

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS

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Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Acharei Mos, 5661.

This parsha presents Klal Yisroel with numerous mitzvos. Rashi notes that many of these mitzvos are introduced with the words: " ... Ani HaShem Elokeichem." ("I am HaShem, your God." (See Rashi's comment on the pasuk (18: 2).

Rashi is echoing a remark by the Mechilta, which notes another case where mitzvos are presented the same way that they are presented in our parsha. Where? The Aseres Hadibros (the Ten Commandments) are also introduced with the same prefatory phrase (Shemos, 20:2): "Anochi HaShem Elokecha ... " ("I am HaShem, your God ").

The Mechilta there comments: We can understand this introductory statement in terms of the following mashal.. A king entered the capital city of a country that had just become part of his kingdom. His courtiers advised him to promulgate decrees to his new subjects. The king replied: there is no point in issuing my commands now. First, let my subjects accept my kingship; only then will it make sense to issue my decrees.

I have presented this Medrash in accordance with its plain/simple meaning (pshat pashut). But the Sfas Emes reads this Mechilta very differently. As he sees it, the world does not function in a two-stage process like the one just proposed.. (That is: Stage 1. People accept the king's rule; and then; Stage 2: People agree to abide by his decrees.)

Rather, issuing the decrees -- and having them accepted -- is itself the process by which the subjects accept the king's sovereignty. The Sfas Emes explains that the purpose of the mitzvos is precisely to give us an opportunity to accept HaShem as our ruler. That is, one may ask: why do we do mitzvos? The Sfas Emes's answer is: because HaShem commands us to do them. Thus, performing mitzvos is -- so to speak -- our way to place a crown on HaShem's head.

Following up on this thought, the Sfas Emes addresses a question that the Torah leaves unanswered. That puzzling issue is: what did Nahdav and Avihu do that was wrong (Vayikra, 10, 1-2)? The Sfas Emes explains that they went off the track because they did something "ahsher LO tziva ..." -- that HaShem had NOT commanded (Vayikra, 10:1). In other words, their misbehavior lay in their performing a religious act that was not an expression of their subordination to HaShem.

This perspective on Nahdav and Avihu is supported if we take a careful look at the text. The Torah

recounts the story of Nahdav and Avihu after it presents a lengthy series of things that Moshe and Aharon had done "ka'asher tziva HaShem". That is, Moshe and Aharon did what they did solely for the sake of being in accordance with HaShem's will. The contrast with Nahdav and Avihu is clear.

Why does the Sfas Emes give this topic so much attention? First, because it clarifies the episode of Nahdav and Avihu. Second, because this discussion leads to an interpretation of the meaning of mitzvos. And finally, because this context gives the Sfas Emes the opportunity to discuss the connection between two key features of Yiddishkeit -- our relationship with HaShem and our commitment to perform mitzvos. As the Sfas Emes has explained, mitzvos are the means by which we develop and maintain our relationship with HaShem.

Continuing, the Sfas Emes discusses a famous pasuk (Vayikra, 18, 5): "... asher ya'aseh osahm ha'ahdam vachai bahehm." (ArtScroll: "You shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live ...") The Sfas Emes reads this text in a non-pshat mode as follows. He understands the phrase "va'chai bahem" to mean "he shall give life" rather than "he shall live". (That is, he reads the word "vachai" as a transitive verb -- po'al yotzei -- rather than as an intransitive verb -- po'al omeid). Thus, the Sfas Emes reads this pasuk as telling us that by doing mitzvos, we give chiyus -- a concept that includes joy as well as life -- to the whole world.

How does this work? We know -- from the earlier part of the ma'amar -- that doing mitzvos is the way we accept HaShem's kingship. Now the Sfas Emes adds that mitzvos encompass all human activity. Hence, by doing mitzvos we can bring all creation closer to HaShem. By doing HaShem's will -- i.e., accepting His authority -- we can bring life and joy to the world.

For a brief comment on a key issue, we go now to the Sfas Emes of 5635, paragraph 1:

(Vayikra, 18, 3) "Ke'ma'aseh Eretz Mitzrayim ... lo ta'asu ... u'be'chukosei'hem lo tei'lei'chu". (ArtScroll: "Do not perform the practice of the land of Egypt ... and do not follow their traditions".) The Sfas Emes reads this last phrase ("u'be'chukosei'hem ...") as follows. The root of "u'beCHUKOsei'hem" is the same as the root of the word "chuka". A "chuka" is a practice or behavior that has no meaning. Thus, the Torah is telling us that the people of Egypt live their lives with "chukos" -- i.e., behavior without meaning.

Why? Because they do not have mitzvos, and thus they lack access to life's inner content -- the pe'nimiyus. We can do the same things that they do -- the mechanics of living -- but since we have mitzvos, our lives have meaning. The mitzvos enable us to form a relationship with HaShem, a relationship that gives structure and content to our lives.

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