

THE LESSON OF THE HOUSE OF AVTINAS: WHAT IS DESTINED TO BE YOURS WILL ALWAYS REMAIN YOURS

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 #937 – The Obligation To Learn T'Nach. Good Shabbos!

The Lesson of the House of Avtinas

Parshas Ki Sisa includes the mitzvah of *Ketores* [Incense]. The *Ketores* was offered twice a day on the Golden *Mizbayach* [Altar] situated in front of the *Kodesh Hakadashim* [Holy of Holies]. *Klal Yisrael* enjoyed tremendous benefits by virtue of offering the *Ketores*. The *Ketores* was made up of various plants, spices, and herbs which provided a pleasant aroma to the *Beis HaMikdash*.

The Mishna [Yoma 3:11] lists certain families in less than a positive light (*v'elu l'gnai*), one of which was The House of Avtinas (*Beis Avtinas*). The House of Avtinas was in charge of producing the *Ketores* for the *Beis HaMikdash*. However, they refused to teach anyone else the "trade secrets" involved in producing the *Ketores*. For this reason the Mishna mentions them (together with certain other families and individuals) in a negative fashion

The Chofetz Chaim writes, based on this Mishna (in his sefer Shmiras HaLashon): If *Beis Din* [the Jewish Court] instructs someone to do something and he ignores their instruction, it is permissible to speak negatively about him (e.g. -- that he has disobeyed *Beis Din*). He cites the Mishna as precedent for the fact that a person may record someone's evil practices in writing in the annals of the city even if that will preserve the information for all eternity.

The Gemara on that Mishna [Yoma 38a] says that the *Chachomim* tried to undercut the House of Avtinas. They brought in specialists from Alexandria in Egypt who were expert in mixing spices and herbs. They wanted to put the House of Avtinas out of business for refusing to comply with the order of the court to share their recipe for the *Ketores*. (Instead of "outsourcing" the job of making the *Ketores*, the *Chachomim* tried to "insource" the operation by bringing in competing artisans.)

The Gemara says that the Alexandrian experts were able to make a mixture that duplicated the aroma of the *Ketores*, however they did not know how to make the smoke of the burning incense rise up in a straight column as was the tradition of the *Ketores* of the House of Avtinas. The smoke

from the Alexandrian *Ketores* dissipated and filled the entire *Heichal* of the *Beis HaMikdash*, rather than rising up straight as a rod.

The *Chachomim* went back to the House of Avtinas and again demanded that they reveal the secret ingredient that made the smoke go up straight. Again, they refused and kept the secret to themselves. The Gemara says the *Chachomim* concluded, "Whatever the Holy Blessed Be He has created, He has created for His Honor as it is written 'All the actions of Hashem are for Him' [Mishlei 16:4]" [Yoma 38a].

Rabbeinu Chananel interprets "G-d has taken action by giving extra wisdom to this one more than to this one for His sake so that His work will be accomplished by the one He wants to accomplish it." G-d gave the House of Avtinas the secret of how to do this and we can infer that He wants them to do it and no one else. Sometimes G-d gives individuals certain knowledge or talents to accomplish something and this is because He wants specifically them to be able to accomplish the task.

The *Chachomim* had no choice but to rehire the Family of Avtinas to be in charge of the *Ketores* manufacture. The Talmud relates that the *Chachomim* sent them a message (wanting to tell them that they had their job back), but they refused to come. The Gemara says the *Chachomim* had to double their salary before they would take their job back. Originally, they were paid 12 maneh a day and now they received 24 maneh a day.

When they finally came back (at the higher wage), the *Chachomim* asked them, "Why did you refuse to teach others how to do this?" They answered "We have a tradition that the *Beis HaMikdash* is destined to be destroyed. We are afraid that this information will fall into the hands of inappropriate people who will make such a *Ketores* to serve idols. That is why we keep the secret in our family."

The Maharsha writes that the *Chachomim* did not believe this answer. They felt that the only reason the family was refusing to reveal their knowledge was to keep the monopoly on the *Ketores*. They had a cartel that they did not want to lose. For this reason, the Mishna listed them among the families who deserved condemnation and based on this the Chofetz Chaim wrote that we are allowed to publicly condemn people who disobey *Beis Din* -- even if they have an excuse for doing so -- if *Beis Din* feels their excuse is self-serving and insincere.

The Gemara then discusses other details about the House of Avtinas. At the end of the discussion, the Gemara relates the following: "From here (this incident with *Beis Avtinas*) Ben Azai said '*B'Shimcha Yikra-oocha u'bimkomcha yosheevucha*' (by your name you will be called and in your place you will be seated)". Rashi interprets this to mean: A person should not worry and say "so and so is taking away my livelihood" for regardless you will be called back and returned to your proper station." In other words, everyone will ultimately receive the income and the property to which he is entitled. No one can take away his neighbor's livelihood (against the Will of G-d).

Rav Pam writes in his sefer that we see a very important thing from this Gemara. If based on Jewish law, a person may open up a competing business [without infringing on the *halachos* of 'hasagas

gevul' (encroaching on the territory of one's neighbor)] then the original business owner does not need to worry that the second business will negatively affect his own. A person's income is predetermined from the beginning of one year until the beginning of the next year. What is yours and what is his is his.

Just like the *Chachomim* could not break the monopoly of *Beis Avtinas* because they were destined from Heaven to have that job and that income, so too no one's livelihood can be affected adversely as long as the other competitor is acting within the guidelines of Jewish law. (If he is acting outside the parameters of Jewish law, then there is legal recourse through the Jewish Court system.)

Several months ago, there was a person in town who owned a certain type of business. He heard that there was a competing type of business that was going to open. He and another owner of a similar business had a meeting. He suggested that they should collude to drop the prices on a certain product that this other business was going to feature, such that the new fellow would not even be able to get his new venture off the ground. The plan was to put him out of business before he even started.

The person who was contemplating this scheme asked me whether he should do this and I told him that he should not. If the newcomer *al pi din* [according to Jewish law] has a right to open a new business (and he did have that right) then you need to realize that whatever is going to be yours is yours and whatever is going to be his is going to be his. This is what we see from the Gemara of *Beis Avtinas*.

Kol Poel Hashem L'Ma'aneyhu [all of Hashem's actions are for His sake]. The Almighty wanted the House of Avtinas to have the exclusive right to make the *Ketores*, for whatever the reason might be, so nothing is going to affect that. Not only that, but they wound up charging double -- which the Gemara did not like -- but nevertheless Ben Azzai is telling us that no one can take away his neighbor's livelihood against the Will of G-d.

In the course of our lives, this comes up so often. "If this person does this, it will put me out of business..." Do not worry! "*B'Shimcha Yikra-oocha u'bimkomcha yosheevucha*." What is destined to be yours will always remain yours.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Ki Sisa is provided below:

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