

A GOOD NAME IS BETTER THAN GOOD OIL

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayakhel

A Good Name Is Better Than Good Oil

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 366, The Melacha of Tearing. Good Shabbos!

There is an interesting Medrash on the pasuk "See G-d has called by name Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur of the tribe of Yehudah" [Shemos 35:30]. The Medrash references the pasuk in Koheles "A good name is better than good oil" [Koheles 7:1]. The Medrash elaborates that the scent of good oil may precede the oil by a mile or two at most, even if the oil has a very powerful aroma. However, a good name can precede a person even across continents.

The Medrash then asks how far a person must remove himself from contact with the prohibition of Shatnez [the forbidden mixture of wool and linen]. The Medrash answers that even if a person is wearing 99 layers of clothing and none of them are Shatnez, he still may not wear a garment containing Shatnez as the one hundredth layer of clothing.

What is the connection between distancing oneself from Shatnez and the pasuk that says, "A good name is better than good oil"?

Rav Nissan Alpert gives the following interpretation of this Medrash (in his sefer Limudei Nissan):

Every time the Torah introduces Betzalel, it uses the following unique expression: "Look, I've called him by this name..." Why does the Torah give Betzalel such an introduction? The Medrash explains that the reason why Betzalel merited to be the master builder of the Mishkan was not because he had master architectural talents or special artistic ability. Betzalel's uniqueness was that he -- for some reason -- merited having a 'good name'. The Medrash then emphasizes how wonderful it is to have a good reputation (shem tov). G-d, in choosing someone to construct his dwelling place on earth (the Mishkan), did not want to be associated with anyone who had anything less than an impeccable reputation.

How does one obtain a good reputation? The Medrash answers this question by introducing the matter of Shatnez. The Medrash is teaching that the way a person acquires a good name is not by merely avoiding evil or sin, but by avoiding even the slightest hint of impropriety. It is not sufficient to merely 'play it by the book'. A person must distance himself to the ultimate extent from anything that even smacks of impropriety.

Shatnez is a peculiar prohibition, in that the two substances involved (wool and linen) are completely permitted when taken individually. Only a combination of the two is prohibited. The Torah is teaching us that a person merits a good name by staying away from Shatnez. Avoiding Shatnez represents staying away from anything that has even a minute mixture of something improper.

Those people in our communities who have achieved a good name are people who are above reproach. They have removed themselves from any taint of scandal or impropriety. Impeccable reputations are not achieved by playing it on the edge or bending the rules.

We all know that certain people's handshakes are more reliable than other people's signed contracts. The reason why is because the first group of people stay away from 'forbidden mixtures'. They stay away from the slightest hint of 'non-Kosher' business practices. Ultimately, this is what pays off for them in the long run. When G-d builds a Mishkan, He does not want it built by a person regarding whom people may have suspicions. He wants a Betzalel -- a person above reproach, who possesses a good name, which is superior to good oil.

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 Vayakhel are provided below:

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