

THE DIVINE PUSH

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

"Carry out My laws and safeguard My decrees to follow them; I am G-d, your Lord. You shall safeguard My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live - I am G-d." (Vayikra/Leviticus 18:4-5) As G-d was about to instruct the Jewish nation about propriety in personal relationships, He exhorted them to avoid the corrupt behaviors of the Canaanites and the Egyptians. He demanded their vigilance in maintaining the sanctity of the different categories of Divine instruction, both the laws (practices which would be dictated by reason, even without the Torah's commands) and decrees (laws unfathomable by human intelligence). But considering the maxim that the Torah does not repeat any words unnecessarily, why does the Torah seemingly repeat the mandate from the first verse, to safeguard and perform the decrees and laws, in the second verse?

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, the commentator par excellence, whose commentary is considered basic to the understanding of the text) elucidates that the goal of the second verse is to add "safeguarding" (refraining from negative acts of violation) to protect the logical laws, and "carrying out" (the positive imperative of fulfillment) to the realm of the superhuman decrees. But if the goal was that simple, the second verse should simply have mirrored the first - "safeguard My decrees and carry out My laws." Instead, the second verse has both dictums for both categories of commandments, apparently rendering the first verse superfluous. Why?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem in New York City; the leading Halachic/Jewish legal decisor and foremost leader of Torah Jewry of his time) explains that the first verse is constructed per rational human psychology. Laws, the rules of interpersonal respect and order that common sense dictates are essential for a functional society, require our commitment to their fulfillment, but their obvious necessity should not require the additional caveat of safeguarding. Anyone who maintains proper ethical direction and G-d consciousness should automatically safeguard himself from violation of these laws. But we are witness to the frailty of the human, the inability of many to control their urges to have at the expense of others because of their inability to resist the calling of their yetzer hara (internal desire to act contrary to G-d's will; in many experiences, it is the side of the internal tug-of-war that pulls us to do what we know we should not). Thus the second verse emphasizes the need for safeguards for both decrees and laws. We cannot rely on our own motivations to keep us vigilant in protecting the laws; we need a Divine push.

Have you ever thanked a highway patrolman for giving you a speeding citation? True, his efforts are

not entirely altruistic, but ultimately he is simply enforcing the laws that the government of the people created to ensure our safety. Our forefathers accepted the instructions of the Torah, both the laws and the decrees, at Sinai 3315 years ago because they appreciated that G-d IS completely altruistic and understood that these rules are the timeless structure for ensuring our spiritual safety and fortifying our G-d consciousness. The period between Pesach and Shavuot is a time of metamorphosis, from subjugated servants of the mundane into freely choosing servants of the Divine. As we emulate the transformation of our forebears, we thankfully reaccept the Torah and the Divine push it offers.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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