

Sparks

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Getting From the Real to the Ideal

The Journey of Personal Transformation

When you go forth to war against your enemies, and the Lord your G-d has delivered them into your hands, and you have taken them captive, And you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and desire her, and take her for a wife - Then you shall bring her home to your house... .. and she remain in your house and weep for her father and mother for a month, and after that she shall be your wife. And if you do not want her, you shall send her out on her own; you shall not sell her at all for money, you shall not treat her as a slave, because you "violated" her. (Deut. 21:10-14)

The Torah permits this only as a compromise to the yetzer ha-ra (evil urge). (Talmud Kiddushin 21b)

'And you shall take her unto you as a wife' - the Torah only permits this in the context of the yetzer ha-ra (evil urge), for if G-d would not permit her to him, he would marry her anyway despite the prohibition.... (Rashi Deut. 12:10)

Torah does not advocate complete suppression of our negative urges rather it gives us outlets to sublimate them while guiding us to gradually overcome them. Therefore, sometime when we crave, we must satisfy the craving in some way while working towards kicking the habit.

Take a drug addict, for example. There are two approaches to treating the addiction. One method is cold turkey—just stay off the stuff and go through an excruciating period of withdrawal. The other approach is measured withdrawal, which looks like hospital-sanctioned drug abuse but is really medical intelligence. To wean the addict, the doctors slowly administer, each day, decreasing amounts of the drug until the addiction is gone. If a person who did not know anything about this method walked into the hospital, from his limited perspective he would conclude that this place promotes drug abuse as an ideal.

In the same way, there are Torah laws that do not express the ideals of Torah but exist as a way to reach those ideals. In the case of the captive woman the Torah temporarily concedes and allows us to do it in the interest of helping us eventually overcome the urge.

How Ideal is the Law?

Although the Torah spells out for us the goals of life and the way to get there we cannot assume that all the laws written in the Torah represent the ideals of Judaism. Sometimes a Torah law expresses only the way to reach an ideal, rather than stating the ideal itself. There are some laws that even contradict the very ideal that in actuality they are helping us to achieve.

The Torah is a system of values arranged in a specific hierarchy, according to their priority for the present in consideration for reaching an ideal in the future. Certain authentic Torah values might be temporarily conceded for the good of the future, even though they may seem to be valuable for the

present. Only G-d can decide which values temporarily overrule other values for the purpose of getting us to where we must go. Only G-d can see the beginning, the end, and the middle of the ethical and spiritual evolution of humanity.

The Talmud states: “G-d says, ‘I created the evil inclination and I created Torah as its antidote.’” The Torah is an antidote to our negative and destructive inclinations. Therefore, the Torah may sometimes appear to be sanctioning some type of amoral behaviour, but in fact, it is simply employing a realistic approach in order to empower people to stop doing what they otherwise may not have had the power to overcome on their own.

The Torah is directing the moral and spiritual evolution of humanity. It therefore considers not only where we need to get to in the future but also where we are at in the present. When we read the Torah some of its laws may disturb our moral sensitivities. When this happens we must remind ourselves of the purpose of the Torah. Not all the laws of Torah represent its ideals. Some of them may even seem to contradict the very ideal that they are serving to empower us to achieve. Torah asks us to trust the Creator and Master of time. G-d knows our souls and sets our goals and gives us the guidance to get there.

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