

OF BREAD AND MILK

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In the first Pasuk of this week's Parsha Moshe focused on the performance of those Mitzvos that are usually "taken for granted and performed by-rote." Why the emphasis on Mitzvos that are taken for granted more so than Mitzvos in general?

Moshe informed the Jews that the potential reward for "not doing Mitzvos by-rote" is G-d's love, blessing, prosperity, and overall bounty. It would seem that such a reward should be earned for doing all the Mitzvos. Why did Moshe associate G-d's bountiful benevolence as the reward for "not doing Mitzvos by rote?"

In Moshe's concise but all encompassing description of the plenty waiting to be had he included "no infertility." (10:14) What is there about "not doing Mitzvos by rote" that merits the fertility of the nation and its flocks?

Later in the Parsha, Moshe asked the \$64,000 question. (10:12) "What does G-d ask of you?" Moshe answered, "G-d asks you for everything including the kitchen sink!" (10:12-13) "Fear Him, follow his ways, love Him, serve Him with all your heart and soul, and keep all His laws and statutes!" To quote the Talmud in Berachos 33b, "Is Moshe's answer a simple thing to attain?" Moshe defined the integration of our awareness and commitment to G-d into every aspect of existence! Is that all G-d wants from us?! To underscore the extreme nature of G-d's expectations, the Talmud in Berachos explained that what Moshe defined in this week's Parsha in seemingly easy terms is only so because Moshe had already attained that level of commitment. "For Moshe it was a simple thing!" For the rest of us shleppers it was far more difficult!

I would like to suggest that Moshe's emphasis on "not doing Mitzvos by-rote" and the impressive rewards awaiting the nation if they should avoid doing Mitzvos by-rote is the same as Moshe's answer to the \$64,000 question.

Let's rephrase Moshe's question and his answer. "What does Hashem really want from His Chosen people and by extension the rest of humanity? The answer is, "Hashem wants to have a real relationship with his children. Hashem does not want that His children will be indifferent and casual about their relationship with Him. G-d desires that the Bnai Yisroel model for the other nations a relationship that integrates awareness of G-d, appreciation for G-d, and a closeness with G-d that transcends the expectation of getting back anything in return. Regardless of reward and gain reason or rational His Chosen People will serve Him because they desire closeness with G-d above all else.

The measure of their success will be in direct proportion to how close or distant they are from G-d.

How do we measure closeness and distance in a relationship?

A few years ago in a Yom Kippur Drasha I offered the following example of a relationship founded on the principal of "not doing Mitzvos by rote". I stipulated that all of us would do everything possible to save the life of anyone including a total stranger. However, for whom would we do the small things that appear to be far less important? In other words, which is a greater indication of closeness and love? saving your spouse's life or going store at 11:45 pm to buy bread and milk for tomorrow's lunch because your spouse forgot to do so? Undoubtedly, the latter is a greater expression of love and concern than the first. That does not mean that the gravity of concern isn't greater in saving a life than buying bagels! However, how many of us would leave the cradle of our beds and pillows to accommodate the forgetfulness of a stranger?

The doing of Mitzvos and our attitude while we do them are the only tangible expressions of our relationship with G-d. Hashem provides us with the bounty of life in a manner that defies our ability to imitate or comprehend. In return we are supposed to listen to His Mitzvos and follow in His ways. However, in so far as relationships are concerned, there is a significant difference between the perfunctory performance of G-d's commandments and doing them with intent and concern.

In the performance of Mitzvos there is the concept of Hiddur Mitzvah ? the beautification and glorification of Mitzvos. It's like eating a meal on paper plates with plastic cutlery vs. the same food being presented and enjoyed on fine china with silverware and crystal. The first is perfectly functional and delivers nutrition and sustenance to the human organism; however, the second elevates our basic needs into the realm of esthetic appreciation and enjoyment. Somehow the china and silver conveys a sense of being special. Hiddur Mitzvah is intended to reflect on how we feel about our relationship with Hashem. The closer we are, the more we care, the more important doing G-d's Mitzvos become, the greater our emphasis on form and presentation should be. (shades of Kayin and Hevel)

In many families, china, silver, and crystal are rightfully reserved for special occasions such as Shabbos Yom Tov and the greeting of special guests. The rest of the week, functionality and convenience motivate our social and familial protocols. The question is, should that be the way we relate to G-d? Should the nuance and esthetics of our relationship with Hashem be reserved for special occasions or should they be constants in the expressions of our love and caring? In thinking about the answer do not dwell on effort, time, and expense ? they are circumstantial to our attitude of caring and concern. Instead, think of what should be if you did not have to take effort, time, and expense into consideration. Undoubtedly, the greater our closeness to G-d and our love for Him the greater would be our emphasis on intent and detail.

Fundamental to the give and take of our relationship with G-d is the rule of "measure for a measure." As we have discussed many times, this judicial principal empowers us to decide the manner of our

reward and punishment. If we show indifference to G-d, G-d will be indifferent to us. If we show concern for G-d, G-d will show concern for us. It is identical to the principal of "G-d is near to all those who call out to Him." G-d cares for every one of His creations; yet, He is nearer to those of His creations who maintain a more involved and constant relationship with Him.

Mitzvos by-rote are performances that do not address the quality of our relationship with G-d. They accomplish the basic requirements for service and functionality as G-d's servants; however, they do not attend to the intent and nuance of a relationship with G-d that should be ultimately important and significant. On the other hand, when Mitzvos that are often done by-rote are instead done with concern and intent, they become an even greater expression of closeness to G-d than the occasional Yomim Tovim and their special Mitzvos. The measure of a person's religious commitment is more evidenced in the making of Berachos (blessings), daily Tefilah (prayer) and Minyan (prayer quorum), set times for Torah study, and maintaining routine practices of Kashrus and Family Purity than fasting on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur may be tantamount to saving a person's life while all the other Mitzvos are the 11:45 pm run to the supermarket for some milk and bread.

Hashem's greatest investment in this world is the human race. The rest of the universe is the stage setting for humanity to emulate His ways and develop their relationship with Him. After creating Adam and Chava, Hashem blessed them and said, (Ber.1:28) "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth." G-d's ongoing investment in the universe is predicated on each generation giving rise to the next. However, raising a generation to be indifferent to G-d and His wishes is to turn G-d's blessing into a curse. The most effective way for parents to raise an indifferent child is for them to be indifferent. The most effective way for a parent to raise a concerned and involved child is for them to be concerned and involved. G-d promises that if we ourselves will not do Mitzvos by-rote, but instead do them with concern and intent, we will merit to be fruitful and multiply.

Hashem wants us to be close to Him. He wants us to care about His commandments and to raise our children to be close and caring Jews as well. Whether the child is our own genetic issue or the product of our love and concern for their physical and spiritual well-being, the measure of our success and blessing will be in the small things that reflect closeness with G-d.

After all is said and done what G-d really wants to know is, will you make the 11:45 pm bread and milk run?

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