

... BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

The Torah does not usually leave room for official questions of faith. It tells us, in no uncertain terms, what our responsibilities are and the commitment we must make to be observant Jews. Every mitzvah entails sacrifice. Sometimes it requires a monetary commitment, sometimes a commitment of time and morals. Not often does it consider the human trials one encounters in mitzvah performance. They are our problem and we must deal with them as human beings and as Jews.

Yet this week the Torah uncharacteristically provides leeway for those who may waver in their commitment.

In Parshas Behar the Torah charges the Jewish people with the laws of shmittah. Every seventh year, we are told that the land of Israel is to lie fallow. No work is to be done with the earth. There is not to be a harvest, nor may the ground be sown or reaped.

Observing shmittah is a true test of faith. Imagine! One must not harvest his grain but instead rely on pure faith for his daily fare. Yet the Torah does not leave us with the austere command. The Torah deals directly with the human emotion related to the issue. In Leviticus 25:20 the Torah foretells a human side. "And if you will say in your heart, 'what shall we eat in the seventh year, behold the land has not been sown nor has it been reaped?'" Hashem reassures the people that His bounty will abound in the sixth year and they will live the seventh year in comfort.

This is not the only time the Torah realizes human wariness. In reference to the command of conquering the Land of Canaan, the Torah states in Deuteronomy 7:17: "Perhaps you shall say in your heart, 'these nations are more numerous than me. How will I drive them out?'" Once again Hashem reassures His nation that He will not forsake them.

The question is glaring. Why does the Torah answer to human psyche? Why doesn't the Torah just command us to let the land lie fallow, or conquer the Land of Canaan? If there are problems or fears in our hearts, they are our problems. Those fears should not be incorporated as part of the command.

Isidore would meet his friend Irving every other week while doing business. "How are you Irving?" Isidore would always ask. "How's the wife and kids?" Irv would always grunt back the perfunctory replies. "Fine." "A little under the weather." "My son Jack got a job."

This one sided interrogation went on for years until one day Isidore exploded. "Irv," he said abruptly.

"I don't understand. For six years I ask you about your wife, your kids, and your business. Not once mind you, not once did you ever ask me about my wife, my kids, or my business!"

Irv shrugged. "Sorry, Izzie. I was really selfish. So tell me," he continued, "how is your wife? How are your kids? How is your business?"

Izzie let out a sigh of anguish and began to krechts. He put his hand gently on Irv's shoulder, tightened his lips, and shook his head slowly. "Don't ask!"

Reb Leible Eiger (1816-1888) explains that there are many questions of faith that we may have. The faithful may in fact fear the fact that there is fear. "Is it a flaw in faith to worry?" "Am I committing heresy by fearing the enemy?" "Am I allowed to ask?" The Torah tells us in two places, "you will have these questions. You will ask, 'how am I going to sustain myself and family?' 'You will worry,' 'how will I conquer my enemies?' 'Will I be destroyed?'" The Torah reassures us that there is no lack of trust by asking those questions. We mustn't get down on ourselves and consider questions a breach of faith. Life and sustenance are mortal attributes. They warrant mortal fear.

Adam, the first man was originally blessed with eternal life without having to worry for his livelihood. After sinning, he was cursed with death and was told that he would eat by the sweat of his brow. The Torah assures us that it is not only human but also acceptable to worry about these two issues -- one's livelihood and survival, as long as we believe in the reassurances about those worries.

Good Shabbos!

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