

## A Thought for the Week

Rabbi Jay Kelman - Jay Kelman. The Torah is more than a list of "do's" and "dont's".

A Thought for the Week - Yitro  
Rabbi Jay Kelman

Fulfilling the commandments of G-d is no doubt the essence of Torah. "If not for my covenant day and night the laws of heaven and earth I would not have established" (Yirmiyahu 33:25). Rashi begins his commentary on chumash asking why does the Torah begin with "in the beginning"? Being a book of mitzvot it should have begun with the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people, namely the sanctification of the new moon.

Nonetheless a closer analysis reveals that it is not mitzvot per se but rather inculcating the values underlining the mitzvot that is the goal of Torah. The Ramban famously pointed out that one could technically observe all the mitzvot of the Torah and yet still be a "scoundrel" devoid of holiness. While technicalities have their place, they were always used by our Sages to alleviate human difficulties, not to avoid moral obligations. Thus a court of law would look for each and every technicality to avoid implementing capital punishment. Our sages "split hairs" in order to allow one to keep chametz in one's 'home' for pesach or to charge "interest", thereby avoiding huge financial losses for the Jewish people. They allowed for the use of a shabbat elevator making life easier for those living in many cities. The prohibitions of chametz, electricity on Shabbat and even (non usurious) interest are not ethical wrongs but are prohibitions we would never observe if not demanded by G-d. However using a technicality to avoid giving someone a loan bespeaks a person who has not absorbed Torah values, their level of observance of the actual mitzvot of the Torah notwithstanding.

One of the big mistakes we often make, especially when teaching youngsters is presenting Judaism as a series of do's and don'ts, of obligations, prohibitions and restrictions. Rather the do's and don'ts are the means to creating a Godly personality, a just society and a world at peace. Man left to his own devices is prone to do that which is expedient, that which brings pleasure and that which serves his self interest. The believing Jew does that which is correct, that which brings fulfillment and that which serves the greater good of society. This is often the more difficult path, and we need the divine imperative to ensure we follow this more meaningful path.

"You must seek out from among all the people, men of (moral) strength G-d fearing men, men of truth who hate injustice" (18:21). The backdrop to Matan Torah to Divine revelation is Yitro's advice to Moshe regarding the proper administration of a justice system. It is characterized not by specific, objective behaviours but rather the emphasis is on the character traits that are most desirable. An honest G-d fearing person is defined not by specific actions, but is rather a description of personality traits that will be obvious to all who come in contact with them. As we actually arrive at Sinai G-d charges Moshe with the stirring words, a mission statement if you will, that "you will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to Me" (19:6). The Netziv explains that the command to be a "nation of priests" refers to relations to our fellow man which must be based on "the straight and the good" and that of a "holy nation" regulates our relationship with our Creator. The exact contours of these obligations are not and can not be defined by the Torah

as they are dependant on the given situation in which one finds himself and "not all places and times are the same" (see his commentary to 19:5).

Priesthood and holiness derive their meaning from their influence on and relevance to the world around us. Actions which in the past may have been perfectly acceptable might with the passage of time become a violation of the ethical norms of society. While polygamy may have been perfectly acceptable during biblical times revulsion at this practice by society as a whole helped create a climate in which one that violates what the Torah allows was to be excommunicated. To take this a step further in the democratic, egalitarian societies that we are part of we must be attuned to the fact that many woman of today see their roles as different from woman of generations past. We must create models of holiness that permeate the workplace, both for men and woman.

The Netziv adds a second explanation, primarily directed to the leaders of Israel . Our being chosen by G-d obligates us to ensure that our actions for the sake of G-d, to glorify the name of G-d and not to advance our personal goals. May we merit that our observance of the mitzvot of the Torah enable us to fulfill our mission to be "kingdom of priests and a holy nation". Shabbat Shalom!

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