

THE SHOFAR OF THE YOVEL: POSITIVE PEER PRESSURE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Behar

The Shofar of the Yovel: Positive Peer Pressure

This dvar Torah was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape# 145 - Kidney Donations: Endangering Oneself to Save Another. Good Shabbos!

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of Shmitah and Yovel [Sabbatical and Jubilee (years)] - the Biblical command that every seventh year, the land in Eretz Yisroel must lie fallow and after every seven Shmitah cycles the Jubilee year begins in which all servants go free. To signify this, the Torah commands (Vayikra 25:9) "You shall sound the Shofar throughout the land", a mitzvah performed on Yom Kippur of the Yovel year -- the point in time at which time all slaves went free.

The Sefer HaChinuch in this week's parsha analyzes the significance of the Shofar. The Sefer HaChinuch points out that the matter of sending away one's servants is very difficult for a slave-owner to carry out. Slave owners sustained a very substantial financial loss.

In general, owning slaves was a financial bonanza. Just imagine -- for anyone who has a business -- what it would be like not to have to pay workers. There was no salary, no social security taxes, no pension, no health insurance, nothing. It was almost like having free labor (other than cost of food and basic care).

Now, suddenly, they must wave good-bye to the slaves. Slave owners incurred major financial losses. The Chinuch says that in order to give the people the strength and the encouragement to fulfill this very difficult command, the Torah requires the sounding of the Shofar throughout Eretz Yisroel, to give everyone the sense that they are not alone in making this sacrifice: It is a phenomenon that transpired throughout the land.

When the Shofar sounded throughout Eretz Yisroel, the slave owner recognized "I'm not the only one taking a financial killing; everyone is taking a financial bath. Everybody has to send out their slaves today."

The Chinuch emphasizes that nothing strengthens the spirit of mankind like universal public action. The fact that "everybody is doing it" is the greatest source of encouragement. That, according to the Chinuch, is why the Shofar was blown. If everyone else has to do it, it is easier for me to do it as well.

This is a tremendous insight. Nonetheless, we still might ask, "So what if everybody is doing it -- I will still take a beating!" Why does this help?

All we have to do to answer this question is to read the newspaper or listen to the radio. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, the whole country was bombarded with the slogan "Just Say No to Drugs". Thank G-d that in our society, for the most part, we are insulated from this, but it is a plague that is smiting the entire country (makas medinah)! It is destroying all of society. There is not a kid in all of America that does not know that drugs are bad for him. So are they all idiots? They know it is going to hook them, they know it is going to kill them, and yet so many start? The answer is "Everybody is doing it". Peer pressure, social pressure is such that it can make a person do something that he does not want to do.

One can know something is bad for him, but as the Chinuch says, there is no greater encouragement to human activity than the fact that everyone is doing it.

That is why even though I know I need to send away my slave and it will cost me a fortune, I am strengthened by the fact that I know everyone is doing it as well. That is human nature. We are tremendously influenced by our peer and social pressure... to the extent that we will do something that is inherently bad for us, but we will be able to do it because everyone else is doing it.

The lesson to be learned from this is the importance of community. A person needs to understand that not only is one's spouse and immediate family a tremendous influence, but the type of community that one chooses to live in is as well. If everyone does something in one way, a person will feel obliged to conform -- for good or for bad. A person will act better than he would usually act, because of community standards, and on the other hand a person will act worse than he would otherwise act, because "listen, this is what everyone is doing".

We do not outgrow this. When we were teenagers there was peer pressure, but even as adults we have peer pressure, social pressure. Therefore it is imperative, no matter how old a person is, that he find a community that wants the right things out of life. He must put himself in such a community and put his children in such a community.

Children will not be able to withstand the forces of peer pressure. They are human beings and whatever their peers do, they will do. One should not fool himself. We are all influenced, especially children and teenagers, who are so dependent on what their friends say. This is what the Torah is reminding us through the blowing of the Shofar throughout the Land.

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah

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