

A SINGLE WORD

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

A single word, unexplained.

Libraries of meaning sometimes attach to one word, powerful because it both need not be explained, and at the same time defies explanation.

Devekus, clinging to Hashem, is one such word.

The staccato presentation of four commands in one verse trumpets an announcement of signal importance. "*Hashem your G-d you shall fear, Him shall you serve, to Him you should cling, and in His Name you shall swear.*"¹ We can sense that the brevity with which these items are mentioned belies the place they play in our lives.

Devekus is important enough that we will see it again in our parshah.² It will make two more appearances³ before our Chumash presents its last verse. After emphasizing that no mortal can literally "cling" to the overpowering presence of Hashem, Chazal."⁴ emphasize that the mitzvah of *devekus* must offer some sort of functional clinging that is within the realm of human possibility. Indeed, they find the perfect *modus vivendi* for us. We can attach ourselves to those people who are so far ahead of ourselves in their connection to Hashem, that they are human refractions of His greatness. Clinging to *talmidei chachamim*, to genuine Torah scholars, fulfills the obligation of *devekus* for us.

And yet it really doesn't. *Toldos Yaakov Yosef*, accompanied by a plurality of great commentators, tells us that in regard to this verse as well, the simple *pshat* cannot be ignored. *Devekus* remains a mitzvah in the plain, ordinary sense that it is usually understood. We are to attach ourselves to Him. *Talmidei chachamim* offer us a commonly available modality for finding Him and fastening ourselves to Him. They have already achieved *devekus*; when we attach ourselves to them, we connect with Hashem through them. The real goal, however, remains *devekus* to Hashem Himself.

It is a mitzvah that is indeed important enough to be mentioned by the Torah several times. (*Devekus* does not enjoy a monopoly on repetition. The Torah calls us to *kedushah* - another one of those compact but all-important words - a handful of times as well.)

How are we to understand the nature of this mitzvah? We can start by recalling the would-be convert who asked to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one leg.⁵ His challenge was no

match for Hillel, who responded, "what you find distasteful, do not do to *chaverchah*, to your friend. The *Avodas Yisroel* ⁶ reports what he heard in the name of his teacher. The word *chaverchah* should be understood as *chaverusecha*, the relationship of closeness between you.

Hillel, then, telescoped the entirety of Jewish life into one all- important preoccupation: *devekus* with Hashem. Do not do anything that could disturb or impede your relationship with your Creator. All the affirmative obligations bring us closer to that goal, while all the prohibitions seek to distance us from what could drive a wedge between Hashem and ourselves. The rest is all commentary - go forth, and study it.

His rebbi went on to find an allusion to this in the words "One thing G-d spoke; these two I have heard." Torah seems to vacillate between two unrelated poles - telling us what to do, and what not to do. In truth, these two are different facets of the "one thing" about which He spoke. He asks of us that we forge a relationship that is close and intimate. To accomplish this, He legislates for us activities that will bring us closer, while proscribing those that will move us further away.

Once we grant the centrality of *devekus* in Torah life, we understand as well why the Torah includes so many references to it. As a central pillar of our conduct, *devekus* is no simple acquisition. You cannot really answer the question of whether you have achieved *devekus* with a simple "yes" or "no." *Devekus* is complex and nuanced. It includes many different levels. The sundry references to *devekus* in the Torah are not repetitions for the sake of emphasis. Rather, each one of them refers to a different gradation or level of *devekus*.

Looking more closely, you will see that *devekus* is sometimes paired with *yirah*, fear of Hashem while other references link it to *ahavas Hashem*, or love of Hashem. These differences do not simply suggest that there are several access points to the universe of *devekus*. Rather, they stem from *devekus*' complexity. *Yirah* and *ahavah* generate different forms of *devekus*, which occupy different positions on the vertical scale that links heaven and earth.

In much the same way, the Torah exhorts us to *kedushah* in several places. *Kedushah* is the real *linchpin* of *devekus*. To whatever extent a person lacks some subtlety of *kedushah*, to that extent he misses out on *devekus*. This means that *kedushah* as well is not a simple, uncomplicated quality, but a constellation of values. The multiple references to it reflect many points on a continuum, many forms of *kedushah*.

Important as *devekus* is, we still have a difficult time understanding the Torah's prodding us about it, treating it as an independent quality. We achieve *devekus* when we properly address two related obligations: *ahavas Hashem* and *yiras Hashem*. The Torah itself links them,⁷ implying an organic relationship between them. Indeed, how else could it be? A person contemplating the greatness of Hashem, standing in awe of His exalted grandeur, has little choice but to be drawn close to Him and long to become part of Him. Having instructed us independently in the obligations of *ahavah* and

yirah, why does the Torah make separate mention of *devekus* elsewhere?

The Ramban⁸ provides an answer. *Devekus*, he says, implies that we never avert our gaze from Him, that we never lose our focus on our love for Him. *Devekus* is constant and uninterrupted. Episodes of elevation and attachment to Him are important, but they do not describe the madregah that Hashem asks us to achieve. True *devekus* means a bond so strong, that it cannot be severed, whether for long periods of time or short ones. The Maharal⁹ puts it quite succinctly. "If *devekus* is erratic, by chance alone, it is not *devekus* at all." >."10

We seem to have set our sights at too elevated a position. Having explored the implications and interconnectedness of *ahavah*, *yirah*, and *devekus*, we cannot help but be impressed. We also cannot fail to realize that none but a special, small group of individuals can hope to achieve them as they have been defined. If *devekus* is the touchstone of Torah living and its single most important goal, of what value are our own lives? We can toil for decades, without coming close to achieving what Torah is all about! How depressing!

This is a misunderstanding. In regard to all the mitzvos of the inner person (even including the mitzvah of loving another as oneself), the essential obligation is to strive. The fulfillment of the mitzvah is in the concern, the concentration, the will to accomplish - not in the accomplishment itself.

We must see these lofty qualities as part of our personal universe, not the domain of the special others. When we do, the effort we expend is itself our success.

¹Devarim 10:20

²Devarim 11:22

³Devarim 13:5; 30:20

⁴Kesubos 111B

⁵Shabbos 31A

⁶Avos 3:10

⁷As in Devarim 10:20, linking *yirah* with *devekus*

⁸Devarim 11:22

⁹ Nesiv HaAvodah chapter 4

¹⁰ R Aryeh Kaplan zt"l was greatly pained by the hundreds of young Jews who sought spirituality in Eastern practices, convinced in their ignorance that there was nothing spiritual in Judaism. He

emphasized that there was no spiritual experience or insight in those practices that was not ready and available in our own seforim. The Rebbe's treatment of devekus in this paragraph is an ironic example of where the Torah sets the bar higher than other disciplines, which often content themselves with periodic episodes of elevation and clarity.

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