

Sparks

by Rabbi David Aaron
*Founder and Dean, Isralight
Rosh Yeshiva, Orayta*

To Serve with Joy *Is your life 'out of service'?*

“And Moses and Aaron were brought again unto Pharaoh; and he said unto them: 'Go, serve the LORD your G-d; but who are they that shall go?'

And Moses said: 'We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go; because the holiday of G-d is for us.'”
— Exodus 10:8-9

The King of Egypt must have been quite surprised by Moses answer. To serve G-d is not like serving you. It is not about degrading back-breaking slavery rather a joyful celebration for the whole family. To serve G-d is a holiday for us.

The Secret to Service

Most people think that a *mitzvah* is a "demand" meant to deprive or diminish our godly self worth. But that is incorrect. A *mitzvah* is a "command" enabling us to co-operate, associate, identify and thereby consciously bond with G-d and experience His love. This is the meaning of the blessing said prior to doing a *mitzvah*: "That you have made us holy through your commandments." As it says in the Torah: "You shall be holy for I am holy." ^[1] In other words, when we bond with G-d, the Holy One, we too become holy.

The Midrash ^[2] states:

"For what great nation is there, that has G-d so close to them?" ^[3] Hence the popular saying: "The King's servant is a king; cleave to heat and it will warm you."

Each day we are challenged with feelings of our nothingness. When we see ourselves relative to this enormous and overwhelming universe, we realize that we are not even the size of a speck of dust. And yet, even though everything from without seems to tell us that we are nothing, something within stubbornly insists that we are something. It is the very nature of humanity to try and overcome this threat of nothingness. We all do it. But the question is: can we really transcend the limitations of our beings? Can we beat our mortality and eventual return to dust?

It is human nature to want to identify with greatness in order to experience and partake of it. This is the psychology of patriotism; through commitment and devotion to my country, which I perceive as great, I will go beyond myself and my limitations, to partake in the great, sharing its glory and its eternity. Human beings often seek to be servants of the greater, whether it is a king, country or cause. In fact, this devotion may even lead to an individual giving his or her life for some important principle. This might sound like a gross nullification of self. However, it is this kind of commitment and self-sacrifice that gives people

unusual strength and an even greater sense of self-worth. These benefits are all achieved through our devoted service to and identification with something which transcends our limited selves. All the hard work and personal sacrifice inspired by our passionate devotion actually leads to the ultimate in self-gratification. All is gained when you give of yourself to the beyond yourself.

When you serve your country or selflessly dedicate yourself to a great cause you do not feel self-effaced, nor do you experience your service as a degrading and depriving form of slavery. You actually feel just the opposite. Through service, you go beyond yourself, identifying and bonding with larger forces, eternal values and ideals. You become one with the great and share in its splendor. A *mitzvah* is G-d's gift to humanity, the opportunity to serve and bond with G-d; Who is the Greatest. Our humble service to G-d through the *mitzvahs* actually empowers us. We achieve greatness and transcendence when we identify and bond with G-d and thereby partake of His splendor and eternity.

***Mitzvah* - Redemption from Nothingness**

The very concept of *mitzvah* is truly marvelous. How is it that G-d has any expectations of us at all? What can we do for G-d, who is almighty and complete? Am I so important that He would want my service? This question is expressed eloquently in the Psalms: ^[4]

When I behold Your heavens, the works of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him? The son of a man that You appoint him? And yet, You have made him just a little less than EL OHIM. You crown him with glory and honor.

The fact that I can do something for G-d is truly wondrous, because it redeems me from my apparent nothingness. When I live selfishly, caring only about myself, that's when I really feel like nothing. Only through serving G-d and devoting myself to the Divine values and ideals, accomplished through *mitzvahs*, can I truly redeem myself of my nothingness. King Solomon's dismal introduction to Ecclesiastes is the inevitable truth of life lived without *mitzvahs*: "Futility of futilities said Kohellet, futility of futilities, all is futile." ^[5]

The entire book of Ecclesiastes questions the significance of man and his few days on earth:

"What profit has man of all his labor under the sun? ... One generation passes away and another generation comes, but the earth abides forever. There is nothing new under the sun. There is no remembrance of the earlier generations, nor will there be remembrance of the later generations by those who come after them."

King Solomon however concludes:

"In sum, after all has been heard, revere EL OHIM and keep His commandments; for this is the all of humanity." ^[6]

The fear that *mitzvahs* rob humanity of our independent worth and power, is totally unwarranted. Rather, *mitzvahs* are Divine gifts that empower us and lead us to ultimate worth. *mitzvahs* only challenge our illusions of existing as a self-contained unit, independent of G-d's oneness. Although *mitzvahs* challenge our sense of independence in one way, they also offer a real path to self-fulfillment. We achieve a genuine and eternal being through service to, and identification with, G-d. ^[7]

The *mitzvahs* are not an expression of G-d's desire to diminish us or make us subservient to Him, rather they are expressions of G-d's love and His desire to elevate us by offering us ways to consciously bond with Him. The *mitzvahs* offer us the opportunity to realize G-d's all-embracing oneness through doing for G-d and experiencing love.

Mitzvahs and Love

When you give of yourself to another person, investing time and effort in him or her, you bond with that person and thereby feel love. The ecstasy of love is experiencing the bond and identification you forge with another person by giving of yourself to him or her in action.

Parents feel a profound and intimate connection with, and love for, their children through all their hard work in providing and caring for them. However, the children do not always reciprocate that same intense identification; they do not always feel love for their parent because of all that they have received. Why is that? Because the act of giving leads to a far greater identification and love than that accomplished through the act of receiving.

According to Judaism there is no greater happiness or joy other than doing a *mitzvah*. Each *mitzvah* is a taste of the eternal. Each *mitzvah* is a rung in the ladder of human ascension to godliness. Every time you do *amitzvah*, you provide the ultimate service to G-d, which is to crown Him as the King. Through doing a *mitzvah* you bond with G-d and enjoy the ecstasy of loving G-d. The Talmud teaches that the reward of a *mitzvah* is the *mitzvah* — the reward of love is love. A transgression, however, severs us from G-d. To sin means to break our bond with G-d and betray the love. The real punishment for a transgression is the transgression. We punish ourselves by alienating ourselves from the ground, root and context of our lives — G-d. We punish ourselves by forfeiting the opportunity to experience being in love.

When we follow the *mitzvahs* and serve G-d, we bond with G-d and enjoy the ultimate in self-worth and personal fulfillment. However, when we transgress the will of G-d, seeking to only fulfill our desires and serve ourselves, then we feel like nothing. We have severed ourselves from G-d, Who is the only true source of eternal being and self-worth.

The choice of love and life is whether we choose to serve or to sever. The *mitzvahs* are an opportunity to serve G-d. They are G-d's gift to us. They are the gift of giving ourselves to G-d, becoming godly and feeling and expressing love. To serve is joyful celebration for the whole family.

Rabbi David Aaron

Author of *Endless Light, Seeing G-d, The Secret Life of G-d, Inviting G-d In, Living A Joyous Life, The G-d-Powered Life, and Tefilla Training*

[1] Leviticus 19:1

[2] Bereishis Rabba 16:3

[3] Deuteronomy 4:17

[4] Psalms 8:4

[5] Ecclesiastes 1:2

[6] Ecclesiastes 12:13

[7] This is what is written in Proverbs (8:21): "To inherit to My beloved substance."