

BACK TO BASICS

by Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig

"The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov (Jacob)." (Devarim/Deuteronomy 33:4) As every Hebrew letter has a numeric value, the word "Torah" equals 611. The Talmud explains this verse homiletically that Moshe taught us 611 of the Torah's 613 commandments, because at the Revelation at Sinai, G-d Himself declared the first two of the Ten Commandments. Our belief in G-d and the exclusion of all other gods were miraculously heard by the entire nation directly from G-d.

The difference between the fundamental principles of Jewish belief and all of the other commandments is not only in the way they were received. When Eliyahu HaNavi (the prophet Elijah) attempted to influence the Jews to repent and return to G-d's path, he said to them: "How long will you dance between two opinions? If G-d is the G-d, go after Him! And if the Ba'al (the popular idol of the era), go after it!" Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik (1) asked about the latter statement. In general, no matter how many mitzvah (Divine commandment) opportunities a person has forsaken he is still encouraged to perform even one mitzvah, or to refrain from transgressing even once, for despite his past the heavenly reward for this one act will not be erased. Why then did Eliyahu tell the people that if they chose to believe in both G-d and the Ba'al they may as well only believe in the Ba'al? Would not their partial belief in G-d be of some value? Why should they not fulfill the mitzvah of believing in G-d, even if it would not be done superlatively?

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that there is a difference between the foundations of belief and all other mitzvos. When a Jew performs other mitzvos, he can earn Divine reward for himself for performing them even in a less than idyllic fashion. When it comes a person's belief in G-d, however, there can be only one truth. Therefore Eliyahu told the people that if they chose to also believe in the Ba'al, they might as well only believe in him. If they would choose to not believe in the Oneness and Omnipotence of G-d, they have discarded the underpinnings of Judaism. There is a fundamental difference between one who believes in something but is not meticulous in his practice, and one who lacks this most basic belief.

The opening chapter of Mesilas Yesharim (2) is an exposition of the Mishna in Pirkei Avos/The Ethics of The Fathers, "This world is like a lobby before the world to come, prepare yourself in the 'lobby' so you may enter 'the banquet hall'." (4:21) G-d gave us the mitzvos of the Torah to facilitate the creation, nurturing and strengthening of our G-d consciousness in this life so that the intense relationship and identification exists for a meaningful, joyous afterlife. But proper preparation

mandates clear understanding of the charge. Therefore, the inauguration of this relationship, the Revelation at Sinai, begins with G-d's personal definition of the relationship: I am G-d Who took you out of Egypt. I took you out because I love you and I give you these mitzvos because I love you, but know that I am G-d Who took you out of Egypt with the most miraculous, nature-defying display of wonders so that Pharaoh, Egypt and the world know that there are no other gods in My presence.

Have a Good Shabbos!

FOOTNOTES:

- (1) 1853 - 1918; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean in Volozhin and, subsequently, Rabbi of Brisk, he became known as Reb Chaim Brisker; renowned equally for his genius in Torah learning and his saintliness
- (2) "Path of the Just", one of the most popular Mussar (introspective Jewish self-improvement) works in Jewish literature; a moving, inspiring work describing how a thoughtful Jew may climb the ladder of purification until he attains the level of holiness; authored by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, 1707-1746 of Padua, Italy, and Amsterdam

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