

Parashat Tzav – Shabbat Hagadol, 5770, 2010:

Rabbi David Etengoff

The Joy of Understanding the Mitzvot

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Sheva bat Sarah Rivka, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir ben Shaindel, and in honor of the birth of my first grandchild to my children, Devorah and Zevie Burger.

Command Aaron and his sons, saying, This is the law of the burnt offering: That is the burnt offering which burns on the altar all night until morning, and the fire of the altar shall burn with it. (*Sefer Vayikra* 6:2, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The above-found verse is the second one in our *parasha* (Torah reading). The first word in this *pasuk* (verse) “*Tzav*” (“Command”) gives our Torah portion its name. Rashi (1040-1105) provides a thought provoking explanation of our verse that is based upon the *Sifra*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Vayikra*: “**Command Aaron**: Hebrew “*tzav*.” The expression “*tzav*“ always denotes urging [to promptly and meticulously fulfill a particular commandment] for the present and also for future generations.” (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The word “*tzav*“ forms the basis for the word “*mitzvah*.” This led Rav Herschel Schachter *shlita* to note: “...the term ‘mitzvah’ has a technical connotation. It refers specifically to an obligation that is binding throughout all the generations.” (“Torah and *Nevuah*,” torahweb.org/torah/2004/parsha/rsch_tzav.html)

Given Rashi’s explanation of “*tzav*,” and Rav Schachter’s emphasis upon the eternal nature of a *mitzvah*, our *parasha* gives us a unique opportunity to pause and reflect upon our relationship to the *mitzvot*. On the most basic level, we know that there is a tripartite

process that forms the background of each and every commandment: Hashem as the *metzaveh* (the Commander), the *mitzvah* (the commandment), and man as the *metzuveh* (the commanded). Each time we are *mekayam* a mitzvah (fulfill a commandment), we demonstrate our loyalty to our Creator and prove to the world that the Voice emanating from *Har Sinai* (Mt. Sinai) continues to be heard in all of its power and majesty. In addition, we show the entire world that the relationship forged with our forbears continues to flourish until our own historical moment. By keeping Hashem's Torah, we joyfully proclaim: "*Hashem Hu HaElokim.*" ("Hashem is our G-d and Master")

We all recognize the beauty and supernal wisdom of the Torah and its mitzvot. This idea was formulated by our Sages in a stirring prayer that is found immediately after *U'vah l'Tzion* in *Tefilat Shacharit* (the morning prayer service):

Blessed is He, our G-d, Who created us for His glory, separated us from those who stray, gave us the Torah of truth and implanted eternal life within us. May He open our heart through His Torah and imbue our heart with love and awe of Him and that we may do His will and serve Him wholeheartedly, so that we do not struggle in vain nor produce for futility. (Translation, *Artscroll Siddur*)

While we embrace this notion, we need to analyze to the best of our limited abilities exactly why Hashem bestowed upon us His gift of the mitzvot. In other words, what purpose(s) do the mitzvot ultimately serve? How can we relate to them in a manner that touches our hearts and souls? In other words, how can we get past thinking about the number of commandments and focus, instead, upon their ultimate meaning in our lives?

Chazal (our Sages of blessed memory), during the periods of the Tannaim (approximately 200 years before and after the year zero) and the Amoraim (approximately third century C.E. until the sixth century C.E), developed at least three

over-arching reasons for the rationale behind the mitzvot. The ones that I have been able to identify are: *l'zakot et Yisrael* (to confer merit upon the Jewish people), *l'tzrofe et Yisrael* (to purify the Jewish people), and *l'kadash et Yisrael* (to sanctify the Jewish people).

We find the clearest and best-known expression of *l'zakot et Yisrael*, in the statement of the Mishnaic period figure, Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia. It is recited at the end of each chapter of *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*) and quite often at the end of a *shiur* (Torah study lesson):

Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia says: The Holy One, Blessed is He, wished to confer merit upon Israel; therefore He gave them Torah and mitzvos in abundance, as it is said: "Hashem desired for the sake of its [Israel's] righteousness, that the Torah be made great and glorious." (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 60:21, translation, *Artscroll Siddur*)

Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia is unmistakably teaching us that one reason why *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (The Holy One, Blessed is He) gave us His holy Torah is to make us even more worthy in His eyes. It is true that we all have some degree of *zechut avot* (merit of our forefathers). This, however, is dependent upon exactly who our particular ancestors were. The *zechut* of the mitzvot, however, serve to "level the playing field" and allow everyone the opportunity, regardless of their forebears, to achieve prominence in Hashem's eyes. In a word, we all can have true greatness as a result of careful and meaningful mitzvot observance. Rashi underscores this idea in his comment entitled "*l'zakot*" to *Talmud Bavli, Makkot* 23b:

The Torah had no need to command many of the mitzvot and the admonitions (prohibitions) regarding crawling bugs and improperly slaughtered animals, since there is no one who naturally does not pull back from them [in disgust]. The only reason why they were commanded was to [enable man] to receive reward by separating [himself] from them. (Translation, my own)

Rav, the disciple of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi (redactor of the Mishnah) and one of the greatest of all of the Amoraim, provides us with the next reason as to why Hashem conferred the commandments upon us. He is the author of the following pivotal Midrashic statement on the meaning of the mitzvot:

Rav said: “The commandments were only given to purify His creations through [performing] them. Do you really think that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* cares if a person slaughters an animal on the underside of its neck or on the back of its neck? [No!] The entire purpose of the mitzvot is to purify His creations.” (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 44:1, translation, my own)

Rav, like Rabbi Akiva before him (see *Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Tazria*, section five in reference to *brit milah*), champions the idea of *l'tzrofe et Yisrael* as the rationale behind the mitzvot. It is important to note that the Hebrew words *l'tzrofe et Yisrael* are used in this source and not *l'tahare et Yisrael*. They have entirely different meanings even though they are often translated the same in English translations. “*L'tzrofe*” means to purify in the sense of purifying a metal such as gold. Through the metallurgy process, the gold smelter is able to remove the dross and produce nearly pure gold. In contrast, “*l'tahare*” refers to taking something or someone from the state of ritual impurity and, through one of several means, changing their status to that of being ritually pure. When Rav explains the commandments as having the purpose of “*l'tzrofe et Yisrael*,” he is metaphorically teaching us that Hashem wants us to be “as good as gold,” as pure as the finest gold that man can ever produce. In His incredible love for us, as demonstrated by the gift of the mitzvot, He helps form us into His children and His special treasure, His *am segulah*.

The final concept that I would like to discuss regarding the rationale behind the commandments is *l'kadash et Yisrael*. Rabbi Isi ben Yehudah offers the following formulation of this idea in the early halachic Midrash to *Sefer Shemot* known as the *Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael*: “When the Omnipresent (*Hamakom*) gave a new mitzvah to the Jewish people, He added to their holiness.” (*Mishpatim, Parasha 20*) A second source of this concept is found in the halachic Midrash to *Bamidbar* known as the *Sifrei*:

“And you shall be holy to your G-d.” Is this referring to the holiness that is brought about through the commandments in general or is it referring to the holiness that is brought about specifically through the mitzvah of *Tzitzit*? As it is said this is referencing the idea of the holiness of **all** of the mitzvot.” (*Piska 115, translation, my own*)

This notion is also underscored by *Chazal*'s formulation of the first part of every *birkat hamitzvah* (blessing prior to performing a commandment): “*asher kiddashanu b'mitzvotov vitzivanu*” (“[He] who makes us holy through His mitzvot and commands us.”) Herein, our Sages of Blessed Memory clearly teach us that one of the reasons for the gift of the commandments is to make us holy. When we reach this lofty plane, we become worthy of Hashem's continuing and ongoing beneficence. Moreover, we fulfill the mitzvah of *Kedoshim t'hiyu*, as found at the beginning of Parashat Kedoshim (*Vayikra 19:2*): “Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, the L-rd, your G-d, am holy.”

May this *Pesach* be our final one in *Galut* (the Diaspora). With G-d's help, may it be the time when we finally grasp the joy of understanding the purposes inherent in the mitzvot, so that we can consciously and authentically invest our lives with ultimate and eternal meaning. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

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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.