

# THE LIMITATIONS OF MAN'S UNDERSTANDING

*by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky*

## 1. What is the Inherent Value of Mitzvos?

When the Torah enumerates Statutes (Chukim) and Ordinances (Mishpatim) it always mentions the Statutes before the Ordinances. One would think that when the Torah presents our obligation it should first present the laws that can be understood on a rational basis and then the Statutes, which are dictates that are incomprehensible to the human mind. We explained earlier that the Torah presents the Statutes first and then the Ordinances to teach us that in fact there is no difference between the Statutes and the Ordinances in terms of their rationale. Meaning, the reason why we are bound to the Ordinances such as not stealing and not killing is not because of their rational value but rather because it is the Will of G-d. For the same reason we follow the Statutes.

Moshe said to the Jewish people, "V'haya eikev tishmeun ais ha'mishpatim... (This shall be the reward when you hearken to these ordinances), and you observe and perform them; Hashem, you G-d, will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers...And you will merit all the bounty and reward." Rashi cites the Chazal which explains that the reason why the Torah uses the word "eikev"(which also means "heel") because it is alluding to the mitzvos which are viewed as not important and therefore they are trampled upon. The Torah tells us that if one keeps even these mitzvos he will merit the greatest degree of material reward. The question is why is keeping the seemingly less important mitzvos the cause of one's exceptional reward?

Whenever the Mishpatim are mentioned they are always mentioned in conjunction with Chukim. In this instance the Torah only states, "If you will keep the mishpatim" and there is no reference to the Chukim. The question is why?

We had asked - why if one keeps the seemingly less important mitzvos, that were trampled upon by one's heel, is he deserving of an exceptional level of reward. If one observes the mitzvah because it is the Will of Hashem then why does one differentiate between the more stringent mitzvah and the seemingly less important mitzvah? In either case one must adhere to both with the same level of commitment because they are BOTH the Will of Hashem. Evidently if one does differentiate this is an indication that the motive for the performance of the mitzvah is not doing the Will of Hashem but rather it is purely motivated by self-interest. Consequently the "more stringent" mitzvah where the liability is greater or conversely the accomplishment has greater value one is willing to sacrifice for

its sake. However, the seemingly less important mitzvah where the liability is of lesser consequence, a person tends to be less concerned with its transgression. Therefore if one even adheres to the mitzvos which are normally "trampled upon" by one's heel, he is deserving of the greatest level of reward because he is performing the mitzvah purely for the sake of Hashem.

With this understanding we are able to appreciate why Moshe used the expression "Mishpatim" (Ordinances) and not "Chukim" (Statutes) because he is speaking about the mitzvos that have been ignored or transgressed because of their perceived lack of value. If this is the case then the cause of one's failing is only because of one's approach to mitzvos was based on evaluation rather than doing the will of Hashem. If in fact the approach to mitzvos would have been "Chukim" then one could have not rationalized their transgression because of their perceived lack of value.

Therefore Moshe is pointing out that if one regards Hashem's Commandments as "Mishpatim" then he is susceptible to failure because his own sense of value is the determining value of their importance. However if one performs the mitzvos because they are purely for the sake of doing the Will of Hashem, then he will merit the greatest level of reward.

## **2. Regardless of One's Level, One Must Realize His Vulnerability**

Moshe Rabbeinu tells the Jewish people, "He (Hashem) afflicted you and let you hunger, then He fed you the manna that you did not know, nor did your forefathers know, in order to make you know that not by bread alone does man live, rather by everything that emanates from the Mouth of G-d does man live." What is the meaning of "Hashem afflicted you and let you hunger"? One could think that the Torah is referring to the forty-year period in which the Jews wandered in the desert. However, the Torah tells us that every Jew was given a sufficient amount of mann to satisfy his daily need. Regardless of how much or how little he gathered in, miraculously every Jew had a sufficient amount of mann. If this is the case then what is meant when Moshe Rabbeinu tells the Jewish people, "Hashem afflicted you and let you hunger"?

One could think that since the Jewish people only received a daily stipend from day to day, they were continuously in an uncertain state of existence not knowing if the stipend would repeat itself the following day. If one would want to store the mann for the following day it did not keep and it became putrid. If this was the reality of the Jews in the dessert, we can understand the meaning that they were in a continuous "afflicted" and "hungry" state. However, this understanding is flawed because after an extended period of time of receiving the mann day in and day out, one would think that their fears of not receiving were put to rest. If so what is the understanding that they were "afflicted" and went "hungry" as a result of the mann?

The Gemara in Tractate Yomah tells us that although the mann took on the taste, texture, and nutritional value of any food that one would have in mind that it should be; nevertheless, the Jews were in a continuous afflicted and hungry state. The Gemara explains that the visual effect of food is a necessary element to satisfying one's hunger. Therefore the Gemara tells us that a blind man will

never be sated, regardless of how much he eats, because he does not have the visual effect of the food, which he is eating.

If a person is living in a spiritual context and is surrounded with continuous miracles, seemingly this type of person only eats as a means to sustain his existence to perform the Will of Hashem. If this is so, how do we understand that although the Jews did not have the visual effect of seeing what they were eating, why did they feel deprived? When the Vilna Gaon zt'l had food prepared for him it was made in such a way so that he should not derive any degree of physical pleasure from it because his only interest was to benefit from it as a means of sustenance. only wished to benefit from it as a means of survival. If this is the case how can we say that the most special and spiritually "enlightened" generation of Jews that ever lived be "afflicted and hungry" because they did not have visual effect from what they were eating?

The Gemara tells us, "The greater the person the greater is his inclination (evil inclination)." This principle is true because if one's inclination was not in sync with his spirituality then he would lose the power of choice. Therefore as he advances himself spiritually, so too does his inclination intensify. The generation of the desert experienced revealed miracles on a continuous basis (the mann, the wellspring of Miriam, and the Clouds of Glory). Hashem had to keep their evil inclination in pace with their spiritual growth. Therefore within this context, although it should have not been considered a test, they were tested because of the mann's lack of visual appeal. Similarly, the Gemara tells us in Tractate Avoda Zarah that after the Sinai experience, the Jews should have not sinned with the Golden Calf; nevertheless, Hashem intensified their evil inclination to have the choice to either reject idolatry or to succumb to its temptation.

Since Hashem wanted to teach the Jews the lesson that one does not live by bread alone, but rather by the Word of Hashem, He caused the Jews to feel afflicted and denied.

### **3. How Does One Guarantee His Spirituality Despite His Material Success**

The Torah states, "You will eat and You will be satisfied, and bless Hashem, your G-d, for the good Land that He gave you." This verse is the basis for one's obligation to acknowledge Hashem after we have eaten to a sated level which is the Birchas HaMazon (Grace after Meals). The Torah continues, "Take care lest you forget Hashem, you G-d, by not observing His commandments, His Ordinances, and His Decrees, which I commanded you today..." The Torah is warning that one may come to forget Hashem as a result of one's prosperity. After one has achieved prosperity one may say, "My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth!" How does one forget Hashem? Certainly the Torah does not mean that suddenly one day a person awakens and does not remember Hashem. Rather, forgetting Hashem is a gradual process which begins with neglecting His commandments, His Ordinances and His Decrees. Torah Judaism is not a conceptual religion, but rather its essence is the observance and the study of the Torah.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us, based on the verse quoted earlier, that there is an

obligation to recite a blessing after one is satisfied from a meal. The Gemara asks, "How do we know that one also has an obligation to recite a blessing before one eats?" The Gemara answers based on the principle of Kal V'Chomer (one of the methodologies of interpreting the Torah) that if one is obligated to bless Hashem when one is sated is it not logical to say that one must acknowledge Him before he eats when he is hungry? Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk zt'l comments that the grace after meals is a Torah obligation while the blessing recited before eating is only a rabbinical. If the obligation of reciting a blessing before eating is derived through the principle of Kal V'Chomer (which is a Torah principle), then even the pre-blessing should be considered a Torah obligation.

Reb Meir Simcha answers that there is a fallacy in the cogency of the Kal V'Chomer and therefore it is not valid. The reason why the Torah obligates one to acknowledge Hashem after one is satisfied is because it is the tendency of a human being natural to forget Hashem when he is in a state of complacency. It is natural that when one does not feel needy, but rather content and secure, his tendency is to reject Hashem and attribute all that he has to his own accomplishment. Because of this human vulnerability, the Torah obligates one to immediately acknowledge the source of his satiation in order to counter one's natural tendency. However when one is hungry and needy a person has a natural understanding that he is in need of Hashem. Therefore, the Torah does not obligate to identify his source of sustenance. Thus the blessing that precedes eating is only rabbinical.

The Rambam tells us that the obligation of tefilla (prayer) is Biblical. This Torah obligation is to pray to Hashem once a day using the format of: introductory blessings (praise and glorification), middle segment of requests, and concluding segment to give thanks to Hashem for all that He has provided us. However, rabbinically we are obligated to pray (Amidah) three times a day; morning (shachris), afternoon (mincha), and evening (arvis). The question is - why did the Rabbis of Blessed Memory feel it necessary to enact an additional two prayer services within one twenty four hour period.

Rambam rules that if one omits the middle section of "requests" from the Amidah he has not fulfilled his Torah obligation of tefilla. The question is - if tefilla is acknowledgement of who G-d is and recognizing that all that we receive is from Him, then why is it that if one omits the middle section of requests does one not fulfill his obligation of tefilla? The answer is - if one omits the section of requests from his tefilla, it is the equivalent of saying to G-d that He is not needed. This is because if in fact G-d is the provider then how do we not beseech Him for our needs? One may have acknowledged G-d's greatness, however, regarding his own existence, whether it is his health or livelihood, G-d does not play a role. Therefore it is not sufficient only to acknowledge who G-d is but rather one must request from G-d to address all of his needs. If one does not it is the equivalent of saying, "My strength and the might of my hand has made me all this wealth!"

Understanding human nature, the Rabbis felt it necessary to obligate one to pray three times a day. Regardless of one's success or failure at any particular period of the day, one must acknowledge that the determining factor is whether G-d wishes to provide or not. If one does not have the

quantifying anchor of tefilla on an ongoing basis throughout the day, then one could be easily swept away by the successes of our daily lives, which would cause us to forget about Hashem.

If we are continuously cognizant and understand that everything emanates from Him then we will never forget Hashem or our need of His Kindness.

#### **4. When will the Jewish People be Esteemed by the Nations of the World?** (from Va'eschanan)

Moshe said to the Jewish people, "See, I have taught you Chukim (statutes) and Mishpatim (Ordinances)... You shall safeguard (Shmartem) and perform them, for it is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the peoples, who shall hear these statutes and who shall say, 'Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!' Statutes are laws that are not based on rational human thinking but are rather Divine decrees. For example, dietary laws, Shatnez (not wearing a garment made of wool and linen), the law of Red Heifer etc. are statutes. Mishpatim (ordinances) are rational laws which one is able to comprehend their value. Even if they were not dictated by G-d mankind would have very possibly promulgated them.

Moshe Rabbeinu told the Jewish people that if they want to be esteemed by the world and to be viewed as wise and discerning, they must be proficient in the laws of the Torah as well as abide by them. If the Jew is consistent with the Torah in his personal life then the world will esteem him. However, if the Jew lives his life as society as a whole does, although it may be of an ethical and moral standard he will not be esteemed by the world. In fact ultimately the world will despise him because he is not living his life as a Jew is meant to - according to the dictates of the Torah.

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk z'tl predicted in his commentary (that was written at the beginning of the twentieth century), on the Portion of Bechukosai (the Portion that describes the curses that will befall the Jewish people if they deviate from the pathways of the Torah) that the holocaust will originate in Berlin because the Jews of Germany referred to Berlin as "Jerusalem". The reason that he gave for his understanding of the upcoming holocaust that would befall the Jewish people was because the Jews in Germany were behaving no different then German society. The gentile does not want to see the Jew outpacing him in his own ways.

When the Jew lives a life that is consistent with Torah values and laws, Hashem says that the nations of the world will esteem him; however, if he does not live according to the dictates of the Torah then ultimately holocaust will come.

The verse states that when the nations of the world will hear of the Statutes abided by the Jewish people, they will respond by saying, "Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!" The question is why will the nations of the world be impressed when they see the Jews living within the context of laws that seem to be humanly irrational and without any relevance to human comprehension? If this is the case then why when they hear these statutes will they say, "Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!"

Mishpatim (Ordinances) such as the prohibition of not to steal and not to kill etc., on the face of it, seem to be rooted in humanitarianism, which we observe because they are logical and necessary to maintain order in society. Chukim (Statutes) on the other hand, which are laws that cannot be understood by the human mind are kept only because they were commanded by G-d. However this is not the case. The basis for the Mishpatim is no different then the basis for the Chukim. The reason why the Jews does not kill or steal is not because it is immoral or unethical but because G-d said "You Shall not Kill and You Shall not Steal." Therefore they are unethical and immoral. In essence there is no difference between Chukim and Mishpatim. The basis for both classifications of laws is the Will of Hashem. We do not kill not because it is "inhuman" to kill, but rather because G-d commanded us not to kill. If the basis for not killing touches upon humanism of man then one could justify euthanasia as a correct and proper way to end one's life. However, since "Thou Shall not Kill" is rooted in the Word of G-d, regardless of one's justification, it is considered murder.

If we observe the Mishpatim for the same reason that we observe Chukim, which is only because G-d commanded us to do so and not because of our own subjective reasons, then there is no basis or circumstance that will allow one to justify compromise. If the Jew adheres to the Torah and lives his life in this manner, then the nations of the world will esteem him. If the Jew however is corrupted because of his conflict of interest and compromises the truth of the Torah, then the world will despise him because falsehood is not something to be esteemed.

The Jew is not esteemed by the world by mimicking and imitating their values and lifestyles. It is when the Jewish people are proficient in Torah and observe its Statutes and Ordinances because G-d commanded us to do so, and then we will be esteemed in the eyes of the nations of the world.

## **5. The Forecasting of Our Destruction is in Essence of Our Survival (from Va'eschanan)**

In the Torah Portion which is read on Tisha B'Av the Torah states, "You will be for a long time in the land and you will become corrupted (idolaters). When you will do evil in the Eyes of Hashem, your G-d, He will become Angered and Heaven and Earth will be witnesses that I (G-d) will destroy you." Rashi cites the Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin which explains that "You will be for a long time in the land" is an allusion that the Jewish people will go into exile after 852 years. Rashi however continues that the Jews went into exile two years earlier than alluded to in the verse because if they had remained in the land for 852 years Hashem would have destroyed them - as the verse states, "You will be destroyed quickly from the land." Rashi quotes the verse from Daniel, "Hashem was diligent to bring about the evil (the exile) that he brought upon us because Hashem, our G-d, is a Tzaddik." Meaning, it was because of the righteousness of Hashem that we went into exile two years earlier. The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin asks- how could Hashem be considered a tzaddik for bringing upon the Jewish people sooner rather than later (to be exiled from the Land of Israel)?

The Gemara tells us that at the time of the First Bais HaMikdash (First Temple) that there were a number of exiles which lead up to the final exile when the Jews were driven out of the Land of Israel.

When the exile of Tzidkiyahu, the King of Yehudah, took place the exile of Yechanya (a previous exile) was still in place in Babylon. Meaning, that the people of the previous exile were still alive in Babylon when the people of the second exile arrived. The verse in Kings tells us that a group of Torah sages that were exiled with Yechanya were of such a dimension of Torah greatness that when they would speak, people would listen to them and accept their words as if they were "deaf mutes". When these same Torah sages would give a halachic ruling it would be the final word and no one would any longer debate the issue.

If the second exile would have been delayed for another two years, these special Torah sages would have passed away and the Jews who followed would have not been exposed to this dimension of person- resulting in the spiritual destruction of the Jewish people. Therefore, when Hashem brought the destruction of the Temple two years earlier, which resulted in the exile, it was a blessing.

When the Torah tells us that if the Jews would have been in the Land for the numerical value of 852 they would have "been destroyed quickly from the Land" it does not mean physical destruction, but rather spiritual destruction, which ultimately would cast the Jewish people into oblivion. If the Jewish people are not connected to G-d, through His Torah, then it is only a matter of time before the Jew withers and dies. The essence of the Jewish people is the Torah. Thus, Hashem is referred to as a "tzaddik".

We see from this that punishment is not restricted only to the physical. To be put into a state of spiritual dislocation is also punishment. If the Jew is spiritually cut off then it is the equivalent of his annihilation. Chazal tell us, "An evil person during his lifetime is considered as dead." This is why the Prophet states, "Hashem is a Tzaddik for hastening the destruction."

The Jews who immigrated to America and sacrificed for the sake of Torah by not working on the Shabbos are the forbearers of the Torah community of today. On the other hand, those who did not sacrifice for their Judaism have been left with descendants that may not even be Jewish.

If a person understands the value and importance of the mitzvos and the study of Torah then whatever "sacrifices" that may be needed will not be perceived as hardships. As the Mishna tells us, "The reward of a mitzvah cannot be given in this existence" because the value of a mitzvah is eternal.

Despite the exiles and the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people, Hashem promised us that the Torah will never be forgotten from the Jewish people. The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that even if Hashem has to install a king whose decrees are as harsh as those of Haman, He will do so to compel the Jew to do teshuvah (repentance). There are circumstances in which it may appear that the Jews are experiencing great tragedies or hardships; however, as Chazal have taught us based on the verse in Prophets, what is perceived as tragedy is in fact the greatest gift. As it is stated, "Hashem is a tzaddik for expediting the exile." Similarly, there are many situations which we perceive as tragedy or hardship but at the end of the day it will be revealed to us that they were the

source of our greatest blessing.

---

Copyright © 2002 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Kalatsky is the founder of the [Yad Avraham Institute](#), a New York-based learning center whose mission is to disseminate Torah to Jews of all backgrounds and walks of life.