

Parashat Eikev, 5778, 2018:

## *Encountering Hashem*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha, Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Tzvi Yoel ben Yocheved and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the well-known verse, “And it will be, because you will heed (*eikev tishme'un*) these ordinances and keep them and perform [them], that the L-rd, your G-d, will keep for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers.” (*Sefer Devarim* 7:12, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Our classic *meforshim* (Torah commentators) focus upon the uncommon expression, “*eikev tishme'un*,” that begins our verse, since it is an unusual way to refer to *mitzvot* observance. By way of illustration, Rashi (1040-1105), in a midrashically-infused gloss in his *Commentary on the Torah*, suggests the following interpretation of our phrase:

In the Hebrew language, *eikev* literally means heel. [The connotation is, therefore,] “If you will heed the minor commandments (*hamitzvot hakalot*) which one [usually] tramples with his heels [i.e., which a person treats as being of minor importance].”

In this instance, the original text of the Midrash adds clarity to Rashi’s somewhat brief comment:

Blessed be the Name of the Holy One Who gave the Torah to the Jewish people. It contains 613 commandments, comprised of minor and major (*kalot v'chamurot*) commandments. Many people pay the *kalot* little heed, instead, they toss them underneath their heels [and treat them with disrespect]. Therefore, even King David was afraid of his ultimate judgment day and declared to the Almighty: “Master of the

Universe! I am not afraid of [my failure to fulfill] the major commandments of the Torah, for they are major [in their singular importance]. Of what, then, am I afraid? I am afraid of the minor commandments. Perhaps I violated one of them or failed to fulfill [one of them], precisely because it is a minor commandment. (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Buber edition, Parashat Eikev, section 1, translation, underlining and brackets my own)

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* helps us understand the meaning of our elusive phrase “minor and major commandments:”

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: “The Torah text equates the most minor commandment among the *kalot* with the most major commandment among the *chamurot*. What is the most minor commandment among the *kalot*? This is the commandment of sending away the mother bird [prior to taking her eggs or young]. [And what is] the most major commandment among the *chamurot*? This is the commandment to honor one’s father and mother. [The reward regarding both of these commandments is the same,] as it is written [in each instance] “and you should lengthen your days.” (*Sefer Shemot* 20:11 and *Sefer Devarim* 22:7, *Talmud Yerushalmi*, Vilna edition, *Peah*, chapter 1, translation and brackets my own)

Based on this passage, the terms *kalot* and *chamurot* reference the ease with which commandments can be performed. In other words, if a *mitzvah* is relatively easy to perform, as in the case of sending away the mother bird, it is labelled a minor commandment. Conversely, if the *mitzvah* is difficult to fulfill, in the sense of the commitment of time and effort it entails, such as the commandment to honor one’s father and mother, then it is known as a major precept. Fascinatingly, the Torah assigns the exact same reward to both of these *mitzvot*.

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi was the editor of the *Mishna* in the early part of the third century. Among his numerous contributions to the Rabbinic literature of his day, he is known for the following statement that discusses the relationship that obtains between *mitzvot kalot* and *mitzvot chamurot*: “And you should be as careful in the performance of a minor commandment as with a major commandment, since you do not have the ability to know the reward of the *mitzvot*.” (*Pirkei Avot*, II:1, translation my own) In sum, Rabbi

Yehudah HaNasi is teaching us that precision and alacrity in all *mitzvot* are the watchwords of Torah observance. This is particularly the case since, in general, “we do not have the ability to know the reward of the *mitzvot*.” At first glance, this latter statement seems to contradict another well-known Rabbinic dictum, “Ben Hei Hei would say: ‘According to the pain is the gain.’” (“*L’fum tza’ara agra*,” *Pirkei Avot* V:21, translation, Rabbi Yosef Marcus) Herein, it appears quite clear that the greater the effort undertaken to perform a *mitzvah*, the greater the reward. As such, a major commandment should have a greater reward than a minor commandment. What, then, does the statement, “we do not have the ability to know the reward of the *mitzvot*,” actually mean?

Rabbi Moses Almosnino (1515-1580) is renowned for his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* entitled, *Pirkei Moshe*. Therein, he wrestles with our question and suggests the following profoundly insightful response:

The kind of reward that is meant [by the phrase, “we do not have the ability to know the reward of the *mitzvot*,”] is above and beyond the standard notion of reward, and is, therefore, not [conceptually] connected to the statement, “*l’fum tza’ara agra*,” or the essence of the *mitzvah* itself. Instead, it refers solely to one’s desire and degree of perfection of *kavanah* (intentionality) in fulfilling the commandments – and such reward is, by definition, unknown to us. Therefore, it is stated that one must be exacting and act with all speed regarding both minor and major commandments, since even if we know the normative reward of the *mitzvah*, which is based upon the difficulty of its performance, its ultimate reward remains ever hidden from us, as it is immeasurable. (Page 33, translation, brackets and underlining my own)

Rav Almosnino’s explanation is nothing less than a spiritual tour de force. In a few words, he revolutionizes our understanding of the status of the *mitzvot*, and teaches us that they are all equal in their ultimate reward – as long as we infuse each one with our deepest and most fervent *kavanah* and desire for its complete fulfillment. In my estimation, this is reminiscent of *David HaMelech*’s (King David’s) passionate proclamation, “*Tzama*

*nafshi l'Elokim l'A-le chai*" ("My soul thirsts for G-d, for the living G-d...", *Sefer Tehillim* 42:3), which may be readily interpreted as referring to his total devotion to Hashem and ardent longing to fulfill the *mitzvot* from the depths of his being. Little wonder, then, that like Abraham and Moses before him, Hashem calls him, "*David avdi*" ("My servant David"), which we see no less than ten times throughout the Tanach.

With the Almighty's help, may each of us seek to connect with our Creator through sincere *mitzvot* observance, so that we may be counted among those whose souls thirst for Him as authentic *avdai Hashem* (the servants of Hashem). *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdb718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.