

THE PRIVILEGE OF DOING

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

He [R.Chanina ben Dosa] used to say, "Whoever's actions are greater than his wisdom, his wisdom endures. Whoever's wisdom is greater than his actions, his wisdom does not endure.

Can wisdom and actions be measured on the same scale? We might be able to speak of actions in terms of quantity, but wisdom can only be compared qualitatively. People have long puzzled over this Mishnah!

We might add that a Mishnah at the end of this perek revisits the same theme. In R. Elazar ben Azaryah's version, only the mashal appears to change. There, the person whose actions exceed his wisdom is likened to a tree with a vigorous root system and trim branches. A person with a surfeit of wisdom relative to actions, on the other hand, is compared to a tree with too many branches, and inadequate roots, which can easily be toppled by the force of a passing wind.

How apposite is the comparison to the tree? Can more wisdom - which, after all, means Torah wisdom, ever harm a person? To take it further (as Maharal does), is the best model for life the richly-rooted, sparsely- branched tree? Adding more branches to a tree with the same root network will certainly leave it more of a target for a strong wind. Do we really mean to say that adding more branches (i.e. more wisdom) to a person whose deeds stay constant is disadvantageous?

One solution might be to reconsider the meaning of merubah/ greater in the Mishnah. Rabbenu Yonah does just that, citing a different version in which R. Chanina ben Dosa's maxim is followed by a proof-text - the famous words na'aseh v'nishmah / "we will do, and we will listen" with which Klal Yisrael enthusiastically proclaimed their acceptance of the Torah . One's actions should be greater than his wisdom in the same way that Bnei Yisrael placed their actions in front of their comprehension. They pledged in advance to do whatever the Torah would demand of them. Having accepted to act unconditionally in accordance with Hashem's future instructions, explains Rabbenu Yonah, they were credited with actions they did not yet know about! Their actions indeed exceeded their knowledge of what was asked of them.

The Mishnah's instruction to us is not to go back in time and add to the chorus of na'aseh v'nishma sayers. It speaks to us in the here and now. Indeed, we have two distinct ways of generating more actions than our wisdom allows - of putting our deeds before our comprehension.

The first is similar to what Bnei Yisrael did at Har Sinai, but applied on an individual level. Every person has the opportunity of fixing in his heart an unconditional willingness to do whatever Hashem

asks of him. Doing this requires a good amount of bitul, of negating one's own desires and autonomy in favor of Divine guidance. (Bowing entirely to the Will of Hashem is the daily regimen of the angels. For this reason, the gemara depicts the astonished reaction of a Heavenly voice upon hearing Bnei Yisrael say na'aseh v'nishma. "Who revealed this secret to my children - a response that the angels use!" This response fairly well distills the actions of the angels.)

A different application of the principle calls upon us to apply it to individual mitzvos. We might look approvingly to a person who approaches every mitzvah with expectancy and enthusiasm, anticipating the pleasure that comes with feeling connected to Hashem. The anticipation of this pleasure, however, is symptomatic of a lack of self-negation. Part of his performance is contingent on his own need, his own joy in fulfilling it.

This is not the way it should be. Mitzvos ought to be exercises in yielding ourselves entirely to the Divine. We should act because He asks us to, without needing any comprehension or understanding, without requiring a spiritual adrenalin rush.

But how can this be? A mitzvah without joy is like a body without a soul! How can we banish the pleasure that comes with a mitzvah without sapping its life?

We will find the answer in differentiating between two different kinds of joy associated with mitzvos. We are privileged, sometimes, that a mitzvah resonates within. We connect with it, we "get" it - intellectually or emotionally, we see the mitzvah is a new light, and on some level comprehend something of its essence. We are really connecting at such times with Hashem Himself, on some level, and experiencing the pleasure of being with Him. Mesilas Yesharim tells us that there is no greater joy in life.

A second kind of joy flows from comprehending what a privilege it is to be able to do Hashem's bidding. We may understand and feel nothing of the mitzvah itself, but feel elated that we are capable of responding to His Will.

It is possible that this joy is even greater than the first we described.

When Klal Yisrael put na'aseh before nishma, they also chose the second joy over the first. They said, "We will approach Your commandments with joy. We will prefer the joy of na'aseh, of meriting to be in a position to do, over the joy of nishma, of beholding the inner luster of each mitzvah. We will gladly perform, even if the latter joy is denied us."

It is now apparent why two Mishnayos seem to speak about the same tension between wisdom and action. R. Chanina ben Dosa teaches about the general willingness to obey whatever Hashem will ask of us, even when we have no idea of what that might involve. By agreeing unconditionally to do whatever we will be called upon to do, we are credited as if we had already performed. Our actions therefore exceed our wisdom. In the merit of this unconditional acceptance, we are blessed with Divine assistance - a necessary preservative of Torah wisdom, without which it is often lost. (As the

Ya'avetz teaches regarding our Mishnah, HKBH allows access to His wisdom only to those who manage to please Him.)

R. Elazar ben Azariah speaks of the other variety of placing deed before wisdom. Those who expect epiphanies of insight when they perform mitzvos set themselves up for failure. Too often, we are simply not in a position to achieve such insight, for several reasons.

One is that the yetzer hora targets the times of the year in which such insight would seem to be most available. Many people have noticed that in the run-up to special holy times like the yomim tovim, they find themselves unfocused and preoccupied. Because yomim tovim have so much potential for good, the yetzer hora works tactically to keep a person out of range of any elevation. Such a person approaches important occasions with great expectation, only to be left deflated and depressed when he is left with nothing. His mind has been stopped up; his heart has been stopped up. (In a very down to earth sense, this is an example of what sifrei chassidus mean when they speak of achizas chitzonim, of the seizure of a mitzvah object by forces of evil.)

The comprehension-oriented person is in danger of having his entire approach to life uprooted when he sustains a few failures of this kind - or at other times that he feels an acute need for special insight and elevation to keep him going, and finds none. He is an easy target, just like the tree struggling with the weight of its branches.

Not so the person whose finds joy simply in the opportunity to do, to perform the Will of Hashem. None of the passing winds are a match for his spirit, one that accompanies him in all situations in life.

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