

TWO TYPES OF PERFECTION

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Yisro

Two Types of Perfection

Sponsored by
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on the yahrzeit of Esther's mother
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Today's Learning:
Kinnim 2:5-3:1
O.C. 275:12-276:1
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Kamma 48
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Kiddushin 12

King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (15:32), "He who rejects mussar / discipline despises his soul, but he who listens to tochachah / reproof acquires [an understanding] heart." R' Yaakov ben Chananel Sakly z"l (Spain; 14th century) writes: In this verse, King Shlomo is instructing us regarding two types of perfection that a person should strive to attain. "Mussar" refers to improving one's behavior toward other people, while "tochachah" refers to strengthening one's attachment to, and understanding of, Hashem. This latter form of perfection is also known as "chochmah" / wisdom, and it is found in the Torah, which is called "chochmah." We see this, for example, in the verse (Devarim 4:6), "For it is your chochmah / wisdom and binah / understanding in the eyes of the peoples, who shall hear all these decrees and who shall say, 'Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!'"

Which of these self-improvements comes first? R' Sakly writes that mussar must precede chochmah. A person must learn mussar first, for if he cannot get along with other people, he will never have friends who will help redirect him away from an incorrect understanding of chochmah (i.e., Torah). This is the meaning of the verse in Kohelet (10:3), "Even on the road as the fool walks, he lacks sense, and proclaims to all that he [i.e., the other person] is a fool." Since a fool has no one to direct him, he assumes that his ways are correct and everyone else is a fool.

Alternatively, R' Sakly writes, "He who rejects mussar despises his soul" refers to Amalek. As described at the end of last week's parashah, Amalek typifies the person who lacks any respect for others; thus, he burst into the camp of Bnei Yisrael uninvited. [Amalek wanted to kill Bnei Yisrael. Apparently, then, R' Sakly views Amalek's display of bad manners as a greater transgression than attempted murder.] In contrast, "he who listens to tochachah acquires [an understanding] heart" refers to Yitro. We read in this week's parashah that Yitro announced himself when he arrived at the camp of Bnei Yisrael and waited to be invited inside. Thus he merited to have part of the Torah associated with his name. (Torat Ha'minchah)

"Yitro heard . . ." (18:1)

R' Yehuda Leib Eiger z"l (chassidic rebbe of Lublin; died 1888) writes: The parashah which contains the Giving of the Torah begins with the word "Vayishma" / "He heard" to indicate that a willingness to listen and absorb is the key to coming closer to Hashem. Even a simple person, and even someone who is distant from Hashem, can draw closer when he is ready to listen to, and absorb, what G-d is saying.

How do I know that this is true? asks R' Eiger. Because a person who studies Torah constantly and performs many mitzvot realizes that he is distant from Hashem. Why then is he considered a meritorious person? Only because he wants to hear what G-d has to say. It follows, then, that anyone who wants to hear what G-d has to say can likewise draw himself closer. (Torat Emet)

"It was on the next day that Moshe sat to judge the people . . ." (18:13)

What types of property disputes did Bnei Yisrael have in the desert? R' Shalom Rokeach z"l (1803-1855; the first Belzer Rebbe) explains that they were arguing over the booty from the Red Sea. One man said, "This fine object washed up on the beach closest to you. It's yours." The second man replied, "No, you picked it up. It's yours." The first man retorted, "I picked it up on your behalf. It's yours." Pretty soon, they found themselves in court. (Quoted in Sefer Maharash)

"Moshe's father-in-law saw everything that he was doing to the people, and he said, 'What is this

thing you are doing to the people? Why do you sit alone with all the people standing by you from morning to evening?'

"Moshe said to his father-in law, 'Because the people come to me to seek G-d.'" (18:14-15)

R' Moshe Sofer z"l (the Chatam Sofer; rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Pressburg, Hungary; died 1839) explains this exchange as follows: Yitro understood that there were two reasons that might have justified Moshe's sitting while Bnei Yisrael were standing--either because of Moshe's own greatness, or because he was speaking G-d's word to the people. However, Yitro did not understand that the civil laws that Moshe taught immediately after the Giving of the Torah (see next week's parashah) were of Divine origin; he thought that Moshe had made them up for the benefit of society. Thus, he assumed that Moshe was sitting for his own honor.

To this Moshe answered, "No, the people are coming to me to seek G-d." All of the laws of the Torah are of Divine origin. (Torat Moshe)

"Honor your father and your mother . . ." (20:12)

R' Eliyahu Capsali z"l (Candia, Crete; died 1555) writes: Among all the mitzvot sichliot / commandments that our intellects would have dictated even if the Torah had not commanded them, honoring parents is the most obvious. Indeed, writes Capsali, there is no creation more worthy of honor and respect than parents. An indication of how lofty, yet obvious, this mitzvah is is the fact that throughout Tanach, when a speaker wishes to honor a person, he calls it "father" or "mother." Some examples:

The Torah says of Yosef (Bereishit 41:43), "He also had him ride in his second royal chariot and they proclaimed before him, 'Avrech!'," a word that Onkelos translates as "Father to the king."

Later, Yosef told his brothers to tell Yaakov (45:8), "He has made me father to Pharaoh."

In Devarim (32:7), we read, "Remember the days of yore, understand the years of generation after generation. Ask your father and he will relate it to you, and your elders and they will tell you." R' Capsali writes: "Father" in this verse must mean a wise man, not a biological father, for how can the Torah tell all people to ask their fathers about G-d's miracles when some people's fathers are wicked? Indeed, the Gemara (Shabbat 23a) derives the obligation to observe Rabbinic mitzvot (Chanukah candles) from the phrase, "Ask your father." Apparently, then, the Gemara understood "father" to mean Sages.

In Shmuel I (12:15) we read, "The hand of Hashem shall be against you and your fathers," which some commentaries interpret as "kings."

In Shmuel I (24:12), the future King David said to King Shaul, "Observe now, my father . . ."

When Eliyahu Hanavi ascended alive to Heaven, his disciple Elisha cried out (MelachimII 2:12), "Father! Father!" The Gemara (Mo'ed Kattan 26a) explains that the repetition was intended to convey the meaning: "Father and mother."

In Mishlei (1:8), we read, "Hear, my child, the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother." R' Capsali explains that "father" in this verse refers to anyone who disciplines a person. Again, it cannot be a blanket command for all people to listen to the discipline of their fathers, as discussed above. Furthermore, writes R' Capsali, to interpret the verse as referring to biological parents would imply that one must accept discipline only from parents. This is not true, as one must even accept discipline from a gentile in the marketplace.

Likewise, concludes R' Capsali, we find throughout the Talmud that distinguished men are called "Abba" and distinguished women are called "Imma." (Meah Shearim ch.6)

This Week in History, Halachah, and Minhag

Thursday night of the week of Parashat Yitro: It was the custom among the Jews of Tunis to hold a "Seudat / Feast of Yitro" on this night. Some say that the feast commemorates the feast that Yitro made in this week's parashah (18:12). Others say it celebrates the betrothal of the Jewish People to the Torah (see Rashi to Devarim 33:4). Finally, some say that the occasion is a feast of thanksgiving for the end of a plague that attacked the community's children at an unspecified time in history. (Luach Davar B'ito p.554)

The Jews of Algiers also celebrated this day with a feast, which they called, "The Feast of Siyum"--an acronym in Hebrew for Seudat Yitro v'Moshe. (Luach Davar B'ito p.554)

Shabbat Parashat Yitro: It was the custom in Yemen to call all of the children in the congregation to the Torah for the sixth aliyah (which contains the Aseret Ha'dibrot). (Luach Davar B'ito p.357)

22 Shevat: Asher the son of the Patriarch Yaakov was born on this day, and he died on this day 123 or 126 years later. He was buried in Kedesh Naftali together with his half-brother whose name the place bears. (Seder Ha'dorot)

23 Shevat: Some people fast on this day, which is the anniversary of beginning of the civil war described in Shoftim, chapter 20. (Shulchan Aruch, O.C., 580:2)

On this day in 4509 (749 C.E.), a deadly earthquake struck the Kinneret region of Eretz Yisrael. (Luach Davar B'ito p.564)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics

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