

MULTIPLE-CHOICE AVODAH

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Now, Yisrael, what does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem your G-d; to go in all His ways and to love Him, and to serve Hashem your G-d with all your heart and all your soul; to observe the commandments of Hashem and His decrees which I command you today, for your good.

"Only?!" What more could He ask? Does this list leave any demand unstated? Have we missed some form of avodah that is not mentioned here?

The gemara^[2] begins to address the difficulties in these pesukim - and then drops the ball. "Is fear, then, such a trifling matter? Indeed, in regard to Moshe it is a small thing." Why does the gemara not challenge all the other demands of these pesukim, and ask whether they, too, are minor affairs?

Furthermore, this list sports an internal contradiction, as well as a paradox. After demanding that we love Hashem, we learn a few phrases later that Hashem's demands of us are for our own good. "Love" in the pasuk implies a selfless love of devotion and service of Hashem; it is incompatible with that service being tainted by our own self-interest. The demand that we love Him is also paradoxical. We know of only two ways in which a person can rise to the lofty level of loving Hashem: avodah in the beis ha-mikdosh, and deep Torah study. These are not accessible to all people at all times. How, then, can the Torah turn love into a normative demand of all Jews?

Clearly, the answer is that He doesn't. The various items on the list do not apply universally, but to four different sub-groups within Klal Yisrael. The beginning of parshas Nitzavim^[3] explicitly describes the makeup of these four groups: "the heads of your shevatim; your elders and officers; - all the men of Israel; your small children, your women." Hashem assigns each group a different avodah. The remaining forms of service are not demanded. Indeed, in some cases they are forbidden, as we shall see.

We begin with the first - the "heads of tribes." This is another way of saying community leaders. Burdened as they are with a constant procession of needs and issues, they have no time to devote to the quiet, contemplative hours of devekus to Hashem. Should they attempt to work on their ahavas Hashem, their performance as leaders will suffer. (Avraham's ministering to the three guests^[4] at the moment that he readied himself to receive the Shechinah illustrates this point. The gemara^[5] determines that hosting guests is "greater" than receiving the Shechinah. This certainly does not mean that the spiritual value of the former is greater than that of the latter. The opposite is true. What makes hachnosas orchim "greater" is that it can trump the obligation to perform other

mitzvos. It takes legal precedence over receiving the Shechinah, even if it does not excel spiritually. Similarly, the community needs borne by its leaders often push aside the observance of mitzvos, even though these mitzvos are spiritually loftier.)

Having shown that the community heads cannot involve themselves in love of Hashem and devekus, and that pressing communal matters must sometimes push aside their performance of practical mitzvos, we begin to understand what the Torah demands of them. They, more than any other group, need to be incessantly preoccupied with yir'as Hashem.

There is good reason for this expectation. Leaders in a position of power face an occupational hazard. Power corrupts and is corruptible. Leaders can easily utilize their power for their own advantage - unless a heightened sense of fear of Hashem leaves them no room to do so. They can apply their power unevenly, favoring those who flatter them, and using it as a cudgel against those who have slighted them - unless the fear of Hashem weighs heavily upon them. Perhaps more importantly, leaders need to focus on yir'as Hashem for their own protection. Aveiros against other human beings are not easily atoned for. When all else fails, it is yir'as Hashem that will protect them from willingly or unwittingly slighting others.

The second group listed in parshas Nitzavim are the elders, those looked up to by the community for guidance and inspiration. These elders are the talmidei chachamim who spend their days toiling in Torah. The next few demands of our pasuk all apply to these zekeinim. They can - and should - spend much time focused on Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu, in a manner that leads to greater attachment to Him and love of Him. Moreover, their learning prepares them to serve Hashem with all their heart and soul, meaning that the avodah of their mitzvos is performed with full meticulousness, precision, and attention to small detail. Their penetrating understanding of Torah leads them to "go in all His ways," i.e. understand enough about Him that they can imitate His various modes of compassionate conduct.

These demands are not placed upon the legions of working people, preoccupied as they are with making a living. Hashem asks of them that they "observe the commandments of Hashem and His decrees." They are asked to rise to the challenge of ensuring that their involvement in their work does not come at the price of slacking off in the performance of their mitzvah duties.

That still leaves a good number of people who do not fall into any of the other categories. Not spending their days working at a livelihood, their productivity is generally in the service sector - they facilitate and enable the work of the other three categories. The Torah asks of them that they work for their "good," meaning that they specialize in producing good for the rest of mankind, and in the process, become good people themselves.

The Torah brings all four categories together because together they describe the entirety of the Jewish people. Through those categories, all the different expectations Hashem has of different groups can be succinctly stated. Indeed, this variegated avodah is not so difficult. Each sub-group is

predisposed towards its designated form of avodah. (The gemara only questions the yir'ah asked of the leaders: is this such a trifling demand. After pondering the question, the gemara relates that in the company of a Moshe Rabbenu, yir'ah is not so difficult to come by. The gemara does not ask the parallel question regarding the acquisition of love of Hashem, perfect service, etc. Since these are expected only of the talmid chacham, the gemara realized that limud Torah itself facilitates those ways of relating to Hashem.)

Hashem not only refrains from asking the impossible of us, He engineers things so that what we are expected to do is close at hand, well within our grasp.

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1. *Based on Ha'amek Davar, Devarim 10:12*
 2. Berachos 33B
 3. Devarim 29:9-10
 4. Bereishis 18:3
 5. Shabbos 127A
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