

"YOUR SERVANT, OUR FATHER"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshios Miketz & Chanukah

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: CD# 881, The Treifa Chicken Scandal. Good Shabbos!

The Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer says (in Chapter 38): In the dialog between the brothers and Yosef, Yosef heard his brothers utter the phrase "your servant, our father" 10 times and he did not protest even once. They thought they were speaking to the Viceroy of Egypt and everyone is the Viceroy's servant so they referred to Yaakov as "your servant, our father". On the other hand, Yosef knew that they were talking about his father as well, who clearly was NOT his servant. The Medrash comments that "silence is like acquiescence" and therefore for this disrespect to his father, 10 years were deducted from Yosef's lifespan. (He died at age 110 rather than age 120.)

The Vilna Gaon points out that this is an appropriate ("measure for measure") punishment. Inasmuch as the reward for honoring one's parent is "In order that your days be lengthened" [Shemos 20:12] (i.e. - you will have a long life), it makes sense to have one's life shortened for dishonor shown to one's parent.

The problem with this Medrash is that if one listens to the Torah reading this Shabbos, one will discover that we do not find the phrase "your servant, our father" ten times. It only appears 5 times! The Vilna Gaon deals with this problem. He explains that Yosef had to pretend that he did not understand Hebrew so he had an interpreter repeat the remarks of the brothers to him in Egyptian. Thus, he did hear the expression 10 times - 5 times in the original Hebrew spoken by the brothers and five more times in the Egyptian language translation spoken by the interpreter.

However, Yosef could not have objected to the expression "your servant, our father" because that would have blown his cover. He needed to play the charade that he was NOT their brother and that Yaakov was not his father. Had he objected the charade would have been over! How then, can Chazal fault Yosef for keeping quiet?

I saw an answer to this question from Rav Yitzchak Sortzkin which fits in very nicely with the earlier mentioned insight of the Gaon: True, when the brothers were speaking and said "your servant, our father," Yosef could not have objected. However, when the interpreter in Egyptian said "your servant, our father," Yosef could certainly have indicated in Egyptian to the interpreter (who Chazal say was his son Menashe) to not speak like that. When Yosef had the opportunity to object and he did not object, then he was even punished for the brothers' mention of that phrase in the situation where he really was not able to object. There was some kind of a lack of respect for his father by allowing himself to repeatedly hear this phrase in a situation where he could have objected without blowing his charade.

An analogy to this is people who do not have an opportunity to learn as much Torah as they should because of the burden of earning a living and spending long hours on the job in order to support their family. That may be a valid excuse, but then when the opportunity presents itself to find time for learning Torah outside of their working hours and they do not take advantage of the opportunity, then it shows that they were not totally blameless for their neglect of Torah study even during the time when they supposedly had a "valid excuse".

There are certain individuals who despite working for a living, on December 25 when they have "vacation" from work, spend their time in the Beis Medrash [Study Hall]. This proves that the only reason they did not come to the Beis Medrash to study Torah on a regular day was because they had no choice - they had to be at their job. The same is true for retired people who regularly come to Beis Medrash while drawing their pensions. This proves that all the years when they were not in Beis Medrash, it was only because they needed to make a living.

This helps explain our issue. The fact that Yosef did not object when he heard those words from the interpreter when he could have objected, tells us that he was not totally faultless when he heard those same words from his brothers and could not have objected.

From Dungeon to Palace in the Blink of an Eye

We have all heard stories of individuals who worked their way up the corporate ladder and went from the mailroom to the Boardroom. However, Yosef's story of going from jail to being the second most powerful man in Egypt in one day seems to be virtually without precedent! Yosef went from the dungeon to the palace overnight. This is certainly not your typical "climb up the corporate ladder"!

The events occurred with lightning speed: "And Pharaoh removed his ring from upon his hand and put it on Joseph's hand. He then had him dressed in garments of linen and he placed a gold chain upon his neck. And he had him ride in his second chariot and they proclaimed before him, 'Avrech!'

And he appointed him over all the land of Egypt." [Bereishis 41:42-43]

This is an indication of what happens many times in life. Fate can change so quickly. One day, a person can be sitting on top of the world and the next day he can find himself, literally bankrupt. This is a two way street - it works both ways. Sometimes a person thinks a situation is hopeless and then within a matter of days or months, he finds himself on top of the world.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz, the late head of the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, was both a great Torah scholar and a tremendous master of Mussar [Jewish ethics]. Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz would extract great ethical lessons from many seemingly mundane every day events. Once, when Rav Chaim was walking in the streets of Jerusalem, he saw a garbage truck collecting garbage. In earlier times, the way garbage was picked up in Jerusalem was that a garbage man on the ground picked up the can of garbage off the street and handed it to another garbage man who stood atop the truck. The man at the top of the truck would then empty the contents of the can into the garbage truck. The preferred job was to be on top of the truck, rather than running around on the ground picking up the cans and handing them up to the man on top.

The garbage man on the bottom turned to the Rosh Yeshiva and said, "Rebbi, do not worry - in ten minutes I will be on top also! We take turns and switch places every so often." Rav Chaim commented that this is what life is all about. In ten minutes, a person can go from being on bottom to being on top or from being on top to being on bottom. In the blink of an eye, life can change from bad to good, or sometimes the other way around.

The story of Yosef is the story of how in a matter of hours, Yosef went from dungeon to palace. If the Master of the World is on one's side, that can happen at any time.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Miketz are provided below:

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