

Parshas Shoftim

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1. Seeing G-d in All Aspects of Creation

Every Jewish male has an obligation to write a Sefer Torah for himself. In addition to this obligation, the Torah tells us that the King of Israel is obliged to write for himself an additional Sefer Torah when he becomes the King. The Torah states, **“It shall be that when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah in a book, from before the Kohanim, the Levites. It shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear Hashem, his G-d, to observe all the words of this Torah and these Statutes, to perform them...”** The Torah tells us that by reading the Torah on a continuous basis the King of Israel will “learn” to fear Hashem. How do we understand that reading the Torah itself would be sufficient to cause the King to fear Hashem?

Sforno explains that when the Torah states that the King of Israel should “read,” it means that when he probes into the Torah he will develop a depth of understanding. Through this advanced level of comprehension he will perceive and see Hashem in every aspect of existence. Thus, he will come to fear Him. It is important to note that Sforno is emphasizing that the King delves into the depth and breadth of Torah and does not merely study it in a cursory manner. It is only through this level of study that one can come to appreciate the profundity of Hashem’s Wisdom and thus see His ongoing involvement in existence.

Dovid HaMelech (King David) states in Tehillim (Psalms), *“Ma rabu maasecha Hashem kulam B’Chachma aaseesah* - How great are your works Hashem – they are all made with *Chochmah* (Wisdom).” Rabbi Moshe Cordovero in his work *Tamar Devorah* (Chapter 2) explains that in this verse Dovid HaMelech is communicating to us that every aspect of existence has the imprint of Hashem, the Master of the Universe. All existence reflects the Wisdom of Hashem. If one is able to see His imprint on all creation, he will be awestruck by Hashem’s Infinite Genius, thus, causing him to fear/ revere Him.

The type of fear that we are discussing is not a “fear” of harm, but rather an awe and appreciation of something that is greater than oneself. For example, a person who has the most advanced degree in physics, although he believes that he has a grasp of his subject matter, will nevertheless feel uneasy in the presence of Einstein. A person’s sense of self worth is determined by his feelings of accomplishment. If one however were to meet a person whose level of accomplishment dwarfs his own, then (in that context) he would experience fear. The reason for this is since one’s sense of self and worth gives him confidence and security, if this should be lost, one feels insecure – thus causing fear/ awe.

When a person understands and appreciates the depth and pervasiveness of Hashem’s Chochmah (Wisdom), which is evident in all existence, then he will realize his own insignificance. Comparing oneself to G-d, one’s sense of self worth and accomplishment is reduced to a non-existent level. How does one come to this level of understanding which will cause him to be in awe of G-d?

Only through the in-depth understanding of the Torah can one appreciate the Infinite Wisdom of Hashem. One must understand the truth, cogency and intellectualism

of the Torah in order to begin to appreciate who he is not, and who Hashem is.

The Torah tells us that the King of Israel, who is the monarch of the Jewish people and has within his power to grant life or at times to pronounce death over his subjects, will only learn to fear Hashem through the study of Torah. Through his in-depth study of Torah, the king, despite his own power, will come to understand his own insignificance. As a result of this understanding, the King will learn to fear Hashem, thus causing him to observe all the mitzvos of the Torah.

The only path to attain reverence and awe of G-d is to have an appreciation for His Wisdom and to see Him in every aspect of existence. This is only possible through the in-depth study of Torah itself.

2. One's Susceptibility to Conflict of Interest

The Torah tells us that there are certain prohibitions which pertain only to the King of Israel. The Torah states, **“Only he shall not have too many horses for himself, so that he will not return the people to Egypt in order to increase horses....And he shall not have too many wives, so that his heart not turn astray; and he shall not greatly increase silver and gold for himself.”**

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon), who was the wisest man who ever lived, raised stables of horses despite the prohibition. He also had exceeded the allowed number of wives despite its explicit Torah prohibition. How could King Solomon, who was the wisest man and a tzaddik (devoutly righteous), so blatantly violate something that is explicitly prohibited in the Torah?

Shlomo HaMelech because he was the wisest man who ever lived believed that these prohibitions did not pertain to him. He understood that the prohibitions stated in the Torah of raising stables of horses or having more than the permitted number of wives were based on the concern that he may cause the Jewish people to return to Egypt and that his wives would cause his heart to go astray. However, he felt and believed that regarding himself because of his exceptional level of understanding and wisdom that this was an impossibility. Thus, he did not see himself as a person who had transgressed the Torah. However, as it is stated in Prophets, Shlomo HaMelech did fail because his wives did influence his heart and he did cause the people to return to Egypt.

Normally the Torah does not provide any rationale for any of its prohibitions. It only says thou shall not do such and such. It is evident that the basis to observe Negative Commandments is because Hashem has commanded us to do so. However regarding the Negative Commandments pertaining to the King, the Torah does provide the rationale for the prohibitions. It is interesting to note that Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest man to ever live, only failed in the areas in which the Torah did provide a rationale for the prohibitions.

People tend to fail in areas in which they believe that they understand the basis for the mitzvah (Positive and Negative Commandments). If one truly understood that the rationale for observing the mitzvos is beyond human comprehension, and it is solely related to the spiritual make-up of the Jew (which is only G-d understands) then there is no basis to rationalize and compromise the integrity of any mitzvah.

The Torah tells us that the wife of Potiphar (the master of Yosef) attempted to seduce him. He rejected her advances by saying, how could he betray his master after all

that he had done for him. Potiphar his master had given Yosef full reign over all that he possessed with the exception of his wife. In other words betraying his master would be considered an act of ingratitude. However Yosef concluded by saying to her, "I cannot do it (commit adultery) because I will sin to G-d." Meaning, Yosef understood that it is not sufficient to withstand temptation by relying on the rationale of being ungrateful to one's master. He understood that when one has a conflict of interest one is able to justify anything that he desires to, despite the evil nature of the act. Therefore Yosef concluded by saying "I cannot because I will sin to G-d." In this context there is no room for justification or rationalization.

The Torah empowered the Chachamim (The Rabbis) to promulgate fences to protect the Torah. All Rabbinic fences are to be adhered to as if they were decreed by the Torah itself. The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us of a situation in which the Rabbis legislated a fence and would not reveal the reason for this enactment. The Gemara explains that because of the caliber of the community, the Rabbis chose to withhold the rationale for the enactment. They understood that if the concern would be shared, the community would ultimately reject it based on the belief that it had no relevance to them. Whenever the Torah or the Rabbis reveal the rationale behind a prohibition, we become susceptible to having a conflict of interest. When one has an understanding of the rationale behind a prohibition then he is able to justify violating it by saying that the prohibition has no relevance to his particular situation.

Since the Torah does not reveal the rationale for any of the mitzvos (Positive or Negative Commandments), one should not calculate their value or relevance based on one's own understanding. Rather one should only perceive that the value of mitzvos is doing the Will of Hashem. When one applies his own quantification to mitzvos it is only a matter of time before he will fail.

3. How to Perceive Value

The Torah at the beginning of the Portion of Shoftim states three Negative Commandments, **"You shall not plant for yourselves an idolatrous tree (*asheira*).... And you shall not erect for yourselves a pillar (*matzeivah*), which Hashem, your G-d hates. You shall not slaughter for Hashem, your G-d an ox or a lamb or kid in which there will be a blemish, any bad thing, because it is an abomination (*to'aivah*) of Hashem, your G-d."** Regarding these three prohibitions (idolatrous tree, the pillar, and the blemished sacrifice) the Torah expresses itself with strong terminology, which communicates Hashem's intense dislike for these things. What is the commonality between these three issues? Why are they considered so abominable to Hashem?

Sforno explains that the Torah juxtaposes these three prohibitions because they are similar on an aesthetic and physical level. In the physical and material sense they are attractive and may be considered something of exceptional quality; however, on a spiritual level they represent the antithesis of spirituality because of what they are. The *asheira* tree was an attractive tree that was found in the temples of idolatry. While it may be a beautiful tree it is not to be planted near the Altar because of what it represents. Sforno likens the *asheira* to a judge who has the physical appearance and presence of one who is qualified to be a judge but who is in fact not qualified at all.

Sforno continues that before the Sinai event the pillar (*matzeivah*) was something special because it was used as a location to bring sacrifices to G-d. However after the Sin of the Golden Calf the Jewish people were spiritually diminished and thus the *matzeivah* no longer represented what it had initially. It was defiled because of the idolatrous act of

the Golden Calf. Once again we see that despite the physical and aesthetic value of the *matzeivah* (as appearing to be something that is special), it is detestable to Hashem because of its spiritual defilement.

Regarding the bringing a blemished sacrifice, Sforno explains that although, in terms of its monetary value it may have great worth, because it is physically blemished it does not qualify as an offering despite its exceptional value. However, an animal that is unblemished and perfect, although it may have negligible worth, is something that G-d values because of its perfect physical state. Thus, it qualifies as an offering.

The Torah is teaching us that what one may perceive as special because of its physical appearance or monetary worth, may in fact be detestable to Hashem because it has no relevance to or is the antithesis of spirituality.

There is a Negative Commandment in the Torah that states, “In the way of their (non-Jew) statutes you shall not walk.” Meaning, a Jew is not permitted to assume a mode of behavior (dress, action, ritual) of a non-Jew. Ran in his commentary on Tractate Avodah Zorah explains that if a mode of behavior or practice was originally of an idolatrous nature, although presently it is no longer, it is nevertheless prohibited for a Jew to emulate because of its origins. Although the practice or behavior pattern may be socially accepted, nevertheless, the Torah tells us “you shall not emulate their ways.”

The Jewish people who are a holy people (*goy kaddosh*) should be engaged in things that are not rooted in anything that is contrary to *kiddusha* (holiness). Despite one’s personal perception of value, the Torah is teaching us that if something is spiritually deficient or abominable to Hashem a Jew is not permitted to engage in it.

The law is that if one bows to an animal, it does not qualify as an offering – regardless of its physical state of perfection. If one gives an animal as payment for a sexual favor, it is disqualified as an offering - despite its material worth. If a sefer Torah is written by a heretic, the law is that it must be burned – despite meeting all of the physical requirements (as a Torah scroll). Regarding spiritual matters, it is not the material state that qualifies something to be acceptable but rather it is its spiritual essence. This qualification is determined by the Torah and not one’s own perception and intellect.

4. How Does G-d Become Credible to Every Individual

The Torah states, “**You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, your G-d. For these nations that you are possessing- they listen to astrologers and diviners; but as for you- not so has Hashem, your G-d, given for you.**” There is a Positive Commandment for every Jew to be wholehearted and unquestioning towards Hashem. A Jew is not to be concerned with what the future brings because he has complete and unswerving faith in G-d – unlike the nations of the world who need to consult their soothsayers about the future. It is true that one must take the initiative; however, regardless of one’s initiative one must understand and believe that ultimate success is in the Hands of G-d. If one is concerned about the outcome after taking the initiative then he must strengthen his wholehearted faith in G-d.

One will put trust and have faith in someone with whom he has had an ongoing relationship. When one has a relationship over an extended period of time with another individual a track record is established to determine whether the other could be trusted or not. One would be less likely to have wholehearted trust in one who he has met for the first time.

Regarding the Positive Commandment of having wholehearted faith in Hashem, Moshe Rabbeinu communicated this after the Jewish people had been redeemed from Egypt, witnessed the splitting of the Sea, experienced the Sinai event, and after being provided for by Hashem in every conceivable way in the desert over a period of 40 years. The Jewish people witnessed the Hand of G-d in the most revealed manner. Since this special relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people was established, it is reasonable that the Torah command every Jew to have wholehearted faith in Hashem. It is important to note however that the verse does not merely state, "You shall be wholehearted with Hashem," but rather it states, "You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, *your G-d.*" The term, "your G-d" implies that there must be some degree of personalization in the relationship between oneself and Hashem in order to be truly wholehearted with Him. How does one establish this personalization with Hashem?

If one attributes his successes to himself and attributes the failings in his life only to external circumstances then he is in effect rejecting G-d's involvement in his life. An example of this is if one compromises on his observance of mitzvos for the sake of his material success. If one believes that that he will succeed by compromising on his mitzvah observance, then he is denying G-d's involvement in all facets of his life.

If on the other hand one recognizes that it is Hashem who bestows success or that one does not succeed because G-d does not allow it to be, then he is continuously acknowledging G-d in his life. By continuously attributing one's success or failure to Hashem one develops a personal relationship with Him. It is because of this level of cognizance Hashem becomes "his G-d." It is as a result of one's continuous cognizance of G-d's involvement in his life that G-d establishes a track record with him. Consequently, the individual will be wholehearted with Hashem - *his G-d.*