

They approached him and said, “Pens for the flock shall we build here for our livestock and cities for our small children”... Moshe said to them... “Build for yourselves cities for your small children and pens for your flock.” (32:16,20,24)

The *halachah* regarding reciting a *brachah* over two fruits that are not from the seven species of fruit with which *Eretz Yisrael* is blessed is clear: One first makes the *brachah* upon the fruit which one likes more. What if he likes one more, but the second fruit has more therapeutic value, more vitamins in it? *Horav Avigdor HaLevi Nebentzhal, Shlita*, contends that the fruit which is qualitatively better for the person is the one that takes precedence in regard to the blessing. The source for this *halachah* can be derived from Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s dialogue with *Bnei Gad* and *Bnei Reuven*. They said that prior to leaving for the battle for *Eretz Yisrael*, they first wanted to provide for their sheep and their children. In his response, Moshe *Rabbeinu* emphasized their responsibility to their children as a priority before their obligation to their sheep. *Parnassah*, earning a livelihood, is certainly important, but it does not take precedence over one’s own children.

Furthermore, as *Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, z.l.*, writes in his *Michtav m’Eliyahu*, the concern they had regarding their sheep was not a simple monetary one. No! Their *Avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty, their *Kiddush Shem Shomayim*, sanctification of the Name of Heaven, was through the medium of their sheep. They were willing to forego living in *Eretz Yisrael* because they felt that it was difficult to raise sheep in *Eretz Yisrael*. Sheep need to graze. In a populated area such as *Eretz Yisrael*, it was inevitable that they would graze in areas that did not belong to them. In *Ever HaYarden*, TransJordan, there were large tracts of grazing land that were ownerless, which would provide sustenance for their sheep.

In other words, raising both sheep and children was a critical component of their service to Hashem. Yet, there are **priorities**; there is an *ikar*, essential, and a *tafel*, secondary priority. One must give precedence to the *ikar* over the *tafel* – always. This was their mistake.

Rav Nebentzhal cites a number of situations in our daily life in which we err and focus on the *tafel* and ignore the *ikar*. First, there is the distinction between *kiyum ha’mitzvah*, the basic fulfillment of a *mitzvah*, and *hiddur mitzvah*, beautification, enhancement of the *mitzvah*. Regrettably, people go to great lengths to satisfy the precepts governing *hiddur mitzvah*, while simultaneously giving secondary significance to the actual fulfillment of the *mitzvah*. He cites a simple – but common – example. One purchases a very expensive, beautiful, filigreed silver *Chanukah menorah*. Great *hiddur*, wonderful devotion to the *mitzvah*. When he lights wax candles, however, instead of using pure olive oil, he indicates that the *hiddur* takes precedence over the essential *mitzvah* which emphasizes the importance of using olive oil, even though it might “tarnish” the beautiful silver *menorah*.

It happens all of the time. We build beautiful *shuls*, traveling far and wide to get ideas to enhance the architectural and esthetic beauty of the edifice. Do we show the same concern, however, in regard to the beauty of the *davening*, service, or the Torah classes that form the foundation of the *shul*? People are more concerned and become petty with the price of hiring a competent rabbi/teacher to give Torah classes, but think nothing about the price of flowers for *Shavuos*. The list goes on.

There are circumstances when a person's dedication to a *mitzvah* should inspire him to be *mevater*, forego, the *mitzvah*. Rav Nebentzhal writes that he witnessed an episode that demonstrated how far one can go in pursuit of a *mitzvah* and simultaneously disregard the spirit of the *mitzvah*, demonstrating a lack of concern for another Jew's feelings. He was in a *shul* when an individual was called up to the Torah for *Maftir*. Suddenly, one of the members declared that he is a *chiyuv*, had an obligation to fulfill, and since he had *yahrzeit*, he should receive *Maftir*. The fact that someone else had already been called up for the *aliyah* did not concern him at all. He could care less; he had *yahrzeit*. He did not mind embarrassing the person that was originally called up to the Torah or humiliating the Torah as it "waited" for the person to recite the blessing. He had *yahrzeit*! He forgot that the reason he had an obligation to receive an *aliyah* was that it serves as a *nachas ruach*, source of spiritual satisfaction, for the soul of the departed. What he seemed to ignore is that by hurting another Jew he certainly was not providing any satisfaction for the soul of the departed.

It is related that *Horav Yisrael Salanter, z.l.*, once came to *shul* on the day of his mother's *yahrzeit* prepared to lead the services in her memory - according to the *Halachah*. He noticed that there was another Jew in *shul* who had *yahrzeit* for his daughter. While *Halachah* clearly states that a *yahrzeit* for a mother precedes that of a child, Rav Yisrael gave the *amud*, relinquished his right, and told the other individual to lead the services. He saw that the unfortunate Jew was anguished over not being able to lead the services in memory of his dear daughter, so he gave him the *amud*. He later explained, "On the day of my mother's *yahrzeit*, I will perform a *chesed*, act of kindness, to another Jew. This will give my mother greater satisfaction." This is a benchmark of a *gadol*, Torah giant. He understood the spirit of the *mitzvah*, its purpose and its goal, and consequently realized that making a Jew feel good was the greatest source of satisfaction for his mother's

This idea applies equally to Torah study. We invest so much of our time and energy in learning Torah. A person is measured by his erudition and scholastic ability. True, Torah study and erudition is all-important, but what about *Yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven? If one gathers together a large amount of grain and forgets to add a small preservative to retard spoilage – it will all go to waste. To focus on the academic and disregard *Yiraas Shomayim* is to overlook the *raison d'être* of Torah study, as well as the ingredient that will ensure that the Torah he studies will be internalized and be a part of him – forever.