

APPRECIATING THE VALUE OF THE JEW

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. The Value of Reverence

The Torah states, "Every man: your father and mother shall you revere My Sabbaths shall you observe- I am Hashem, your G-d." Rashi cites the Gemara, which explains that although there is a Torah obligation to revere one's parents, one may think that if his father commands him to violate the Shabbos on his behalf he would be obligated to heed his request. Thus, the Torah juxtaposes "I am Hashem, your G-d" to teach us that G-d's honor supercedes the reverence of one's parents because they are also obliged to revere and honor Hashem.

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk z'tl explains that when the Gemara uses the term "hechsher mitzvah - in preparation of a mitzvah," it does not necessarily mean preparing to perform the mitzvah. It could also refer to the mitzvah itself if it is only a means and not an end unto itself. The example that he offers is the Positive Commandment to build the Mikdash (Temple/Sanctuary). Although the building of the Mikdash is a mitzvah unto itself, its purpose is to have a setting in which one is able to bring the prescribed sacrifices to Hashem and to allow G-d's Presence to dwell in our midst. Thus, the building of the Bais HaMikdash is classified by the Gemara as "hechsher mitzvah."

Reb Meir Simcha z'tl asks, "What is the consideration that one would think that the Positive Commandment of revering one's parents would supercede the observance of the Shabbos?" There is a concept that when a positive and negative commandment conflict, the positive supercedes the negative. This is the case only when the positive and negative commandments are between man and G-d. However when the positive commandment is between man and his fellow (such as honoring one's parent) we do not find that this commandment supercedes a negative commandment which is between man and G-d (such as the observance of Shabbos). If this is so, then why is it necessary for the Torah to conclude "I am Hashem, your G-d" to indicate that one does not follow the dictate of the parent?

Reb Meir Simcha offers a profound insight. He explains that the credibility and authenticity of the Torah is based on its immutable transmission from Sinai. The transmission is from father to son throughout the generations. The only way to guarantee that a child will give credence and value to the teaching of his father is only if he reveres his parents. Because of the special value that the child attributes to those teachings, he transmits it to his child and subsequently it is transmitted throughout the generations. However, if one did not revere and see one's parents in a special light,

the transmission of the Torah from father to son would be in jeopardy because the teachings of the father would not be valued sufficiently. Thus, there would be no relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. Without Torah there is no Jewish people.

Therefore, although the mitzvah of revering one's parents is between man and fellow man, however in terms of its inherent value, its classification is "hechsher mitzvah." Meaning, it is to guarantee the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. Thus, one would consider that honoring one's parents supercedes the observance of the Shabbos. The verse concludes, "I am Hashem, your G-d" to indicate that this principle is not applied because the parents themselves are obliged to heed the Word of Hashem.

It is interesting to note that the mitzvah of honoring one's parents is one of the Ten Commandments. It appears on the same stone tablet containing the commandments of believing in One G-d, the prohibition against idolatry and the observance of the Shabbos, which is a testament that G-d is the Creator of existence. What is the common thread between honoring one's parents and these other commandments? It is only because of the infrastructure of the family set forth by the Torah that one's parents must be honored and revered to guarantee the unbroken transmission of Torah from Sinai. Thus, there is a basis for believing in One G-d, rejecting paganism, and believing that G-d is the Creator of existence.

There is a Positive Commandment that one must revere a Torah sage. The Talmud in Tractate Yomah tells us that a Torah sage is a person who is not only proficient in all areas of Torah but he must also be a person whose behavior is consistent with his Torah knowledge. One's linkage to Torah is only through the sage. It is only because of the special reverence that one must demonstrate towards the Torah sage that the Torah is valued and adhered to as the Word of Hashem.

The Gemara tells us that if a Torah sage does not conduct himself appropriately, one is not permitted to study Torah from that individual. In the words of the Talmud, "Only if the teacher has the characteristics of an angel of G-d should one seek Torah from that individual. If he does not resemble an angel then one should not." Rambam in the Laws of Talmud Torah cites this passage in the Gemara as law. One is not permitted to study Torah from an individual who does not have a semblance of an angel because the student who receives the transmission from his teacher must see him as a special person in order to value what is being taught to him. Thus, the rebbe (teacher) must conduct himself as that special Jew to be respected and revered in order not to jeopardize the transmission of Torah.

2. Understanding G-d's Kindness

The Torah states, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not finish off the corner of your field, and you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not harvest the young grapes of your vineyard; and you shall not gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; for the poor and the

proselyte shall you leave them - I am Hashem, your G-d." When one harvests his field, one must leave the corner of his field for the needy. The same is true regarding fallen fruit and un-harvested produce. The verse concludes, "I am Hashem, your G-d." Rashi cites the Midrash, which explains this to mean that G-d is a judge who exacts punishment and will take lives in payment for denying the needy what is rightfully theirs.

Sforno in his commentary explains the words- "I am Hashem, your G-d" to mean that just as Hashem is Chesed (kindness) and Emes (truth) so too should the Jew behave in a similar manner. G-d wants the Jew to emulate Him as it is stated in the verse, "You shall be holy because I your G-d am Holy." The way the Jew demonstrates the attribute of chesed is to leave the corner of his field to the needy. Similarly a Jew must emulate Hashem's attribute of Emes (Truth) by not perverting justice, judging one's fellow in a righteous manner, living a life of honesty, and not taking a false oath. The Gemara tells us in Tractate Shabbos, "The signet of Hashem is Emes (Truth)."

It is interesting to note that the Yalkut in the Portion of Emor cites the verse from Proverbs, "A path of life waits (above) for the intelligent one." The Midrash explains "the path of life" is referring to the words of Torah. As Shlomo Ha'Melech (King Solomon) refers to the Torah as "Eitz Chaim - the Tree of Life." Thus, one who delves into and appreciates the mitzvos will have life. The Midrash continues, "The Torah states, "You shall not consume the corner of your field." Regarding Amon and Moav, who consume their fields (and do not leave anything for the poor), the Prophet states, "I will consume them." Contrastingly, in regard to the Jewish people who do not completely consume their fields (namely they leave a portion for the needy) the Prophet states, "And you I will not consume." How do we understand this?

The Gemara discusses the various tithes that must be given to the Kohen and the Levy. The distribution of these tithes, in terms of choosing which Kohen or Levy, is determined by the one who is distributing the tithe. The inherent right to choose the recipient is referred to as "tovas hanaah - good will" which is the gratitude of the Kohen and Levy towards their benefactor. However, regarding the corner of the field that is left for the needy or the other remnants of produce, which are left in the field, there is no beholdeness to the one who owns the field. This is because the produce is made available to the poor regardless of the wishes of the owner of the field. Even if one's enemy meets the economic criteria of being needy, he has a right to partake of the produce.

Thus, one who does chesed in a context in which there is no personal benefit will have a place at the end of time and will merit eternal existence. Since the individual who performs this mitzvah emulates the quality of Hashem's Chesed (which is chesed without any payback), he has assumed Hashem's posture of Chesed and thus merits having that special relationship with Him. Peah (leaving the corner of one's field to the needy) is a representation of chesed shel emes (true kindness) that does not have any other motive associated with it other than performing the act of kindness itself.

The Midrash tells us that when Avraham our Patriarch purchased the Tomb of Machpelah (the burial

place for Sarah his wife), Hashem said to him, "After all of these years you are finally assuming My cloak of kindness." Sarah passed away when Avraham was 137 years old. He had devoted his entire life to doing acts of chesed, which were one of a kind; however, it was only at that time that Hashem said to Avraham that he performed a true act of kindness similar to His. How do we understand this?

All the acts of chesed that were performed by Avraham, other than the purchase of the Machpelah, were only used as vehicles to disseminate and espouse monotheism - converting people from paganism to belief in one G-d. Thus, these acts, although invaluable in themselves, were not identical to the Chesed of Hashem because they were not done for the sake of chesed itself. The Chesed of G-d is an end unto itself. When Avraham purchased the Tomb Machpelah, it was an act of chesed that was for its own sake and not a vehicle to bring about any other result. The mitzvah of Peah meets the standard of chesed for its own sake because there is no "good will" or "beholdeness" associated with it. One leaves the corner of one's field to provide for the needy only because it is the Will of Hashem. This is Sforno's understanding of the conclusion of the verse, "I am Hashem, your G-d." Meaning just as Hashem does chesed for its own sake, so too should the Jew do chesed for its own sake.

When one performs a mitzvah for its own sake without any ulterior motive or self-interest, it is emulating Hashem's quality of Emes (Truth). Thus, when one does perform a mitzvah (l'shmah - for its own sake) it brings about the most intimate relationship with Hashem.

3. What is the Essence of the Jewish People?

The Torah states, "You (the Jewish people) shall be holy because I your G-d am holy." The Yalkut explains an application of this concept is found in the verse stated in the Book of Devarim "And you are attached to Hashem." Yirmiyah the Prophet says, "Just as one's belt is attached to one's waist so too are the Jewish people attached to Hashem." The Yalkut continues, "Hashem said to the Jewish people, "I am not like the mortal king who does not permit his subjects to carry his name (which would be punishable by death). You (the Jewish people) carry my Name." The Yalkut continues to discuss the various ways Hashem is identified and how the Jewish people are known in the same ways. For example, Hashem is referred to as Elokim (an appellation for G-d) and Hashem called the Jewish people by His appellation. As it is stated in the verse in Tehillim (Psalms), "I have said that you (the Jewish people) are Elokim." Hashem is called Chacham (wise) and He refers to the Jewish people as Chachamim. Hashem is referred to as Dode (Beloved) and He refers to the Jewish people as beloved. Hashem is identified as Chassid (scrupulously Pious) and He refers to His people as the scrupulously pious. Hashem is referred to as Kadosh (holy) and He refers to the Jewish people as Kadoshim (holy). What is the significance of identifying the Jewish people with the many appellations of G-d Himself?

Tana d'vei Eliyahu (teachings of Eliyahu the Prophet) states that every Jew must say, "When will my accomplishments be comparable to accomplishments of my forbearers Avraham, Yitzchak, and

Yaakov?" Some commentators explain the reason one must aspire to the accomplishments of nothing less than our forefathers (and not to people of lesser dimension) is that one must set his goals at the most advanced level in order to go farther. However, we are able to explain this passage of the Tana d'vei Eliyahu differently.

The Gemara in Tractate Yevamos tells us that Jews possess three innate qualities: they are merciful, have shame and perform acts of loving-kindness. These qualities exist within the Jew because they are passed down to us from Avraham our Patriarch. The Jewish people are the spiritual heirs of our forefathers and thus possess the innate characteristics and qualities exemplified by Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. They are part of our spiritual gene pool. The spiritual potential of the Jew goes beyond ordinary limits only because of his relevance to his forbearers. It is only because the Jew descends from the holy Patriarchs that he has unlimited spiritual potential. Therefore, one must aspire to the spiritual accomplishments of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov because his spiritual potential is defined by their accomplishments. One will not achieve to the level of the accomplishment of our Patriarchs; however, one must aspire to it because we are a semblance of who they were.

The Jewish people may think that they are no different from any other nation. To this Hashem says that the Jewish people are truly unique. He identifies them with many of His own appellations (Wise, Pious, Beloved, Holy, etc.). Since the Jew is identified by G-d as such, it is an indication that the Jew possesses these inherent qualities and characteristics. He possesses a semblance of G-d's Wisdom because He chooses to refer to the Jew as Chachim.

The Jew needs to understand and appreciate who he is. If a Jew is able value and understand his intrinsic ability, he will be able to pursue his potential.

At Sinai when Hashem identified the Jewish people as "My kingly, priestly and holy people," after they had said, "Naaseh V'nishma - we will do and then we will listen," He was revealing to them that they are inherently kingly, priestly and holy. It was only because they possessed a potential for these qualities that they were able to accept the Torah unequivocally with the declaration of "Naaseh V'nishma."

G-d commands the entire Jewish people, saying, "You must be holy, because I am holy" in order to communicate to every, individual, Jew that he has relevance to holiness because of his unique commonality and connection with Hashem. How does one hone and appreciate these special characteristics? The tool that was gifted to us for this specific purpose is the Torah itself. It is through the study of Torah that one is able to achieve his potential. As it is stated, "It (the Torah) is a tree of life." Life is synonymous with the Torah. If one appreciates this reality, then he will be in a position to take advantage of his spiritual potential, which was inherited by each of us from our Patriarchs.

4. How to Does One Overcome Conflict of Interest?

The Torah states, "In the presence of an old person shall you rise and you shall honor the presence

of a (Torah) sage and you shall have fear of your G-d - I am Hashem." Rambam states in Hilchos Talmud Torah (The Laws Pertaining to Torah Study) if a Talmud Chacham (Torah scholar) passes within one's four cubits, he is obligated to acknowledge his presence by standing. Rashi cites Chazal, "One could think that he may turn a blind eye and behave as if he did not notice the Torah sage, and thus avoid acknowledging him. This is why the verse states, "and you shall have fear of your G-d." Although one's intent is hidden in one's heart, G-d knows one's true intent. Therefore the verse concludes, "and you shall have fear of your G-d" because only through the fear of G-d that one will not behave in this manner."

The Torah is teaching us, regarding the acknowledgement of a Torah sage, that if one knowingly transgresses the law of giving appropriate honor, albeit in a concealed manner, he will be punished because G-d knows the truth. This principle seems to be true regarding any transgression. Therefore, why does the Torah need to stress this issue of valuing of a Torah sage? If one were to violate dietary laws (and it is only known to the transgressor), G-d would know that the individual violated the law. Nevertheless, in that case, the Torah does not conclude "and you shall have fear of your G-d." How do we understand this?

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that if one experiences serious difficulties in his life (financial, physical, etc.), he should introspect and reflect on his past behavior and try to understand where he had failed, thus, correcting the wrong. Difficulties and problems only come about because of one's spiritual transgressions. The Gemara continues to say that if one had introspected and did not find any reason for deserving punishment, he should attribute his difficulties to bitul Torah (not studying Torah sufficiently).

The Vilna Gaon zt'l asks, "If one had properly introspected and reflected on his past and did not discover any infractions regarding his observance of the Torah, then evidently his commitment to the study of Torah had been sufficiently accommodated. If this is the case then why should he attribute his suffering to his deficiency in his Torah study?"

In response to this question Rav Y.I. Ruderman zt'l (Baltimore Rosh Ha'Yeshivah), responds by asking, "What is defined as studying Torah sufficiently?" If one has eighteen hours a day available for study Torah and he studies less than the full eighteen hours, the minutes that were available to study but not utilized are considered bitul Torah (not studying Torah sufficiently). If on the other hand a person only has one hour a day available to study Torah and he utilizes the hour fully, he did not violate the law of bitul Torah. Bitul Torah is clearly based on a subjective assessment that one makes of his own time. It is difficult to assess the exactness of time that one must commit to Torah study because of continuously changing circumstance. For instance, if one truly needs an additional hour of relaxation to enable him to be reinvigorated for the study of Torah, then that time taken is not considered bitul Torah. However if any usage of time was not legitimately invested in such activities as earning a livelihood or addressing one's personal obligations with family or community, then it is considered bitul Torah. Therefore, although when one initially reflected, he did not discover any spiritual failing

(including the area of Torah study) his unceasing difficulties only confirm that his assessment of the utilization of his time was not accurate.

The issue of acknowledging a Torah sage could be seen in a similar manner. One may conclude, based on his own assessment (which is subject to many variables), that this particular individual does not meet the criteria of one who is considered to be a Torah sage. Thus, he is not obliged to acknowledge his presence when he enters nearby. However, on the other hand if one does not openly acknowledge this individual, it could be considered a chillul Hashem (desecration of G-d's Name) because others may consider this individual as a Torah sage. Thus, this individual (who believes differently) will resort to pretending not to notice this "so called" Torah sage to not cause disrespect to the Torah. To this, the Torah responds, "and you shall have fear of your G-d - I am Hashem." It is because of one's conflicts of interest that his assessment is inaccurate. Therefore, one could only overcome this subjective view by understanding that he will face Divine retribution.

Very often one is involved in situations where he would like to convince himself of a certain reality that is consistent with his own agenda although it may not be fact. This would cause one to legitimize an action or a behavior pattern that is unacceptable. However, if one fears Hashem, he will be cognizant of the ramifications and the ultimate price that will have to be paid. Thus, causing him to behave accordingly.

5. How Does One Internalize the Loss of a Tzaddik?

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk zt'l (on the Portion of Achrei Mos) cites the Jerusalem Talmud that asks, "Why does the Torah juxtapose the passing of the sons of Aaron to the Yom Kippur service?" The Gemara answers, "Just as Yom Kippur atones for sin so too does the passing of the tzaddik (righteous person) atone." The Gemara continues, "Why does the Torah juxtapose the passing of Miriam to the parah aduma (the Red Heifer used in removing the spiritual contamination of the dead)? Just as the parah aduma atones, so too does the passing of the tzaddik atone. Why does the Torah juxtapose the passing of Aaron to the breaking of the stone tablets containing the Commandments (Luchos)? This is to indicate that just as the breaking of the Luchos was painful to Hashem, so too is the passing of the tzaddik painful to Hashem." Reb Meir Simcha explains, "What is the significance of each of these comparisons? Seemingly, they are redundant. Evidently each juxtaposition teaches us something different."

Reb Meir Simcha explains that Yom Kippur is a day in which G-d is most receptive to one's penitence. It is a time of G-d's willingness to forgive (Ais Ratzon) - Hashem's forgiveness/mercy." Thus, when the Torah juxtaposes the passing of the sons of Aaron to the service of Yom Kippur it is to communicate to us that just as Yom Kippur brings about intense Ais Ratson so too does the passing of the tzaddik bring about a willingness on Hashem's part to be forgiving. However, if a person does not value the significance of Yom Kippur and does not wish to maximize the benefit of the day, then Yom Kippur does not bring about atonement. To the contrary, it is a detriment to the

individual. Identically, the way one maximizes the benefit of the Ais Ratzon, which comes about because of the passing of a tzaddik, is to value and appreciate the tzaddik who had passed away. If one does not value that tzaddik or (subsequently) his absence, then the individual does not benefit from that special moment.

Regarding the juxtaposition of the passing of Miriam and the Red Heifer, Reb Meir Simcha explains that the sprinkling of the ashes of the Red Heifer (together with the water) brought about tahara (purity). Doing teshuvah (repenting) brings about tahara. The passing of the tzaddik arouses one's conscience and causes him to introspect and do teshuvah. The individual will say to himself, "If the tzaddik who is a special person ultimately falls victim to death, I, who cannot be compared to the tzaddik, must definitely make corrections." This realization will bring about stirrings of teshuvah within the individual, which causes tahara. However if one does not come to this realization then the passing of the tzaddik does not have that affect.

Regarding the breaking of the Luchos (Tablets), Reb Meir Simcha explains that we find that there are two types of tzaddikim: one who is a righteous person in the absolute sense and one who is considered a tzaddik only relative to his peers. For example, Lot did not wish to live in proximity to his uncle Avraham (at the time of the destruction of Sodom) because by living so close to his uncle he would have been considered a rasha (evil person). However, if Lot were removed from that location he would be considered a tzaddik relative to the Sodom community. Reb Meir Simcha explains that if the generation of the tzaddik does not heed his words and example, prosecution will be brought upon that generation because compared to the tzaddik, the generation is classified as evil. Thus in order to avoid bringing about prosecution on the Jewish people, Hashem takes the tzaddik. As a result, Jewish people can be classified as righteous relative to the nations of the world.

The Sinai experience was considered the marriage of Jewish people to Hashem. The Torah itself was regarded as the marriage contract. Moshe broke the Luchos because the Jewish people's participating in the Golden Calf was the equivalent of a bride who had committed adultery under the chupah (marriage canopy). Thus, by breaking the Luchos (the marriage contract), the Jewish people would be considered as unmarried and thus would not be classified as rashaim (evil people). Therefore the Torah juxtaposes the breaking of the Luchos to the passing of Aaron in order to communicate to us that just as Hashem was pained with the breaking of the Luchos (in order to guarantee the survival of the Jewish people) so too He is pained by the passing of the tzaddik for the sake of the Jewish people.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon every Jew to take advantage of the moment of the passing of a tzaddik to relate to and understand the significance of the loss. It should arouse within oneself stirrings of teshuvah because only then will one be the beneficiary of the Ais Ratzon.

Copyright © 2003 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.