

COMPLIMENTS -- IN THE PRESENCE AND OUTSIDE THE PRESENCE OF A PERSON

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Noach

Compliments -- In The Presence And Outside The Presence Of A Person

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 829, Bending The Truth of the Torah. Good Shabbos!

In Parshas Noach, the Torah states: "Go into the tayva, you and all your family, for you I have seen as righteous before Me in this generation." [Bereishis 7:1] Rashi comments that the Parsha begins [Bereishis 6:9] with the words "And Noach was a COMPLETELY righteous person (tzadik tamim) in his generation." However, here when Hashem tells Noach to enter tayva, He merely calls Noach righteous, not completely righteous. This teaches, Rashi says, that it is appropriate to only say part of a person's praise in his presence, saving the full description of praise for a time when the person is not present.

This Rashi is based on the Talmud [Eruvin 18b] which states this principle in the name of Rav Yirmiya ben Elazar. As a matter of fact, this is not the only place in Chumash where Rashi invokes this teaching. Rashi mentions the exact same idea in Parshas Beha'aloscha. Miriam and Aharon have problems with the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu separated from his wife. G-d addresses them critically regarding the fact that they spoke against their brother, but He first told them to step outside. Rashi [Bamidbar 12:5] attributes the reason that G-d told them to step outside, away from the presence of Moshe, to the fact that He wanted to emphasize the uniqueness of Moshe to them and "one says only part of the praise of a person in his presence and all of his praise when the person is not present." In describing to Aharon and Miriam who their brother was, the Almighty was going to spare no detail. He described "all his praises." Therefore, the message had to be delivered away from Moshe's presence. This Rashi in Beha'aloscha, which is almost identical to the Rashi here in Parshas Noach, is based on a teaching in the Sifrei in the name of Rav Elazar ben Azarya.

Rav Elazar ben Azarya is a Tanna (sage of the Mishnaic period). He taught the principle of "saying part of the praise of a person in his presence and all the praise of a person not in his presence." Rav Yirmiya ben Elazar (the source of this teaching in Tractate Eruvin) was only an Amora (sage of the later Talmudic period). He was, in fact, a latter day Amora. The question can therefore be asked: What was Rav Yirmiya ben Elazar adding -- several generations later -- to what was already taught by Rav Elazar ben Azarya many years earlier?

Furthermore, we should note that in our Parsha, Rashi's expression is "From here we learn..." (m'kaan anu lomdim). In Parshas BeHaAloscha, Rashi's language is "Because we say..." (l'fi she'omrim). What is the difference between these two expressions?

I saw what I think is a beautiful answer to these questions in a Sefer called Heimah Yenachamuni from the current Tolner Rebbe in Jerusalem. He asks whether the principle of saying all of a person's praise in his absence and part of his praise in his presence is an "issur" or a "mitzvah". Another way to express this is -- is the emphasis "do not say all of a person's praises in his presence" (a prohibition) or is the emphasis to say the praises of a person (mitzvah), but we are advised that when we say them in front of him, we should only say part of the praises.

Rav Elazar ben Azarya in the Sifrei (quoted by Rashi in Beha'aloscha) and Rav Yirmiya ben Elazar in Eruvin (quoted by Rashi here in Noach) were speaking about two different things. Rav Elazar ben Azarya was speaking about a case where the Almighty had to set the record straight. He had to say compliments about Moshe Rabbeinu to impress upon Aharon and Miriam his true nature. Therefore, Hashem took them outside so they would be away from Moshe's presence. But this narrative gives us no indication that it is appropriate to say nice things to a person (the idea of "partial compliments in his presence"). There the emphasis is on saying "complete compliments outside his presence". Therefore Rashi explains there why they were asked to step outside: "Because one does not say complete praise in the presence of the subject".

In Noach, however, we see something else. G-d could have merely told him "Come inside the Ark". The sentence could have ended there. But the Almighty adds something: "For you I have seen to be a righteous person before Me in this generation." This superfluous expression teaches us something new: "From here we see that it is part of the Attributes of G-d to give compliments."

No matter who one is, no matter how successful and how acclaimed a person may be, everyone likes a compliment. A compliment does something for a person. It strengthens him. This is the novelty that Rav Yirmiya ben Elazar is teaching us from Parshas Noach. "From here we see that one says (partial) praise to a person." This idea was not found in Parshas Be'Ha'loscha and it was not taught by Rav Elazar ben Azarya.

It could in fact be that this "compliment" of the Almighty to Noach was the key to Noach's salvation. The Medrash Rabbah in Tehillim indicates that it was Noach who spoke the words: "Thou wilt destroy those that speak lies; the man of blood and deceit the L-rd abhors. But as for me -- due to

the magnitude of Your kindness I will enter Your house:..." [Tehillim 5:7-8]. ...The Medrash says that Noach says "As they (the generation of the flood) did, so did I." In other words, "I was as bad as they were". (The Talmud in Sanhedrin teaches a similar idea, that really Noach himself should also have died in the Flood, based on personal shortcomings.) But Noach adds (according to the Medrash) that G-d did him a favor and therefore "I -- due to the magnitude of Your kindness -- will come into your house" "Because", Noach says, "You told me that 'You I have found to be righteous before me in this generation', I was motivated to be righteous." "What made me change," says Noach, "is that You, Almighty, complimented me. That is why I changed -- because of the 'partial praise' I heard You say before me."

Rabbi Gissenger of Lakewood, New Jersey, was a student of Rav Pam and a very distinguished Rav in his own right. Several years ago, his shul honored him at a dinner and they invited Rav Pam to come speak about his disciple. Rav Gissenger was given the honor of introducing his Rebbi. He said, "When I was 16 years old in Rav Pam's shiur, before we left for the summer, Rav Pam encouraged us to try and write him our Chiddushei Torah (novel Torah-based thoughts) over the summer." Rabbi Gissenger in fact did that and sent his Torah insights to Rav Pam in the mail. Rav Pam sent him back a postcard in which he wrote, "I enjoyed very much your Chiddushei Torah..." whereupon Rav Gissenger whipped out the postcard that Rav Pam had sent him 30 years earlier!

He kept that postcard. Why did he keep it? He was so inspired and thrilled by the fact that Rav Pam stated he enjoyed his Chiddushei Torah that it made his decade! It inspired him for life! This is what a compliment can do.

"From here we see that one says partial praise of a person to his face" -- it is a good, advisable, practice to engage in! This is teaching us a mitzvah (meritorious practice), not an issur (prohibition). It is the behavior of the Almighty and it is a behavior worth emulating. When someone davens for the amud, if he is half decent tell him "Yasher Koach! I enjoyed your davening! Good job!" Give a person a compliment. It won't cost you anything and it is emulating the ways of the Ribono shel Olam.

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 this Parsha are provided below:

027 The Abortion Controversy
069 Ma'ariv and Mitzvos in the Land of the Midnight Sun
118 Suicide: Is it Ever Permitted?
165 Euthanasia
211 Animal Experimentation
255 Preventing A Suicide
301 Teaching Torah to Non-Jews

345 Milah for Non-Jews: Is It Permitted?
389 Abortion to Save a Baby?
433 Assisting in a Suicide
477 Tzedaka and Non-Jews
521 The Ben Noach & the Nectarine
565 The Golam
609 Cosmetic Surgery
653 The Har Habayis - The Temple Mount in Halacha & Hashkafa
697 The Case of the Fascinating Ger
741 Your Wife's Medical Bills: Who Pays?
785 Spreading Bad News
829 Bending the Truth of the Torah
873 Stem Cell Research
917 Did Shimshon Commit Suicide?
960 Geshem Reigns--Mashiv Haruach U'moreed Hageshem? Hagoshem?
1004 Shinui Hashaim: Changing the Name of A Choleh
1048 Zichrono Le'vracha: On A Living Person?
1091 V'sain Tal U'Matar - Starting Too Early?
1134 Are Non-Jews Only Obligated in "The Seven Mitzvos"?

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