

TAKING CONCRETE ACTION LEAVES STRONG MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vaera

Taking Concrete Action Leaves Strong Mental Impressions

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #841 Serving McDonalds To Your Non-Jewish Employees. Good Shabbos!

Prior to beginning the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, the Torah lists the genealogy of the Tribes of Israel, beginning with Reuven, Shimon, and Levi. When the Torah reaches Levi, it enumerates Levi's descendants through Moshe and Aharon, who will be playing the central role in the story of the Exodus. The Torah then stops its genealogical listing.

The Shalo"h Hakadosh points out there is a striking difference between the way the Torah introduces the sons of Reuven and Shimon on the one hand and the way it introduces the sons of Levi. Regarding the sons of Reuven [Shemos 6:14] the Torah writes "The sons of Reuven the first born of Israel were..." Regarding the sons of Shimon the Torah writes [Shemos 6:15] "And the sons of Shimon were..." However, regarding the sons of Levi, the Torah writes [Shemos 6:16] "And these are the names of the sons of Levi, according to their birth..."

The Shalo"h says that there was something special about the Tribe of Levi. Chazal teach that the entire tribe was never enslaved throughout the period of Egyptian bondage. Levi, knowing this prophetically, was concerned that his children might grow up having no sense of the suffering that the rest of Klal Yisrael was feeling. Levi said, "I want to do something - to make a point to my descendants - so that despite the fact that they will not be physically enslaved, they will at least be able to empathize with their brethren who are unfortunately suffering.

In order to do this, Levi gave his children names that connoted something relating to the enslavement. The first son was called GERshon because they were kicked out of their land and were strangers (GERim) in the Land of Egypt. The second son was named KEHAs which is related to the

expression KEEHu as Shineihem (literally their teeth became blackened and indented by the enslavement). The third son was named MERARi from the word MAR which means bitter.

In fact, we see that Levi's strategy worked. In the famous incident when Moshe sighted the Burning Bush - we are taught that he inferred from this miraculous phenomenon that salvation would come to the Jewish people: If the bush can burn and yet not be consumed, this is a positive omen that the Jewish people will be able to endure the suffering they are experiencing in Egypt and yet not be destroyed.

Reb Elya Svei once made the interesting observation that this event took place 40 years after Moshe left Egypt. We see that despite the fact that Moshe was geographically removed from the enslavement (and physically removed from it even while in Egypt) and despite the fact that he was now 40 years removed from it in time, the first association he made when seeing the Burning Bush was with the plight of his brethren in Egypt. Their suffering must have been constantly on his mind. Why else would he associate the phenomenon he viewed in the desert outside Midian with Klal Yisrael?

The answer is that this was Levi's plan and strategy all along. He gave names to each of his sons that symbolized the enslavement, so that the suffering of their brethren would always be part of their self-awareness, despite the fact that they themselves were not in bondage.

We can learn from this Shalo"h that when one wants to empathize with someone else's pain, it is not enough to say merely "tsk, tsk, it's a shame". It is not enough to merely say "I feel your pain." That may be good for a politician's speech, but it does not really mean anything. In order for a person to really empathize, he needs to do something tangible.

During World War II, the Rebbetzin of Rav Aharon Kotler did not put sugar into her tea. As part of G-d's Mercy, she and her husband escaped the holocaust, but she knew what was going on in Europe. She wanted to identify with the suffering of her brethren, so for the entire period of the war, she did not sweeten her tea.

One may ask: What good does that do? Certainly it did not in any way mitigate the suffering of the Jews in Europe, but at least from Rebbetzin Kotler's perspective, every time she had a cup of tea, she was forced to think about what was happening to her brethren and sisters in Europe.

Rav Moshe Eiseman once told me that his father-in-law, who was somewhat of a classical music fan, did not listen to music the entire period of World War II. This is how a person can identify with the pain of his brethren. To empathize with another, one must do something physical which becomes part of his everyday life.

Otherwise, people usually become momentarily inspired, but then life goes on. With the passage of time, we forget. The only way to capture the emotion and make it last is to put it into concrete form (a 'davar gashmi'), that will provide a constant tangible reminder.

The Gemara states [Bava Kamma 97] that the coin of Avraham Avinu had an old man and an old woman on one side and a young man and young woman on the other side. Rashi in Bava Kamma says that on one side of the coin was Avraham and Sarah and on the other side was Yitzchak and Rivka. The Maharsha in his Chiddushei Aggados says that were it not for Rashi's explanation, he would interpret differently: that both sides of the coin portrayed Avraham and Sarah. However, Avraham did not want to forget the miracle that when he was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 years old, they had a baby together. Miracles occur, but if we do not do something physical to commemorate a miracle, one can forget about it. How does one constantly remember the inspiration? How can one always remember about Yitzchak - that this is a miracle child? The answer is that one mints a coin which will be put to constant use which commemorates the event. The old man and the old woman pictured on one side of the coin became young again and are pictured as youthful parents on the other side of the coin. This is a miracle and I do not want to forget it!

The Maharal's brother explains why Avraham specifically used a coin to commemorate the miracle. The Maharal's brother says there is one thing in life - more than any other - that makes us forget where we came from - that is money. Many people start out from very humble beginnings but money has a way of going to their heads. They forget where they came from and what they went through. Therefore, when they want to make sure they do not forget their humble beginnings; they take the money and make a sign out of it so as to remember their unassuming origins.

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 Vaera are provided below:

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