

SECOND NATURE. AND THIRD

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Do not do as the deeds of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled, nor do like the deeds of the land of Canaan to which I bring you. Do not go in the way of their traditions.^[2]

We find here both unnecessary elaboration, and confusing changes of verbs and of order. If both Egypt and Canaan practiced all sorts of evil, the Torah could have simply joined them together, and instructed us to not do as the deeds of Egypt and Canaan. Why are they separated into two phrases? What does the end of the *pasuk* add when it instructs us not to follow their *chukim* / practices? For what purpose does the Torah emphasize that we once dwelled in Egypt? Is there some special reason to avoid the evil of a land in which we once lived? We are warned not to go in the way of their *chukim* / practices. Yet when we are pointed to the proper alternative, i.e. following the dictates of the Torah, "going" doesn't seem to be enough. Rather, the Torah tells us^[3] that we should safeguard to go in their ways.

Two observations may be the key to understanding the Torah's point. First, that people are far more inclined to be receptive to the familiar norms of a society in which they spent time, than those of a new place to which they have arrived. Second, that religious obligations tend to fall into two groups. Some are the behaviors that the faith wants to see in its adherents. Others serve to support those behaviors. They promote a life style in which the required behaviors can be performed easily. They train adherents to react and respond in ways that facilitate the key religious practices.

In training adherents, repetition is crucial. By repeating some action many times, it can become second nature. This repetition which aims to make some behavior easy and effortless, is called *halichah*, or "going" in a certain way. The Torah speaks of "doing" the key, crucial activities. The supportive actions that facilitate those activities the Torah sees as "safeguards."

In promoting proper conduct, it is not enough to exhort the people to merely "do" the mitzvos. Hashem wishes that His mitzvos become part of our nature. He therefore speaks not just of doing them, but of safeguarding this doing. In other words, He instructs us to surround those mitzvos with fences around the Law, and with supporting actions that make the mitzvos become part of our nature. Furthermore, He asks us to "go" in this way – meaning that we should bring constancy and repetition to them, so that they become ingrained in our schedules and in our inner selves. This should apply to all parts of our reactions. The "safeguarding" becomes second nature by constant repetition; all the more so does the "doing" of the core commandments. (This gives us another way

of looking at Hashem's instruction to Avraham: "Walk before Me and become perfect."^[4] By "walking," He means the constancy of frequent repetition; "Before Me" means the ancillary activities that prepare a person for the mitzvah-demands that later cross his path. By constantly readying himself in anticipation of future mitzvos, it becomes much easier for him to do what the Torah asks of him at that time. The constant preparation makes it more likely that he will be able to truly perfect himself.

So far, we've considered what Hashem wants us to do. He also commands us to distance ourselves from the impermissible. In avoiding what He wants us to stay away from, things shake out a bit differently. The Torah first addresses the sins of Egypt, where they dwelled for centuries. Precisely because we grew up in that society, we are inured to them. We don't see them as horribly wrong. Because their evil deeds are so familiar to us, we don't run in the opposite direction when accosted by them. We have no defenses against these activities. To the contrary, they call out to us as old neighbors. The Torah demands that we nonetheless find the strength to resist. If we are able to do so, then surely we will be able to deal with the challenge of Canaan, in which we did not grow up, but will be brought there by G-d. The despicable practices we will witness will entice us, but will be even easier to spurn than those of Egypt.

After speaking about Egypt and Canaan, our *pasuk* turns to something else. "Do not go in the way of their practices." It speaks of *chukim*/ traditions, and it speaks of "going." Behavior that the Torah considers fully sinful it terms *aveiros*. But the practices in a culture that lead up to or support sinful activity are also harmful, especially since they are repeated often. The Torah here tells us that if we can avoid the serious *aveiros* of Egypt and Canaan, it will be easier yet to turn our backs on the *chukim* of those societies – the cultural elements of those communities, not quite the real *aveirah*, but related actions that predispose their citizens to act as they are expected to. These, too, the Torah despises.

1. Based on Meleches Machsheves by R. Moshe Cheifetz, 1663-1711 .
2. Vayikra 18:3 .
3. Vayikra 18:4 .
4. Bereishis 17:1 .