

WE WERE NOT CHOSEN FOR OUR BRAINS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Yisro

We Were Not Chosen For Our Brains

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #932 Saying The Shem Hashem While Learning - Yes or No? Good Shabbos!

Although the Revelation at Sinai and the narration of the giving of the Asseres HaDibros [Ten Commandments] is certainly the dramatic pinnacle of this week's parsha, the parsha begins on a very different note. Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe, arrived; he observed the situation that Moshe Rabbeinu was busy the whole day adjudicating between people; he advised that this was not a good system and he recommended a system of higher and lower courts. Therefore, Chazal say that Moshe's father-in-law (who had multiple names) was given the additional name of Yesser because a portion was added to the Torah in his merit ("Yesser al shem she'yiter parsha achas b'Torah").

The Talmud records a dispute as to whether the events in this week's parsha are recorded chronologically or not. In other words according to one opinion Yisro initially came before the giving of the Torah as the events are recorded in our parsha and according to the other opinion Yisro came after the giving of the Torah, in which case the story of his initial coming does not appear in true chronological sequence.

Regardless, literarily the prelude to the acceptance of the Torah is the narrative of Yisro coming and giving Klal Yisrael this "novel plan" of establishing a hierarchical court system. This matter needs to be analyzed. Why is this the beginning of the story of "Kabalas haTorah"? Why is our Parsha not known as "Parshas Kabalas HaTorah" or why is not this Shabbos known as "Shabbas Kabalas HaTorah"? Why is it "Parshas Yisro" and "Shabbas Parshas Yisro" as if somehow the message of Yisro's coming almost overshadows the significance of Matan Torah?

The Or HaChaim haKadosh suggests a very novel answer to this question. In truth, the Or HaChaim writes, Yisro's idea is not "rocket science". The idea of the efficiency of a division of labor and the

practicality of implementing a hierarchical court system is something that Klal Yisrael should have no doubt figured out on their own without Yisro. However, the Almighty wanted to send a message to the Jewish people of that generation and of all future generations that wisdom DOES exist amongst the nations of the world and that "there are some wise gentiles out there." The lesson is that the Jews should not think that Hashem chose them because they are the wisest of all nations. We were not the only nation to whom Hashem chose to give the Torah because we necessarily have higher IQs than non-Jews. The reason why the incident with Yisro is the introduction to Kabalas HaTorah is to teach this lesson.

Why then were we Chosen? We were chosen because of Divine Kindness and because of Hashem's love for the forefathers. It was because of the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Granted, they may have been smart, but that is not what the Almighty valued in them. Hashem valued the fact that Avraham was the Master of Chessed [kindness] par excellence. He valued Yitzchak because he was the Master of Gevurah [spiritual strength]. He valued Yaakov because he had the attribute of Emes [truth]. G-d values the forefathers because of their respective attributes and because those were the attributes they passed on to their descendants. This is why "He Chose us from all the nations."

Unfortunately, there is sometimes a perpetual misperception in certain segments of our society. The misperception is that the nations of the world are stupid. This is an inappropriate Jewish outlook. There are in fact very bright people from the nations of the world. The last time I checked, Bill Gates is not Jewish. When my computer crashes, I do not know what to do and he does. Therefore, he is at least smarter than I am! Warren Buffet has made billions of dollars in the stock market and most of us have not. He too is smarter than we are. I am sure that there are brilliant doctors that are non-Jewish and there are brilliant lawyers that are non-Jewish and there are brilliant scientists that are non-Jewish.

Our Chosen-ness has nothing to do with brains. It has to do with middos [character traits]. This, the Orach Chaim haKadosh is teaching, is the reason we were chosen. At the end of the day, this is what it is all about.

Rabbeinu Bechaye points out that when the Torah talks about the greatness of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, and Dovid, it never comments about how smart they were. Moshe is praised for his modesty, not for his brains. Noach is praised for his righteousness. Because of his Tzidkus, he was saved, not because of his brains. Yaakov is described as a simple person (ish Tam). Nothing about brains or intelligence or IQ is mentioned.

The bottom line is that the central challenge of Judaism is working on a person's character traits (middos). The Vilna Gaon says on the verse "Hold fast to discipline (mussar / character); do not let go. Be careful with it; watch it for it is your life." [Mishlei 4:13]: The reason we are here in this world is to improve a character trait, which we have thus far not perfected. Therefore, a person must always work hard on this, for if one does not improve on his middos while here, what is the purpose of life?

This is an important idea to remember in raising our children. We value brains so much, we value grades so much, we value success so much. But when our children come home from school with a report card that says they are polite, they are kind, they are helpful to others, we should make as big a deal about that as we do when a child gets straight As. At the end of the day, this is what it is all about - Hold fast to character discipline, do not let go.

Understanding The Fundamental Nature Of Number 3 and Number 10

The commentaries point out that the Asserres HaDibros [Ten Commandments] are the foundation of all other mitzvos. They go to great pains to indicate how the balance of the commandments are somehow included and subsumed within the Ten Commandments themselves. It is as if the Ten Commandments are the 'Avos' [major principles] and the rest of the commandments are the 'Toldos' [derivative principles].

For eight out of the ten, it is very easy to make a case that these are in fact major principles of our religion. "I am the L-rd your G-d..." is clearly fundamental. "You shall have no other gods before Me..." is clearly fundamental. The fact that G-d created the world in seven days and commanded us to observe the Shabbos is also fundamental. Honoring one's parents is fundamental because Judaism is a tradition-based religion and in order to have tradition, one must have bearers of tradition (baalei messorah). One cannot have society when there is murder. One cannot have holiness in the family when there is adultery. One cannot have a society in which there is theft or falseness.

However, among the Asserres HaDibros, there are two that do not immediately strike us as being worthy of being "up there" with the other major principles of our religion.

The prohibition of taking the Name of G-d in vain does not seem to be in the "same league" with the other commandments engraved on those two tablets of stone. Keep in mind that "Thou shall not take the Name of the L-rd thy G-d in vain" does not just mean one should not swear falsely (which perhaps could be considered a fundamental basis of society). "Thou shall not take the Name of G-d in vain" means that one is not allowed to even swear something which is obviously true. (I swear that this table is a table, etc.) Such an oath does not affect society. It appears to be a totally "victimless crime." Why is it so fundamental?

I saw in a sefer that the importance of this commandment of "Lo Sisa..." is that it teaches us how important speech is. This is why it is in the Asserres HaDibros. Speech separates us from animals. The Targum translates the phrase "a living being" (nefesh chaya) in the pasuke "And He blew into his nostrils the soul of life and man became a living being" [Bereishis 2:7] as "a speaking being", indicating that speech is the essence of the difference between man and animal. Speech is one of the greatest gifts that the Almighty gave human beings. Therefore, the Torah says, "be careful with

your speech". To swear that a table is a table or that a cow is a cow is wasting and abusing the gift of speech. This gift is so vital and fundamental to Yiddishkeit that its abuse is prohibited in the Asserres HaDibros.

The other remaining "problematic" commandment is Lo Sachmod [Thou shall not covet]. We are prohibited from coveting our neighbor's house or our neighbor's wife. Jealousy is bad and not being jealous is a nice quality, but can it rank up there with "I am the L-rd your G-d" and with Shabbos and with "Thou shall not commit murder"?

Even more wondrous, Rav Chaim Vital writes about the tenth commandment (Lo Sachmod) that it is the climax of the Asserres HaDibros and is "equal in weight to all the others put together". What is so fundamental about this commandment not to be jealous of our neighbor's possessions?

The Rekanti writes that one who covets does not believe in G-d. If we really believe in G-d then we believe that the wife that I have, the car that I have, the position that I have, and everything that I have is because the Master of the World wants me to have it. It is Personal Divine Providence (Hashgocha Pratis) that I have what I have and that I do not have what I do not have. Becoming emotionally worked up because I do not have what my neighbor has indicates a deficiency in my Emunah [Faith in G-d]. It is a deficiency in our fundamental belief as Jews - namely in Hashgocha Pratis: The Almighty knows what we have and deems it that this is what we have, and controls every aspect of our lives. This is a fundamental Jewish belief.

The Gemara states at the end of Tractate Makkos [24a] that subsequent prophets came and reduced the essence of Jewish belief to ever-simpler formulations. The final line is that "Chabakuk came and reduced it to a single principle, as it is written: 'and the righteous will live by their belief' [Chabakuk 2:4]". At the end of the day, it is all about Emunah and that is what Lo Sachmod comes to reinforce.

Therefore, "Lo Sisa Es Shem Hashem Elokecha L'Shav," which speaks to the importance of the gift of speech and "Lo Sachmod beis re'yecha," which underlies one's belief in the control the Almighty exerts on this world and on a person's life - are fundamentals of Jewish belief that indeed belong in the Asserres HaDibros.

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 Yisro are provided below:

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