

NEEDLESS LOVE

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"If you will follow My decrees and observe My Commandments and perform them..." [26:3]

The Torah reading this week begins with a blessing, in which G-d promises us that the land of Israel will be fruitful and peaceful. But as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) notes, the first sentence appears to have a redundancy. Once we are told to observe the Commandments - which covers all types of Mitzvos, why is it necessary to also specify following the decrees?

His answer is that "following" indicates pursuit [see the *Sifsei Chachamim*]. He explains that "following the decrees" means becoming deeply involved in Torah studies - pursuing knowledge. Rashi then goes on to explain that the juxtaposition of the two indicates that we should learn in order to properly fulfill our obligations. But I would like to explore an alternative explanation for why these two appear together.

Later in the parsha, we read one of two troubling passages of curses, which G-d promises will befall the people of Israel should they abandon Him. Our Sages tell us that the two passages were realized with the destruction of the two Temples, each of which stood for over 400 years - and they analyzed the behavior of the Jewish nation, and explained in what ways they had abandoned G-d in each case. Concerning the First Temple, they said that Israel had violated the three "cardinal sins," for which one should sooner give up his or her life than betray: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and murder. Concerning the Second, they explained that Israel was observing the Commandments, but needless hatred brought down the Temple.

Clearly, the promises of blessing given at the beginning of the parsha are the opposite of the curses which follow. The opposite of violating the three cardinal sins is also obvious: observing them! And if one is careful to observe **all** the Commandments, then he or she will certainly observe these three as well. So thus we understand why G-d promises His blessings if we observe the Commandments - for we see that it was the complete abandonment of them which caused the destruction of the First Temple.

I would argue that **each** of the two phrases in the first verse is intended to oppose destruction: just as observance of all the Commandments is intended to ensure behavior which is the opposite of violating the three cardinal sins, deep involvement in Torah study is intended to produce the

opposite of needless hatred. What is the opposite of needless hatred? Needless love.

In the second chapter of the Sayings of the Fathers, we learn that Rabban Yochanon ben Zakkai, the leading teacher of his time, had five students - and he told them, go out and see what path a person should follow. Rebbe Elazar said that a person should have "a good heart" - and Rebbe Yochanon said that this was the best answer, for it included all the goals expressed by the others.

So Rebbe Yochanon, the leading scholar of his day, indicated that a good heart was the greatest attribute for a person to have. And Hillel also said there, in Chapter 1, "love all creatures, and bring them closer to Torah." The study of Torah is supposed to bring us to a warm heart, overflowing with love. As we study, let us work to bring this to fruition - and the blessings will follow.

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