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The Right and the Good

Buried among the epic passages in V'etchanan - among them the Shema and the Ten Commandments - is a brief passage with large implications for the moral life in Judaism. Here it is together with the preceding verse:

You shall diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and His testimonies and His statutes, which He has commanded you. And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, that it may go well with you, and that you may go in and take possession of the good land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers. (Deut. 6:17-18)

The difficulty is obvious. The preceding verse makes reference to commandments, testimonies and statutes. This, on the face of it, is the whole of Judaism as far as conduct is concerned. What then is meant by the phrase "the right and the good" that is not already

included within the previous verse?

Rashi says, it refers to "compromise (that is, not strictly insisting on your rights) and action within or beyond the letter of the law (*lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*).\" The law, as it were, lays down a minimum threshold: this we must do. But the moral life aspires to more than simply doing what we must.¹ The people who most impress us with their goodness and rightness are not merely people who keep the law. The saints and heroes of the moral life go beyond. They do more than they are commanded. They go the extra mile. That according to Rashi is what the Torah means by "the right and the good."

Ramban, while citing Rashi and agreeing with him, goes on to say something slightly different:

At first Moses said that you are to keep His statutes and his testimonies which He commanded you, and now he is stating that even where He has not commanded you, give thought as well to do what is good and right in his eyes, for He loves the good and the right.

Now this is a great principle, for it is impossible to mention in the Torah all aspects of man's conduct with his neighbours and friends, all his various transactions and the ordinances of all societies and countries. But since He mentioned many of them, such as, "You shall not go around as a talebearer," "You shall not take vengeance nor bear a grudge," "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor," "You shall not curse the deaf," "You shall rise before the hoary head," and the like, He went on to state in a general way that in all matters one should do what is good and right, including even compromise and going beyond the strict requirement of the law ... Thus one

should behave in every sphere of activity, until he is worthy of being called "good and upright."

Ramban is going beyond Rashi's point, that the right and the good refer to a higher standard than the law strictly requires. It seems as if Ramban is telling us that there are aspects of the moral life that are not caught by the concept of law at all. That is what he means by saying "It is impossible to mention in the Torah all aspects of man's conduct with his neighbours and friends."

Law is about universals, principles that apply in all places and times. Don't murder. Don't rob. Don't steal. Don't lie. Yet there are important features of the moral life that are not universal at all. They have to do with specific circumstances and the way we respond to them. What is it to be a good husband or wife, a good parent, a good teacher, a good friend? What is it to be a great leader, or follower, or member of a team? When is it right to praise, and when is it appropriate to say, "You could have done better"? There are aspects of the moral life that cannot be reduced to rules of conduct, because what matters is not only what we do, but the way in which we do it: with humility or gentleness or sensitivity or tact.

Morality is about persons, and no two persons are alike. When Moses asked God to appoint a successor, he began his request with the words, "Lord, God of the spirits of all flesh."² On this the rabbis commented: what Moses was saying was that because each person is different, he asked God to appoint a leader who would relate to each individual as an individual, knowing that what is helpful to one person may be harmful to another.³ This ability to judge the right response to the right person at the right time is a feature not only of leadership, but of human goodness in general.

Rashi begins his commentary to Bereishit with

the question: If the Torah is a book of law, why does it not start with the first law given to the people of Israel as a whole, which does not appear until Exodus 12? Why does it include the narratives about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the patriarchs and matriarchs and their children? Rashi gives an answer that has nothing to do with morality - he says it has to do with the Jewish people's right to their land. But Netziv (R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin) writes that the stories of Genesis are there to teach us how the patriarchs were upright in their dealings, even with people who were strangers and idolaters. That, he says, is why Genesis is called by the sages "the book of the upright."⁴

Morality is not just a set of rules, even a code as elaborate as the 613 commands and their rabbinic extensions. It is also about the way we respond to people as individuals. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is at least in part about what went wrong in their relationship when the man referred to his wife as *Ishah*, 'woman,' a generic description, a type. Only when he gave her a proper name, *Chavah*, Eve, did he relate to her as an individual in her individuality, and only then did God "make them garments of skin and clothed them."

This too is the difference between the God of Aristotle and the God of Abraham. Aristotle thought that God knew only universals not particulars. This is the God of science, of the Enlightenment, of Spinoza. The God of Abraham is the God who relates to us in our singularity, in what makes us different from others as well as what makes us the same.

This ultimately is the difference between the two great principles of Judaic ethics: justice and love. Justice is universal. It treats all people alike, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, making no distinctions on the basis of colour or class. But love is particular. A parent loves his or her children for what makes them each unique. The moral life is a

combination of both. That is why it cannot be reduced solely to universal laws. That is what the Torah means when it speaks of "the right and the good" over and above the commandments, statutes and testimonies.

A good teacher knows what to say to a weak student who, through great effort, has done better than expected, and to a gifted student who has come top of the class but is still performing below his or her potential. A good employer knows when to praise and when to challenge. We all need to know when to insist on justice and when to exercise forgiveness. The people who have had a decisive influence on our lives are almost always those we feel understood us in our singularity. We were not, for them, a mere face in the crowd. That is why, though morality involves universal rules and cannot exist without them, it also involves interactions that cannot be reduced to rules.

Rabbi Israel of Rizhin once asked a student how many sections there were in the Shulchan Arukh. The student replied, "Four." "What," asked the Rizhiner, "do you know about the fifth section?" "But there is no fifth section," said the student. "There is," said the Rizhiner. "It says: always treat a person like a mensch."

The fifth section of the code of law is the conduct that cannot be reduced to law. That is what it takes to do the right and the good.

1. See Lon Fuller, *The Morality of Law*, Yale University Press, 1969, and R. Aharon Lichtenstein's much reprinted article, 'Is there an ethic independent of the halakhah?'
2. Numbers 27:16.
3. Sifre Zuta, Midrash Tanhuma and Rashi to Numbers ad loc.
4. *Ha-amek Davar* to Genesis, Introduction.



Listen

It is very difficult to reduce a religion into a series of terse statements, particularly when that religion is Judaism. Jews have been called the "People of the Book," a term which was first intended as pejorative. Ironically, Jews have never considered this sobriquet to be an insult; if anything, their only question is, which book? The Torah? The Prophets? The Talmud? The Shulchan Aruch? Telling a Jew to choose only one book to take to the proverbial deserted island would cause deep angst: Which book would it be? This being so, the thought of summarizing Judaism, of reducing all of the ideas contained in all those books into one statement, seems impossible.

And yet, in Parashat VaEtchanan there are two serious contenders for the title of "The Jewish Credo," two sections that are often considered **the** central statement of the Jewish religion. The first is a section known as the Ten Commandments, which were first recorded in the book of Shmot, in the account of the Revelation at Sinai, and are repeated by Moshe in this parashah for the benefit of the new, Israel-bound generation; the second is the *Shma*.

The Ten Commandments, a list of principles also known as the Decalogue, is comprised of ten statements that are, in essence, categories of Jewish law and legal philosophy. The second contender is probably as close as Judaism gets to a catechism: The *Shma* is a concise statement of the belief in one indivisible God, followed by a group of commandments that

are a direct outgrowth of this belief.

What, we might well ask, is the relationship between these two monumental teachings? The easy answer is that the statement of *Shma* is remarkably similar to the first of the Ten Commandments. The similarity might even lead some to question the necessity for this seeming redundancy; after all, these statements appear in close proximity in the text. If we are to follow this line of reasoning, we might broaden the question, and ponder the necessity of repeating the Ten Commandments in the book of Devarim altogether, seeing that these same statements were already taught in the book of Shmot.

The Midrash makes a surprising statement which may provide an answer to these questions: As the Jews prepared for the great Revelation at Sinai, in anticipation of hearing God Himself speak, they declared: "*Na'aseh v'nishma*," "We will do [whatever we are commanded], and we will hearken [to the word of God]." With this declaration, they accepted monotheism, they accepted God's authority, and they committed themselves to obeying the laws they would be taught. As we know, this commitment was cast aside very shortly after it was undertaken: The people worshipped a calf that was formed out of their gold jewelry, in an act that is the antithesis of what they had committed "to do" -- "*na'aseh* - we will **do**." This almost unimaginable breach of their commitment was also a direct violation of the first two commandments they had heard from the mouth of God Himself (as it were): "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt... Do not make a graven image..."

The Midrash delves deeper into this point, albeit in allegorical language: When the Jews declared "*Na'aseh v'nishma*," two luminous spiritual crowns were placed on each of their heads, and when they made the golden calf, they forfeited the crown that symbolized *na'aseh*. At first glance this seems strange: By

making the calf, they had disobeyed the word of God; they had failed to **listen**. Why, then, was the crown symbolizing *na'aseh* forfeited, and not the crown symbolizing *nishma*? Apparently, the midrash is responding to a very particular verb used over and over in the account of the sin of the golden calf: The text is loaded, even overloaded, with variations on the word "do" or "make" -- *asu*. By **making** the calf, the midrash intimates, the Israelites demonstrated retroactively that the commitment to accept the Torah had been less than sincere. The Ten Commandments were not simply ignored, they were actively rejected when the Jews **made** the golden calf.

The midrash then goes on to teach a sublime idea, and in the process illuminates the link between the Ten Commandments and the *Shma*:

What reason did Moshe have for teaching Shma Yisrael ["Hear, O Israel] at this particular point? The Rabbis say: It is like the case of a king who betrothed unto himself a noble lady [by giving her] two precious stones. When one of the [the stones] was lost, the king said to her: "You have lost one, take [good] care of the other." So, God betrothed Israel unto Himself with the words "Na'aseh v'nishma" [We will do, and we will listen]. When they lost the 'We will do' by making the golden calf, Moshe said to them: 'You have lost "We will do;" observe, then, "We will listen."' This is the power of Shma Yisrael ['Hear, O Israel']. (Midrash Rabbah Ekev 3:10)

According to this teaching, *Shma Yisrael* is given to us in order to strengthen the second "crown," the crown of *nishma* - "we will listen." Having lost the crown of *na'aseh*, "we will do," the relationship with God had to be strengthened. Interestingly, the midrash does not raise the possibility of addressing the

transgression against *na'aseh*, of fixing the active role the people had taken in making a graven idol and worshipping it; presumably, that aspect of the sin was countered by the command to **make** a Mishkan, to use their creative, active capabilities in the service of God as a means of restoring their commitment to "**we will do.**" Instead, Moshe chooses to educate and inspire the people in order to preserve what is left of the special relationship they already have with God, the relationship based on *nishma*. Moshe stresses the idea of listening, of hearing, of remaining attuned to the voice of God, and teaches them the *Shma* - specifically in the shadow of the sin of the golden calf: "Listen! Harken! Hear, O Israel! God is our master, God is One." There are no other deities, no other powers outside of Him - not a calf, nor any other man-made manifestation of divinity. In order to maintain focus on this credo, we must continue to listen, to hear God's voice, and to hearken to the content of God's spoken words.

An important lesson may be distilled from this teaching - a lesson that is as applicable to our spiritual lives as it is to our personal lives: Sometimes, relationships can be derailed due to a misdeed of one of the parties. The natural, instinctual response is to make an immediate and concerted effort to repair the damaged area; steps to this end are logical and important. On the other hand, other aspects of the relationship - those that have always been strong, and remain undamaged - should be strengthened. The odds of saving any relationship are greatly increased when the two sides focus on the healthy, positive qualities of the relationship and reinforce their dedication to one another through these aspects.

The *Shma* is the most popular Jewish prayer. It is recited each and every day, in the morning, evening and night; it is declared at every *brit milah*, as every newborn male enters into the faith community; it is recited by every Jew as he or she takes leave of this world. The sin of

the golden calf had profound repercussions; so much was lost, so much was changed in our national story, but the *Shma* has enabled us, since the day Moshe taught it to our ancestors in the desert, to repair and heal our relationship with God - both on a personal level, and as a nation.

For a more in-depth analysis see:
<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2016/08/audio-and-essays-parashat-vaetchanan.html>



The Easy Commandment

WHY SHOULD WE HONOR OUR FATHERS AND MOTHERS? The Torah gives us one reason in *Parashas Shemos* (20:12), "So that you may live long." In *Parashas Vaes'chanan*, however, the Torah gives an additional reason, "As God your Lord has commanded you." What is the significance of this additional phrase?

The *Meshech Chachmah* refers to the *Talmud Yerushalmi* that considers honoring parents an "easy commandment." Every person understands that debts have to be repaid. If someone lends you \$100,000 when you need it, you would be only too happy to repay the money once you have enough of your own. It would not be a hard thing to do.

By the same token, every person also understands that he has a moral obligation to repay his debt of gratitude to his parents. After all, the cost of raising a child must be at least

between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Not to mention the time, effort and energy parents invest in their children. Therefore, the least people can do is honor their parents. It is not a hard thing to make such a small payment on such a large debt.

The Torah tells us here that this is not the proper motivation for honoring parents. It is not a self-evident obligation to make at least a small payment on a debt owed the parents. It is an obligation incumbent on us solely because "God your Lord has commanded you" to do so.

The Torah waited until *Parashas Vaes'chanan* to make this point, because it becomes most clear after forty years in the desert. During those years, raising children was easier than it ever was, before or since. They did not have to be fed. There was *manna* from heaven. They did not need to be given to drink. There was water from Miriam's Well. They did not need new shoes and clothing all the time. Nothing ever wore out. Most likely they didn't need orthodontic braces either, because life in the desert was paradise. And still, the Torah demanded that parents be honored. Clearly, the obligation was to obey Hashem's commandment rather than repay a debt of gratitude. By the time the Jewish people had lived through the era of the desert, they could relate to the *mitzvah* of honoring parents as an independent obligation.

How far does this go? How much do you have to do for your parents? The Talmud responds (*Kiddushin* 31a) to this question with the famous story about a gentile from Ashkelon by the name of Dama bar Nesinah.

The Sages once needed a stone for the *Urim v'Tumim*, and they heard that Dama had exactly the stone they needed. A delegation came to see him and offer to pay him a princely sum for the stone. The stone was in a strongbox, with the key under his father's pillow. Dama did not disturb him.

"I cannot help you," he told the Sages. "My father is sleeping, and I wouldn't disturb his sleep."

The Sages left.

A year later, a perfect red heifer, suitable for a *parah adumah*, was born in Dama's herd. The Sages came to purchase it.

"How much do you want for it?"

"I know that you would give me any price I ask," he replied. "But I only want the amount of money I lost by not waking my father last year."

This story establishes the parameters of the *mitzvah* of honoring parents.

At first glance, the Talmud seems to be deriving *halachos*, laws, from the conduct of a gentile. But this cannot be. Rather, the Talmud uses this story to establish the parameters of human nature.

As parents get older, they can become querulous and demanding. They can test the patience of their children. Sometimes, honoring parents under such circumstances can take a lot of patience and forbearance. Is there a limit to such patience? How much patience can be expected of a person? Is there a point where a person is allowed to run out of patience and be exempt from this *mitzvah*?

This is what the story about Dama bar Nesinah teaches us. The Sages were offering him a huge sum of money for the single stone they needed for the *Urim v'Tumim*. He knew that if he could only get the key, the money would be his. What thoughts must have gone through his mind. Maybe I'll make a little noise and he'll wake up. Maybe I'll slide my hand under the pillow very slowly so that I'll be able to get the key without waking him up. He must have been very tempted. But he didn't give in. He was able to honor his father even under such

circumstances. This was the extent of what human nature is capable.

It follows, therefore, that if a gentile could have the forbearance to forgo such a huge sum of money and allow his father to sleep, certainly a Jewish person, descended from Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, can find it in himself to honor his parents under any and all circumstances.



The Essential Command

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

One of the highlights of Parshat Va'etchanan is the repetition of the Ten Commandments. In vivid detail, Moses recalls the scene as the Jewish people received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Moses also describes this monumental event later in the Torah, saying, "God came from Sinai, having shone on them from Seir, having appeared from Mount Paran..." (Deut. 33:2). According to Rashi (Avodah Zara 2b), Seir is a location associated with Esav, whereas Mount Paran is associated with Yishmael.

We know that God first offered the Torah to the other nations of the world before He gave it to the Jewish people. Each nation wanted to know the contents of the Torah before accepting it. When the nation of Esav discovered that the Torah contained the commandment "You shall not murder," they

refused to accept it. Similarly, the nation of Yishmael did not want to accept the Torah once they heard the commandment, "You shall not steal."

It seems odd that the nations refused to accept the Torah based on these basic restrictions. The seven Noachide laws - that every nation must uphold as universal law - include the prohibitions against murder and theft. What made the acceptance of Torah any different? Why would the nations refuse to do something so easy - that in fact they were already doing?

The commentator Ohr Gedaliyahu suggests an explanation based on the purpose of mitzvot. According to his view, the Ten Commandments are intended to sanctify us to such a degree that the mitzvot become part of our basic nature. In other words, through performing the mitzvot, we become so attached to God, and so aware of Him in our thought, speech, and action, that our very essence changes.

We see a support to this in the Mechilta (Parshat Yitro, citing Rebbe Akiva), which states that the Jewish people answered "*hein*" (yes) when they were informed of the prohibitions in the Ten Commandments. Instead of responding, "No, we won't murder," they replied, "YES, we won't murder." What is the significance of a positive response to a "thou shalt not" command?

According to the Ohr Gedaliyahu, this positive response hints to a transformation that the Jewish people underwent when they received the Torah at Mount Sinai. When they heard the command, "You shall not murder," they became filled with such love for each other that it was impossible for them to even entertain the idea of harming another person. In other words, this "thou shalt not" command brought them to a level of connection with God that their very essence changed.

Based on this idea, we can understand why the

nations of the world refused to accept the Torah. Previously, the nations with a proclivity toward murder had refrained because it was against the Noachide Laws. The Torah was altogether different. It was not a reiteration of universal law, but rather an expectation of positive change. The nations refused to accept this offer. Sometimes it is easier to hold on to our pockets of darkness and negative baggage than to attempt to make positive changes in our lives. The Jewish people were the only ones who were willing to transform themselves in order to fulfill the Torah.

CLOSE CONNECTION

This idea will help us gain an insight into another highlight of the parsha: the Shema. Our intention when reciting "Shema Yisrael" should be that we are willing to give up our life for God if the situation requires (Sefer HaChinuch, mitzvah 417). Where do we find a hint to this idea in the words of the Shema?

According to the Slonimer Rebbe, the word "*echad*" (one) carries the same implication as the verse "*Ein od mil'vado*" - There is nothing besides Him (Deut. 4:35). Nothing exists outside of God. Therefore, by working on ourselves to grow ever closer to Him, it is as though we have already given up our life. Our whole life is totally given over to God.

This also helps us understand why, in Parshat Shoftim, the officers of the Jewish army begin their pre-battle talk to the soldiers by telling them, "Shema Yisrael! You are going out to war against your enemies" (Deut 20:3). According to the Talmud (Sotah 42a), the officers' phrasing implies that, even if the soldiers have only the merit of saying the Shema, that is reason enough for God to protect them. This makes sense according to the reasoning of the Slonimer Rebbe. If a soldier says Shema properly, and connects to God with his whole life, of course he will be victorious, because he will have aligned himself as much as possible with the unlimited

power of God: the only force that exists.

We therefore learn from both the Shema and the Ten Commandments the importance of having a close connection to God. But how do we achieve this attachment? Connection to God grows out of loving Him. We see this on a practical level - since, when we love someone, we want to be with that person every possible minute. The Torah even *commands* us to love God (Deut. 6:5). Yet how can we be commanded to feel an emotion?

The Slonimer Rebbe suggests that, rather than being commanded to love God, we are commanded to *do* things that bring us to love God. One of these is to study Torah (Deut. 6:6). Once we start studying Torah and doing mitzvot, it is much more natural for us to begin feeling love for God.

May we soon see the day when, in the merit of this connection to the Divine, our true enemies will disappear, and we will enjoy an era of everlasting peace.