asserres HaDibros [Ten 'Commandments'], the Torah says that the people became afraid of the experience of hearing the Words of the Almighty. They begged that Moshe relay G-d's message to them instead. Moshe responded: "Do not fear, for in order to elevate you has G-d come; so that the awe of Him shall be upon your faces (u'bavur tiheyeh Yiraso al pneichem) so that you shall not sin." [Shemos 20:17]

The Mechilta comments that the expression "the awe of Him shall be upon your faces" refers to shame, the fact that people have a sense of embarrassment. Rabbeinu B'Chayei asks how it is that the Mechilta takes a pasuk which, on the surface, seems to speak of Fear of G-d (Yiras HaShem) and

refers it to shame (busha). What is the connection? Rabbeinu B'Chaye answers that Fear comes from the heart. We do not normally speak of "fear appearing on a person's face". The attribute that IS evident on a person's face is the attribute of shame, which is noticeable when a person turns red from embarrassment. If the pasuk is speaking of something that "shall be upon your faces," it must be referring to shame - busha.

The idea conveyed by the Mechilta is that a sense of shame brings a person to fear sin. If a person has a strong sense of busha -- which emerges from recognition of his great and ongoing debt to the Almighty, he will not be able to sin. A sense of embarrassment keeps a person in his place.

Rav Schach once met with a group of educators and asked them to state their opinions as to why the spiritual level of our society in today's times has deteriorated to such a low level. Rav Schach went around the table. Each teacher expressed his opinion.

One educator mentioned the general concept of the "descent of generations" [yeridas haDoros]. Rav Schach took issue with this theory and told the educator. "This is incorrect. In my time, when I was young Europe, was far from perfect. There were all sorts of philosophies and movements that swirled around and entrapped people with their attraction: Socialism, communism, Bundism, humanism, the Yiddishists. There are many people that went off the straight and narrow path and left the fold. However, it was nothing like what is happening today. What is the difference?"

Rav Schach finally explained that up until very recently, there was a sense of shame that existed in society. People were never perfect. They always had their foibles. But at least there was a sense of embarrassment. There are certain things you just do not say. There are certain things you just do not talk about. People's inhibitions have always put a certain moral constraint on society."

Today we are seeing a fulfillment of what the Mishneh says at the end of tractate Sotah -- that in the period leading up to the coming of Moshiach (Ikvesa d'Mishicha), brazenness will become blatant. The problem we see today is not just the natural decline of every generation, as it moves one generation further away from Sinai. Today we are seeing a breakdown in society that has nothing to do with Jews or with Judaism. It has to do with humanity. Human beings (as opposed to animals) have always had a sense of embarrassment. Animals do anything in public because they do not realize that there is anything to be embarrassed about. Human beings used to refrain from doing certain things in public because of a sense of shame. "You just do not do that or talk about that in the open."

This generation has removed the sense of busha from humanity. All a person needs to do is turn on the radio or even look in the newspaper. Things that people would not have dreamed of saying 20 years ago have become common language.

Our problem, especially the problem that we have with our children, is that society has lost its sense of BUSHHA and children have lost their sense of BUSHHA. The genie is out of the bottle. Unfortunately, I do not think it is going to be put back into the bottle until the coming of our Moshiach Tzidkaynu,

may he comes speedily in our days.

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 Yisro are provided below:

- Tape # 042 - Kiddush: To Sit or Not to Sit
- Tape # 085 - Christianity in Halacha
- Tape # 133 - Honoring In Laws
- Tape # 180 - The Mitzvah of Kiddush for Men and Women
- Tape # 226 - The Fearless Judge: A Difficult Task
- Tape # 270 - Paternal Wishes vs. Staying in Israel
- Tape # 316 - The Reading of the "Aseres Hadibros"
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- Tape # 404 - Making a Brocho on a Makom Neis
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