

THE MITZVOS TRANSFORM US

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"Hashem came forth from Sinai, shone forth to them from Seir, having appeared to them from Mount Paran" (Devarim 33:2)

The Midrash records that prior to Hashem offering the Torah to Bnei Yisroel, He made it available to the nations of the world. He offered it to the children of Esau (who lived in the land of Seir). When they discovered that it contained the prohibition of murder, they rejected the Torah on the grounds that, by nature, they were a violent people. A similar result occurred when Hashem offered the Torah to the children of Yishmael (living in Paran). They rejected it, for it contained the prohibition of stealing.¹ The following difficulties have to be dealt with: Firstly, the two precepts that were rejected, namely "Do not murder" and "Do not steal", are already included in the Seven Noachide Laws.² Therefore, they are already bound to uphold these precepts. Secondly, the precepts as they appear in the Noachide Laws are more severe than they are in the Torah. The punishment for theft in the Torah is a payment of twice the principle.³ The Noachide Laws are capital offenses. To be found guilty by a Jewish court, two witnesses must be present at the scene of the crime, and a warning to the perpetrator had to have been issued. This is not required to convict according to the Noachide Laws. Why were they rejecting the Torah based upon precepts that would have been less restrictive than those that they were already obligated to keep?

The Rambam in his introduction to Pirkei Avos poses the following question: Which is a higher service of Hashem, one who by nature does not have the desire to violate the precepts, or one who struggles with the desire, finally conquering his evil inclination, and does the will of Hashem?⁴

The Rambam comes to the following conclusion: In the Torah we find two categories of Mitzvos (precepts). There are those that, by nature, we sense the obligation to uphold. We understand that violating them would be doing something intrinsically wrong (i.e. murder, stealing, adultery). The second category of precepts is those that we would have no inkling of them being prohibited, were it not for Hashem restricting us from doing them (i.e. cooking milk together with meat, shaatnez, etc.). Concerning those that we identify as being wrong, the Torah obligates us not to desire to do them. The soul that adheres to these precepts, but desires to do them is defective. Concerning those with which we do not associate an intrinsic wrong, the higher level of adherence is desiring to do them, but restraining only because Hashem commands us to do so.

The difference between the Seven Noachide Laws and the 613 Torah laws is not only quantitative, but qualitative as well. The Noachide Laws are essentially a directive to insure that society does not self-destruct. Noachide man is only commanded to act, or desist from acting in a certain manner. There is no obligation to inculcate the precept into his very being, no obligation regarding his thoughts or sensitivities. Torah law requires more than providing a functioning society; it requires that man be a reflection of his Maker. This is attained by incorporating the precepts into our very being. "Do not steal" is not merely do not commit the crime; rather our very being is required to be reviled by the act of stealing.

Those precepts which the nations of the world rejected are from the category that one is able to sense are wrong (just as are all seven of the Noachide Laws). However, those who are bound by the Noachide Laws are not commanded against desiring to do them. What Hashem offered them was an entirely new level of observance, a qualitative change of themselves as human beings. It is this which they rejected. It is a quantum leap from being commanded not to do something, to being commanded to revile the very act itself.

1.13:3 2.Gur Arye 13:26 3.158:1

Hashem Wants To Be Our King

The Ibn Ezra recounts a question that he was asked by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi ¹: Why does Hashem define Himself as the G-d who took us out of Egypt ? ² A seemingly more appropriate title would be G-d, Creator of the Universe. To define Hashem as Creator refers to Him as the One responsible for all existence, whereas, the One who took us out of Egypt refers to Him only as responsible for one historical incident.

Rashi, on the same verse, comments on the words "from the house of slavery": We were slaves to Pharaoh, not to his subjects. Presumably, Rashi is explaining that this is meant to be a form of solace to Bnei Yisroel. It is difficult to understand how this is so. We experienced tremendous atrocities at the hands of Pharaoh. The Midrash relates that he alone was responsible for the slaughter of 75,000 Jewish children for their blood. ³ (Bathing in blood was considered a remedy for leprosy, an ailment from which Pharaoh suffered.) It is difficult to imagine how our plight would have been worse being slaves to his subjects.

The Rambam teaches us that a king has the authority to enlist any of his subjects for his personal service. However, the king has an obligation to compensate that individual. ⁴ What Rashi is telling us is that we became Pharaoh's slaves, and therefore, we had a right to demand compensation (which we took when we left Egypt). This would explain a fascinating story related in the Talmud. When Alexander Macedonia conquered the Middle East, he formed a tribunal that adjudicated claims brought by the different nations for injustices perpetrated against them by other nations. One such

claim was made by Egypt against Bnei Yisroel. They demanded that the money and valuables Bnei Yisroel left Egypt with be returned to them. A Rabbi by the name of Gaviha ben Pessisa spearheaded the defense for Bnei Yisroel. He counterclaimed, mathematically computing the work hours that the Jews had toiled when they were in Egypt showing that the Egyptians still owed us money; the Egyptian claim was dropped.⁵ It is difficult to understand Gaviha ben Pessisa's position. Since when does a slave have a right to demand compensation from a master? The answer must be as explained by the Rambam. If a king enlists his subjects to serve him, the subjects have a right to demand compensation.

Perhaps we can now answer Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's question. Rashi explains that we are obligated to serve Hashem since He took us out of slavery.⁶ This implies that our relationship with Hashem substituted for the one we had with Pharaoh. The significance of this is as follows: If we relate to Hashem as the Creator of the Universe, since He created us, He owns us and we have no rights. A master does not owe his slave anything. If one owns a car, he does not owe it to the car to keep it in good condition; doing so is in the owner's best interest. The car, however, has no right to claim rewards for service. So too, a slave cannot demand reward for service to his master. However, although a king has the right to enslave his subjects, the subjects still have rights and may demand compensation. What Rashi is explaining is that the relationship that Hashem wants to create with Bnei Yisroel is predicated on- reward and punishment. We have a right to expect reward. This is why the Torah defines our relationship to Hashem as the One 'who took us out of slavery'; we became His subjects and He, our King. If the definition would have been 'Creator of the Universe', then He would have been our master and we, His slaves, and as such we would have no right to expect reward. Although Hashem is also our Creator, He wants to relate to us as King, so we will have a sense of "earning our keep".

1. R. Yehuda Halevi is the author of the Kuzari. 2. Ibn Ezra 20:2. 3. Mechilta 2:23. 4. Melachim 4:2,3. 5. Sanhedrin 91a. 6. Rashi ibid.