

Torah & Reason

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From time to time, it is necessary to review fundamental principles of Jewish belief. On Shavuot, we celebrate the Revelation at Sinai and the Jewish people's acceptance of Torah. We are thus sworn to study Torah and keep the *Mitzvot* (commandments).

Observance of the laws are essential to fulfilling our mission as Jews. All would agree that in any constructive endeavor, understanding the reason of the activities we are engaged in is vital to achieving their full benefit. It is therefore necessary to ask, what is the nature and purpose of *Mitzvot*?

This is no simple or unnecessary question. We live in a time when mystical religious trends have become popular. They have had an impact on Jewish religious thinkers especially the ones whose popular writings influence the masses.

The "mystics" tend to downplay the logic and intellectuality of *Mitzvot*. They do not view the commandments as embodiments of wisdom which must be studied and internalized. Rather they are seen as "mysterious" phenomena containing "cosmic" significance and "supernatural" power which the reason of mortal man dare not analyze or explain.

I believe it essential to obtain clarity about this basic issue, for our orientation toward *Mitzvot* determines how much we benefit from their performance. Thus it is important to shed light on an ancient question: Are the *Mitzvot* rational?

We read in the book of Psalms: "The Torah of Hashem is perfect restoring the soul". Every *Mitzvah* is designed solely for our benefit and leads us to our true perfection. Whoever maintains that a *Mitzvah* has "no reason" (even Chukim) denies the Torah which states "For it is not a vain thing from you", to which the Rabbis (Chazal) add "and if it is vain (i.e. you find it empty) it is "from you" meaning the defect lies in your lack of understanding.

All of the great Torah sages such as Rambam, Ramban, Avraham Even Ezra, and Saadia Gaon to name just a few, openly affirm this principle in their works. Nachmanides, in his commentary on the Torah (Devarim 22:6) explains that all of the *Mitzvot* are intended for the purpose of refining and perfecting man's nature.

Rambam, in the Guide for the Perplexed (Part III Chapter 26) says:

"All of us, the common people as well as the scholars, believe that there is a reason for every precept, although there are commandments the reason of which is unknown to us, and in which the ways of G-d's wisdom are incomprehensible."

Avraham Even Ezra in his commentary to Shemot 20:1 says "

...and the second kind are hidden Mitzvot it is not explained why they are commanded, and heaven forbid to say that any of those Mitzvot are contrary to human reason; rather we are obliged to keep everything

which Hashem commanded whether the secret is revealed or not...

The Lord our G-d is True- hence everything, which comes from G-d, is true. In most cases, with diligent study, we can discover the purpose and benefit of *Mitzvot*; and when we do so we must incorporate the underlying value into our personality, for this is how we improve our soul and get closer to Hashem.

However, all *Mitzvot* are perfectly rational even if our intelligence is too deficient to discover the hidden wisdom of any specific one. Hence, it is rational to keep a *Mitzvah* that on its surface makes absolutely no sense to you. For since you know that it comes from G-d, you know it is both rational and beneficial even though you cannot demonstrate how.

This is similar to one who follows the advice of a great physician even though he does not understand how the medicine works. We say that such a person is acting rationally, and one who—ignorant of medicine—refuses to take the advice of a great doctor because it makes no sense to him, is a fool.

Such is the case with Torah. We know that it is true because we know that it comes from G-d—Who revealed Himself on Sinai to the entire nation in a manner which would leave no doubt to those present and to all future generations that the Torah and its authentic exposition by Moses and all subsequent Masters of The Oral Law—is from G-d.

Moses commanded the people to remember the events they witnessed at Sinai as the foundation of all Torah commandments. He never called on them to have faith that the Torah is from G-d, but only to “take heed” of what they saw with their own eyes.

What could be clearer than Devarim 4:35 "You have been shown to **know** that Hashem, He is the G-d, there is none beside Him".

The Rambam, in the Mishneh Torah Yesodei HaTorah Ch 8, explains that the purpose of Sinai was to remove any possible doubt as to the Divine origin of Torah.

Therefore, we do not have faith but **know** that the Torah comes from G-d and is therefore perfect and rational in every respect. As such, we keep all the *Mitzvot* and do not subject them to the scrutiny of our deficient intellects to determine whether they make sense to us or not. That would be sheer arrogance and stupidity.

Rather we devote all our energies to uncovering the wisdom of Torah with a sense of humility and with the guidance of our authentic sages and teachers. As the genuine scientist knows that everything in nature has a cause and explanation so too the genuine *Ben-Torah* (Torah scholar) knows that everything in Torah has a perfect explanation and he studies diligently and endlessly and prays to G-d: "Open thou my eyes that I may understand the wonders of your Torah". (Psalms 119:18)

As we approach the holiday of the Revelation may we merit to incorporate its lessons and return to Hashem and His Torah and expound its wisdom in a manner which will cause all who hear it to proclaim;” what a wise and discerning nation is this great People".

Chag Sameach to All