

NICE GUYS FINISH WELL

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayigash

Nice Guys Finish Well

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: CD# 882, Father Or Grandfather: Whom Do You Honor. Good Shabbos!

Yosef sent gifts to his father upon wagons (agalos). When Yaakov saw the wagons, his spirit was rejuvenated because he was convinced that Yosef was still alive. Rashi cites the Medrash that by sending wagons (agalos), Yosef was sending a signal to Yaakov that he remembered the last thing they studied together before being separated. They had been studying the laws of the decapitated calf (Eglah Arufah). (The term eglah [calf] has the same root as the word agalos [wagons].) The law of Eglah Arufah is that if a person leaves a city and is subsequently found dead, the elders of the closest city need to bring an atonement known as the Eglah Arufah, because it involves decapitating a calf.

The Daas Zekeinim m'Baalei HaTosfos elaborate upon Rashi's comment. The Daas Zekeinim explain that when Yaakov sent Yosef on his mission (to look for his brothers) Yaakov accompanied Yosef part of the way. The Daas Zekeinim derive this from use in the narrative of the word "Vayishlacheihu" [and he sent him] [Bereishis 37:14]. The Daas Zekeinim say that throughout the Torah, the word Vayishlacheihu does not merely mean "he sent him"; rather it means "he escorted him."

When Yosef's father started accompanying him, write the Daas Zekeinim, Yosef urged him to go back home. At that point, Yaakov told Yosef that he wanted to teach him the Torah value of "levayah" [escorting someone on the road], which is learned from the law of Eglah Arufah. (This is by virtue of the fact that the Elders of the city need to state that they do not have blood on their hands because they did not refuse to escort the dead person on his journey.) The implication of the statement of the Elders in the procedure of Eglah Arufah is that someone who neglects to provide escort on the road is guilty of spilling innocent blood.

Why is levayah [escort] so important? The Maharal explains that the escort shows the person being escorted "you are still a part of us; you are not alone; you are still part of a community." As part of the community, the person still has the merit of the community and in this merit he should be confident that he will be protected on his journey. When one is "on his own," accidents can happen and thus the Elders of a community who let someone go off totally on his own retain a responsibility for what happens to him.

Yosef understood that Yaakov was teaching him much more than just the law of levaya. Implicit in Yaakov's message and implicit in the mitzvah of levaya is that one must care about his fellow Jew and look for opportunities to give him chizuk [strength]. This was the last message Yosef heard from his father before their separation and this is the message Yosef carried with himself for the next 20 years: The importance of worrying about one's fellow man and trying to strengthen him.

If we look back at the entire story of what happened to Yosef in Egypt, we see a pattern in his behavior throughout the narrative. To put it in very mundane terms (not really appropriate for Yosef HaTzadik), Yosef was always a 'nice guy.' Everything turned out for Yosef's good because he was a 'nice guy.' He was thrown into the dungeon. There he met the Wine Butler and the Baker. We know the story. He interprets their dreams and as a result of that he is recommended to Pharaoh and ultimately becomes the Viceroy of Egypt. But how does it all start? It starts with Yosef being a 'nice guy.' Yosef saw them one morning and asked them "Why are you in such a bad mood?"

How many people sitting in a dungeon would have that attitude? Here are two Egyptians who probably would mistreat Yosef because he was a "lowly Jew" and Yosef was still genuinely concerned that they seemed to be upset. Yosef wanted to know what was bothering them and see if he could in any way put their minds at ease. Because of that kindness, everything turned around for Yosef. This was Yosef's attitude throughout his entire sojourn in Egypt. He was always worrying about the other person. This saved him.

When the brothers finally learned the identity of the Viceroy of Egypt and they were petrified of him, what was Yosef's reaction? "It is not your fault! The Master of the Universe sent me here. You do not need to worry! I was sent here to provide salvation from the famine." Yosef did not need to say that. He could have let them stew in their guilt. Why did he need to say that? Yosef said it because this is what he learned from his father: Be a nice person, strengthen your fellow man and care for him.

The Baal HaTurim interprets the pasuk "Al Tirgazu b'Derech" [Bereishis 45:24] to mean that Yosef told his brothers not to trespass on the way home. He warned them not to take short cuts through other people's property and rely on the fact that they were the brothers of the Viceroy of the country who had special perks. Yosef was constantly worried about doing the right thing and about not hurting another person.

This is the Torah lesson Yosef learned from Yaakov when they last saw each other. This is what saved him. Yaakov understands this message when he sees the 'Agalos'. Yosef is 'telegraphing' the

message: "Father, do you know why I survived these past 20 years? It is because I never forgot the lesson of 'Eglah Arufah.'"

A Story With Two Connections to the Parsha

I received an e-mail from Dr. Leon Zakarowitz of Far Rockaway, who related an interesting story about his wife's grandfather, Rav Yosef Lichter. Rav Lichter was a descendant of the Rama^ah and was himself a Dayan in Europe before World War II. Rav Lichter and his three sons survived the war by disguising themselves as Polish peasants. They apparently were never in the Concentration Camps.

Yosef Lichter was meticulous in his observance of the practice of Kiddush Levanah [Sanctifying the New Moon]. He used to quote the 'Segulah' that is mentioned in various sources that one will never die in the month in which he sanctifies the New Moon. He used to say that Kiddush Levana is a 30 Day Insurance Policy.

When the Nazis were finally defeated and the Russians moved into Poland, the Russians imposed a dawn to dusk curfew. It was prohibited to walk in the street after dusk. Rav Lichter did not want to violate his firm practice of reciting Kiddush Levanah, so he took his chances, went outside, and recited the prayer for Sanctification of the new moon.

He was arrested by the NKVD (associated with the Soviet Secret Police). They took this poor Jew down to a dimly lit basement in front of a Soviet judge. They accused him of violating the curfew. The judge asked him in Russian, "How do you plead - guilty or not guilty?" Rabbi Lichter responded, "Not guilty" and then he began speaking in Yiddish. He figured "What do I have to lose? I'll tell him the truth!" He could have lost his life for this, but he felt that he had nothing to lose.

He told the judge, we have a religious custom to bless the new moon every month, the moon is only visible after dusk, and that is why I violated the curfew. Upon hearing this, the judge told the NKVD officers to leave the room. He then asked Rabbi Lichter - "Do you remember, long before the war, you were once walking home from shul, and there were a bunch of bullies beating up a little Jewish boy named Chaim? You stopped them and told them 'Leave the kid alone.'"

The Judge then looked at Yosef Lichter and said "I am Chaim!" He brought the soldiers back in and told them, "This person is a long time Communist. He is a Communist from before the war. He is a good person. He is for the masses. Leave him alone, take him back home, and make sure that he is not harmed."

This story has two connections to Parshas Vayigash. First, we see that when one is a nice person, it always comes back to his benefit. Second, this is yet another example of an "I am Yosef" incident.

Just like when Yosef saw his brothers and announced to them, "I am Yosef" they were shocked, this is a somewhat similar story of "I am Chaim." "Since you stuck up for me in the past, now I am going to stick up for you now."

Yosef Lichter survived the war. He came to Borough Park. He had children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He was saved and lived into the 1960s because he learned the message of Eglah Arufah - that when someone cares about another person, one will eventually be repaid in ways that can save his or her own life!

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 Vayigash are provided below:

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