

TRUST AND POSITION

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

How far are you willing to trust? In a recent conversation with a friend I encouraged him to distinguish between events that are within his control and events that are not within his control. The events that are within his control deserve his best effort in accomplishing for himself and his family. The events beyond his control demand that he trust G-d for their outcome. He can pray, in fact he should pray a lot, but along with prayer he must trust that what G-d does is for his benefit and the benefit of everyone else.

For example. Going to minyan every morning and evening is mostly within our control. We may have to rearrange our schedules accordingly and negotiate with family and job to accomplish it, but if there is the desire to do so there is the will, and if there is the will there is a way. On the other hand, confronting illness or disability in self or others may impose circumstances beyond our control. As much as we might desire, will, and try to overcome the illness or disability the reality may be that daily minyan is impossible. At that point, effort becomes wasteful and trust becomes everything. It is no longer a matter of action but of attitude. We have only one choice to make, accept the limitation as G-d's will or not acknowledge it as G-d's will. Either way the illness and the disability remain the limitation that they are.

As the Jews were preparing to transition beyond the desert experience, Moshe instructed them in some detailed laws of sensitivity and trust. For example: The law of retrieving and returning a lost object (22:1) is predicated on trusting G-d. It presumes that all objects are valuable to their rightful owner, either because of their intrinsic value or because they were given to him by G-d. As such, we act on the assumption that the owner did not forgo finding his lost object and would be grateful for its return. That assumption imposes responsibilities on us to do everything in our means to return that item to its owner.

The Halacha goes so far as to discuss the parameters of "retrieving and returning a lost object" over other obligations one might have. Must one forgo attending an important meeting in order to retrieve and return a lost object? What if retrieving a lost object involves action that would otherwise be demeaning to a person's stature in society? In the context of this discussion the answers are not important - the mere asking of the question is! Who else would even pose the question in the first place? Of course my schedule and my dignity take priority over someone else's lost object! However, that is not necessarily so from the perspective of Torah and the trust we must have in G-d.

In so far as the Torah is concerned, there is always an ethical deliberation and choice to be made. If

the law is that I must forgo my meeting to do the Mitzvah of returning a lost object I must accept that it is G-d's will that I do the Mitzvah rather than attend the meeting. Regardless of what potential the meeting might represent, I must trust that G-d's desire is for me to retrieve the lost object and try to find its owner. Whatever the gain in doing the Mitzvah and whatever the loss in not attending the meeting, I must trust that the outcome is for my benefit and the benefit of everyone else. (Never judge a Mitzvah by its cover! - Avos 2:1)

I once shared the story of a good friend who gave up what appeared to be a very lucrative business opportunity because it involved working on behalf of an organization considered by all to be a cult. When he posed the Shaylah he ended his Shaylah by stating, "Rabbi, do not think about the money or the opportunity. I only want to know what the Halacha says. Nothing else is important. If the answer is yes, great! If the answer is no then it is no. Clearly, G-d doesn't think the opportunity is the right thing for my family and me. Just tell me what the right thing is." (It being a few years since my friend forwent the opportunity I can tell you that his business has done extremely well since that time. In many respects he has gained far more than that one opportunity, both financially and spiritually!)

Additionally, the Mitzvah of retrieving and returning a lost object highlights the understanding that who we are and what we have is not necessarily paramount at any given moment. Basically, we must all take turns. Sometimes my issues will take precedence over all else; at other times, your issues will take priority. It is because we believe that G-d created and maintains all that we are able to accept that I am no more important than you and you are not any more important than me. In the eyes of G-d we are equally important; otherwise He would not have created us to exist at the same time.

In a recent lecture I pointed out that appreciating every person, Jew and non-Jew, as the creation of G-d is among our most difficult challenges. The scene in Bereishis (18:17-33) where Avraham attempted to avert the destruction of Sodom highlights this obligation in the most extreme terms. The scene began with G-d telling us that He was going to do something about the "cries of Sodom." G-d then presented Avraham with the opportunity of defending them even though there was never the possibility of G-d rescinding His decision. Why go through the process if the outcome was already decided? I explained that the entire scene was to teach Avraham "and his household and children after him" (18:19) that the ways of G-d were truly "charitable and judicious (18:19)." As the nation that would be a blessing to the families of the earth G-d granted Avraham the unique opportunity of questioning His manner of justice. In doing so, Avraham was able to teach the rest of the world that G-d is truly righteous and just.

However, the entire discussion concerned saving the amoral, unjust, anti-charitable, murdering, citizens of Sodom! Why did Avraham care? If G-d decided that a certain society must be destroyed who was he to question and argue? The answer is that from a purely intellectual point of view we should not attempt to change G-d's decree of destruction. Certainly, if we are not emotionally

invested in the people of that society we will accept G-d's decision rather than fight. However, from an emotional point of view, from the perspective of caring, from the understanding that every human being has both the intrinsic value of being G-d's intended creation as well as the value of whatever potential he or she represents, we should fight! In the end we must also trust that G-d's decision is just and charitable and the only decision that will best benefit all involved.

The second law in this week's Parsha is the case of the "Rebellious Son." (21:18-21) Regardless of whether or not such a case ever happened, the mere notion of parents bringing their child to the Sanhedrin (supreme court) and requesting that he put to death defies our emotional sensibilities. Yet, that is what the Torah describes! How can that be? The answer is obvious. If we trust G-d that He only does those things that benefit us and the rest of the universe then we also trust that He only commands those things that are good and that will benefit all involved. As I asked at the very beginning of this essay, how far are we willing to truly trust G-d?

What about position? Are we willing to trust G-d when He designated our position within humanity and within society. What about man vs. woman? The eternal battle between the sexes; how much are we willing to trust and accept? (22:5) "A woman should not wear male clothing and a man should not wear a woman's clothes..." Regardless of the specifics of the Mitzvah, the fact is that the Torah states as clear as can be that clothing is not optional. Whatever the mechanism for designating male vs. female garments, there will always be a distinction between men and woman in the manner of their dress that must be respected; otherwise, "...it is an abomination to G-d."

This is not a question of equality or chauvinism; it is purely a question of trust. Do we trust that G-d knew what He was doing when He separated the original Adam into male and female? Do we accept that His intention in doing so was to designate distinction and purpose as created and mandated by Him alone? Do we understand that when we attempt to blur those distinctions under whatever rationalization and justification we might contrive we are desecrating G-d's intention and proclaiming that we know better than G-d what is good for the individual and humanity!

Remember, the underlying value is that all people, Jew or non-Jew, man or woman, are intrinsically valuable because we are all G-d's intention. Therefore, separation between people and nations should never result in bigotry, racism, and prejudice. Just the opposite! The respect we show each other should be the most expected standard of human behavior. No matter where we go and whom we encounter we should know that we are safe from harm to person, property, or ego. Unfortunately that is not yet so. As the children of Avraham, as the heirs to the Promised Land, as G-d's designated teachers of what it means to be created in His image of charity and righteousness, we must first trust G-d. We must trust that all He commands and all that He does is for our benefit and the benefit of the entire universe.

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