



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Va'Etchanan – Spirit of the Law

People have been known to criticize Judaism for being too legal, too “letter of the law” and not focusing enough on ethics, values and “spirit of the law.”

In this regard, Nachmanides (Ramban) makes a monumental remark in this week’s Parsha. He is commenting on the verse:

Be sure to keep the **commandments, decrees and laws** that the Lord your God has enjoined upon you. Do what is **right and good** in the sight of the Lord. (Deut 6:17-18)

This verse begs the question. Once one is doing the “commandments, decrees and laws” of God, why add that one should “do what is right and good”? What additional observance could be indicated here? Nachmanides answers

From the beginning God said to keep God's commandments, decrees and laws as God has commanded them. And now, it says: **even regarding what God did not command**, pay attention to do what is good and right in God's eyes, because God loves goodness and righteousness. ... **It is impossible for the Torah to list every detail of human conduct**; interaction with neighbors and friends, the totality of business dealings, and societal and national laws. The Torah having legislated specific laws, such as: "Do not gossip" (Lev. 19:16); "Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge" (Lev. 19:18); "Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (Lev. 19:16); "Do not insult the deaf" (Lev. 19:14); "Rise before the aged" (Lev. 19:32), etc., now makes a general statement which applies to the entire gamut of human behavior, the Torah repeats this idea that one should do what is “right and good” ... acting beyond the strict demands of the law.

Ramban is saying that the Torah leaves some of the ethics to our personal intuition and conscience. After legislating specific laws, such as the Ten Commandments which are in our parsha, it understands that there are legal and ethical loopholes. In any situation, if a person thinks that something feels wrong, even if the law allows it, the Torah says: “Do what is right and Good,” act ethically and listen to your conscience!

Please discuss:

- Have you ever heard of areas in which an area or a detail of Jewish Law (halakha) can lead to unethical behavior?
- Have you ever had a feeling that something is just wrong or immoral and decided not to do it, not because of the law, but because of an inner feeling? Tell us about it.
- What practical situation would be a fulfillment of doing “what is right and good” as conceived by Ramban?

Shabbat Shalom!