

# TAMING THE BEAST

*by Rabbi Dovid Green*

I would like to continue the discussion of the verse "Sh'ma Yisroel..." Hear Israel, Hashem or G-d is the One and Only. "And you shall love Hashem your G-d with all of your heart..." The Torah states that we must love G-d with all of our hearts. Our sages take note of the Hebrew spelling of the word "heart" in this passage. There is a second and seemingly extra letter "beis" in the word which is not the common way of writing the word. Our sages explain that our heart in the broader sense of the meaning, our psyches, contain two oppositional components. The inclination to do G-d's will, and the inclination to follow our own desires and judgments. The two components are represented by the letter "beis" which the word is normally written with, and the second additional letter which is found here in this verse.

Maimonides, in his enumeration of the 613 commandments of the Torah, writes that there is a commandment to foster and cultivate our belief in G-d. It is idiomatic that the commandments of the Torah are incumbent on all female Jews 12 years of age and up, and on male Jews 13 years of age and up. Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman asks how it is possible for G-d to expect that kind of intellectual maturity from children when even great philosophical minds could not conclusively arrive at faith in G-d. Isn't it an unreasonable expectation?

Rabbi Wasserman writes that in fact, the opposite is true. If a person found a watch laying on the ground in the middle of the desert, he would naturally conclude that someone had been there. By the same token it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that there is a transcendent power which is behind our universe which is infinitely more complicated and phenomenal. How then can these great minds not have arrived at this conclusion?

Rabbi Wasserman explains that there is another force at work. The Torah commands: "do not to take bribes". This is a rule which generally applies to judges and legal matters, but it has other far-reaching applications regarding our own judgment. The prohibition of taking bribes applies to even Moshe and Aharon, the greatest luminaries. Why? The reason is that bribes cloud judgment, and no one is above that. No matter how great our depth of reasoning and righteousness may be, once a vested interest has the opportunity to mold our agenda, it will cloud our judgment and we will lose our objectivity, leading us to arrive at the wrong conclusions in a given matter. For this reason we find that many sages are recorded in the Talmud as having disqualified themselves from judging a particular case. They may have received even an unrelated favor from one of the plaintiffs in a legal issue, and they understood the profound influence it had on their ability to judge reality.

This is really one of the issues we need to consider when we form our opinions and attitudes, especially in important matters such as how we relate to G-d. Do I want to believe? What do I lose or gain by doing so? Rabbi Wasserman explains that this is why belief in G-d became difficult. I would add that the hypocrisy of some spiritual leaders and absurdity of some religious doctrines have contributed to that desire not to believe as well. But by and large, it is the desire not to have to be accountable. If one could remove accountability from the picture of belief in G-d, it would be easy to conclude that there is a transcendent force behind the universe. Now we can fully understand why the Torah even expects children to foster their belief in The Creator. Indeed, children have a much easier time doing so than adults.

Our job in loving G-d with all of our hearts is to recognize that there are inner forces which pull us away from committing ourselves to that which is for our ultimate good. We must rally both of the forces in us around the same cause, much in the same way that a rider directs the horse he is riding to be a vehicle of his will.

In this week's parsha, G-d directs the Children of Israel to camp in a particular formation while they wandered in the wilderness. Each of the twelve tribes had its own banner, and its own approach to serving G-d. Yet the entire formation had the Tabernacle as its nucleus. Serving G-d through meticulous study of Torah and performance of commandments was the central focus, even if the "banner," the emphasis and approach to G-d's service, the individuality, differed from tribe to tribe, and from Jew to Jew.

Our G-d is the One and Only. We His people merit to share that trait with G-d. It is achieved by loving Him with all of our hearts; by focusing our full strength on doing what the Torah says G-d wants from us; by understanding our divergent motivations and recognizing the "bribes" which cloud our focus; and by using our individual strengths to rally around the holiness that dwells in our midst.

Good Shabbos!

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