

PAY ATTENTION TO THE DETAILS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parsha is the introduction to the halachic process of observance of the commandments of the Torah. In every commandment there are numerous layers of meaning and importance. There is the social and moral value that the commandment represents and teaches. There are also the technical minutiae and complex details that comprise the fabric of every commandment.

The commandments regarding the observance of Pesach and of the structuring of the Jewish calendar are part of this week's parsha. The general values of these commandments are apparent to all. Pesach represents for us the value and concept of freedom from bondage and teaches us the beginning history of our people. The calendar has always been a necessity for social and commercial life and keeps us in tune with the changing seasons of the year.

These are the general reasons and lessons of these commandments. However, as we also all know, the devil always lies in the details. What is the mechanism that will enable the story of our departure from Egyptian slavery to freedom to remain fresh and vital thousands of years later? Values only have life if they are somehow translated into human action and normative behavior.

Theories are wonderful but they rarely survive the tests of time and ever changing circumstances. Every scientific theory is therefore subjected to be proven by physical experiment and validation. Freedom is a great theory but unless somehow put into practical application in society it remains divorced from the realities of everyday existence. Just ask the North Koreans or the Syrians and Iranians about freedom! It is the technical requirements of the commandment - the matzo, chametz, hagadah, etc. - that alone are able to preserve the value and validate the theory and guarantee its meaningfulness for millennia on end.

The uniqueness of the Jewish calendar lies also in its technical details. The permanent calendar that we now follow, established in the fifth century CE, is a lunar calendar with adjustments to make it fit into a solar year span. The technical halachic details how the last Sanhedrin squared this circle are too numerous and detailed for the scope of this parsha sheet.

However, suffice it to say, that if not for those details and calculations our calendar would long ago have disappeared just as the ancient calendars of Egypt, Babylonia, Greece and Rome have disappeared. Many people look at calendars not as Godly commandments but as merely a practical way to mark our passage through time. Thus the details are really not important to them since we are only interested in the so-called result.

But in Judaism, the details are of equal if not even greater importance than the general value and end result that they represent. In our time, those Jews who for various reasons only concentrated on the values, who were good Jews at heart but observed no commandments or details, rarely were privileged to have Jewish descendants.

Of course concentrating only on the details and ignoring the value system that it represents is also a distortion of the Godly word. Seeing both the general value of a commandment and observing its necessary technical details in practice is the guarantee for allowing the Torah to survive amongst the people of Israel for all times.

Shabat shalom,

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