

Parashat Bo 5772, 2012:

*Achieving True Spiritual Growth*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Torah is the interweaving of “ethical” and “ritual” laws. For example, at the beginning of Parashat Kedoshim, we are met with the general commandment to be “holy,” the mitzvah of *Kibud Av v’Am* (parental respect), and almost immediately thereafter by laws referring to sacrificial offerings. The juxtaposition of these commandments contains a vital message, namely, “ethics” and “ritual” are inseparable. Together they form the constitutive elements from which Judaism is fashioned.

The indissoluble interconnectivity of all mitzvot is a central theme of the Sefer Hachinuch’s philosophy of commandments. This anonymous 13<sup>th</sup> Century work sheds light, as well, on a particular mitzvah that is found in our *parsha*. During the Torah’s enumeration of the requirements of the *Korban Pesach* (Paschal Lamb), we find: “*Ba’bait echad yah’achal lo totzi min habait min habasar chutzah, v’etzem lo tishbaru bo*” (“In one house it shall be eaten, you may not take any of the meat outside from the house; and you shall not break its bone”). Initially, one would expect the Sefer Hachinuch to provide a purely halachic exposition regarding the breaking of the bone of the Paschal Lamb. Normally, this would encompass such elements as: What constitutes a break, and the time frame of the prohibition. Fascinatingly, however, this commandment becomes

the platform whereupon the Sefer Hachinuch presents one of his fundamental concepts of Torah analysis, namely, “based upon the actions and symbolic gestures that we perform, a matter [i.e. concept, idea] will become permanently fixed in our souls [and mind].” As the Sefer Hachinuch states:

At the root of the precept lies the purpose to have us remember the miracles of Egypt... This is also a branch [corollary] of the above root purpose: For it is not a way of honor for royal princes and counselors of the land to scrape the bones and break them like dogs. This is fit only for the hungry poor of the people to do. Therefore at the beginning of our emergence to become the treasured choice of all the nations, a *kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation* (Exodus 19:6), and again every year at the same time, it is fitting for us to perform deeds, which reflect the great degree of excellence to which we rose at that hour. Through the action and symbol that we perform, we set this matter in our souls permanently. (*Sefer haHinnuch: The Book of [Mitzvah] Education, translation, Charles Wengrov, page 118*)

As his examination of our mitzvah proceeds apace, the Sefer Hachinuch addresses the questions: “How do we become who we are?” and “How can we become who we would like to be?” He answers both of these in the following manner: “*Hatah ozencha u’shma, alamedcha l’hoil b’Torah ub’mizvot. Da ki ha’adam nifal kfi peulotov, v’libo vchol machshavotov tamid achar maasav sh’hu oseh bahem inm tov v’im ra*” (“Listen with deep contemplation and I will teach you how to reach high levels in Torah and mitzvot; know that man is affected by his actions [becomes the result of his actions] and that his heart and all of his thoughts continuously follow the actions that he performs whether they will be good or evil”). In other words, man’s behaviors shape his past, present, and future, and serve as determinants of who he will become. By way of illustration, if I act with *chesed* (kindness), I will ultimately become kindly in both my demeanor and personality. Sadly, the opposite formulation is no less the case.

The theological and philosophical touchstone for the Sefer Hachinuch's persuasive position is clearly the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) in his *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot* 1:7. Therein we find:

How should a person comport himself in these [positive] temperaments until they become fixed in him? He should perform these ideal behaviors (*hadeot haemtziot*) and repeat them a second and third time and continuously repeat them until they will become easy for him to perform. At that point, they will not be burdensome and they will become entrenched in his soul. (Translation my own)

In addition, the Rambam notes in *Hilchot Deot* 1:5 the manner whereby we can fulfill the commandment of *v'halachta b'drachov* (walking in G-d's path, *Sefer Devarim* 28:9). He bases this on the well-known passage from *Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 14a:

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava]... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*]...so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners [in the case of Yitzhak after Avraham's passing]...so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe *Rabbeinu*]...so, too, should you bury the dead. (Translation my own)

When taken in tandem, the Sefer Hachinuch and the Rambam provide us with a true *derech hachaim* (path of holy life) and a clear roadmap for achieving our spiritual potential. As always, however, we need Hashem's help to enable us to make these changes. We need to call upon Him in the famous words of *Megilat Eichah* 5:21: "*Hasheveinu Hashem alecha v'nashuvah. chadashe yameinu kekedem.*" ("Cause us to return to You Hashem and we will return, renew our days as they were in ancient times.") With His help, may we have the ability and desire to alter our negative behaviors, realize our true potential, and become more than who we are today. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

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