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Chayim ben Tz'vi Zelig a"h
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Balancing Act

PARSHAS CHUKAS 5777

Chazal offer an intriguing interpretation of a familiar *passuk*. Every day in *Keri'as Shema* we review the command bidding us to love Hashem and to dedicate ourselves to His service. As it states: וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת ד' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ – “You shall love Hashem your G-d with all of your heart, all of your soul, and all of your might” (*Devarim 6:5*). (Actually, each of these items [heart, soul, and might] are expounded upon extensively, but we focus here on the first.) Of particular note is the spelling of the word “heart”; the standard version is “*leiv*” for heart (which becomes “*libcha*” for “your heart”). But here, the *passuk* employs a double form, stating “*levavcha*” for “your heart.” The Mishnah in Berachos (9:5) thus accounts for the “double” implications, as it expounds:

בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ, בְּשֵׁנֵי יְצָרֶיךָ, בְּיָצֵר טוֹב וּבְיָצֵר רָע.

“ ‘With all of your heart (*levavcha*)’ – (This implies that you must serve Hashem) with your *two* inclinations – the good inclination and the evil one.”

Now, what exactly is meant by “serving Hashem with your two inclinations” is a subject of much discussion. R’ Moshe Feinstein (*Darash Moshe, parshas Chukas*) provides an interesting explanation, which he derives from a key theme of this week’s *parshah*.

The Parah Paradox

A principal feature of this week’s *parshah* is the law of the *parah adumah*, the red cow used in the process of purifying one who incurs certain ritual defilement. This is the quintessential “*chok*,” that is, a mitzvah characterized simply as a “decree” of the King. Such is this section introduced at the beginning of the *parshah*: וְזֶאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה... וְיִקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדֻמָּה – “This is the **decree** of the Torah... They shall take to you a red cow...” (*Bamidbar 19:2*). There are *mitzvos* classified as “*mishpatim* – ordinances,” which are laws such as the prohibitions against theft and murder, whose rationale is readily apparent. Others belong to the group of “*eidot* – testimonies,” including such examples as *tefillin* and *matzah*, which recall and give testimony to the seminal event of *yetzias Mitzrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt). But those deemed as “*chukim*” consist of *mitzvos* whose rationale is completely concealed from us; these we perform loyally just as a servant follows the bidding of his beloved master, whether or not he comprehends the reasoning. As Rashi states (*ibid.*): גִּזְרָה הִיא מִלְּפָנֶיךָ, אֵין לָךְ רְשׁוּת – “It is a decree from before Me; as such, you are not sanctioned to entertain hesitations.”

Thus, there are numerous aspects of this mitzvah that may appear almost paradoxical to the limited human intellect. Perhaps the most well-known of these is the fact that the *parah adumah* is “*metaheir es ha'temei'im u'metamei es ha'tehorim*” – It causes the impure to become pure, while causing the pure to become impure (those involved in processing the *parah* themselves incur defilement; cf. *Tanchuma, Chukas* § 7). But it is for this that the mitzvah is referred to as a “*chok*,” which indicates the need to subjugate our intellect to Hashem’s infinite intelligence. Thus, even in instances that may not conform to our limited sense of logic, we follow Hashem’s decree with utmost faithfulness.

Now, R' Moshe points out that the *passuk* uses broad terminology in characterizing this mitzvah. It does not merely state, “*Zos chukas ha'parah* – This is the decree of the (red) **cow**,” which would obviously be specific in nature. Rather, the *passuk* states more generally: “*Zos chukas ha'Torah* – This is the decree of **the Torah**.” The implication seems to be that this is actually an overarching principle governing all areas of Divine service: one must conduct himself accordingly, even in seemingly contradictory ways.

Having it Both Ways

In illustrating this concept, R' Moshe points to the quality of *kavod* (honor) as an example. Is this a matter to be shunned or valued? And the truth is that it varies – depending on the subject. When it comes to one's *own* honor, a person is expected to adopt a most humble posture. He should ideally overlook insults to his prestige and generally eschew accolades. But when it comes to his fellow, it is an entirely different story. There, one is not authorized to forego honor and consider it an unworthy quality. On the contrary, he must be meticulous in his relations with his fellow man, ever careful to preserve his friend's dignity and avoid even the most minimal slight to his honor.

Another pertinent example is one's attitude toward spending money. When it comes to the mitzvah of *tzedakah* (charity), a person is expected to avoid stinginess and instead donate generously to the needy. But this, of course, is no invitation to become completely cavalier with the value of money. One may be free with dispensing his own funds in this manner (as he should be), but this does not give him license to assume that his fellow is likewise not particular about parting with his wealth. Here again, one must be careful to the extreme to guard the possessions of others, not even causing his friend the most minimal financial loss.

This, then, is the meaning of Chazal's teaching stated at the outset. The Torah bids us to serve Hashem “*B'shnei yitzrecha* – With your two inclinations.” How does this notion manifest itself? R' Moshe explains based on the above. Any given *middah* (character trait) runs a certain gamut. Using the same example, one's relationship with money can take the form of stinginess on the one hand – according the utmost worth to even a tiny sum – or free-spending on the other. Which is the correct approach? The answer is that in serving Hashem, one must be ready to adopt both ends of the spectrum in accordance with His will, utilizing both tendencies of his character. When it comes to his fellow, he must view even the most minimal amount of money with the utmost seriousness. But insofar as dedicating his own monies to charity is concerned, generosity is the order of the day.

The underlying principle is that these seemingly conflicting approaches need not be considered as such. There is no actual contradiction, as the guidepost is the same: conforming to the will and decree of Hashem at all times. *Zos chukas ha'Torah*.

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