

DIVINE COMPUTERS

by Rabbi Dovid Green

This week's parsha has been following the Jewish People around for over three thousand years. It is probably one of the greatest causes of controversy in history. It is the parsha discussing the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. According to the Torah, G-d revealed Himself to the entire Jewish nation on the mountain. Every person there heard G-d's voice, and experienced the multi-faceted revelation which occurred there. This experience made an indelible imprint on the soul of the people gathered there, and only because of it do we achieve the miraculous continuity which we have achieved throughout our incredible history.

Tradition teaches us that G-d taught Moshe the entire Torah, which comprises the first five books of the Bible. In the Torah there are a total of 613 commandments - 248 do's, and 365 don'ts. Not all of these commandments, or mitzvos apply to all Jews. Many can only be performed in Israel. Many apply to Kohanim, the priestly families who descend from the tribe of Levi. Many regard to the offering of sacrifices. Nevertheless, there are quite a few which still do apply to us all.

Among the ranks of the mitzvah observant we find adherents to different authorities - whom we call rabbis. This was really a concept which has its source in the topic of this week's parsha as well. Initially, the Children of Israel asked G-d (through Moshe) to cease speaking to them directly. The experience was too much for them. At that time the Children of Israel accepted upon themselves to always adhere to the words of their prophets, whom G-d did continue to communicate with. After the cessation of prophecy over a century after the destruction of the first Holy Temple in approx. 424 B.C.E, the people turned to their wise men who had a thorough knowledge and dedication to the observance of Torah and Mitzvos. To this day such an adherence and dedication still exists.

The question which bothers many people is "is this what G-d wanted from us, that we should be a bunch of robots just following directions, without any feeling or participation in the decision process? Where does individualism fit into all of this?

The Midrash Tanchuma (Tazria) states "the mitzvos were not given but to refine people through them." This means to say that through learning and observing commandments we achieve refinement. In other words, G-d gave us advice, and standards for our behavior in this world. By making those standards our goals we have a vehicle through which we can live up to our potential. G-d is challenging us to grow. Fulfilling one's potential is the greatest manifestation of individualism which one can express.

Consequently, instead of being squelched and constrained by the "burden" of all of these commandments and responsibilities, we have "opportunities" through which we can flex our spiritual muscles and live up to and expand our potential. One who accepts the veracity of the tradition, and accepts that these events took place, and that G-d indeed gave us these mitzvos to perform, views other choices of lifestyles as man-made versus G-d-ordained.

Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch (19th cent. Frankfurt) writes that the word Torah (Tav, Vav, Reish, Hey) comes from the root word which means to conceive (Hey, Reish, Hey), as in conceiving a child. Rav Hirsch explains that this is the goal of the Torah; to plant G-d's thoughts in our minds and hearts, that we should nurture and cultivate them, until they become part of our make-up, manifest in our thoughts and deeds. The teachings of the Torah circumscribe and temper unleashed spontaneity, but maintains it in a refined form. One who embraces the teachings of the Torah in thought and deed, becomes an instrument of G-d's will, and a messenger of G-d. At the same time he engages his feelings and emotions, and his own uniqueness in fulfilling the precepts of the Torah. This is the basis of Rav Hirsch's battle with the ethical humanists of his day, who wished to cast off proscribed behaviors, and cultivate the ethical personality from inside outward.

v Choosing to observe mitzvos is a choice to make a commitment. Yet it is still a choice in the fullest sense which a person reiterates with each mitzvah he performs. It is not robotic programming, but nurturing and sensitizing one's heart and intellect to interact with life whether it be on a personal, or communal level in a Torah way. And there are, and have been in history many challenges which impede progress in all of these areas, hence constantly bringing choice-making into the fore.

The Torah was given to the entire Jewish people, applicable to all generations. It is G-d's way of challenging us to make the best of our own unique raw materials. We have risen to the challenge, and that is why with G-d's help, we are still here to talk about it.

Good Shabbos!

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