

ONE CAN RELY ON THE GERER REBBE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayeishev

One Can Rely On The Gerer Rebbe

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: CD # 880 - Lying for the Sake of Truth. Good Shabbos!

Rav Yehudah Leib Zirelson was the Rav of Kishinev (Moldova). He was a great individual, but Kishinev was "off the beaten path" in terms of what was going on in the Torah world of his time. In other words, it was far removed from Central Europe and the major Torah communities of the day - Poland, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, etc. Rav Zirelson used to correspond with a Polish Rav named Rav Moshe Nachum Yerushalmski.

One day, Rav Moshe Nachum received a letter from Rav Yehudah Leib of Kishinev in which he wrote the following: "I recently received a letter that a group of Rabbis intend to start a new organization called 'Agudas Yisrael' and they want to place at the head of this organization someone known as the 'Admor of Gur' (the Gerer Rebbe). They are asking me to go along with their decision. Please tell me, who, is this fellow known as the 'Admor of Gur' and should I acquiesce to his being given this leadership position in the proposed new organization?"

This is what is called "being out of it". However, he simply did not know any better. He was stuck in Kishinev in Moldova and he simply did not have his finger on the pulse of what was going on in the wider Jewish community.

The Polish Rabbi wrote back to his colleague in Kishinev as follows: "Yes the Admor of Gur is someone who can be relied upon. He is in fact a great Tzaddik and indeed has thousands of Chassidic followers. Furthermore, I know that he is a person who has "Siyata d'Shmaya" [Divine Assistance]. He is certainly worthy of the position."

Rav Yerushalmski proceeded to relate the basis of his first-hand knowledge that the Gerer Rebbe possessed "Siyata d'Shmaya": In my little village there is a Jew named Rav Sheinfeld, who happens to be the uncle of the Gerer Rebbe. Every so often, the Gerer Rebbe comes to visit this uncle and --

as was the custom in Europe - whenever a visiting Rabbi visits another town, he pays a courtesy visit to the town's official Rabbi (Moreh d'Asra). Therefore, I had yearly visits from the Gerer Rebbe. During one visit, I was discussing with him the weekly parsha and I told him that I had a question on Parshas Vayeshev.

The pasuk states that "Yosef was a 'na-ar' [youth or lad] with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah" [Bereishis 37:2]. The Medrash questions the use of the term 'na-ar' here, which connotes a young immature child, as at this time Yosef was already 17 years old. The Medrash infers from this description that Yosef did childish things. Rashi, citing the Medrash, explains that Yosef used to fix his hair and groom his eyes so that he should look attractive.

Rav Yerushalmski asked the Gerer Rebbe, that by Akeidas Yitzchak, the pasuk says, "I and the 'na-ar' will go up to here" [Bereishis 22:5] where the word 'na-ar' refers to Yitzchak, even though he was 37 years old at the time! Why does the Medrash not question the use of the term na-ar for Yitzchak, who was more than twice as old as Yosef when he was described as a na-ar?

The Gerer Rebbe dismissed the question. He explained that in the story of the Akeidah, Avraham Avinu called Yitzchak a na-ar. To a father, a child is always a child! It is not at all noteworthy to hear a father refer to his son, regardless of his age, as a young child. However, in Parshas Vayeshev, the Torah calls Yosef a na-ar, not his father. Therefore, this usage can be used for Medrashic exposition!

Rav Yerushalmski, who lived on the second floor of his building, went to accompany the Gerer Rebbe out of his apartment when the visit was over. A 100 year old widow lived on the first floor of the building. The widow came out of her house and upon seeing the Gerer Rebbe she asked him for a Bracha. The Rebbe gave her a bracha. This woman had a son who was 80 years old. She then requested of the Rebbe "Give my little one a blessing as well." Here then was an 80 year old man who was referred to as "my little one" by his mother.

The point of Rav Yerushalmski was that literally within moments of the Gerer Rebbe giving an answer to the question, his insight was validated with a real life story, proving from Heaven as it were, that the 'vort' was true!

The current Tolner Rebbe (Jerusalem) asks on this answer of the Gerer Rebbe one basic question: In the Akeida we find a later pasuk in which the Angel from Heaven calls out to Avraham and also uses the term 'na-ar': "Do not send forth your hand to the 'na-ar'" [Bereishis 22:12]. This was not a parent speaking. Why then does the Medrash ignore the Torah's use the term na-ar by Akeidas Yitzchak?

The Tolner Rebbe answers that the Angel speaks in the Name of Hashem and to the Almighty, every Jew is like a child! "For Israel was a na-ar and I loved him..." [Hoshea 11:1]; "Children are you to the L-rd your G-d" [Devorim 14:1]. Once we are like the sons of G-d, it is understandable why we should always be thought of as a young lad (na-ar).

This Is Not A Story About Heroes and Villains

We should not make the mistake (as others have) to impose personality traits of common sibling rivalry upon Yosef's brothers when the Torah says about them that "they were jealous of him" [Bereishis 37:11] or that "they hated him" [Bereishis 37:4]. We must remember that we are speaking of the "Shivtei Kah" [The Tribes of G-d], the founding fathers and pillars of our people. We are not speaking of petty jealousies but of fundamental theological disputes that were taking place within the family, between Yosef and his brothers.

To bring this point home, I would like to share the following incident:

The Yeshiva in Volozhin, founded by Rav Chaim of Volozhin (a disciple of the Gaon of Vilna) was the mother of all Lithuanian Yeshivos. It had an illustrious history and from it emerged all the Lithuanian-based Yeshivos with which we are so familiar.

In its early days, there was a leadership struggle in Volozhin as to who should become the next Rosh Yeshiva. The two candidates for the job were each great men in Israel. One was Rav Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (The Netziv) the other was Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik (The Beis haLevi), the patriarch of the Brisker dynasty and the Soloveitchik family.

They were both in the Yeshiva. They had very distinct styles of learning and different groups of students rallied around each of the Rabbis with whom they found a particular affinity for their 'derech haLimud' [style of learning]. The Netziv was a 'baki', who had brilliant encyclopedic knowledge of virtually all sources of Torah learning. The Beis haLevi was more of a 'charif', known for his sharp and incisive analysis.

The administration convened a Beis Din of the great Rabbinical leaders of the time to rule on the question regarding who should be the next Rosh Yeshiva of the Volozhin Yeshiva. One of the personalities present at this Din Torah was the famous Vilna Maggid.

The Vilna Maggid requested permission to express his opinion and began his remarks with the following statement: "Today we find ourselves involved in the story of Parshas Vayeshev." This remark immediately drew everyone's attention because it was the end of the month of Tishrei and it was NOT the week of Parshas Vayeshev. Everyone gave the Vilna Maggid quizzical looks. He continued:

I am a Maggid. My stock in trade is that I use the weekly parsha to bring out lessons of life. On a consistent basis, I always show the difference between good and evil. In Sefer Bereishis, I can go through every single parsha showing the 'good guy' and the 'bad guy' and setting them against one another as moral lessons for good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice.

In Parshas Bereishis, I can use Adam and Chava vs. the Snake or Kayin vs Hevel. In Parshas Noach, it is Noach vs. his generation. In Lech Lecha, it is Avraham Avinu vs. Pharaoh. In Vayera, it is Avraham Avinu vs. Lot. In Chayei Sarah, it is Avraham vs. the Bnei Ches. In Toldos, it is Eisav vs. Yaakov. In Vayeitzei, it is Yaakov vs. Lavan. Each of the parshiyos has paradigms of good and evil. However, in Parshas Vayeshev, I am stuck. I have no material. Here it is not good vs. evil. Here both sides - Yosef and his brothers - are wholly righteous. It is very difficult to take sides regarding who is right and who is wrong.

The Vilna Maggid concluded, "Gentlemen, today we find ourselves in a situation comparable to Parshas Vayeshev. On the one hand, the Netziv is a genius and a thoroughly righteous individual and on the other hand the Beis haLevi is a genius and a thoroughly righteous person. This is exactly like Parshas Vayeshev, where we cannot take sides because we are not talking about a righteous person vs a wicked person.

This is how we need to view Parshas Vayeshev.

[The 'Din Torah' was ultimately resolved in favor of the Netziv, who therefore became known as the Netziv of Volozhin].

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 Vayeishev are provided below:

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