

# Re'eh: Actions Shape Character

- Moshe Shulman.

The juxtaposition of war and rachamim is an indication that the Torah requires that we compensate for what the acts of war might do to our character. Because as the Chafetz Chaim says, humans are deeply affected by their own actions. We are what we do! So for the rest of the Parsha the mitzvot emphasize caring....

## REEH: ACTIONS SHAPE CHARACTER

Rabbi Moshe Shulman

1. "Hake take et yoshvei ha'ir ha'hi lefi charev... ve'natan lecha rachamim ve'richamecha" (Deut. 13:15,18) What a strange juxtaposition! The Torah's formula for how we are to deal with idolatry is quite harsh; understandably so, for idolatry in the ancient world was as immoral as it was heretical, fraught with human sacrifice, immorality and licentiousness. We can, understand the Torah's insistence on the obliteration of idolatry from within our midst: "uve'arta ha'ra mi'kirbecha". But in the same breath to talk about how G-d will give us MERCY?! Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind. That is unfortunate. But to describe that as merciful - is that not insensitive?

2. Answered the Chafetz Chaim: We have to understand what the Torah is saying. It is true that the Torah often demands of us the execution of harsh punishment. It is true that the Torah requires the death penalty for many crimes. The Torah requires that we act harshly against the city of idolaters. BUT, says the Chafetz Chaim, the Torah is also sensitive to the fact that human beings are deeply affected by their own actions. What we do and how we behave shape our character, for good and for bad. What would become of a nation so instructed to deal with idolatry? What character traits would be embellished upon their psyche and their soul? That, says the Chafetz Chaim, is why the Torah promises that the Almighty Himself will compensate for this action with an abundance of mercy, to balance out our souls, so to speak. Divine Providence will be necessary to insure that Israel does not become inherently morally deficient because of the need to exact judgment and punishment.

3. What is amazing here is the psychological insight into man's psyche - the understanding that the real way to change man's character is through his deeds. You've heard the expression "we are what we eat". To the Torah - we are what we DO! Our deeds and actions have an incredible ability to impact on the character and soul of an individual.

4. Sometimes we have to go to war. That is part of life. But G-d forbid that war turns us into murderers. When we return home from battle, we must re-learn how to be merciful and kind, "ve'natan lecha rachamim ve'richamecha".

5. That is why, from here till the end of the Parsha, all the Mitzvot detailed focus on the notion of kindness, love, and caring: "aser te'aser" (ibid. 14:22), "patoach tiftach lo" (ibid. 15:8), or lending money even before the "Shmittah" year (ibid. 15:9). Even the prohibition of meat and milk has a context which reminds us of the morality and ethics of our behavior: not to eat a kid in

its mothers milk.

6. Says the Torah: "You shall slaughter the animals (before eating of them) as I have commanded you." (Deut. 12:2) Our Sages comment: "Does the Almighty care if one slaughters an animal from the front of the neck or the back of the neck? The Torah was given only to forge (the character) of human beings." (Gen. Raba, 44) Every Mitzvah we perform impacts on who and what we are. Every transgression weighs upon our soul!

7. Ultimately the goal of Torah is to make us better, more spiritual human beings, able to utilize our intellect and our souls to elevate mankind above his animalistic tendencies. Ultimately, the Torah wants us to be better more faithful spiritual people. But the formula for reaching that goal is not by analyzing what makes a better human being, what makes a more spiritual world, but by doing it!

8. A person is ill - and the doctor prescribes anti-biotics. Will a person get better simply by saying "I understand the theory of anti-biotics. I have studied the concept. It is enough to BELIEVE in the anti-biotics, I don't actually have to take the medicine. After all, its the belief and the faith that counts!"

9, Maimonides writes, in his introduction to Ethics of our Fathers, that the Torah is a prescription for the illnesses of the soul. Every Mitzvah reinforces and strengthens the soul. He means to say, "It's not the thought that counts. It's the Mitzvah that counts".

10. Upon the verse we opened with our Sages further comment: "kol hamerachem al ha'briyot me'rachamim alav min hashamayim" (Shabbat 151). Superficially, this means that the reward for our mercy is the Almighty's mercy. More profoundly, however, this means that if we act in a manner consistent with the characteristic of caring, love, and mercy, we will become more caring loving merciful people. We will then be, by our very essence, more deserving of the Almighty's mercy. We cannot just express our belief in G-d - we have to live by the implications of that faith. We cannot just express our belief in morality and kindness, we have to open our homes to others, care for the sick and the elderly, love the widow and the orphan, give charity to the poor. These are not "concepts". They are a prescription. The medicine has to be ingested, not just understood.

11. Today is Shabbat mevarchim Chodesh Elul. We are beginning to prepare for Rosh Hashana. Traditionally, Ellul is a month for heightened sensitivity, extra care in Mitzvoth and Halacha, a little bit more than the rest of the year. People ask: "Who are we fooling? Can we fool the Almighty into thinking that we can be better one month a year and make up for a whole year?" No. The answer is what we really are doing is trying to exercise our souls a little bit more eagerly. We are pushing that extra five minutes on the treadmill of spirituality. We are trying to impress not upon the Almighty but upon on our own souls the importance of Torah and Mitzvoth. With that extra effort, our Rosh Hashana will indeed be a more spiritual experience, for we will have become more sanctified people.

"Ki am Kadosh ata la'Hashem Elokecha" (Deut. 14:2)

May this Ellul lead to a more spiritual year for all of us.

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(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)