

THE POWER OF PRAYER / A BIRD CREATED B'TZELEM ELOKIM?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #1042 – Dressing Up As A Woman For Chasunah Dancing And On Purim? Good Shabbos!

A Resolution To The Conflict Between The Ben Sorer's Execution And Yishmael's Salvation

This week's parsha contains one of Torah's most perplexing set of laws – the wayward and rebellious son. The ben sorer u'moreh is a young man who has begun on a path of life that Chazal say will eventually lead to destruction and bloodshed. The Talmud says, "Let him die 'while innocent' rather than die after having committed a capital offense." The Gemara [Sanhedrin 68b] categorizes the situation with the famous words "ben sorer u'moreh needon al shem sofo": The wayward and rebellious son is judged based on what would be his end."

Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi asks that this implementation of justice based on projection of future evil deeds appears to contradict a principle the Torah introduces in Parshas Vayera. When the young Yishmael was dying of thirst in the desert and crying out in the throes of death, an Angel appeared before his mother, Hagar, and told her "Do not fear, for Elokim has heard the voice of the lad b'asher hu sham [in his present state]." [Bereishis 21:17]. Our Sages say that the Ministering Angels came before the Almighty at that time and protested, "Master of the Universe, this person, whose descendants are destined to kill your children by forcing them to die of thirst – for him you miraculously provide a well to save his life?"

Imagine if Yishmael had not survived this episode – imagine what this world would be like. Imagine the absence of the suffering that not only Klal Yisrael currently suffers but the absence of the suffering the entire world currently suffers because of the descendants of Yishmael! We would have all been spared from so many tzores if the well in the desert had not miraculously appeared to save Hagar's young son! The world endures so much suffering because of the descendants of Yishmael. This is the complaint of the Ministering Angels to the Almighty: The one whose children are going to kill your children – you miraculously save with a well?

The Sages then record the Almighty's response to the angels: "Currently, is he guilty or innocent?" The angels conceded that at this point in his life the young Yishmael was innocent. The Almighty told them "I judge people only based on their current status" (Einee dan es ha'adaom elah b'sha'ato).

Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi thus presents a glaring contradiction: On the one hand, by the wayward son, we kill him based on future actions and, on the other hand, by Yishmael, G-d only judges a person based on present status!

The sefer Bei Chiyah suggests an answer to the Mizrachi's question. The Gemara [Rosh Hashana 18a] speaks of two people who had the same disease and also of two people who are accused of the same crime and sentenced to the same capital punishment. Despite these pairs of individuals facing virtually identical situations, it often turns out that one of the sick people is cured and one dies; one of those sentenced to death is executed and one escapes punishment. The Talmud asks: how is it that one lives and one dies in such a situation? The answer is "This one prayed and was answered; this one prayed and was not answered. This one prayed a 'complete prayer' (Tefilla shleima) and the other one prayed 'a prayer that was not complete.'"

This answer should resonate with us as we enter the weeks leading up to Rosh HaShannah. The answer is that one davened with complete kavanah, with his whole heart and soul and therefore he was saved. The man who had the same illness or the same sentence but did not recover or escape his punishment did not pray 'a complete prayer'.

We might ask – how does the Gemara know this? How does the Gemara know that the dichotomy of outcomes was due to a qualitative difference in their respective prayers? Maybe one person lived because he had many merits and maybe this other person died because he had many debits in his Heavenly ledger. How can the Gemara so confidently attribute this dichotomy of fates to Tefilla [prayer]? The Bei Chiyah says we see from this Gemara that if a person prays a 'complete prayer,' he has the capacity to survive no matter what "credits" or "debits" he may or may not have based on past actions. A person's fate is entirely dependent on the power of prayer. Everything else is irrelevant. The person who lived may have had terrible sins on his record, but the power of prayer trumped any of those negatives. On the other hand, a person who may have had merits, but did not invoke his power of prayer at the time of crises may not survive.

This can help us resolve the contradiction. The reason Yishmael was saved was not only because he was judged based on his current status. The rule of thumb is – as we see from ben sorer u'moreh – that a person may be executed based on future actions. However, by Yishmael another factor came into play: That factor was vaYishma es kol ha'naar [and He heard the voice of the lad]. Yishmael davened. Therefore, in spite of the fact that he was destined to kill Klal Yisrael and should have been "judged based on his end," his power of prayer trumped everything else.

As we have mentioned in the past, this is something that the Bnei Yishmael do in fact have going for them. They are not idol worshippers and they are very serious about their tefilos. They pray five

times a day. That is what saved them then and that – I guess – is what gives them the power to endure now as well. The only way we can trump them is also through the power of our prayers. May the Almighty hear our cries and finally bring this exile of Yishmael and Edom to an end.

A Bird Created B'Tzelem Elokim?

The parsha also contains the mitzvah of sheeluach ha'ken. The Torah says that if a person finds a mother bird sitting on her eggs, "you shall surely send away the mother and the offspring you shall take for yourself." [Devorim 22:7] We may not remove the eggs or the chicks in the presence of the mother bird.

There is a famous interpretation offered by the Netziv and others: Why is it that the Torah gave us this mitzvah forbidding us to take the young birds and the mother simultaneously? Think about it. Have you ever tried to catch a bird? It is virtually impossible. When I was a little boy, they used to tell me that the way to catch a bird is to put salt on its tail. Of course, being a small innocent child – it never worked. Why did it never work? Because you can never put salt on the tail of a bird!

So why are we ever confronted with the situation where it is necessary to send away the mother bird? Why isn't the mother bird flying away like every other bird naturally does when approached by a human being? The answer is, says the Netziv, that because of the motherly instincts of compassion that the bird has for its brood, it sticks around. The mother bird defies her natural instinct to flee because of her stronger natural instinct to protect her offspring!

Taking the mother would be taking unfair advantage of her maternal instincts to sacrifice her own well-being for the sake of her brood. The Torah does not want to allow this. The mother is doing what mothers should do. She is exhibiting compassion and we are not allowed to take advantage of this.

The Avnei Nezer presents a similar idea to that of the Netziv, but with one difference, which is a tremendous insight. Until the time of Noach, mankind was forbidden to eat meat. Only after the Flood did meat become permitted to human beings [Bereishis 9:3]. The Flood triggered a tremendous change in man's diet – animals were now permitted for consumption. The Torah sums up the newly decreed permission to consume meat with the explanation: "...for in the image of G-d He made man" [Bereishis 9:6]. The simple reading of the pesukim [verses] is that these last words come to explain the first part of pasuk 9 ("Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed..."). In other words, the Torah is explaining why we may not kill another human being. However, the sefer Agra v'Kallah says it is saying more than that. He interprets: Do you know why we are allowed to kill animals for our benefit? It is because we (mankind) are the apex of creation. "For man was created in the image of G-d" does not only explain why homicide is prohibited; it also

explains why we are allowed to kill animals for our food. It is because man is on top of the pyramid creation and animals are inferior to him.

Until the Flood (when "all flesh corrupted their ways upon the earth" [Bereishis 6:12]) animals were on a higher spiritual level and therefore they could not be killed for consumption. After the sins that triggered the Flood, animals descended from their elevated spiritual status.

What does it mean that a person is created "in the image of G-d" (b'tselem Elokim)? The Abarbanel writes that the word tselem comes from the word tsel [shadow]. We all know the nature of a shadow: When a person raises his arm, his shadow also raises its arm; when a person turns his head; his shadow turns its head. B'tselem Elokim asa es ha'adam means that we were created with the capacity to mimic the Master of the Universe. How does one mimic the Master of the Universe? Just as He is compassionate, so too we need to be compassionate; just as He is generous, so too we need to be generous; just as He buries the dead, so too we need to bury the dead; just as He clothes the naked, so too we need to cloth the naked. We who are created b'Tselem Elokim have the capacity to imitate the Attributes of the Almighty.

The Avnei Nezer says the following beautiful idea: When the mother bird does not fly away, she is not merely exhibiting compassion for her brood by protecting them. At that very moment that the bird exhibits the attribute of compassion, the bird is not just a bird any more – it is a higher form of creature. The bird is being a me'rachem [exhibiting compassion]. In a miniscule sense, it is now imitating and mimicking the Master of the Universe. The Avnei Nezer concludes: We are forbidden to take such a bird; we are forbidden to kill it. At that moment, it is not the same type of bird as we find in the market place. The whole heter [dispensation] to take birds, slaughter them, and eat them is because MAN was created in the "image of G-d" (but not animals or birds!). However, at this particular moment in time, when the bird is in fact acting with compassion, that bird becomes elevated. Therefore, "Thou shalt not take the mother; send away first the mother and then take the offspring." [Devorim 22:7]

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