

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Ki Tavoh)

I remember the first Mishnah I ever learned. (The Mishnah is the basic text of the oral tradition, as codified and edited by Rabbi Yehuda Ha'Nasi circa 200C.E., and represents the sum total of the oral tradition handed down from student to teacher in an unbroken chain from Sinai, over three thousand years ago. It is the foundation of Jewish tradition.) As a child I attended a Jewish Yeshiva Day School, but it was not in the school classroom that I was first introduced to the Mishnah; it was in Synagogue.

The Synagogue we attended when I was five years old, had a strict decorum, and I seem to recall or imagine the challenges this presented to my parents (She'yibadlu Le'Chaim Tovim) who had their hands full, I suppose, keeping track of my elder brother and me. Vague images of my red-faced and embarrassed father carrying me out of synagogue kicking and screaming to stop me from jumping up and down on the podium in front of the entire congregation seem to support my perception that I was a handful, to say the least.

Although I do not recall the exact circumstances leading up to this moment, I remember I had succeeded in escaping from the seat next to my father near the rear and running up to the front of the synagogue. The conversation I had with Rabbi Dr. Simon Greenberg, however, is ingrained in my memory. An eminent Torah scholar (Talmid Chacham), he had an honored place in the front row, and I can still remember his piercing eyes and warm smile. He had the largest hands I had ever seen, and somehow, he succeeded in getting hold of me and hoisting me up to sit on his lap.

Most of us have little recollection of the events that filled our early years, and there isn't much we remember from when we were five years old. But this conversation I remember in its entirety. I recall the sefer (book) he was holding, and his query as to whether I knew what it was. And I even remember the text of the Mishnah, which he proceeded to teach me in its entirety. Most people, catching hold of a rambunctious five-year-old shouting and yelling in Synagogue, usually head for either their parents, or the door. But he chose instead to teach me the entire first Mishnah of the Talmud in its entirety, right there on his knees.

Most of all, I still remember how important I felt as a five-year-old, to be sitting on this great rabbi's lap, all the way in the front of the Synagogue with, so it seemed to me, nothing more important to him than our conversation. Looking back, those few moments must have had a strong impact on me, as I still remember not only the text he taught me, but the entire conversation as well. The beginnings of my relationship with Torah, aside, of course, from my parents, and the first stirrings of the love for Torah I still have today, began not with scholarship, but with mentschlichkeit. True Torah scholarship is not only the erudition and familiarity with large amounts of text; it is, as well, the ability, and more importantly the desire to spend time on that text even with a noisy five-year-old boy.

'Mentsch' is a hard word to translate. It refers not to a person's wisdom, or brilliance, but to the pure human decency such wisdom is meant to produce. It would be safe to say that my path to teaching began

not from some brilliant insight full of wisdom from an eminent Torah scholar, but rather from a simple moment filled with the sterling character and caring of a Torah mentsch.

We are in the midst of preparing for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, known also as the *Yamim Noraim*, the ‘*Days of Awe*’. And we spend much time wondering how we can become better human beings, living up to the myriad of laws and challenges, the mitzvot, that the Torah seems to desire of us. On *Yom Kippur* we will beat our breast and cry out our regrets over the missed opportunities and mistakes of the last year. Most people spend time considering the actions we regret, but very little focus on whether our character needs refining as well.

We attempt to make the food we eat, and hopefully the speech we impart as Kosher as the Torah scrolls from which we read. But what of the less specific question and certainly less measurable challenge of being, generally, a fine human being? Is there a mitzvah to be a *mentsch*?

This week’s portion, *Ki Tavoh*, begins with a series of blessings which we will merit as a people if, collectively, we adhere to the path Hashem (G-d) has given us to embrace.

“Ve’Haya, Im Shamoah’ Tishmah Be’Kol Hashem Elokechah’ Lishmor La’asot Et Kol Mitzvotav Asher Anochi Metzav’chah’ HaYom... U’va’u’ Alechah’ Kol Ha’Berachot Ha’Eileh’ Ve’Hisiguchah’.”

“And it will come to pass, if you will listen to the voice of Hashem your G-d, to guard (cherish) and fulfill all His Mitzvot (Commandments) which I Command you this day... then all these blessings will come upon you and catch you up.” (Devarim 28:1-2)

It would seem that all the collective blessing we dream of, and hope to experience as a people, depends on our willingness to adhere to Hashem’s mitzvot, the opportunities we are given to live a committed Jewish life.

But this verse is not quite as simple as it seems. It is worth noting that this verse speaks to us not as a collective people, as we might expect, but rather to each of us as individuals. The entire verse, and indeed both the blessings and the curses that follow, are given in first person singular, implying that I, as an individual, bear responsibility for the fate and merit of the entire Jewish people, a challenging idea at best.

One might imagine this to mean that every individual is responsible for the entire Jewish people, and that until we learn to value and respect every Jew, we will never achieve our goal as a light unto the Nations, and thus the blessings of peace and prosperity will forever elude us, and this is certainly true. But one wonders if there is some deeper message hidden in the choice of addressee.

Further, if indeed these verses are speaking to the individual, then there is something that seems to make no sense. How can we be enjoined “*Lishmor La’asot Et **Kol** Mitzvotav*”, to “*fulfill all His Mitzvot*”? (28:1)

Are all of these blessings dependent on our (or even my) fulfilling every last mitzvah? If I live a complete Jewish life, but have never had the chance to fulfill, as an example, the mitzvah of *Pe’ah*, setting aside a corner of my field for the poor, are the blessings due the entire Jewish people withheld?

Indeed, it is not actually possible for *any* Jew to fulfill all of the Mitzvoth! If you are not a Kohen (priest), you cannot fulfill the mitzvah of a Kohen, and if you do not have a firstborn son, you cannot fulfill the mitzvah of redeeming the firstborn, etc. In fact, there are mitzvoth I hope please G-d *never* to fulfill, such as the mitzvah of giving a *Get*, a divorce document in the event of the dissolution of a marriage.

And even if one assumes this verse to mean that we must take care not to *transgress* any of the commandments (i.e. *if* you have a field, *then* set aside a corner for the poor) it is still challenging, for who can say he or she has not transgressed any of the commandments? Can it be that for one sentence of gossip, the Jewish people will remain in exile forever? What is the deeper implication hidden in these words?

And there is more: The Torah does not suffice with this explanation of the basis for these blessings. In 28:9, we read:

“Ye’kimchah’ Hashem Lo’ Le’Am Kadosh, Ka’asher Nishba’ Lach, Ki’ Tishmor Et Mitzvoth Hashem Elokechah’ Ve’Halachta’ Be’Deracahav.”

“Hashem will raise you to Him as a holy nation, as He has promised, when (because) you will fulfill the mitzvoth of Hashem your G-d, and walk in His ways.” (28:9)

Notice that in this verse it does not say **all (Kol)** the mitzvoth, but rather we are given the normal enjoinder to fulfill Hashem’s commandments. Why here are we not told to fulfill *all* the mitzvoth? And equally interesting, what is the additional clause of *“Ve’Halachta’ Be’Deracahav”* (“*and walk in His ways*”)?

Perhaps this imperative to walk in the ways or pathways of Hashem, is the key to this entire question.

One might assume this phrase to simply be a repetition, in different format of Hashem’s desire for us to follow the path of Torah laid out for us.

Maimonides, however, lists this particular phrase as a separate mitzvah, in his *Sefer HaMitzvoth (Book of Mitzvoth, Positive Commandment 8)*, implying that there is a very specific mitzvah we are expected to fulfill. But what is this mitzvah on which, it seems, everything depends? And why is this mitzvah specifically associated with all of the blessings and rewards we hope to achieve as a people?

Even more challenging is the fact that the **Rambam**’s inclusion of *“Ve’Halachta’ Be’Deracahav”* as a separate mitzvah seems to go against his own parameters for what does and does not constitute a mitzvah.

In his introduction to the book of Mitzvoth, Maimonides explains that there are certain fundamental principles on which the list of mitzvoth is dependent. The fourth such principle is that any mitzvah which includes all the mitzvoth (or on which all the mitzvoth depend) is not included in the list of mitzvoth.

Thus, for example, Maimonides does not include as one of the 613 mitzvot any obligation to believe in G-d, because without belief in G-d, none of the mitzvot make sense. And this is the source of the debate as to why the Rambam did not include the mitzvah to live in Israel, in as much as none of the mitzvot are complete unless they are fulfilled in the land of Israel.

So how can the mitzvah of walking in the ways of Hashem be one of Maimonides' list of the 613 mitzvot? Isn't this a general principle, which includes all the mitzvot? (Hence, for example, there is to mitzvah to "*listen to the voice of Hashem*", because this principal includes and pertains to all the mitzvot.)

What then, according to Maimonides, is the specific mitzvah of "*Ve'Halachta' Be'Deracahav*", to "*Walk in Hashem's ways*"?

The answer is to be found in Maimonides' *Hilchot Deot*, the laws of character development. In his magnum opus, the Mishneh Torah, where the Rambam delineates and organizes the entirety of Jewish law (*halacha*), the second set of laws, right at the beginning of the first of his fourteen books concern the Jewish recipe for becoming a mensch. Second only to the laws of the foundations of Torah (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, the basic principles of faith in Judaism), Maimonides believed Judaism begins and ends with the challenge of becoming a mensch.

And the basis for his insistence that adherence to a Torah lifestyle begins with the obligation to become a good person is our verse: of "*Ve'Halachta' Be'Deracahav*". (Deot 1:5).

In other words, it is not just commendable, when a person becomes a mensch; it is an **obligation**, without which we are not fulfilling one of the basic ingredients of Judaism. A closer look at Maimonides' *Hilchot Deot* reveals that a person who is too angry or too stingy, too greedy or too lazy, is transgressing (or at least not fulfilling) one of Judaism's basic mitzvot. In fact, the context in which this mitzvah appears here in the Torah, suggests that it is a far more important mitzvah to develop one's character than putting on tefillin, or even refraining from eating pork!

All of the blessings of the entire Jewish people depend on the ability of any given individual learning to behave like a mensch. All the Torah a person may ever teach is not as worthwhile, as the way in which he or she teaches it. It took me a long time to understand that my first Mishnah was not about how incredible it was that a great Torah scholar took the time and had the sensitivity to teach a Mishnah to a wild little five-year-old. Rather, it was *because* he took the time and had the sensitivity to teach a Mishnah to a wild little five-year-old, that Rabbi Greenberg was a true Torah scholar.

Indeed, the Rambam points out, that not only are we obligated to refine our character, but also indeed we have to do Teshuvah (repentance) for our lacking in these areas. The Teshuvah process we seek to achieve in the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah is not just about our mistaken actions, but our incomplete character traits as well! (Hilchot Teshuvah 7:3) We have to do Teshuvah, says the Rambam, for every moment of anger, jealousy, hatred, greed, arrogance and pride as well!

In fact, this is the true meaning of the verse in Isaiah read on the afternoon of community fast days:

“Ya’azov rasha Darko, Ve’ish Aven Machshevotav....”

“Let the wicked leave his path, and the man of iniquity is thoughts...”. (Yishayahu 55:7)

Indeed, this may well be the true meaning of the beginning of the above-quoted verse:

“Ve’Haya, Im Shamoah’ Tishmah Be’Kol Hashem Elokechah’ Lishmor La’asot Et Kol Mitzvotav

*“And it will come to pass, if you will listen to the voice of Hashem your G-d to guard (cherish) and fulfill **all** His Mitzvoth (Commandments). (Devarim 28:1)*

What exactly does it mean to listen to G-d? Each of us has an inner voice, which really is a manifestation of Hashem inside each and every one of us. Do we hear that voice? Do we listen to it? And even more, do we hear the voice that cries out from inside every human being? After all, if I cannot see a little bit of G-d inside the person standing next to me, I will never find G-d anywhere else....

And maybe this is why the Torah speaks in first person singular, because it is precisely the development of ourselves as individuals that the Torah is speaking of here. We often spend a lot of time considering what everyone else is doing wrong, and we speak in lofty ringing tones of the need for the Jewish people to ‘come together’. We sigh and nod when we recognize how much work we have to do as a people to become the collective role model we are meant to be. But that goal is not about telling anyone else what to do. It begins with our determination to make ourselves into better human beings.

Rav Kook (in his *Arpelei Tohar*) suggests that all of a person’s problems and all the baggage we carry in life stem from one’s relationship with Hashem. If my relationship with and perception of G-d is skewered, then I will be skewered as well. That is how a human being who believes in G-d can walk into a pizzeria or café’ on a beautiful afternoon strapped with explosives, and murder innocent women and children in the name of that same G-d.

If my G-d is an angry G-d, then on a certain level, I will be an angry person, and if my G-d is only a G-d of judgment, then I will be a person filled with judgment. But even more, if I cannot see the piece of G-d inside every human being, beginning with myself, then I have an incomplete and skewered perception of G-d. If I can kill, whether by bomb or by character assassination, another human being, then it must be because I do not fully see the image of Hashem inside them. And that is the source of all the pain, and all the curses, as well as the vehicle to achieving all the blessings we so long for in this world.

I remember, during one of my stints in Lebanon, sharing a base in Marja’oun, with some Lebanese Christians, who were allied with Israel. Israel was training and assisting the S.L.A., the South Lebanese Army, in its battle against the P.L.O. in Soutrhern Lebanon.

While we did not do patrols together we would run into them on the base from time to time. As some spoke excellent English I got friendly with a few of them and we would sometimes get together in the canteen and swap stories.

One Sunday afternoon I got back from patrol in time to catch a priest who had come to visit them for mass. It transpired he was an English Priest visiting the Middle East on a large Christian Mission, and he, along with a few of the higher- ups on the mission had been given a special V.I.P. helicopter ride by

some officials from the Ministry of Tourism. Someone had come up with the bright idea of bringing the Christians to visit our Christian allies who were fighting alongside Israel.

When the photo opportunities and sound bytes were over, I got into a conversation with this priest, about the sad state of affairs in Lebanon in general, and in the Lebanese Christian Community in particular. It took me a moment to realize that he was actually clueless to what was really going on in the Lebanese Christian community, which shocked me. Because no matter how deep our relationship with G-d may seem, if it gets in the way of our relationship with our fellow human beings, then we are missing the entire point.

When we will truly 'hear'; the voice of Hashem emanating from every human being, and when that will drive each of us to become the refined and sterling human being we are meant to be, then truly:

"U'va'u' Alechah' Kol Ha'Berachot Ha'Eileh' Ve'Hisiguchah'."

"...Then all these blessings will come upon you and catch you up." (Devarim 28:1-2)

Shabbat Shalom,
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