

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Yitro
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Yitro – Trying to understand Divine wisdom

In this week's Parasha of Yitro we read about the Revelation at Har Sinai and the Ten Commandments, one of which is the prohibition of idol worship and the making of graven images. As well as being one of the Ten Commandments, avoda zara is one of the three cardinal sins for which one must give up their lives rather than transgress. Right at the end of the Parasha, Hashem repeats the prohibition of avoda zara together with some additional commandments. Let's have a closer look at this repetition of the commandment against avoda zara together with Rashi's commentary.

“You shall not make [images of anything that is¹] with Me; gods of silver and gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves.” (Shmot 20:20)

Rashi explains that this pasuk comes to teach us about the cherubim. The cherubim were the two winged, human-like beings with faces of babies that were carved out of gold. They were on the cover of the Aron Hakodesh in the Holy of Holies. Rashi brings three lessons that we can derive from applying the wording of the above pasuk to the cherubim:

- “Gods of silver”: this warns us not to make the cherubim out of silver. If they were to be made out of silver, Hashem would treat them as forbidden gods.
- “Gods of gold”: this warns us not to add extra cherubim. Hashem required us to make two and only two. If more were to be made, Hashem would treat them as forbidden gods.
- “You shall not make for yourselves”: this warns us against making cherubim in a Shul or Bet Midrash in the manner that they are to be made in the Bet Hamikdash.

But this raises an interesting question. The severity of avoda zara is well known. The Jewish people are still suffering the consequences of the sin of the Golden Calf!² Yet Hashem has commanded us to fashion the likeness of two cherubim and place them in the holiest place of the Bet Hamikdash. How can Hashem command us not to create graven images and yet at the same time command us to create the cherubim? Furthermore, what would happen if Betzalel, the chief architect of the Mishkan, decided to make the cherubim out of platinum? Platinum is more precious than gold. Wouldn't platinum cherubim be even better than gold ones? The answer is no, because that is not what Hashem wanted. If the cherubim would be made out of platinum rather than gold, then instead of a beautiful mitzva one would be guilty of avoda zara, fashioning false gods! This all doesn't make sense to us. But it doesn't have to make sense. If Hashem commands us to do something, that is exactly what we must do, regardless of whether or not we understand.

There is a fascinating theological debate as to whether there is an objective 'good' to which Hashem Himself is bound, or if things are only 'good' or 'bad' simply because Hashem said so. Does Hashem command us to do things that are inherently 'good', or are things only 'good' because Hashem has decreed them to be good?

¹ This additional wording is based on the Mechilta as brought by Rashi.

² Rashi to Shmot 32:34 explains that Hashem withheld most of the punishment for the Golden Calf, but whenever Hashem punishes Bnei Yisrael in the future he mixes in a bit of the punishment that was due for that sin. “There is no punishment which comes upon Israel which does not have in it some retribution for the Golden Calf” (Sanhedrin 102a). (According to one opinion brought in the Gemara, that debt has now been repaid.)

It could be that this issue is the subject of a debate brought in the Gemara, masechet Megillah.³ The Mishnah teaches us: “If one says in his prayers... Your mercy is extended to a bird’s nest [an allusion to the mitzva of shiluach haken, the commandment to send away the mother before taking her chicks or eggs], so too extend Your mercy to us... we silence him.” In other words, this person is praising Hashem because he is merciful to the mother bird, but such praise is inappropriate and therefore he should be told to stop praying in that way.

The Gemara brings two opinions as to why such a person should be silenced. According to one opinion, the problem is that this person is transforming Hashem’s attributes into expressions of mercy, when really they are decrees which must be fulfilled regardless. This suggests that our understanding of the reasons for Hashem’s mitzvot is limited – rather, they are to be followed simply because they are all Divine decrees.

According to the other opinion brought by the Gemara, the mitzva of sending away the mother bird is a demonstration of mercy. However we silence someone who states this in his tefilla because he is causing jealousy among Hashem’s creations by suggesting that Hashem is favouring one creature over others. Perhaps this opinion understands that sending away the mother bird is objectively good, unlike the other opinion. (Incidentally, from this opinion we can learn how important it is to avoid causing jealousy. If we see that someone has something extra than others, or has received favourable treatment, we should avoid drawing attention to that. Why should we cause others to be dissatisfied or upset? If this applies to birds and animals which do not have feelings, how much more so do we need to take care when it comes to human beings.) But even if we can ‘understand’ part of the reason behind the mitzva of sending away the mother bird, there is so much more that we cannot understand.

The Torah equates honouring and revering one’s parents with the obligation to honour and revere Hashem Himself.⁴ Part of the mitzva of revering one’s parents is that a child must not contradict or endorse his parent’s opinion in front of them.⁵ It is understandable why a child may not contradict their parent, but why can’t the child say that they agree with the parent? In truth, this also shows a lack of respect. Who gave the child permission to ‘endorse’ his parent’s words? If a child states that he agrees with his parent, he is implicitly suggesting that he agrees this time, but at other times he may not agree. So too, if we ‘agree’ with a mitzva based solely on our judgement or understanding, we risk sounding as if we are ‘endorsing’ Hashem chas v’shalom. This could appear to be a lack of kavod.

The Ramchal’s famous work “Derech Hashem” is a systematic explanation of Jewish fundamentals. It explores why Hashem created the world and how He regulates it and operates within it. But a common phrase used throughout this work is החכמה העליונה – the Divine Wisdom. The Ramchal explains a lot, but there is so much more that is beyond even his explanation. Ultimately, the world and the Torah is a decree of the Divine Wisdom. The world is run according to what is decreed appropriate by Hashem in His infinite wisdom. We can strive to understand as much as possible some of the benefits or rationales for mitzvot, as long as we recognise simultaneously that we really don’t know.

As Yeshayahu teaches us:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, says Hashem. As the Heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts [higher] than your thoughts.” (Yeshayahu 55:8)

Let’s try something this week:

1. Remember that we keep the Mitzvot simply because Hashem said so. Even if things don’t make sense to us, we do them anyway.
2. Remember the lesson from the other opinion brought in relation to shiluach haken. If you see someone that has received favourable treatment or has something that others are lacking, don’t point it out. Why should you be responsible for causing others to feel jealousy?

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ Daf 25a. Those who learn Daf Yomi will remember this Daf from about 2 weeks ago.

⁴ See Kiddushin 30b.

⁵ See here for more details: https://halachipedia.com/index.php?title=Kibud_Av_V%27Em