

ABANDON YOURSELF TO THE GREATER MORAL TRUTH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This is the statute of the Torah which God commanded, saying . . . (Bamidbar 19:2)

As it is known, there are basically two types of mitzvos, Mishpatim and Chukim. Mishpatim, which means "judgments," are the mitzvos that make sense to us, that we might have established even had the Torah not sanctioned them. These are mitzvos such as don't murder, don't steal, etc., the things we need to obey if society is to be civil.

Chukim, usually translated as "statutes," on the other hand, are mitzvos whose Divine logic defies us. These are commandments that, had the Torah not obligated us to perform them, we would never have thought to do so on our own. We would not have been able to see without the Torah, how mitzvos such as the Red Heifer benefit society and Creation as a whole.

It's not as if we can't understand aspects of chukim, especially once we have been told them, just as it would be a mistake to assume that we fully understand all aspects of the mishpatim. There are mishpatim qualities to chukim and vice-versa.

Rashi, when defining chukim says the following:

This is the statute of the Torah: Because the Satan and the nations of the world aggrieve the Jewish people by saying, "What is this commandment?" and "What reason is there for it?" "It is a decree from before Me, and you do not have the right to reflect upon it." (Rashi, Bamidbar 19:2)

From this Rashi one could get the impression that Torah Judaism demands its adherents to have blind faith when it comes to serving God. However, one hour in any Orthodox yeshivah would quickly give a person the exact opposite impression, that Torah Judaism demands that even the average person have a good working understanding of mitzvos and their daily application. Has the Torah simply ignored Rashi, or did Rashi ignore the yeshivah world?

Neither. Rather, both opinions accept each other and actually complement each other, saying that yes, a person has to do whatever he can to understand whatever is understandable about Torah. But, a person also has to know the limits of his understanding, that he will reach intellectual walls over which he may never climb, or at least not until he further develops as a Torah Jew.

There is a rule about life: the yetzer hara cannot attack you over issues on which you are morally firm. Where you are certain about truth he will leave you alone, saving his strength and artillery for

other places where you are not so certain. He knows how to pick his battles and where best to expend his energy, and the only defense against him then is to know those places as well. Then a person can work on eliminating the intellectual confusion that creates the emotional vulnerability in the first place, and remove the yetzer hara from there as well.

Sometimes that is not possible at all, or at least at the moment of crisis. What is a person to do where that occurs so that he not fall prey to the often irresistible temptation of the yetzer hara to go with human reasoning over Divine logic? This week's parshah answers that profound question with a profound answer: Abandon yourself to the greater moral truth.

In last week's parshah, the inability to do this is what brought Korach and his rebellion down. He had questions, and Moshe's approach to them defied his logic. Rather than realize his intellectual and emotional limits, some of which were based upon concealed biases, and abandon himself to the greater moral truth, he challenged it, drawing courage from his own perspective on the matter. In simple terms, he thought too much, and it made him a sitting duck for the yetzer hara and the Sitra Achra.

Thus the Torah says, this is the chok of the Torah, which is interpreted on many levels. One fundamental level is exactly this: as wonderfully understandably as life may be, never lose sight of the fact that it is also incredibly chok-based. Creation is a function of Divine logic which is far more sophisticated than human logic can ever hope to be. The Torah was given to us to recall this, and to teach the difference between right and wrong, from the Creator's perspective, so that when our idea of "right" conflicts with God's, we can abandon ours and pursue His.

There is a story in the Talmud that does not seem to be talking about this, but it really is:

When Rav Zera went up to the Land of Israel and could not find a ferry with which to cross [the river] he grasped a rope bridge and crossed. Thereupon a certain Sadducee sneered at him, saying, "Hasty people, that put your mouths before your ears, you are still, as ever, clinging to your hastiness." (Kesuvos 112a)

The Sadducee, or Tzaduki in Hebrew, was referring, of course, to the time of the receiving of the Torah. When asked by God whether or not they would accept His Torah, the Jewish people responded with the famous phrase, "We will do and we will understand" (Shemos 24:7), what the Talmud calls the "language of the angels" (Shabbos 88a).

In other words, the Talmud is saying, it is not very human to talk this way, putting obedience before logic. It is, however, quite angelic, because angels exist to do the will of God and don't even have the capability to do otherwise. Hence:

Rav Alexandri on concluding his prayer used to add the following: "Master of the Universe, it is known full well to You that our will is to perform Your will . . ."

When the Jewish people answered "We will do and we will understand" they were in effect saying that when it comes to the will of God, human understanding is secondary at best. There is no second-guessing God when it comes to right and wrong, except, as Rav Alexandri concluded, when the yetzer hara gets a piece of the action:

"... What prevents us [from faithfully doing the will of God]? The 'yeast' in the 'dough' and being subject to foreign powers." (Brochos 17a)

the "yeast" referring to the yetzer hara and the "dough" referring to the body.

On the other hand, the Jewish people did not only answer, "We will do." They also answered, "We will understand," meaning that where it is possible to understand we will endeavor to do so. In fact, as the Arizal explained, it is an obligation to do so:

There are four levels [of Torah learning] and the hint is "Pardes," which stands for: Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod—Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, and Kabbalah. A person needs to toil in all of them to the extent that he can, and seek out a teacher to educate him. If a person lacks any of these four levels relative to what he could have achieved then he will have to reincarnate [to complete the levels he is lacking]. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 11)

Hence, in this simple but crucial answer of the Jewish people to God's offer of Torah we have a reference to the concepts of both chok and mishpat. Whereas the rest of mankind, the Tzaduki was saying, would have "normally" put mishpat before chok, the Jewish people put chok before mishpat. They did this when they committed themselves to do the will of God before being able to even understand it. What the Tzaduki did not realize was that by putting mishpat before chok, situations can arise that result in rebellions, such as in the case of Korach in last week's parshah.

This is the most fundamental difference in the entire universe between a loyal servant of God and of mankind, and a disloyal one. When man makes his service of God dependent upon his perception of reality, which is dependent upon his assumptions about reality, he will often get to points where his logic will take precedence over God's. This can only be ultimately destructive for himself, his society, and the world in general. His yetzer hara will have a voice, and a strong one at that, as it clearly has throughout mankind's convoluted and often self-destructive history.

To be clear, we're not talking about "blind faith," which some religions advocate and which has given faith a bad name. Blind faith ignores the concept of mishpat altogether, ignoring human logic where Divine logic permits it and even insists on it. True faith, the kind that God expects of man, must be a combination of both chok and mishpat, as the Torah says:

You have been shown to know that the Lord is God; there is no other beside Him. (Devarim 4:35)

So when the Talmud states that the only way a person can overcome his "deadly" yetzer hara is with

help from God, this is it. It is only by having faith in God that a person can fight against and be victorious over his or her yetzer hara. It is faith that takes the wind out of the sails of the yetzer hara, and it is faith that opens up a person to the kind of Divine assistance that makes victory over the yetzer hara possible. As it says:

Moshe Rabbeinu knew quite well that this was to test them, and therefore he led them into the desert, into the place of the Sitra Achra . . . in order to battle against his trickery so as to break his power and strength and to smash [the Sitra Achra's] head and subjugate him . . . Had the Jewish people constantly strengthened themselves [in faith] so that their lives and hearts were given over to God, He would have promised them that the revelation of the great light . . . would not leave them even while in the desert. And they would not have had to look at the Sitra Achra and his schemes at all because all of it was just a test. Indeed, this is specifically the kind of action from below that would have drawn down upon them the great light . . . Moshe Rabbeinu knew that at that time it was dependent upon their strengthening themselves in trust in God, and for this the verse faults them: *"Because you did not believe in God and did not trust in His salvation" (Tehillim 78:22)*, and it adds: *"Nevertheless, they sinned further and had no faith in His wonders" (Tehillim 78:32)*. (*Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 3, Siman 3*)

It was true for the Jews who were about to wander in the desert after they left Egypt. It has been true for every Jew since then who has had to "wander" through life. It is the only way to truly defeat the yetzer hara, and even better, channel its energy in the direction of the service of God and reward in the World-to-Come.

Text

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