

WEAR YOUR SHOES

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And now, Israel, what does HaShem your G-d ask from you, but that you fear HaShem your G-d..." [10:12]

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the father of modern Chassidus, offers a very interesting - and very Chassidic - twist on this verse.

When a father instructs his son not to run around barefoot, he does so to prevent injury - he doesn't want his child stepping on anything harmful. The reason the son obeys, however, depends on his age and development. A young child, who doesn't yet understand that the world can be a dangerous place, will wear shoes only in order to avoid punishment. He has no idea that going barefoot is inherently risky and therefore foolish - his father makes it so by threatening dire consequences.

An older child already understands that various things which appear safe and harmless might be very threatening in actuality. Furthermore, he recognizes that his father knows the dangers better than he. Thus when a father tells a more mature child to wear shoes, the latter obeys not in order to avoid punishment, but due to his appreciation of his father's advice. There is no difference between the fear of the father and that of the son - both are worried that the son may injure his feet.

G-d gave us 613 Commandments, explains the Ba'al Shem Tov, in order to protect us from over-involvement in material things, from haughtiness, from those things which would cause us to distance ourselves from Him. The Mitzvos form a system designed to straighten us and purify us of worldly influences, enabling us to become G-dly.

HaShem does not want us to observe the Commandments because we are afraid of Divine Retribution (fear of punishment). That is the attitude of a small child. Rather, says the Ba'al Shem Tov, G-d wants us to share His concern for our own spiritual growth and protection (fear of transgression). That is an "adult" attitude towards the Commandments.

Thus the twist on the verse, which in Hebrew reads "Ki im l'yirah es HaShem Elokecha" - "but that you fear HaShem your G-d." "Es" is an indefinite article with no English translation, but it can sometimes mean "with," as in "but that you fear with, or like, HaShem your G-d." His fear - His concern for our spiritual development - should be our fear as well.

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