

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The Hebrew Bible is the most truly revolutionary document read by humanity, expressing truths of social conduct which even so-called enlightened society has not yet begun to live by. This week's Biblical portion commands, "You shall not exploit nor harass the stranger, because you were strangers in (a foreign) land (Exodus 22:20)", and again, " You shall not harass the stranger; you know the soul of a stranger... because you were strangers in the Land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). The Bible knows of two types of strangers or gerim: the righteous stranger, or ger tzedek, who may emanate from a foreign and even idolatrous nation but who has decided to become a "Jew by choice" and link his/her life and destiny to the people, religion and nation of Israel; and a stranger who may live among us in the land of Israel (if he/she so chooses) even though he/she has not converted, since he/she lives by the basic laws of social morality (not murdering, not stealing, not committing rape or adultery, not blaspheming G-d, not indulging in the orgies of idolatry, not eating the limb of blood of a live animal, living within a legal structure of just courts of law) In both cases the ger is a stranger, an other - and he/she must be positively loved and embraced rather than negatively reviled and scorned.

Our Bible delineates two types of unseemly conduct towards the stranger: ona'ah or exploitation in business (as in hiring foreign workers for a fraction of what an Israelite would receive in wages) and lehitzah, or harassment with words, reminding him/her of his/her foreign forbears and background (B.T. Bava Metzia 58b). While both are forbidden, verbal harassment is considered to be the more stringent of the two crimes since restitution can be made for financial exploitation whereas a hateful word can never be recalled.

The most fascinating question is precisely why our Bible expresses such poignant sensitivity towards how we treat the other, the different one, the stranger; remarkably, our Bible warns us in no less than thirty-three (or forty six) places against harassing the ger! (B.T. Bava Metzia 49b).

The Ramban (in his 12-13th century commentary to exodus 22:20) explains that G-d, the loving and compassionate creator of life, is especially solicitous and protective of the "weaker vessels," the

widow, the orphan, the indigent, the stranger. From the point of view of the Divine G-d of loving-kindness and compassion, the test of any society, and of every human being within a particular society, is how it treats its weaker vessels - and those who act towards them in high-handed fashion will have to answer for their insensitivity before G-d Himself.

Perhaps this idea goes even deeper. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin chapter 4) praises the Almighty precisely because of the differences, the otherness, within His creation of the human being: "Behold the uniqueness of G-d, the King of all kings, when He compared to a mortal king of flesh and blood. The mortal king takes one mold and mints from it many coins, each precisely and exactly a replica of the original as well as of each other. The Almighty blessed be He, however, created the mold of Adam, the first human being, and derived from him numerous other human beings, not one of them looking like any other, not one of them thinking like any other..."

It is this very differences between individuals,- in their facial features, bodily builds, thumb imprints, opinions, ideologies and outlooks - which expresses the true glory of the Creator; it is the grand unity which emerges from the sum total of all of these separate and disparate elements which will ultimately express true wholeness peace and redemption. Uniformity, totalitarian enslavement and brainwashing, are the Babelian hobgoblin of little minds, fearful of being challenged by the new and the different; Unity which emerges from an honest synthesis of respected and diverse attitudes and perspectives ultimately produces a free and open pluralism in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It goes without saying that the stranger can serve as a most welcome addition, even as a necessary yeast-like ingredient, for any societal mixture, as Abraham apparently did for the Hittites ("I am a stranger and a resident among you"), as Moses (Prince of Egypt) did for the Hebrews, as Ruth did for First Commonwealth Judea. Excluding the stranger often means excluding societal growth and development.

The Bible itself, however, provides the most fundamental rationale for our sensitive consideration towards the stranger: "You shall not oppress (harass) the stranger, because you Know the soul of the stranger-since you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). We the Jewish people, a nation which

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twice suffered exile and lived for more than 2000 years as strangers in an alien host country, know to the depths of our historic soul what it feels like to be suspected, envied, feared, persecuted and delegitimized only because we were different. We the Israelites symbolize the ultimate stranger-and our collective experience must teach us not to do to others the kind of persecution which was done to us. We must teach the world to love the stranger.

And indeed, are we not-all of us humans-strangers in an alien universe? Do we not require the close embrace of all of humanity together to help protect us mortal, flesh and blood creatures, against a new ice-age brought about by global warming, tsunamis and earthquakes which wreak havoc upon our societies, against a nuclear disaster which one madman threatens to unleash? And does not the Almighty G-d Himself feel like a stranger, as it were, in His world of free choice in which so much evil is wrought? Does not our Bible have G-d command the Israelites to "make for Him a Sanctuary so that He may (finally) dwell in our midst" comfortably, and does not our mystical tradition teach that "the Divine Presence is in exile"? If Rav Nahman of Bratzlav can teach that in a world not yet redeemed, "Who is a whole individual? Only one with a broken heart," may we not also teach that in a world not yet redeemed, "Who is at home? Only one who feels himself to be in exile"! To love the stranger means to love G-d; to love the stranger means to love yourself, because, after all, in the final analysis, each of us is other, different, a stranger, vis a vis everyone else. © 2007 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

If a Jewish servant/worker wants to stay with his master/boss after six years, a hole is bored through his right ear (Shemos 21:6). Rashi tells us why the ear was chosen for this process: "This ear, which heard [G-d command] 'do not steal' on Mt. Sinai, [yet] he went and stole, should be bored. And if he sold himself (to be a servant worker, rather than being sold by the courts because he couldn't pay back the value of what he stole), the ear that heard [G-d say] 'for the Children of Israel are my servants' (and not servants of servants)

on Mt Sinai, [yet] he went and got himself a [different] master, should be bored."

Although it can be said that "do not steal" was heard on Mt. Sinai (with "stealing" including all forms of theft, and the entire nation hearing all 10 "commandments" at once, even if the last 8 had to be repeated by Moshe in order to be understood), the verse that says that only G-d should be their master was not part of the public revelation. Rather, G-d told it to Moshe, who repeated it to the nation. How can Rashi (or the Talmud, in Kiddushin 22b, upon which Rashi is based) say that the ear heard it directly from G-d at Sinai if it didn't?

Additionally, these acts of disobedience occurred before the servitude ever started, as he either sold himself willfully for the agreed-upon price to first become a servant, or he was initially sold because he stole something and couldn't pay it back. Why does the ear only get bored after six years, when he extends his servitude, rather than when it first started? And why are these discretions the only two that result in the ear getting bored? Didn't it hear all the commandments (9 others directly from G-d at Sinai)? Also, even if the servitude began because of theft, since he willfully extended the servitude, why does Rashi need to give separate correlations for each of the disobediences? Shouldn't having accepted a master other than G-d, which both are guilty of, be enough to explain why the ear was chosen to be perforated?

Finally, if there is a problem with becoming a servant (or extending the servitude), how is it allowed at all? Why did G-d create a mechanism through which one can become a servant (or extend it) if He doesn't want it?

The commentators discuss these questions, and by integrating several of the answers suggested (slightly adjusting some of them), we may be able to explain them all.

The verse that says that G-d is our (only) master (Vayikra 25:55) was not said to the would-be servant to dissuade him from becoming one, but to the master, to persuade him to treat his servant properly and to let him end his servitude earlier (see 25:53-54). It's not a prohibition against becoming a servant/worker. Only someone who was in dire straits would willingly sell himself as a servant, and only someone without any money to repay what was stolen was sold as one. In such circumstances, G-d allowed the sale to occur. After experiencing this for 6 years, the servant/worker has two choices; continue having guaranteed food to eat and a roof over his head, or take the opportunity to start from scratch (including some start-up money given to him after the six years, i.e. the "ha'anaka") and once again be independent. Each has advantages and disadvantages, and each would be a better choice for some but not for others. G-d therefore allowed each servant to choose which is

better for him. Nevertheless, there is one additional factor that G-d wanted the servant to take into account—his ability to grow spiritually.

One could argue that being a servant would lend itself to becoming more religious, with the down-trodden always looking towards heaven for help. But this is not the way G-d views things, as He prefers that we are as free from any other responsibilities as can be, in order to focus on real spiritual growth (not just spiritual yearning). This is not apparent from the admonition against mistreating a servant, but from a combination of two things. The first of the "10 commandments," where G-d identified Himself as the One whom took us out of Egypt, adds "from the house of servitude" (Shemos 20:2). An integral part of our ability to fully serve G-d is to not have any other masters. When we hear that G-d tells the other master (which he allowed because of the dire circumstances) to remember that the Children of Israel are really His servants, and no one else's, we now know what G-d meant in that earlier commandment, which we heard directly from G-d at Sinai: ideally we should be free from other servitude in order to focus on Him. Either commandment alone would not send this message, but recalling what we heard from G-d directly informs us that His message to the human master is also a message to the servant that if possible, he should avoid, or end, his servitude.

The wording of the Talmud, "the ear that heard my voice at Mt. Sinai, at the time that I said, 'the Children of Israel are my servants and not servants to servants,'" implies that there were two separate instances ("hearing my voice at Sinai" and "the time I said they are my servants"). Otherwise, the wording should be more straightforward ("the ear that heard me say at Sinai that they are my servants"). Similarly, the wording of the Tosefta (Bava Kama 7:2), "the ear that heard from (not at) Mt Sinai," implying that it wasn't heard directly at Sinai but understood from what was heard there. Based on what was heard directly from G-d at Sinai, in conjunction with what the human master was commanded, it is apparent that G-d prefers that we weren't servant/workers. A hole is therefore made through the ear of the person that heard directly from G-d, yet made it tougher to get close to Him by becoming a servant, even if he is allowed to make that choice.

The original sale was necessary because of the circumstances, but the extension of the servitude was a choice made, and so that is when the ear is perforated. The thief was sold to pay back what he owes. However, by choosing to extend the servitude he indicated that it wasn't such a hardship, and agreed to the same conditions even after his debt was paid. Because the first 6 years can no longer be considered compensation for his theft (even if nothing is owed anymore), the sin of stealing was never fully erased. Even though he also

purposely acquired another master, by including the sin of stealing as the reason for making a hole through the ear, Rashi is alluding to this issue as well. And because ending the servitude after 6 years would indicate that they were payment for his debt, it is only after asking to stay on that the ear is perforated.

Other commandments have their own consequences (whether in this world or the next), and so the ear is not perforated when any of them are violated. The ear isn't perforated as a punishment for wrongdoing, but to send a message that is unique to these two circumstances. One is allowed to become a servant/worker, but the hole is made in the right ear as a reminder that it is not ideal. The thief has technically repaid his debt, but because it wasn't paid back with a currency of any value to this particular thief, he needs an extra reminder about the severity of stealing.

Why was the ear chosen to be perforated? Because it heard G-d say that we shouldn't steal and/or because based on what it heard G-d say, should understand that He prefers that we not become distracted from getting closer to Him by becoming beholden to other masters. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Judaism is primarily a society of laws and not of men. It is possibly the first society in human history that stressed the primacy of law over the rule of humans, no matter how righteous and benign that rule may be. In Jewish life, law reigns supreme. Judaism is a religion of halacha. Within that field of halacha there is room for opinion and innovation, but there is no possibility to leave that field and decide matters on the basis of personal whim or set agenda.

The parsha of Mishpatim follows immediately after the parsha that described the giving of the Torah to Israel on Mount Sinai. This juxtaposition is to reinforce this idea of the supremacy of the law in a Torah society. There is no absolute freedom for leaders and rulers to do as they wish, to institute norms that are contrary to the laws and values of the Torah itself. The law of the Torah reigns supreme in Jewish life. There may unfortunately be lawbreakers in Jewish life, just as there are in all societies. But that in no way diminishes the supremacy of Torah law and its discipline on Jews.

It has been this adherence to law instead of to charismatic and even scholastic human leaders, over the ages, that has kept Judaism rooted in its eternal values and able to weather all of the changing vagaries of fashion and current "political correctness." The halacha in all of its divinity from Sinai is the framework for all Jewish existence and survival. Stepping outside the framework of halacha and attempting thereby to create new norms in Jewish life has always led to disappointment and eventually disappearance and disaster, both on a personal and national level.

Mishpatim also teaches us, through the wide variety of subject matter covered in the parsha, that there is no area of human life or society that is not governed and shaped by halacha. Judaism is not restricted to the confines of the synagogue or the study hall. It is rather all-pervasive, touching on all aspects of the human condition, physical moral, societal and spiritual. There is no place in life that is empty of Torah, its laws, wisdom and guidance. Its presence therefore in every nook and cranny of our lives is itself what enables us to enjoy and live a truly "Jewish life."

The Torah guarantees our right to privacy and our absolute freedom of choice at any given moment and circumstance in our life. Yet the realization that Torah has something to say about this particular circumstance and situation facing us now, itself serves as a background enabling us to make wise and holy choices. G-d commanded us to "choose life." In that statement is the implicit instruction to follow halacha and to be truly a people of the book- the law book that halacha represents.

In our Torah blessing we state that the Torah plants within us eternal life. Anyone who follows its precepts and lives a life in accordance with Torah values and practices will certainly sense that serene sense of eternity present in halacha and Jewish law. Law brings stability to Sinai. Halacha-Jewish law-brings holiness on its wings. © 2007 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Jewish law is commonly broken down into two groups, laws which refer to the link between humanity and G-d (bein adam la-Makom) and laws which govern interpersonal relationships (bein adam le-havero).

For this reason, many traditional commentators have suggested that the Ten Declarations (Aseret Ha-dibrot) can split vertically. The first five statements are associated with our commitment to G-d, the second five with our commitment to our fellow human beings.

The tradition of this demarcation raises concerns for it seems that the laws connecting human beings with G-d pre-dominate. According to this line of reasoning, relating to G-d seems to be more important than the way we interact with other people.

Yet, there are several Rabbinic sources that take the opposite approach. For example, the Midrash comments on the verse describing Avraham (Abraham) being visited by G-d after his circumcision. As the famous story in Bereishit (Genesis) tells us, he sees three visitors. Running to greet them, he asks G-d to

wait as he welcomes his guests. (Genesis 18:3) "From here," the Midrash says, "we learn it is more important to attend to guests than to receive the presence of G-d." Concerned that bein adam le-havero would be viewed as less important, this Midrash emphasizes its paramount nature.

So while there are opinions on both sides, there exists a third option. This position claims that there, indeed, exists no demarcation between bein adam la-Makom and bein adam le-havero-each of these categories complement one another.

Bearing in mind that every human being is created in G-d's image (tzelem Elokim), it follows that the way we conduct ourselves towards our fellow person, impacts directly upon G-d. If I bring joy or sorrow to another, I bring joy or sorrow to the tzelem Elokim within that person.

Kli Yakar (Rabbi Ephraim Luntshitz, Poland, 16c.) makes this point in his unique approach which insists that the Aseret Ha-dibrot be split horizontally rather than vertically. For example, "Thou shalt not murder" (Declaration #6) is opposite belief in G-d (Declaration #1), as murdering the other means that the image of G-d, as manifested in the victim, has been obliterated.

The flip side is also true. Jewish ritual, commonly associated with our relationship to G-d, invariably connects us to other humans and in fact is the pathway to Torah ethicism. Proof of this phenomenon is the fact that before prayer, an act associated with the relationship to G-d, there is a tradition to give charity, an act associated with our relationship to fellow humans. Additionally, virtually all our prayers are in the plural to teach that even as we participate in a very personal encounter with the Divine, we must express concern for those in need, and pray not only for ourselves, but for others as well.

Our portion clearly reflects this idea. It states: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your ass may have rest and the son of your handmaid and the stranger shall be refreshed." (Exodus 23:12) Here, the Torah deflects from its prior reasoning for Shabbat presented in the Ten Declarations. The first two times Shabbat is mentioned in the Torah it is associated with recognizing that G-d created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. (Genesis 2:1-3, Exodus 20:8-11) Shabbat seems to be a law that resides solely in the realm of our acknowledgement of the rule of G-d.

But here, in our portion, G-d is not at all associated with Shabbat, His name is not mentioned. In our text, Shabbat teaches us something about human relationships and our responsibility to others. It tells us to rest on Shabbat so that all in your household will rest. In other words, Shabbat is the great equalizer - all people whatever their station, must rest. Here the Torah is displaying the important priority of giving

dignity to all. Extraordinary. Shabbat, which heretofore is only mentioned as describing our relationship to G-d, is here fashioned in terms of interpersonal ethics.

By loving our fellow person, we learn to love G-d; and through loving G-d and doing His ritual, we can achieve love of his fellow human being. From this perspective, the human-G-d and human-human laws do not stand as opposing forces, they stand as perfect complements, leading to an increased ability for us all to help achieve unity between heaven and earth. © 2007 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI ADAM LIEBERMAN

A Life Lesson

In the previous Torah portion, G-d gave the Jews the Ten Commandments. And in this portion, the very next commandment G-d gives the Jewish people is: "If you buy a Jewish bondsman, he shall work for six years; and in the seventh he shall go free..." (Exodus 21:2)

G-d instructs every Jew that if he has a Jewish slave working for him, then after six years he is to be set free. On the surface, it seems like when the seventh year arrives the slave would eagerly, happily, and enthusiastically run from his master's house into his new found freedom. But this just isn't how a slave feels. The reason for this is that the longer a person is under the "rule" of someone or something else, the less belief he has that he can actually make it on his own.

One of the most debilitating aspects of any form of enslavement is that it robs a person of his self-worth and self-confidence. He becomes enslaved physically, emotionally and mentally. But the fact the G-d commands the slave to be set free in the seventh year demonstrates an incredible and powerful seed that G-d plants within all of us. And that is knowing, without question, that we all have the ability to make it on our own without this master.

Whether you realize it or not, each and everyone of us are enslaved to someone or to something. Whether it's continuing to stay in at a job we dislike, in a relationship that's unhealthy, engage in destructive behaviors, or need to watch hours of television in order to escape the thoughts of the day—we all choose to be slaves.

While no one wants to be controlled, this enslavement is far better than we fear what will become of us if we chose to leave. The bottom line is that within all of us is a powerful and driving belief that questions if we really can make it on our own without this master. And although the enslavement is hard, frustrating, and painful, we don't leave because we doubt our ability to make it in un-chartered waters.

But the exact opposite is true. Whatever unhealthy situation controls a part of your life and keeps you from blossoming and becoming great, then also know that you can walk away and make it without this master. And when you do muster the strength to leave and fight the inner voice that questions your ability to succeed, then the battle is 99% won. Because when you commit to being free, you just have to hand the ball over to G-d and He will give you everything you need to make it. © 2007 Rabbi A. Lieberman and aish.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

As we have done in past years for the Torah portion of Mishpatim, we will discuss the contrast between the simple interpretation of the passages and laws that are derived in the Midrash. The passage of the Jewish slave which is at the start of the portion discusses a slave who wants to remain in his master's house and not be set free: "Let him take him to the door or to the doorpost ("mezuzah"), and let the master punch through his ear with an awl, and he will serve him forever" [Shemot 21:6]. The verse seems to imply that a hole can be made in the slave's ear and then either in the door or the doorpost, and that either place is acceptable. But Rashi quotes the Midrash, "You do it on the door, but not on the doorpost" (source: Mechilta, Nezikin, Chapter 2). This is based on a verse, "and you shall take the awl and put it through his ear and the door" [Devarim 15:17], which does not mention the doorpost at all. Thus, the sages take the mention of the "doorpost" to teach that "just as the doorpost is standing, so the door must be standing" (that is, a door must not be used if it has been removed from its proper place).

However, as noted above, the straightforward interpretation of the verse seems to imply that the doorpost may also be used. This is noted by the GRA in his commentary on the Torah. "The simple meaning of the verse would allow the doorpost, but the halacha has overturned the text." (He then adds: "This is true of most of this Torah portion, just as for several other portions. This is the greatness of the Oral Torah, which was given as halacha to Moshe at Mount Sinai, which can transform things like raw material.") In fact, it appears at first glance that the point of the verse in Devarim too is not to deny the possibility of performing the ceremony near the doorpost but rather to note one of the alternatives, that of using a door. If so, the question remains: Why did the sages refuse to accept the simple interpretation of the passage?

Evidently, this halacha is related to another law, the mitzva of mezuzah, and here too the Oral Torah does not accept the simple interpretation of the verse. Twice a day, in Keriyat Shema, we recite the verse, "Tie it as a symbol on your hand, and it will be a

sign between your eyes. And you shall write it on the mezuzot of your house and of your gateways." [Devarim 6:8-9]. Following the sages, we are used to interpreting these verses as referring to Tefillin and to a Mezuzah. However, the Rashbam, in his commentary on Shemot 13:9, writes that "The inner meaning is to imply that you should always have a memory of the matter as if it were written on the hand itself, similar to the verse, 'place me on your heart as a seal' [Shir Hashirim 8:6]." This seems to mean that what is necessary is for the Torah to completely surround a person's being, as if it were on his hands and on the doors of his house (see also Ibn Ezra). Thus, according to the Torah in order to achieve our spiritual goal it is necessary to act out the metaphor, by wearing Tefillin and putting a mezuzah on the doorposts, and the inner feelings will then follow suit with the actions.

This means that the Oral Torah established the sanctity of the mezuzah, as the place where the words of the Torah are written. Because of this, the place of the mezuzah took on a holy status, where it would not be proper to punch a hole in the ear of a slave. The result is that the verse about the slave had to be interpreted differently than its straightforward meaning.

Divine Law and the Law of the Supreme Court

by Rabbi Yechezkel Yaacobson, Head of Yeshivat Hesder, Shaalvim

The fact that the Torah portion of Mishpatim is close to the portion of Yitro might seem to us at first glance to be disappointing. All at once, we fall from the heights of the momentous events of Mount Sinai to the depths of minor disputes between neighbors. At length and in great detail, the Torah discusses all the laws, the claims, the conflicts, and the arguments which can arise between one person and another. Is this what should be discussed at this moment? Isn't it just at this moment that we stood at the foot of Mount Sinai?

The answer to this question can be found in the words of Rashi at the beginning of the Torah portion. "These are the laws that you should place before them? Just as the first laws stemmed from Sinai, so do these laws too." The Torah wants to teach us that "one who wants to be righteous must observe the laws of damages" [Bava Kama 30a]. No man should expect a direct link to the Almighty if he does not have proper contact with those who surround him. The path to the top of Mount Sinai goes through the courtyard of the neighbors. One should not make a mechanical separation between the mitzvot between man and G-d and the mitzvot between man and his fellow man, it is all the same Torah! Just as the first laws stemmed from Sinai, so do these laws too.

In his sermons, the RAN adds that the justice system is not "a social and political institution" but is rather an intrinsic part of Yisrael's service of the Almighty; it is an expression of the desire for Divine

justice. And this brings us to the deep chasm between Torah law and the law of the Supreme Court. In Israel, the courts see the law itself as having utmost importance, while the Torah sees the laws as an inseparable part of the sanctity of Yisrael, since after all we are "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" [Shemot 19:6]. Thus, in Torah law it is not man that is at the center, it is the Almighty, and rather than emphasizing individual rights we are involved in man's obligations in this world. The source of financial laws is Sinai, and their purpose is to cause Yisrael to be closer to their Father in Heaven. This approach is the direct opposite of the position of the priests of democracy who serve in the halls of justice, for they see the law itself as an absolute value. It therefore comes as no surprise that over and over again they make decisions which oppose not only the sanctity of the nation of Yisrael but also our very right to exist in our land.

Let us continue to pray from the depths of our hearts: "Return our judges as they were in ancient times... and let grief and sorrow be removed from us."

RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

In this week's parsha, the Jewish people make the penultimate statement of their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness: Na'aseh v'nishma—"Whatever G-d has spoken, we will do and we will hear" (Exodus 24:7).

According to the Talmud, the Jewish people received three rewards for preceding the word "na'aseh" (we will do) to the word "nishma" (we will hear). First of all, 600,000 angels crowned every Jew with two crowns: one for "na'aseh" and one for "nishma" (Shabbat 88a).

Secondly, in response to the statement "na'aseh v'nishma," G-d called the Jewish people "My firstborn child" (Shabbat 89b on Exodus 4:22). Finally, the Jewish people's utterance of "na'aseh v'nishma" caused a Heavenly voice to proclaim, "Who revealed this secret of the angels to My children?" (Shabbat 88a). We see that "preceding action to listening" is an attribute of angels, as the verse says (Psalms 103:20), "Angels do G-d's word and listen to His voice."

These three rewards given to the Jewish people—two Heavenly crowns, being designated as G-d's firstborn child, and being compared to angels—are extremely lofty. What was so extraordinary about the statement "na'aseh v'nishma" that caused us to merit receiving these tremendous rewards?

The Slonimer Rebbe (based on Me'or Einayim) shares three approaches in understanding what the Jewish people meant when they declared "na'aseh v'nishma." Let us examine these three different ways of understanding.

The first approach regards the ups and downs that every person experiences during daily life. We must be aware that truly accepting Torah involves

doing the will of G-d not only when we are feeling confident and secure, but also during difficult and challenging times. This is what the Jewish people meant when they said, "Na'aseh v'nishma." Their commitment to following the will of G-d ("na'aseh") preceded their understanding of the Torah's laws ("nishma").

Failure to understand even logical laws (many of which are found in Parshat Mishpatim) indicates a time of challenge in our lives. The commentator Ohr Gedalyahu explains why this is so. The laws in this week's parsha seem logical and rational to us not because they are inherently sensible, but because G-d created us with an innate sense of right and wrong. Since G-d created us in this way, we have the ability to come close to G-d and to align ourselves with His will. When a Torah law seems logical to us, it is a sign that we are on the right path-i.e. close to G-d and aligned with His way of thinking. When we fail to see the rationale behind laws that we have the potential to understand, it is a sign that our behavior has distanced us from our innate sense of right and wrong. The statement "na'aseh v'nishma" is therefore a commitment by the Jewish people to follow the Torah's laws even at low times, when the laws do not seem sensible to us.

The second approach is based on the Talmud's statement (Yoma 28b) that it is possible to serve G-d even before being commanded to do so. This determines whether we relate to G-d as a child to a parent, or as a servant to a master. A child, out of love, will do the parent's will without being told. A servant, however, will only perform when commanded by his master. G-d's failure to command us indicates distance, as we see in the Talmud's statement (Bava Kama 38a), "Greater is one who is commanded than one who is not commanded."

We can suggest a new approach in understanding this idea by means of a parable. Imagine two families. One family insists that the children finish their homework before supertime, has set bedtimes for the children, imposes curfews, and has all sorts of other rules and expectations. The second family allows the children to eat whenever they want, to stay out as late as they feel like, and does not impose any limitations or boundaries on the children whatsoever. The first family, with its structure and clear expectations, shows that the children's well-being is a top priority. The second family, with its total freedom and permissibility, may actually demonstrate a lack of care for the children. When G-d commands us, He shows that He cares about our well-being. When He does not command us, it can indicate a distance between us.

The Jews' statement of "na'aseh v'nishma" can be understood in light of this idea to mean, "We will do even before we are commanded." Despite the Jewish

people's not being commanded, which could indicate a distance between them and G-d, they proclaim their intention to fulfill G-d's will anyway. This commitment demonstrates the eternal love a child has for his parent-the desire to fulfill the parent's will even when not specifically asked to do so.

Our performance of G-d's will even at low points in our lives, and even when we feel distant from Him, enables us to attain the highest level, which is the third approach. The Torah's 613 commandments correspond to the 613 parts of the physical body, which in turn correspond to the 613 parts of the soul. Just as our bodies do not need to be taught natural drives (eating, drinking, relieving of waste), so too should the soul be able to perform the will of G-d naturally, without being taught. However, the body's drives prevent the soul from expressing its full potential. Only when we completely purify and refine the body is the soul able to naturally and automatically perform the will of G-d.

When the Jewish people declared, "Na'aseh v'nishma," they implied, "We can do even before hearing the will of G-d, because we have purified our bodies to the point where expressing the Divine will comes naturally." This purification takes place only when we are committed to performing the will of G-d even during the low points in our lives and even when we feel distant from the Divine. If we are able to reach this level, we become like angels, who do not have a body that separates them from naturally expressing the Divine will.

These three approaches will help us to appreciate the greatness of the Jewish people's statement "na'aseh v'nishma," and will show us why the Jewish people deserved the three rewards they received. As we mentioned, the people were given two crowns. This reward corresponds to the first approach in understanding "na'aseh v'nishma": the commitment to following the will of G-d not only during times when we feel confident and positive, but also during the low points in life. These two extremes-the highs and the lows-correspond to the two crowns given to the Jewish people.

The second reward was G-d's designating the Jewish people as His "firstborn child." This reward corresponds to the second approach in understanding "na'aseh v'nishma": the Jews performing the will of G-d even when not commanded. Although not being commanded could indicate distance, the Jews' perseverance despite this possibility demonstrated their investment in building a parent/child relationship with G-d. G-d then reciprocated with the second reward: calling the Jews "My firstborn child."

For the third reward, the Jewish people were compared to the angels, who are capable of acting before hearing. This reward corresponds to the third approach in understanding "na'aseh v'nishma": the Jewish people being able to purify their bodies to such

a degree that their souls could express the Divine will without any obstacle. Automatically performing the will of G-d is an angelic quality; hence, the Jewish people were rewarded by being compared to angels.

May we all be blessed to persevere even during the low times, when we feel far away from G-d, so that we live to be commanded once again in all the mitzvot that depend on the Temple—a time when serving G-d will come naturally, and we will deserve to be crowned as G-d's only child. © 2007 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & aish.com

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah, read in conjunction with Parshas Sh'kalim, deals with the collection of funds for the Bais Hamikdash. Before King Yehoash's reign, the Bais Hamikdash was seriously neglected and much repair work was necessary to restore it to its original splendor. When the righteous King Yehoash came into power, he immediately instructed the kohanim to collect the necessary funds. After their unsuccessful attempt in achieving this goal he personally spearheaded the collection and received an overwhelming response.

The reason for this terrible neglect is explained in Divrei Hayomim (2:23) wherein the wicked Queen Atalya and her sons are blamed for the deteriorated condition of the Bais Hamikdash. The royal family severely mistreated the holiest structure in the world by carelessly roaming inside it, bringing much damage to its interior walls and structure. Although the Jewish people consistently donated funds to repair the Bais Hamikdash, the wicked sovereign repeatedly misappropriated them. Instead of using them for the Bais Hamikdash, she channeled them to further her idolatrous practices. After the pious Yehoash came to power, he removed idolatry from the royal family and faithfully applied the collected funds to their intended usage. After many years of neglect, the Bais Hamikdash was finally restored to its previous glory.

The pattern in this haftorah is reminiscent of the Jewish people's formative stages as a nation. This week's maftir reading alludes to the Jewish people's comeback after abusing their financial resources, resulting in their most shameful plunge in history. (see Daas Z'kainim S'hmos 30:13). Moments before the Jewish people miraculously left Egypt, Hashem rewarded them with abundant wealth. Hashem effected a change of heart in the ruthless Egyptian slave drivers and they generously showered the Jewish people with gifts and wealth. However, the Jewish people did not properly appreciate Hashem's unbelievable favor and became influenced by their newly gained wealth and power. During very trying and desperate moments, their newly gained sense of control heavily influenced them. Instead of turning to Hashem for assistance, they

applied their wealth and golden ornaments towards securing their own destiny and produced the Golden Calf. Hashem severely responded to this grave offense and the Jewish people sincerely repented to Hashem. Hashem then granted them opportunity to rectify their sin by inviting them to participate in the erection of the Mishkan. They learned their lesson well and generously applied their money to a most appropriate cause, the construction of Hashem's magnificent sanctuary. Hashem recognized their new approach to wealth and its potential good and deemed them worthy of His Divine Presence for the next thousand years.

The reading of Parshas Sh'kalim and its accompanying haftorah are a most befitting introduction to our month of Adar. We read in Megillas Esther (3:9), that the wicked Haman offered the king an impressive ten thousand silver blocks in attempt to purchase the Jewish people from the wicked King Achashveirosh. Haman intended to use his wealth to influence the king to grant him permission to destroy the entire Jewish nation. However, Chazal teach us that Haman's efforts were preempted by the the Jewish people's annual donation during the month of Adar to the Bais Hamikdash. By no coincidence, Hashem instructed the Jewish people to annually donate this exact sum—ten thousand silver blocks—to His treasury for sacrifices in the Bais Hamikdash. Hashem said, "Let the Jewish nation's sacrificial donation of ten thousand blocks preempt Haman's attempt to influence the king with his ten thousand blocks" (see Mesichta Megilla 13b).

The meaning of this seems to be that the Jewish people's annual donation demonstrated their proper understanding of wealth and its power. They allocated their wealth to the most worthy of causes and eagerly donated annually—without fail—ten thousand blocks of silver to Hashem and the Bais Hamikdash. This perfect approach to wealth and its positive values protected them from Haman's financial influence on the king. The Jewish people understood the true value of wealth and were not personally influenced by its potential ills. Therefore, they were not subject to Haman's financial influence and his powerful seductive approach to the king could not determine their fate. Eventually, the king would and did see through Haman's madness for power and all Haman's power and financial influence were of no avail. © 2007 Rabbi D. Siegel & Project Genesis, Inc.



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