

FLOWERING INITIALLY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah CDs on the weekly portion: CD #906 - Tachanun Without a Sefer Torah? Good Shabbos!

Flowering Initially "Lifnei Hashem"

A very interesting event followed the suppression of the Korach rebellion. Hashem gave Moshe the following commandment:

"Speak to the Children of Israel and take from them one staff for each father's house, from all their leaders according to their fathers' house, twelve staffs; each man's name shall you inscribe on his staff. And the name of Aharon shall you inscribe on the staff of Levi, for there shall be one staff for the head of their fathers' house. You shall lay them in the Tent of Meeting before the Testimony, where I meet with you. It shall be that the man whom I shall choose – his staff will blossom; thus I shall cause to subside from upon Me the complaints of the Children of Israel, which they complain against you." [Bamidbar 17:17-20]

Moshe did as he was instructed. Every tribal leader gave a staff, including Aaron who gave his staff to represent the Tribe of Kohen-Levi. Moshe placed the 12 staffs in the Ohel Moed, before the Aron [Ark], as he was commanded.

By the next morning, the staff of Aharon, representing the Tribe of Levi, had indeed blossomed: "...It brought forth a blossom, sprouted a bud and almonds ripened." [Bamidbar 17:23]

On a fruit bearing tree, first a little flower blossoms, then there is a little bud and then the fruit grows from that bud. This is what happened with Aharon's staff. Aharon was the "winner", so to speak, in the "Contest of Staffs".

From reading the pasukim [verses] superficially, you would assume that all three things – the blossom, the bud, and the almonds – occurred within the Ohel Moed. However, the Rashba"m, in his Torah commentary, interprets differently. The Rashba"m says that the next morning, when Moshe removed the staffs from the Ohel Moed, the only thing unique about Aharon's staff was that it contained flower blossoms. ("And it was on the morrow and Moshe came into the Tent of the Testimony and behold Aharon's staff from the House of Levi gave forth a flower..." [Bamidbar 17:23])

According to the Rashbam, the blossoming of the bud and the appearance of the almonds happened in public "before the eyes of all of Israel" after Moshe removed it from the Ohel Moed. The Rashbam argues that if all three stages occurred at once in the Ohel Moed, out of sight of the people, then no one would have been aware of the stages of flowering and of blossoming. They would have only seen the final product -- the almonds -- and there would be no point for the Torah to mention the first two stages.

The Rosh Yeshiva of Gateshead asks -- according to the Rashbam -- why was it necessary to put the staff of Aharon in the Ohel Moed in the first place? Leave all the staffs out in the open, visible to everyone, and let them all watch the whole process transpire: The flower, the budding, and finally the almonds. The Gateshead Rosh Yeshiva answers that it is important for any living thing to come from the best possible source. In spirituality, the holier an item is in its original genesis, the holier the subsequent item will be.

The reason the original flower had to bloom in the Ohel Moed is that a flower that begins to grow "Lifnei Hashem" [before G-d] has an impact on all the subsequent fruit. If the environment in which it got its start is "Lifnei Hashem" then all subsequent growth will be a different type of growth.

This is a profound lesson. It is a lesson in terms of having children. It is a lesson in terms of raising children. It is a lesson in terms of making sure the foundation and the original structure of a child's education is set up under the best of all possible circumstances. To buttress his point, he cites a Talmudic passage in Tractate Gittin. The Gemara discusses a tree in which the roots grow in Eretz Yisrael and the branches are in Chutz L'Aretz [outside of the Land of Israel]. The fruit of the tree are actually over the border but the original roots grow in Israel. The Gemara wants to know whether the status of the fruit is that of "fruits of the Land of Israel" or "fruits from outside the Land of Israel." The ruling is that as long as the roots were planted in holy soil, the fruits -- wherever they grow -- are "holy," requiring separation of Terumos and Ma'asros [Gifts to the Kohen and Levi]. When the roots are holy, the fruit is holy.

We learn from this Gemara that beginnings are crucial in determining spiritual identity. This is why it was so crucial that the original budding of the flower -- which was symbolic of the seed of Aharon for all future generations -- took place within the confines of the Ohel Moed, "Lifnei Hashem". This makes people into different people and fruit into different fruit, because they blossomed initially in the Ohel Moed, before the L-rd.

Giving Up Everything For The Chance To Work In The Beis HaMikdash

The Torah's narration of the above referenced story with the twelve tribal staffs concludes with the following pasuk: "Moshe brought out all the staffs from before Hashem to all the Children of Israel; they saw and they took each man his staff." [Bamidbar 17:24]

Rav Zalman Sortzkin asks an interesting question: Why did everyone come back and take their staff? There was a "competition" between 12 tribal leaders. Aharon "won". The rest "lost". What further need did they have for their staffs? To what can we compare this? A person buys a Power Ball lottery ticket. The grand prize is \$350,000,000. The winning numbers are announced. Everyone looks at their tickets. "Did I win?" The person who wins is ecstatic. However, the other millions of "losers" take their lottery ticket, rip it up, and throw it away. That is what happened here. Aharon won; they lost. Their staffs were now worthless pieces of wood. Nevertheless, the pasuk makes the point that each man took back his staff. Why?

Rav Sorotzkin offers a beautiful idea. Everyone wanted to become "The Chosen Tribe". Consider, is it really such a great thing to be a Kohen or a Levi? It was the poorest life amongst all the tribes. They do not own property. They work a couple of weeks a year in the Basi HaMikdash [Temple] and are supported by the good graces of people's Terumos and Maasros, the first shearing of the sheep, and the priestly portions of the slaughtered animals (Zeroa, Lechayayim, and Keivah). Essentially, they were given the scraps. It was a poor life. The Leviim had it hard. The Kohanim had it hard. However, everyone wanted to become the "Chosen Tribe". They want poverty! They want this hard life!

Why did everybody want it? They wanted it because of the concept that this is the "Chosen Tribe". This is the Tribe chosen by G-d. They are the "Chosen of the Chosen". This status had special merit and it was worth more than all the property and all the real estate in the world. When the other tribes "lost", they did not toss away their staffs. They came home and they mounted them over the fireplace. They told their children and grandchildren "My sweet children, you see this staff? I was willing to become a Levi! I was willing to give up everything to become the Chosen Tribe! Do you see this beautiful house? Do you see all the beautiful furniture? I was willing to give this all up for the chance to work in the Beis HaMikdash. My proudest possession is this staff, the staff that lost. It is because that staff says everything. The staff says that I know what is important and what is trivial. I know that all the real estate in the world is not worth anything compared to the merit of participating in the Divine Service in the Holy Beis HaMikdash."

The staff was not a worthless lottery ticket that one rips up, throws to the ground, and lets the wind scatter. This was something to be proud of. It shows who the owner was. It shows his values. It is something to show off, to treasure, and to show one's grandchildren and great grandchildren: "I was willing to give up everything to become the Chosen Tribe."

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