



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Bo. Actions Speak Louder!

- Why does Judaism have so much law?
- Why is halakha so detailed, penetrating every aspect of life, and concerning itself with minutia?

Parshat Bo narrates the story of Israel's Exodus, but it also marks the first chapter (ch.12) of the Torah that occupies itself with legal matters, carefully detailing the instructions and laws of the paschal lamb, and the symbolic rituals – Pesach, matza, tefillin, the sanctity of firstborn animals and humans – that will conserve and perpetuate the collective memory of the Exodus.

Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzva #16) raises a great question. Why are there such a plethora of mitzvot dedicated to the Exodus? After all, in addition to the listing above, Shabbat, all the festivals, the Sukka, Mezuzah, the recitation of Shema, are all rituals of “Zecher l'yetziat mitzrayim”! He asks: “Would a single commemorative ritual have not sufficed to preserve the memory” of the Exodus?

This is a springboard for a major lesson in Halakhic psychology and philosophy:

Know that a person is influenced by his or her actions. The heart and thoughts are always [drawn] after his deeds in which a person is occupied, whether good or bad. Thus, even a person who is thoroughly wicked in his heart... if he feels the motivation and puts in effort, setting his actions constantly to Torah and the mitzvot, even if not for the sake of Heaven, he will veer at once toward the good... for the heart is drawn after one's actions. And even a thoroughly righteous person, upright, honest, enthusiastic for Torah and mitzvot, if he fully engages in impure matters, by way of example, if the king forcefully appointed him to an evil vocation, then ... every moment will be that vocation, constantly, then at some point he will abandon his righteousness and become completely wicked. For it is a known and true matter that every person is influenced in accordance with his actions...

Sefer Hachinuch adopts a deep behavioral stance here, proposing that our inner self, our inclination and choices, are highly influenced by our preoccupation, our actions and our environment. For him, actions are so influential that they can absolutely reorient a person, reversing their fundamental moral direction.

He explains a Rabbinic statement in accordance with this thesis:

The Sages z"l said: "Whoever has a Mezuzah at his door, Tzitzit on his garment, and Tefillin on his head, is assured that he will not sin." For these are continual mitzvot, observed constantly, and one is constantly affected by them.

Sefer Hachinuch explains that Judaism seeks to envelop a Jew in a web of action, creating a potent and powerful environment that is the product of the acts and prohibitions articulated by Jewish law/Halakha. The numerous laws of Shabbat, for example, from the most severe to the most minor, all serve to generate a different consciousness, a special mindset, an atmosphere, which is crafted by the laws of Shabbat, and which give a unique flavor and experience to the day. This is true for each and every area of Jewish Law. Jewish Law shapes every aspect of our lives and its comprehensive set of actions have the potential to impact our inner world.

This answers the question of the Sefer Hachinuch. One act of remembrance is totally insufficient. If the Exodus is a cornerstone of Jewish consciousness and a foundational event, it must be internalized by an entire slew of active symbols, laws and rituals.

Since our daily acts are so powerful, the Sefer Hachinuch concludes with some sound advice:

Therefore, examine carefully your profession and your occupation, for after them will you be drawn, and you will not draw them to you... For as we become increasingly occupied with them, so are we affected.

Our professional lives occupy a significant proportion of our time. Some professions enhance our higher selves, others have a detrimental effect upon us. The Chinuch is encouraging us to be mindful that the way in which we spend our time will raise us higher towards a Jewish ideal, and not catalyse a downward trajectory.

So, the Sefer Hachinuch is looking for us to take our everyday actions seriously and to monitor whether our lifestyle is exerting positive or negative influence.

To Discuss:

- Is Sefer Hachinuch correct? Do our actions, our occupations and environments shape us, or do we have the capability to determine our own values irrespective of what we are involved with?
- What areas of Halakha can inculcate deeper ideas, or deeper consciousness?
- Does Shabbat give us opportunities for spirituality?
- Do laws of appropriate speech allow us to have greater inter-personal awareness?

- Do the laws of Chesed and charity arouse us to greater compassion and sensitivity?
- What career are you thinking of/do you work in? How can your work-life enhance the higher values in your life?

Shabbat Shalom!