

TORAH - WHAT IS IT WORTH TO YOU?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

In parshas Eikev Moshe recounts the tragic story of the Golden Calf (Eigel Ha-zahav). Moshe had just received the two Tablets (Luchos), carved by Hashem, upon which He had inscribed the Ten Commandments. Hashem then tells Moshe what the Jews are up to, and he is forced to leave in a hurry (he had been in Heaven 40 days and nights without food or drink). Upon witnessing their rejoicing and merriment as they danced around the Golden Calf, Moshe casts the Luchos down and breaks them - not out of anger but because he felt they no longer deserved them - an act for which Hashem ultimately gives him His approval (Shabbos 87a).

Moshe prays for their forgiveness for forty days and nights, and it is granted. The Torah then writes, "At that time, Hashem said to me, 'Carve for yourself two stone Tablets, like the first ones, and ascend to Me on the mountain... and I will inscribe on the Tablets the words that were on the first Tablets that you shattered. (10:1-2)"

Note that these Tablets were not made by Hashem, but rather carved by Moshe. Rashi (Shemos/Exodus 34:1) comments on the unusual use of the reflexive, "Carve (in Hebrew p'sol) for yourself," that Hashem is alluding to Moshe that the "leftovers" or scrapings of the carved stones (p'soles in Hebrew), which were made of sanpirinon, an extremely valuable gem, were to be Moshe's property, and it was from this that Moshe became rich.

If the Jews had not sinned, and the first Luchos were never broken, then all this would not have taken place, and Moshe would not have become wealthy. Why is it that Moshe was indirectly "rewarded" as a result of the sin of the Calf?

The Gemara (Nedarim 32b) concludes that if one made a vow (neder) not to receive any form of pleasure from someone, he is still allowed to walk through his field, because people generally don't care if other people walk across their property (lo kapdei inshei). What does it make a difference if people care or not? The Ran (ibid.) explains that since the vow specified that he would not derive pleasure from him, things which people aren't particular about are excluded, because something about which people aren't particular isn't called having pleasure.

The Turei Even (Megillah 8a) asks that the Gemara forbids sitting in the shade of an idolatrous tree (Asheira), or in the shade of the Holy Temple (Heichal), because it is forbidden to derive pleasure from them - even though people are normally not particular whether one uses their shade! He therefore explains that the scope of a vow depends on what the person making the vow had in

mind, and we assume that he never intended to forbid something that people don't normally make an issue about. Apparently the Ran differentiates between what is defined as "pleasure" with regard to vows, as opposed to what is pleasure vis-a-vis idolatry or consecrated items (see Darchei David in Nedarim).

At any rate, from the Ran's opinion an exceptional concept emerges: Something that we're not particular about does not have any value. Applying the same logic to the metaphysical: The value of our Torah and mitzvos depends on how particular we are about them. If we approach mitzvos with indifference, aren't we really saying that they are of little value to us? If, by contrast, we approach Torah observance with the greatest care, concern, and meticulousness, it is an indication of how precious and priceless they are.

The Gemara (Chullin 87a) tells the story of a person who slaughtered an animal, and someone else came along and covered up its blood before he had a chance to do so (it is a mitzvah to cover the blood of a slaughtered animal). Rabban Gamliel obligated him to pay 10 golden coins for "stealing" the mitzvah from the slaughterer.

The Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Ha-mishpat 382:1) records two opinions as to how this law is to be interpreted: Some say that in all cases where one seizes someone else's mitzvah the payment is ten gulden. Others say that in each case, the judges (dayanim) must decide the subjective worth of that mitzvah.

How are they to decide the worth of the stolen mitzvah? The S'ma writes (ibid.): It all depends on the person who was precluded from doing the mitzvah: If he is a person who is particular about his mitzvos, and goes to great lengths to do a mitzvah completely and meticulously, then the punishment should be appropriately costly! If he is a person who is apathetic in performing mitzvos, and doesn't mind "getting out" of a mitzvah every once-in-a-while, then the penalty should be reduced. (R' Chaim Kaufman shlita)

How much is a mitzvah be worth to us? Would we be more upset if someone else gave our neighbour a ride home, or if they chapped our parking space? Would it bother us more if we missed answering amen on a beracha, or if we missed a great sale at the supermarket? We may reflexively reply that a mitzvah is worth more to us than anything in the world - "They are more desirable than gold, than even the finest paz; sweeter than honey, than dripping from the combs (Tehillim/Psalms 19:11)" - but it is not our words nor our assertions that answer this question, but our actions and reactions.

The Yismach Moshe (Balak) asks why Moshe didn't kill Zimri himself for committing adultery with a Midianite woman, something which is halachically correct (to kill the adulterer), yet we do not formally teach it (halacha ve-ain morin kein). At least after Pinchas brought up the halacha (he said to Moshe, "Moshe, our teacher, didn't you teach us, when you descended from Har Sinai, that a zealot may kill one who commits adultery with a pagan?"), why didn't Moshe, as the leader, take the matter

into his hands. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 82a) quotes Moshe as saying, "Let the one who read the letter complete the matter" - apparently meaning: You (Pinchas) brought it up, you do it. What is the logic behind this? And why did Pinchas point out that Moshe taught them this halacha "when he descended from Sinai?" And how did Moshe teach it to them in the first place?

Moshe, he writes, was one with the Torah. He was not a Torah scholar in the simple sense; his dedication and total commitment to Torah study were so great that he became a conduit for the Torah, and it was because of this that the Torah was given through him, literally, to us. There are 600,000 letters in the Torah, corresponding to the 600,000 souls that stood at Sinai. Each Jew is a letter in the Torah. When a Jew sins, G-d forbid, he blemishes his letter in the Torah. Since Moshe was one with the Torah, when the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf, they diminished his connection to the Torah. This is why Rashi quotes Hashem saying to Moshe after the sin of the Calf (Shemos 32:7), "Go down - your greatness is only due to them!"

Since, at this point, Moshe's connection to the Torah had been severed, he was able to teach the halacha of killing the adulterer to the Jews; at any other time, he could not have taught it, because the Torah (Moshe) does not teach this halacha. After they completely repented for the sin, and Moshe received the second Tablets, he once again became unified with the Torah, and thus it was impossible for him to do the deed. The Torah is called a "letter" (see Megillah 19a). "The one from whom the letter (i.e. the Torah) is read (that is - me!), can he do the deed?!" That would be tantamount to the Torah teaching this halacha - which it is not meant to.

Moshe, it emerges, suffered 80 days during which his unity with the Torah was severed as a result of their sinning. For Moshe, we can imagine, this must have been a source of immeasurable pain. Since, according to the first opinion in the Shulchan Aruch, one must be compensated according to his love for a mitzvah, it is only appropriate that Moshe receive the immeasurable wealth of the leftover gems from which the Tables were carved.

Have a good Shabbos.

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