

Torah Table Talk – *Pirkei Avot*

Do Mitzvot make a difference?

Parshat Ki Tetzei, Deuteronomy 21:9

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Reading *Parshat Ki Tetzei*, one is struck by the diversity of actions that are defined as *mitzvot* in this *parshah*. They touch on virtually every aspect of life: ritual and ethical, social and domestic, business and leisure. The Torah has something to say about how we build our homes, the type of clothing we wear, the treatment of children and spouses, and most importantly, the protection of the weak and vulnerable in society. Returning lost property, leaving gleanings for the poor, and prohibiting excessive punishment are all considered *mitzvot*; that is, not just good deeds or virtues but holy acts. *Parshat Ki Tetzei* contains 72 *mitzvot*, more commandments than any other portion in the Torah. While it is hard to speak of a single common denominator that ties all them together, there are leitmotifs which suggest underlying motivations. The author of the *Etz Hayim* commentary writes: "Throughout this *parshah*, with its diverse assemblage of laws, one theme is prominent: the irreducible dignity and worth of a human being. Even the most marginal members of society, such as criminals or the female war captive, are fashioned in the image of God and are to be treated accordingly." (Page 1112)

Parshat Ki Tetzei challenges us to think about the meaning of *mitzvah* and the role *mitzvot* play in our lives. It is clear from this *parshah* that a *mitzvah* is more than a good deed, and that it addresses to minutia of our daily life. Of course, we are commanded to 'do justice' and 'love mercy' but we are also commanded to pick up a lost item and safeguard it until its owner comes to claim it. How do I go about accomplishing this task? What is expected of me – and when does my moral duty go beyond my legal obligation? For Jews living is an art – and each act can be fashioned into a thing of spiritual beauty. But even beyond that, each act - no matter how small - can follow us through life as an advocate or an accuser. This is the subject of Rabbi Eliezer's statement.

Pirkei Avot 4:11 Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob used to say: He who performs one commandment acquires for himself one advocate, while he who commits one transgression has gotten for himself one accuser. Penitence and good deeds are as a shield against punishment.

Pirkei Avot 4:2 Ben Azzai said: Be eager to fulfill the smallest *mitzvah* and flee from transgression (*aveirah*); for one *mitzvah* induces another *mitzvah* and one *aveirah* induces another transgression. The reward of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*; the reward of one *aveirah* is another *aveirah*.

Sources

Jerusalem Talmud, *Pe'ah*

Once, a blind person entered the town in which Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob lived. Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob came and sat down next to him. The people of the town said, "If this blind person wasn't a great man, Rabbi Eliezer would not be sitting with him!" They therefore respectfully provided him with a livelihood. The blind man asked: "What did I do to merit (such treatment)? They said, "We saw Rabbi Eliezer sitting next to you!" The blind man then offered the following prayer: "You (Rabbi Eliezer) have done kindly with one who is seen and cannot see. May the One who can see but is not seen accept your prayers and act graciously toward you.

Ma'aMarei Admor HaZaken 5564; Derech Mitzvosecha p. 76

Angels also possess a body and a soul. Through the performance of the deed, the angel's body is created, and through the enthusiasm with which it is done its soul is created. [Accordingly, there are also two aspects of repentance -- regret, and confession. Through regret, the former sinner removes the soul of the accusing angel, and through the movement of his lips reciting confession, he exterminates and erases the body of evil.]

Moses Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishnah

An advocate is one who is assigned to speak on behalf of another before the authority and defends him. An accuser is the opposite: one who is assigned to bring evil reports to the authority in order to disparage him. The statement goes on to say that repentance (is a response to evil deeds), or good deeds (from the outset) have the power to avert calamities and misfortunes from befalling the individual.

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, from *Rosh Hashanah Readings*, edited Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins

I try to walk the road of Judaism. Embedded in that road there are many jewels. One is marked "*Shabbat*" and one is marked "Civil Rights" and one "*Kashrut*" and one "Honor your Parents" and one "Study of Torah" and

one “You shall be holy.” There are at least 613 of them and they are of different shapes and sizes and weights. Some are light and easy for me to pick up. Some are too deeply embedded for me, so far at least, though I get a little stronger by trying to extricate the jewels from the street. Some, perhaps, I shall never be able to pick up. I believe that God expects me to keep on walking on Judaism Street and to carry whatever I can of its commandments. I do not believe that God expects me to lift what I cannot, nor may I condemn my fellow Jew who may not be able to pick up even as much as I can.

Commentary

One of the key issues for modern Jews is the question of *mitzvah*. What does it mean to feel ‘*mitzvah*,’ and if so by whom? Are we commanded to act a certain way? And if one believes that God is the ‘Commander’ how can one not observe these commandments faithfully? And if one questions the very notion of commandments, then why bother living by the *mitzvot* at all? The sages presumed that God not only gave us all six hundred and thirteen commandments but that the fine details of interpretation were part of God’s instructions as well. They did not dwell on this issue; they took it for granted.

But that is not to suggest that they did not dwell on the power of each *mitzvah* in our lives. ‘Because God said so’ was not enough reason to observe the commandments. In this regard, I find the imagery of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob’s statement to be most powerful. Imagine if every act one performed created either an advocate or an accuser. In Hasidic thought this idea was understood literally; every human act took on a life of its own. It created an angel who became an advocate or a prosecutor. Just imagine being followed around in life by a crowd of advocates and an equally large crowd of accusers! The older we got, the larger the crowd of accusers and advocates would be. The image sounds like something out of a Verizon commercial! Most of us perform small every day acts and move on: imagine what our life would be like if for every small act there was a crowd that cheered us on while another group booed? We need not dwell on the question of before whom these advocates and accusers, advocate or accuse. The very idea of their existence, that our actions continue to follow us through life, is powerful enough.

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf offers a different perspective on *mitzvah*. Each one is a precious jewel. We can bend down and pick it up or simply ignore it. He appears to combine a sense of obligation with individual choice. God has given us great opportunities – we can go through life empty handed or take advantage of the blessings that God has given us.

Questions to Ponder

1. Take an inventory of the *mitzvot* in *Parshat Ki Tetzei*. Which ones do you find ‘heavy’ and which ones would you considered ‘light?’ Which ones do you find troubling and which ones would you not considered *mitzvot* because they are universally followed?
2. In what sense do you consider *mitzvot*, ‘commandments?’
3. How does our attitude toward the authorship of the Torah affect our willingness to observe the *mitzvot*? Is it possible to speak of *mitzvah* if you question the divine authorship of the Torah?
4. Elul is a good time to take a personal inventory of the *mitzvot* in your life. What *mitzvot* do you perform already and why? What *mitzvot* would you like to incorporate into your life?
5. How do you understand the statement that repentance and good deeds are “a shield against calamity and misfortune?” Do you agree or disagree with this statement – why? Do *mitzvot* affect the quality of our lives?
6. Rabbi Eliezer makes a distinction between *mitzvot* and good deeds in his statement above. Why? How are they different from one another?
7. Picking up on Rabbi Wolf’s words, what do you think God ‘expects of us?’ Does God have expectations? How do you know?

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