

Parashat Shoftim, 5770, 2010:

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*The Hidden Mystery of the Mitzvot*

Dedicated to the sacred memory and *Yahrzeit* of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

This week's *parasha* contains the *Parashat Hamelech*, the portion that describes the reasons why *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) would eventually long for a king, and the rules and regulations that the king, in turn, was obligated to follow:

When you come to the land the L-rd, your G-d, is giving you, and you possess it and live therein, and you say, "I will set a king over myself, like all the nations around me," you shall set a king over you, one whom the L-rd, your G-d, chooses; from among your brothers, you shall set a king over yourself; you shall not appoint a foreigner over yourself, one who is not your brother. Only, he may not acquire many horses for himself, so that he will not bring the people back to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, for the L-rd said to you, "You shall not return that way any more." And he shall not take many wives for himself, and his heart must not turn away, and he shall not acquire much silver and gold for himself. And it will be, when he sits upon his royal throne, that he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah on a scroll from [that Torah which is] before the Levitic kohanim. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the L-rd, his G-d, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to perform them, so that his heart will not be haughty over his brothers, and so that he will not turn away from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, in order that he may prolong [his] days in his kingdom, he and his sons, among Israel. (*Sefer Devarim* 17:14-20, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*)

Allow me to briefly explicate the direct meaning of these seven verses:

1. Our desire to establish a monarchy will be reflective of our yearning to emulate the other nations of the world. In other words, G-d will accede to our request – He, however, never commanded us to set an earthly sovereign over ourselves.
2. G-d, not man, will choose the king from among the Jewish people. In addition, we are proscribed from setting a non-Jewish king over ourselves.
3. The king is forbidden to acquire many horses and may only have one personal mount. (As explained by Rambam – Maimonides -, 1135-1204, *Sefer Hamitzvot*,

- Negative Commandment number 363). The Torah explains this prohibition in very clear terms: “so that he will not bring the people back to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, for the L-rd said to you, “You shall not return that way any more.”
4. The sovereign is disallowed from marrying an excessive amount of women. Why? So that “his heart must not turn away [from Hashem and His Torah].”
  5. The king is prohibited from acquiring an unwarranted personal fortune. This quite simply would cause him to ceaselessly focus upon his own self-aggrandizement, instead of upon his responsibilities to be a true servant of Hashem and to serve the people’s needs.
  6. The king is obligated to write two *sifrei Torah* (Torah scrolls) and to study them on a constant and ongoing basis. Once again, the rationale inherent in this commandment is presented explicitly in our passage: “so that he may learn to fear the L-rd, his G-d, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to perform them, so that his heart will not be haughty over his brothers, and so that he will not turn away from the commandment, either to the right or to the left...”

*Sefer Melachim* I: 3:5-12 teaches us that *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon) was the wisest man who ever lived. Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch *zatzal* (1808-1888), in his *Commentary on the Siddur*, explains two components of wisdom in a unique fashion. In his view, *da’at* “...denotes the true perception of the real nature of things and conditions,” whereas *binah* “is the insight into the interrelationships of things, to be gained by logical judgment.” He further contrasts these two terms in the following manner:

*Da’ath*, to a great extent, is a talent given to man which develops by itself in and through experience. But he cannot acquire *binah* without an effort on his own part. Therefore [in the fourth *bracha* of the *Amidah*] the term *melamade* [teach] is employed with reference to *binah* instead of *chonen* [that which is given in kindness]...The acquisition of *binah* requires strenuous effort to which man may not be equal and for which he may well lack the strength; for this reason he cannot attain *binah* without the help of G-d.

In a word, *da'at* is the ability to accurately perceive the real nature of the world. It is gifted to man. *Binah*, however, is difficult to acquire and something that one must constantly strive to attain. This struggle can only be won with the help of our Creator.

*Shlomo Hamelech* received the greatest *da'at* from Hashem. Moreover, with G-d's help and love, he acquired the most profound *binah* that any man could ever achieve:

In Gibeon the L-rd appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and G-d said, "Ask what I shall give you." And Solomon said, "You have done Your servant David my father great kindness, as he walked before you in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with You; and You have kept for him this great kindness, that You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as (it is) this day. And now, O L-rd my G-d, You have made Your servant king instead of David my father; and I (am but) a little child; I do not know (how) to go out or come in. And your servant (is) in the midst of Your people which you have chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give (therefore) Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and bad; for who is able to judge this Your great people?" And the speech pleased the L-rd, that Solomon had asked this thing. And G-d said to him, "Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked for yourself long life; neither have you asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked the life of your enemies; but have asked for yourself understanding to discern judgment. Behold, I have done according to your word; behold, I have given you a wise and understanding heart; so that there was none like you before you, nor after you shall any arise like you." (Ibid. , emphasis my own)

Given King Solomon's incredible brilliance, one would have thought that he, perhaps more than any other person, would have been singularly successful in keeping both the content and intent of the *mitzvot*. Unfortunately, however, he violated each of the prohibitions that are delineated in the *Parashat Hamelech*:

The reason for these prohibitions – against accumulating wives, horses and money – is explicitly stated in the Torah: "He may not acquire many horses for himself, so that he will not bring the people back to Egypt in order to acquire many horses... He shall not take many wives for himself, so that his heart shall not turn away [from G-d], and he shall not acquire much silver and gold for himself." Because the reasons for these mitzvot are known, many decided to disregard them [claiming that the reasons do not apply to them]—even Solomon, despite his incredible wisdom and knowledge, and despite the fact that he was dubbed "a friend of G-d" [fell into this trap]. (Rambam, *ibid.*, Negative Commandment number 365, translation, Berel Bell, emphasis my own)

The Rambam utilized *Shlomo Hamelech*'s failure to fulfill these *mitzvot* as an opportunity to teach us a crucial lesson about the hidden nature of G-d's commandments:

This is a valuable lesson for us all. Were we to know the reasons behind all the mitzvot, we would find reasons to abolish them all. If Solomon made this mistake, certainly the un-schooled general public would do the same, saying, "G-d only commanded us to do this, and forbade us from doing that, because of such and such. We will be meticulous regarding the reason why the mitzvah was given—but will disregard the mitzvah itself." And the entire religion would thus be lost. Therefore G-d concealed the reasons behind [many of] the mitzvot, and most of the reasons are beyond the comprehension of the general population. (Ibid. , emphasis my own)

Thus, Hashem purposely hid the rationale inherent in the commandments from us so that we would not dismiss it through our rationalizations. Were we to do so, G-d forbid, "the entire religion would thus be lost." After all, to paraphrase Sigmund Freud (1856-1939): "When it comes to rationalizations, every man is a genius."

In addition, Maimonides noted in *Sefer Hamitzvot* that one should never think that our inability to comprehend the innate meaning of the *mitzvot* means that they are devoid of rationale. Instead: "... there is not one that doesn't have logic and reason. They are all [perfect], as the prophet [King David, *Sefer Tehillim* 19:9] testifies, 'The orders of the L-rd are upright, causing the heart to rejoice; the commandment of the L-rd is clear, enlightening the eyes.'" Thus, according to the Rambam, G-d deliberately hid the *taamei Hamitzvot* (reasons of the Commandments) from us, so that we would be able to authentically serve Him from the innermost depths of our hearts and souls, instead of merely from our all too limited intellects.

Allow me to conclude with the Rambam's final words in the *Sefer Hamitzvot*: "And I beseech G-d for assistance in fulfilling all that He commanded, and [the strength to help me] distance [myself] from all that He forbade." May this prayer be upon our lips and in

our hearts as we continue to grow in appreciation of the hidden mystery and glory of the *mitzvot*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html).

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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: [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).