

TORAH IS A TREE OF LIFE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And all the people answered together and said: "All that God has said we will do." (Shemos 19:8)

The Talmud makes an interesting statement:

Rebi Zera, some say Rebi Chanina bar Papa, said: Come and see how the trait of The Holy One, Blessed is He, is not like the trait of flesh-and-blood. It is the trait of flesh-and-blood that when a man sells something to his friend that the seller grieves and the buyer rejoices. The Holy One, Blessed is He, however, is not like that. He gave the Torah to the Jewish people and rejoiced, as it says: "For I have given you a good possession; do not leave My Torah" (Mishlei 4:2). (Brochos 5a)

This is one of those things that the Talmud says as if it is the most obvious thing in the world, but which forces the rest of us to stand back, scratch our heads, and say, "Huh?"

Is the statement even accurate? After all, usually when someone sells something he is only too delighted to do so. Perhaps in situations in which he is forced to part with something he'd rather keep he is sad to lose possession of it. But normally when someone sells something it is because he'd rather have what he is going to receive not what he is giving up.

Secondly, if we were "sold" Torah at all, we were convinced to buy into it, not to actually buy it. We didn't need any kind of currency to acquire it, just a lot of good will. Had we not been taken from a nation that had imposed a lot of restrictions on our freedom and brought to Mt. Sinai to become a nation with even greater restrictions on our freedom? Hence, if we were being sold anything at all, it was this:

The Tablets are the handiwork of God, and the script was God's script charus—engraved—on the Tablets. Do not read charus but cheirus—freedom—for you can have no freer man than the one who engages in Torah study. (Pirkei Avos 6:2)

Just ask anyone who works in Jewish outreach how tough a sale that is to make to someone, for example, from the former Soviet Union who came to the West for a freer lifestyle, or to someone from the West who has grown up with very few restrictions. It is certainly not easy to sell to someone who grew up in a Torah household but who has decided to bolt because of the allurements of a more secular way of life. On the contrary, if anything should and does make God "sad" it is the failure to make such a "sale." Therefore, nothing makes Him happier than a person who sacrifices his yetzer hara—evil inclination—on the altar of truth to fulfill the words of His holy Torah. It

is for such people, the Midrash explains, that God made the world in the first place.

So, what's with the analogy above? If any analogy can be made, it is this one:

Come and see how the trait of The Holy One, Blessed is He, is like the trait of flesh-and-blood. It is the trait of flesh-and-blood that when a man sells something to his friend that the seller rejoices and the buyer rejoices. The Holy One, Blessed is He, however, is the same. He gave the Torah to the Jewish people and rejoiced, as it says: "For I have given you a good possession; do not leave My Torah."

What then did the rabbis mean with their analogy? It can safely be assumed that they knew our question would arise.

One of the most important points to keep in mind when trying to decipher the worlds of Chazal (an abbreviation of, "Our Wise Men, may they be remembered for blessing"), particularly of the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud, is that they were not only wise people. They were even more than geniuses. They may not have been prophets, but at the very least they had Ruach HaKodesh, literally, "Holy Spirit," a lesser kind of prophecy, or knowledge that can only be derived through supernatural means.

They were also very careful about what they said, especially when it came to the Oral Tradition, in order to purposely mislead people who deserved to be mislead.

Students who were not willing to subjugate themselves to the truth of Torah, and perhaps even abusive to those who are, were purposely kept in the dark regarding the true meaning of their words, something that is reserved for those who appreciate them.

People see what they want to see. Their perceptions are based upon their assumptions in life, so if they have faulty assumptions then they also have faulty perceptions. That's a very important rule about life that Pharaoh learned the hard way, and so many other people throughout the ages have usually learned to late, if at all. As Dovid HaMelech taught, "The secrets of God [go] to those who fear Him" (Tehillim 25:14), and that includes the words of Chazal. The above analogy is but one minor example of this, which is an invitation to delve deeper into the concepts upon which it is based, and many take for granted.

The starting point to unraveling the analogy is to know the impact of purchasing something in life. When we buy something, anything, the transaction is only completed when we give up something of worth for the new object of our desire.

However, what we surrender to make the purchase, because it once belonged to us, became a part of us in some way, on some level, otherwise we would not have related to it and would have abandoned it long ago.

This is why, it is explained, that if someone sinned he had to bring a sin offering from his own money;

someone else could not offer his sacrifice on his behalf. If the animal was to be a stand in for the sinner, then it had to represent the person in a very real way. He had to feel as if a part of him was being offered on the altar to atone for his sin. How could he do that if the animal was purchased with someone else's money?

It is this giving up of self while acquiring something that should create a sense of mourning in some way. Who doesn't hate spending personal money even when it buys something worthwhile? We know it is necessary, and are even willing to do it to acquire something of interest, but it still isn't completely easy. Even fabulously wealthy people often have difficulty spending their money, and mourn, on some level, the need to do so, even for worthy causes.

The Zohar teaches that when someone "takes" Torah it is as if they have "taken" God Himself. Aside from being the blueprint for Creation, Torah represents the revelation of God in this world, so when a person approaches Torah with the right amount of reverence and desire to learn it, they are, in reality, learning about God Himself. As they attach themselves to Torah they attach themselves to God; it is one and the same thing.

So, when God "shares" His Torah with man, He is in fact sharing Himself, even giving up part of Himself, so to speak. Such sacrifice, the rabbis in the analogy above explain, though usually a source of mourning for flesh-and-blood is completely a source of joy for God. Nothing gives our Creator greater pleasure than for human beings to have a "piece" of Him, especially in exchange for our loyalty and commitment to His Torah.

So, by way of a simple analogy Chazal have hinted to a deep sod—secret—of life.

Torah is not simply the will of God, instructions for living given to us by the Author who wrote them down. It is God Himself, Who, by permitting us to acquire His Torah allows us to connect to Him on the highest of levels by ascending through the levels of Torah, Pshat, Remez, Drush and Sod (English: Simple, Hint, Elucidation, and Secret). Thus, as one penetrates deeper into Torah one deepens his or her relationship to God.

And to himself or herself as well. This is because the four levels of Torah also correspond to our four lowest levels of soul (we have five altogether): Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah and Chayah (the fifth is Yechidah). As a result, as one delves deeper into Torah he also delves deeper into himself, since with Torah awareness comes self-awareness, and that makes God happy as well.

This is why freedom was, is, truly engraved on the Tablets. On the outside mitzvos look like just a lot of rules and decrees designed to limit, or even eliminate personal freedom. That's a hard sale to make to any human being at any time in history.

On the inside of Torah, however, it's a different story. Mitzvos are a training course in enhanced spiritual sensitivity that allows a person to move from level of soul to level of soul and to rise above the everyday mundane reality. That's true freedom, and once a person tastes it there is really no

turning back.

"If I had known back then, when I was in Cheder at a Conservative synagogue, what doing mitzvos is all about, and what learning Torah really means, I would have ran towards them, not away from them." That's what someone told me after a couple of learning sessions he just "happened" to attend. Like many people who return to Judaism, though he had once thought Torah was ancient, archaic, and enslaving, he now saw it as current, vibrant, and liberating.

This is what Shlomo HaMelech, in his wisdom, said:

It is a Tree of Life for those who grasp it. (Mishlei 3:18)

In other words, Torah is a tree of life, but only for those who grasp it, who take the time to understand what Torah really is, and what it can do for them. For those who do not, Torah and its Divine wisdom remains only a tree, that is, like plain wood of little value.

This is but the beginning of the discussion. Obviously, there is so much more to say about the topic, and has been said throughout the ages. After all, as already mentioned, Torah is the blueprint for Creation, which is itself is so vast and educating, so how much more so must its blueprint be. And even more so when the Master of the Universe Himself identifies Himself through it.

Text

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