

Parashat Re'eh, 5777, 2017:

Why the Mitzvot?

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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 Yechiel, 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, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

In broad term terms, our *parasha* divides meat for consumption into two separate and distinct categories, *b'sar korban* (sacrificial meat) and *b'sar ta'aveh* (*chulin*, or non-sacrificial meat). The first group constitutes the subject matter of *Sefer Devarim* 12:11-19 and 26-27, while the latter is found in 12:20-25. In the midst of its presentation of *b'sar ta'aveh*, the Torah teaches us that it is forbidden to consume blood:

However, be strong not to eat the blood, for the blood is the soul; and you shall not eat the soul with the flesh. You shall not eat it, you shall spill it on the ground, like water. You shall not eat it, in order that it be good for you, and for your children after you, when you do what is proper in the eyes of the L-rd. (*Sefer Devarim* 12:23-25, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

These verses present us with a significant exegetical problem. Why does the Torah so powerfully emphasize, “However, be strong not to eat the blood, for the blood is the soul...” Why do we need such “encouragement” to refrain from eating blood? After all, most people surely would agree that the very thought of eating blood is disgusting in the extreme. Rabbi Shimon bar Rabi was bothered by this problem, as well, in his analysis of this problem in *Mishnah Makkot* III:15:

Rabbi Shimon bar Rabi said: “Behold the Torah states: ‘However, be strong not to eat the blood, for the blood is the soul...’ When it comes to [the eating of] blood wherein one’s very being is revolted [by such a thought], [nonetheless,] one who refrains from [eating it] will receive a reward, [so, too, in the case of] stealing and illicit relations, wherein

one's innermost being is desirous thereof - and he lusts after them – one who separates himself from them will all the more so [receive reward]. [Moreover, not only] will he merit [reward, but so, too, will] his future generations, and all generations that will come from him until the end of time.” (Translation my own)

Rabbi Shimon bar Rabi is clearly teaching us that we must be sensitive to the Torah's unusual phraseology, and that beyond a shadow of a doubt, eating blood is a revolting and abnormal act. Yet, it is no less true that if we refrain from eating blood because it is Hashem's will, rather than because we are naturally repulsed, we will receive a tremendous reward that will protect our children and our children's children throughout all generations to come.

If we reexamine Rabbi Shimon bar Rabi's statement a bit more closely, it appears that he is actually revealing a fundamental element of Torah observance, and, by extension, an essential aspect of our relationship with Hashem. He is instructing us that our explanations of the *mitzvot* must never be viewed as the reasons why we perform them. In other words, regardless as to what kind of cognitive and emotional excitement these analyses may generate, we must ever be focused upon one basic and overriding truth: We observe the *mitzvot* solely because G-d commanded us to do so. In other words, one of our basic obligations as Jews is to view the entire Torah and its corpus of laws in its proper light. This means that whether or not we understand a *mitzvah*, or believe we have discovered its rationale, its absolute demand upon us, its unquestionable claim upon our being, is derived from the Voice that eternally issues forth from Mount Sinai.

On the most basic level, therefore, we must always recognize that there is a tripartite process that forms the background of each and every *mitzvah*: Hashem as the *metzaveh*

(the Commander), the *mitzvah* (the commandment), and man as the *metzuveh* (the commanded). Each time we fulfill a Torah precept, we demonstrate our loyalty to our Creator and His holy Torah. Moreover, we declare to all mankind that the relationship forged with our forebears continues to flourish until our own moment. When we fulfill the *mitzvot*, we are joyfully proclaiming: “*Hashem Hu HaElokim.*” (“Hashem is our G-d and Master,” *Sefer Devarim* IV:35)

Given these ideas, I believe we have found an answer to the question, “How should we approach the *mitzvot*?” We need to address them with a sense of awe and humility, coupled with an ever-present recognition that we are fulfilling G-d’s will. This means that while the cognitive gesture surely enhances our appreciation and understanding of the *mitzvot*, it is not the rationale for their fulfillment. Humility, even in the case of the *mitzvot*, must ever be our watchword. This crucial concept was given powerful voice by Michah the prophet so very long ago: “O man, what is good, and what the L-rd demands of you; but to do justice, to love loving-kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d.” (VI:8) With His loving help may this be so. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on 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:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3)