

WHY? BECAUSE I'M YOUR FATHER - THAT'S WHY!

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Mishpatim

Why? Because I'm Your Father - That's Why!

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Today's Learning:
Shekalim 6:3-4
O.C. 516:1-3
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Pesachim 39
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Kilayim 6

This week's parashah contains civil laws and laws regarding the judicial system, two types of rules without which no society could exist. Rashi writes that the parashah begins with the conjunction "And" to remind us that just as the Aseret Ha'dibrot in last week's parashah were given at Sinai, so the laws in this week's parashah were given at Sinai.

Why must the Torah remind us of this fact? R' Yitzchak Meir Alter z"l (died 1866; the first "Gerrer Rebbe," known as the "Chiddushei Ha'rim") explains that because these laws are both essential and logical, there is a risk that one would think that they are man-made. The Torah therefore instructs us that they were given at Sinai and that they should be observed, not because they are logical, but because they are G-d's will.

Rashi writes that Moshe might not have taught Bnei Yisrael the reasons for the mitzvot in this parashah, but Hashem commanded that he should. The Sefat Emet (the second "Gerrer Rebbe") explains similarly that Moshe did not want the Jewish people to observe the mitzvot because they agreed with the reasons. He wanted to ensure that Bnei Yisrael observed the mitzvot as G-d's decrees.

Hashem told Moshe, "No! Teach them the reasons. The real challenge is to understand the mitzvot and nevertheless to observe them solely because that is the will of Hashem." (Quoted in Ma'ayanah Shel Torah)

"When you lend money to My people, to the poor person who is with you . . ." (22:24)

The Gemara (Ta'anit 24b-25a) relates that the sage Rabbi Chaninah ben Dosa was so poor that his weekly consumption of food was limited to a quart of carobs. (Rashi writes that R' Chaninah could not even afford bread for Shabbat.) The Gemara continues:

His wife said to him, "How long will we suffer so?" He responded, "What shall I do?" She answered, "Pray that you be given something." He prayed, and he was presented with a golden table leg. Thereafter, he [some say, she] dreamt that all of the tzaddikim in Heaven sat at tables with three legs, while R' Chaninah sat at a table with only two legs. He discussed this with his wife and then prayed that the table leg be taken away from him.

R' Yehonatan Eyebchutz z"l (died 1764) asks several questions regarding this gemara: Why was R' Chaninah's wife complaining? Surely she was righteous like her husband and was not troubled by poverty! Also, why do all tzaddikim sit at three-legged tables, and what is the meaning of R' Chaninah's losing a table leg? He explains as follows:

The complaint of R' Chaninah's wife was not that she was hungry but, rather, that she could not perform the mitzvah of tzedakah. It pained her to see a poor person and to know that she could do nothing to ease his suffering. She therefore asked her husband to pray that Hashem give them the

means to give charity.

However, what happened as a result of R' Chaninah's prayers was the opposite of what his wife intended. When a person truly desires to perform a mitzvah but he is prevented from doing so by circumstances that are completely beyond his control, Hashem views it as if that person had, in fact, performed that mitzvah. Thus, so long as R' Chaninah and his wife were paupers and were unable to give charity, Hashem judged them as if they actually had given a great deal of charity.

On the other hand, when a person does have money and actually gives charity, he can never be sure that he has performed the mitzvah properly. Has he given as much as he should? Has he prioritized his donations properly? Has he, in fact, given substantial sums of money to people who were not deserving?

The three-legged tables in R' Chaninah's (or his wife's) dream represented the three pillars on which the world stands: Torah study, prayer and acts of kindness. Tzaddikim who have served Hashem in each of the three areas sit at tables with three legs. Had R' Chaninah and his wife remained poor, they also would have sat at a three-legged table because Hashem would have credited them with the mitzvah of charity (i.e. kindness) that they wanted to perform but couldn't. However, once they became wealthy, they became obligated to give charity, and they risked losing a table leg if they did not perform the mitzvah properly.

(Ya'arot Devash Vol. I, end of Drush 4)

"Yesod Ve'shoresh Ha'avodah"

("The Foundation and Root of Divine Service")

This year, we are presenting excerpts from the work Yesod Ve'shoresh Ha'avodah by R' Alexander Ziskind z"l (died 1794). The primary theme of this work is improving one's concentration in prayer. In Sha'ar Ha'ashmoret, Chapter 4, the author continues to discuss the blessings recited upon awakening. He writes:

Know this rule: All of the blessings that the Men of the Knesset Ha'gedolah [the assembly of sages at the beginning of the Second Temple Period] enacted--whether blessings on mitzvot, blessings of praise or blessings on pleasure--have as their straightforward purpose, aside from any lofty secrets, to cause man to remember G-d and His Dominion at all times. This reason is expressed by Rambam in Hilchot Tefilah, chapter 1, paragraph 3.

Accordingly, one must certainly take care that every one of the blessings of praise that leaves his lips, for example the Birchot Ha'shachar / Morning Blessings, be recited while concentrating on the praise of Hashem to which that blessing relates. [In other words, a person must know what each blessing means.] If one does not think about praises of Hashem that relate to the subject of each

blessing, how will he come to love and be in awe of His Dominion?

Now [R' Alexander Ziskind writes], I will begin to explain the simplest meaning of each of the blessings, for a blessing recited without such an understanding is equivalent to piggul / an invalid sacrificial offering. Furthermore, such a recitation cannot be called a "berachah," for that word connotes blessing and praising the Creator.

The blessing of "He give the sechvi understanding" refers to the heart's ability to distinguish between night and day. Because a rooster can distinguish between night and day, it also is called a "sechvi." Others write that the blessing actually refers to the rooster; we thank Hashem for creating roosters to awaken us. One who recites this blessing should feel great joy that Hashem has created such creatures. Moreover, one should feel great joy that man was given the understanding to be able to recognize Hashem's wonders.

In the blessing of "He did not make me an idolator" [such was the version recited by R' Alexander Ziskind], the phrase "He did not make me" refers to the circumstances of the individual's birth. [Presumably the author means to avoid the question, "How can I thank G-d for not making me an idolator when it is within my free will to become an idolator?"] One should feel immense joy that he was created with the ability to know G-d rather than being created as an idolator who knows nothing of G-d and His Torah. If a person would truly reflect on this gift, how could his heart not burn with joy when he recites this blessing?!

R' Yerucham Fishel Perla z"l

Except to those who have studied his encyclopedic commentary to the Sefer Ha'mitzvot by the 9th century Babylonian and Egyptian sage, R' Saadiah Gaon, R' Perla is virtually unknown. And, that is as he would have wanted. He was born in Warsaw in 1846 and studied under R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin in Lomza and under R' Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik. While he was still young, he was offered prestigious rabbinates, including in Lublin and Krakow, but he turned them down so he could continue his studies. His livelihood during this period came from a store that his wife operated.

R' Perla began writing his commentary on Sefer Ha'mitzvot when he was 30 years old, and he continued to devote himself to the task for the next four decades. For 14 of those years, he barely left his study. Even his meals were sent in to him. And, since the window of his study adjoined a shul, he did not need to leave his room for prayers.

R' Perla's work is considered to have opened up R' Saadiah Gaon's previously inaccessible Sefer Ha'mitzvot. Although tradition says that there are 613 mitzvot, no definitive list of those commandments exists; thus, many medieval writers composed their own. [There is little practical consequence to whether a given halachah is one of the 613 commandments or merely an offshoot of one, and Ramban makes clear that it is not even an article of faith that there are exactly that

number of commandments.] Some authors of such lists explained what their criteria were for including a mitzvah on the list of 613 or omitting it, but R' Saadiah did not do so. This was one of the reasons that his work was not widely studied until R' Perla's magnum opus was published.

In his eightieth year, R' Perla settled in Yerushalayim, and he died there on 30 Shevat 5694 (1934).
(Source: Kedoshim Asher Ba'aretz)

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