

REFLECTING THE IMAGE OF G'D THROUGH ONE'S OBSERVANCE

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. Reflecting the Image of G'd Through One's Observance

The Torah states, "If you will follow My Statutes (Bechukosai) and observe My Commandments (mitzvosai) and perform them..." The Torah refers to the dictate of G'd as "Statutes" and as "Commandments." In addition, the verse differentiates between "following" the Statutes, "observing" the Commandments, and "performing" them. How do we understand this?

Sforno explains that "follow My Statutes" is referring to one who accepts the Torah upon himself and integrates it as a way of life. It is the unequivocal acceptance of the dictate of the King in every aspect of his life. "...Observe My Commandments" is referring to performing the mitzvos in a meticulous manner. Once one has accepted upon himself the dictate of G'd in every aspect of his life, he should perform the mitzvos meticulously in a deliberate and conscious manner. He must delve to understand the purpose and manner of observance to perform them with the understanding of their ultimate purpose. When an individual integrates the Torah as a way of life and performs the mitzvos with the proper understanding of their purpose, which is to advance spirituality, then one reflects the "image of G'd" (Tzelem Elokim). It is only then that it is considered performing the Will of G'd. Thus, the verse concludes "...And perform them."

Baal HaTurim explains that regarding the verse "If you will follow My Statutes and observe..." if one were to take the first letter of each of the three words *Im bechukosai teileichu* (aleph, bais, tuf) it would spell "avos" (Patriarchs). Meaning, if one accepts the Torah upon himself as a way of life, he will reflect the posture of the Patriarchs - Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. In addition, he comments that letters in the word "osum" (perform them) are the same letter as the word "emmes" (truth). Meaning, one is only engaged in emmes/truth if one fully integrates the Torah into his life by performing the mitzvos meticulously with an understanding of their purpose. He continues, "If one were to count the number of verses from the beginning of the Portion (regarding the blessings) through the verse 'I am Hashem your G'd, Who took you out of the land of Egypt...' it is ten verses - corresponding to the Ten Commandments.

Rabbeinu Sadya Gaon explains that within the Ten Command there is an allusion to all of the 613 mitzvos of the Torah. Thus, one has relevance to the totality of Torah when one fully prescribes to what the Torah suggests as proper observance. There is no time in which there is a lapse with one's commitment to Torah and its meticulous observance. It is only through this totality that one has relevance to emmes - truth.

The verse states, "It (the Torah itself) is a living tree of life, for the one who holds onto it." Chofetz Chaim explains that if one is being swept down a river and he is able to reach out and grab on to a branch of a tree adjacent to the river, he could gradually inch his way onto the tree itself - thus making his way to safety. One must grab onto the Torah itself by performing mitzvos in a qualitatively meticulous manner. For example if one performs a single mitzvah meticulously and understands its value, he has relevance to the entire Torah; thus, he is taking hold of the Torah in its entirety.

2. Setting One's Priorities

The Torah states at the beginning of the Portion, "If you will follow My Statutes(Bechukosai) and observe My Commandments (mitzvosai) and perform them, then I will provide your rains in their time..." If one adheres to the dictates of G'd, He will provide unlimited blessing. However, regarding the curses (Tochacha) the Torah states, "But if you will not listen to Me (lo tishmeyou Lee) and will not perform..." Rashi explains "lo tishmeyou Lee - you will not listen to Me" does not refer to one transgressing the Torah, rather it refers to studying Torah with a lack of dedication/toil. If one does not dedicate and apply himself fully to Torah study, this will initiate the curses to come upon him.

Chazal explain that the verse does not simply state "lo tishmeyou - if you will not listen" rather it adds the word "Lee - to Me." What is the added connotation of "Lee- to Me"? The Toras Kohanim states, "When one does not toil sufficiently in Torah, it is the equivalent of one who recognizes G'd but chooses to defy Him. As we find regarding Nimrod (evil king who attempted to kill Avraham). He recognized G'd but chose to defy Him. Similarly, we find such behavior by the people of Sodom who sinned greatly against G'd. They also recognized their Master but chose to defy Him." When one has the ability to toil in Torah study but chooses not to do so, Chazal equate him with Nimrod and the people of Sodom because he also recognizes his Maker and chooses to defy Him. How could the one who does not apply himself sufficiently regarding Torah study be equated to these individuals who personified evil?

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos states, "A person who has the ability and opportunity to study Torah, and chooses not to do so, all types of suffering will come upon him - thus causing his life to be disrupted." The individual to which the Gemara refers is one who has the time available to him to invest in Torah study but chooses not to engage himself.

If one appreciates the value of Torah and truthfully means what he recites every evening, "For they are our life and length of days and in them (words of Torah) we will engage day and night." then it would be incongruous for him to not toil in Torah study- since he seemingly has such a deep appreciation for its value. However, if one chooses to invest his life differently, it is only due to his prerogative that he chose not to toil in Torah. It is an individual who understands what G'd wants from him, but yet he chooses to set his own priorities. This is a defiance of G'd. One need not violate the Torah to defy G'd in this most serious manner. One may observe the mitzvos meticulously, but if

he has the ability to apply himself to Torah study and he does not do so, then this is the equivalent of the defiance of Nimrod and Sodom. Just as Sodom was obliterated for its defiant behavior, the Torah is revealing to us that if one does not toil in Torah (and he is able to do so) a similar fate will come upon him (the Tochacha (curses)). This does not apply to one who is unaware of his obligation to study Torah, rather it refers to one who recognizes his obligation and chooses not to act upon it appropriately.

Based on the principle of "Aveira goreres aveira - one sin leads to another sin," the Torah tells us that once one chooses to defy G'd by not toiling in Torah, ultimately he will come to reject G'd. The rejection of G'd begins with becoming insensitive to the Will of G'd and ultimately culminates with being oblivious to His existence.

3. The Quantification of the Jew

The Midrash states, "...G'd said to the nations of the world, "You want to offer your children as sacrifices to Me. However, I have no interest in your children or your sacrifices. I am only interested in My children (the Jewish people), as I have given them the laws of offerings. Their offerings are beloved to Me." The Midrash continues, "G'd said to the Jewish people, "If you bring before Me your values, (eirchin), I will value them as if you sacrificed yourself to Me. In the merit of your valuations I will protect you from gehenom (spiritual purgatory)." The Torah states regarding the laws of valuations, that if a male is between the ages of 20 and 60 his valuation is 50 shekalim. A female's valuation is 30 shekalim. Why is the giving of the 50 shekalim (in the case of the man, which seems to be a small amount of money), the equivalent of sacrificing oneself and why does it bring about sufficient merit to be protected from gehenom?

The Torah tells us in the Portion of Mishpatim that if an animal kills a Canaanite slave, the owner of the animal must pay 30 shekalim to the owner of the slave, as a penalty - regardless of the monetary worth or financial loss incurred because of his death. Sforno explains that the reason the owner pays only 30 shekalim is because we find that the valuation of a woman is 30 shekalim. What is the correlation between the penalty for killing the Canaanite slave and the valuation of a woman?

A Canaanite slave has the identical mitzvah obligation as a woman and he is bound by Torah law to the same a degree as a woman, regardless of gender. Thus, the slave's value/worth is evaluated based on a spiritual scale rather on material consideration. The Torah quantifies the valuation of a woman to be 30. Evidently, this is definitely not the monetary worth of a person, which is calculated based on his/her productivity. The 30 shekalim is the Torah's quantification of the innate spiritual worth of the woman. Since the Canaanite slave has the same mitzvah obligation as the woman, the Torah gives him a similar quantification of 30 shekalim.

When one articulates a vow to G'd regarding himself, "Eirkee aalie (my valuation upon myself)" he is quantifying himself based on his spiritual worth, rather than on his material capability. That value of money is then given to the Bais HaMikdash (Temple). Thus, if one recognizes his innateness and

evaluates himself based on his spiritual worth, G'd will protect him from gehenom. It is a humble acknowledgement for a Jew that his objective in life is only to focus on his spirituality and that his true value is not his physical capability, but rather his spiritual capacity, as defined by Torah. Because of this, one merits protection from gehenom. Gehennom is a consequence of one not being sensitive to his essence- his spirituality.

The Midrash tells us that G'd only values the offerings of the Jewish people and not that of the nations. When the nations of the world sacrifice to Him it is only to accommodate their own interests and satisfy their personal needs, which relate to their physicality. The Jewish people unequivocally accepted the Torah with the declaration "Naaseh V'nishma (We will do and we will listen)." However, when the nations of the world were offered the Torah by G'd they asked, "What is written in it?" They wanted to assess the relevance of the Torah to their own needs. It was rejected because it somehow conflicted with their lifestyle. However, the Jewish people accepted it unequivocally because it was the will of G'd. Similarly, the Jew brings offerings only to address his own spirituality, thus, strengthening his relationship with G'd.

4. Torah Study, the Setting for Blessing

The Torah states, "Im bechukosai teileichu (if you will follow My decrees." Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh points out that if the word "Bechukosai (decrees)" is specifically referring to the study of Torah and not all of the mitzvos, it should have been written in the singular "Bechukee (decree)." Why then does the Torah state "Bechukosai" in the plural?

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh offers several explanations. Firstly, "Bechukosai" is referring not only to the Written Law (Torah) but also to the Oral Law (Talmud). He explains further that the obligation of the study of Torah is not only to study for oneself but also to teach others (lilmode u'l' lamaid). Thus, if one studies and disseminates Torah, only then will G'd provide limitless blessing.

The Written Law without the oral interpretation (of G'd) has no relevance to the Word of G'd because the Written text is open to unlimited interpretation. It is inconceivable that G'd would present His will in such an ambiguous context.

One could say that the obligation of teaching Torah to one's fellow is a demonstration of the mitzvah to "love your fellow as yourself." Since the mitzvah of the study of Torah is the equivalent of all the mitzvos combined (Talmud Torah keneged kulum), disseminating Torah to one's fellow is offering him the ultimate. The Torah itself is the life source of the spirituality of the Jew.

The Gemara in Tractate Taanis states, "Rava said, "I have learned much from my teachers, from my colleagues more than my teachers, and from my students more than all of them." Is Rava simply saying that because of the interaction between student and teacher, the teacher is able to advance his level of understanding of the material at hand? Or, is Rava saying something else? It is evident that Rava is not giving us an insight in the value of pedagogy. If this were so, it would not be unique to Torah study, but applicable to teaching any branch of wisdom. What then is Rava telling us?

If one assumes the responsibility to disseminate Torah because of its dimension of importance, he merits a level of Divine Assistance (siyata d'shmaya), which allows him to understand the material and communicate it to others on a more profound level. One only merits this greater level of understanding when one assumes the responsibility of imparting the Torah to others.

The verse "Im bechukosai teileichu (if you will follow My decrees" is communicating that when one studies the Torah with the intent to disseminate it, and in fact impresses it upon others, it will bring about endless blessing and bounty.

When the Jew assumes responsibility for others, he is also fulfilling his responsibility of "areivus" (responsibility for one's fellow) - thus, guaranteeing the fulfillment of the Torah in its entirety.

5. The Proper Setting to Create Spirituality (From Behar)

The Torah states that during Shmitta (the seventh year - Sabbatical year) one is not permitted to engage in agricultural activities and the fields must be lie fallow. The Torah also tells us that the harvest of the sixth year (before Shmitta) will be enough to sustain the Jewish people through the seventh and eighth years until the new crop can be harvested in the ninth. The Torah states, "The Land will give forth its fruit and you will eat until you are sated; you will dwell securely upon it. If you will say, what will we eat in the seventh year? - Behold! We will not sow and not gather in our crops! I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and I will yield a crop sufficient for the three-year period."

Chazal explain that when the Torah states, "...The Land will give forth its fruit and you will eat until you are sated..." it means that one would become sated after eating only a miniscule amount. We find a similar phenomenon regarding the showbread. The Mishna in Tractate Yomah tells us that as long as Shimon Ha'Tzaddik (who was the Kohen Gadol for 40 years) was alive there was blessing in the showbread (lechem ha'panim). The twelve loaves of the showbread were divided amongst the Kohanim (who officiated that week, as well as the incoming group who would officiate the following week). When they ate of the bread, as little as the volume of a bean, they would be sated. However, after the passing of Shimon Ha'Tzaddik, a curse entered into the showbread and it no longer contained miraculous properties.

It is interesting to note that the Torah initially states that the Jew will be sated with the fruits of the land. This means that the harvest of the sixth year would be sufficient to sustain them for three years. However, from the following verse it seems to indicate something different: "If you will say: What will we eat in the seventh year? - Behold! We will not sow and not gather in our crops! I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and I will yield a crop sufficient for the three-year period." This seems to indicate that the blessing of a "bumper crop" that would be sufficient to supply food for three years would only come about if the question is asked, "What will we eat?"

The Sforno explains that the Torah is stating that the crop of the sixth year will satiate someone even if he were to consume only a miniscule amount. He quotes the Toras Kohanim, "If one eats even a

small amount it will bring blessing in his innards. The produce of the sixth year will be enough to sustain the Jews through the seventh and eighth year."

However if one does not have sufficient faith and thus is not worthy of this blessing, G'd will ordain that His blessing should manifest itself in a quantitative manner - that there should be a multiple yield that would be sufficient for a three-year crop. If in fact a miracle must occur in either case, then why does G'd not initially perform the latter miracle - providing a three-year yield?

The Gemara in Tractate Yomah tells us that before Moshe ascended to heaven to receive the Torah he entered into a cloud for six days. This was in order to, "cleanse the food from his innards." Since he was going to ascend to a spiritual realm, he had to be cleansed of the material. The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos states, "Moshe said, 'For forty days and forty nights bread I did not eat and water I did not drink.'" The Gemara explains that since Moshe was in the location of angels (spiritual realm), just as the angels are beings who are not in need of food, so too he did not need to partake.

The Torah tells us that when the Jewish people were in the desert they were sustained by the Manna. This food was completely absorbed in their inner organs and thus there was no bodily waste. The essence of the Manna was spiritual -thus causing it to be absorbed in to their innards without waste. It assumed whatever food item the individual who ate of it wanted.

In the desert, the Jewish people were surrounded and protected by the Clouds of Glory. The Jew had no material responsibility whatsoever because G'd provided for all his needs. There was no illness, clothing never became worn and they were not affected by the elements. They existed within a spiritual setting in a material world. When one exists in such a setting and wants to engage with holiness and have relevance to the Shechina (Divine Presence), one must wean himself (as much as possible) from the material.

The Torah states, "It (the Shmitta year) shall be a Shabbos for G'd (Shabbos la'Shem)." During the Shmitta year, one was to engage in Torah study and spiritual pursuits. All agricultural activities were halted for the explicit purpose to focus on one's spiritual development/relationship with G'd. The produce of the Shmitta year is inherently holy and thus cannot have its holiness (kiddusha) removed through redemption. This is unlike other objects that possess a kiddusha/holy status that can be transferred onto money/redeemed. The Sabbatical year, being a spiritual setting, causes its produce to have an advanced level of holiness. Thus, if one has the proper level of faith, he will be sated with a miniscule amount of food because he has greater relevance to spirituality. However if one questions the blessing of G'd or does not have a proper level of faith (as demonstrated by the question "What will we eat?") then G'd will give him a greater amount (quantitatively) because this is not contrary to his level, which is more physical.

Rambam writes in the Laws of Talmud Torah that if one wants to acquire the "Crown of Torah" he must "Bread with salt you shall eat, water in a measured amount you shall drink, sleep on the ground, and live a life of deprivation." This prescription is also found in the Mishna in Pirkei Avos.

Acquiring the Crown of Torah is a spiritual dimension. Thus in order to succeed in its pursuit, one must only partake in the physical to a minimum. Just as Moshe had to be cleansed before ascending to engage with the Shechina, so too one must limit his participation in the material in order to engage with Torah at an advanced level. Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and **Torah.org**.

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.