YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

PARASHA KI TEITZEI

SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN, SHLIT"A

God Desired to Bring Merit to Israel

Adapted by Dov Karoll

Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do so in the land where you go to take possession of it. (Devarim 4:5)

These are the statutes and judgments, which you shall take care to do, in the land which the Lord God of your fathers gives you to possess all the days that you live upon the earth. (Devarim 12:1)

The second section of Sefer Devarim contains many mitzvot, and this concentration gives rise to the question of whether we are to seek underlying rationales for mitzvot. Chazal and the Rishonim offer different approaches to this issue.

One approach is that there is no rationale for mitzvot. A more moderate view is that each mitzva has a rationale, but it is not known to people, or that it is not meant to be knowable by people. A third approach is that the rationale behind the mitzvot can be understood, with various explanations regarding what exactly can be known.

The Rambam (Moreh Nevukhim 3:26) explains that, while Chazal dispute this question, we follow the approach that claims that we are mandated to delve into the rationales of mitzvot. However, there is a Mishna (appearing in two places, Berakhot 33b and Megilla 25a) that seems to contradict this position. Regarding the mitzva of sending away the mother bird when taking the eggs, the Mishna rules:

If one says, "Your mercy extends to a bird's nest" … he is silenced.

The clear implication of this teaching is that there are at least some limits to what can be known about the rationales behind the mitzvot.

This, however, is not to say that nothing can be known. Regarding a general sense of purpose to the mitzvot, the Mishna says (Makkot 23b, appearing also at the end of each chapter of Pirkei Avot):

Rabbi Chananya ben Akashya says: God desired to bring merit to Israel; therefore, He gave them the Torah to study and many mitzvot to fulfill.

In what way does the multitude of mitzvot serve as a greater merit? One can understand this on a several levels.

First, the existence of more mitzvot provides opportunity for accruing more merits, for accumulating more credit on one's Heavenly register.

Secondly, the Maharal speaks of the great metaphysical impact that mitzvot have, and how this is increased and intensified by the abundance of mitzvot.

Third, the Ramban, in his commentary on the mitzva of sending the mother bird away in this week's parasha (Devarim 22:6-7), cites the Rambam's explanation in Moreh Nevukhim about the rationale behind this mitzva, which deals with the compassion parents have toward their children. The Ramban then goes on to explain that the Rambam is correct when he claims that there is a rationale for every mitzva. However, this benefit does not have to be understood in theological terms, from God's perspective, but rather can also be understood in terms of its benefit to man.

And regarding the mitzvot which the Rambam finds difficult to explain in terms of God's perspective, their purpose lies in the improvement of man.

This is a very religiously humanistic approach; the purpose and rationale of mitzvot is to be understood in terms of their impact on the human religious personality. God gave us many mitzvot to give us greater opportunity to improve ourselves and to come closer to Him.

This is manifest in many ways, for example, regarding the mitzva of tzedaka. The verse states, "For the poor shall never cease out of the land " (Devarim 15:11), but the purpose of giving tzedaka is not only to eliminate poverty. Man needs to give tzedaka, even if he cannot solve the problem entirely. And regarding the mitzva of sending away the mother bird, the Ramban seems to emphasize the idea, based on the Midrash in Bereishit Rabba (44), that the mitzva is meant to subjugate man to the Divine command and thereby purify him. Once again, this emphasizes the idea of what man gains from the mitzva, and not the way God relates to the birds.

Near the beginning of the speech of the mitzvot, Moshe tells the people that the mitzvot are given for their good (Devarim 10:12-13):

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, To keep the commandments of the Lord, and his statutes, which I command you this day for your good?

What is the good referred to here? Not of some physical good, not even of reward, but of improvement of man through mitzvot, and of the opportunity to come closer to God. Throughout this section of Sefer Devarim, the phrase "shema Yisrael, listen Israel" is repeated several times. This phrase, especially in its most famous application, also brings this idea into clear focus. One needs to listen carefully, to decipher what it is that God wants of us, to accept the yoke of Heaven, and, through this, to grow in our service of God. By listening carefully to the word of God, we can come to this recognition.

By applying ourselves to follow the word of God and to internalize its messages, the abundance of mitzvot can indeed serve as a merit, as an opportunity to come closer to God and to become better servants of God. Let us bear this in mind as we approach the days of repentance and the beginning of a new year.

God desired to bring merit to Israel; therefore He gave them the Torah to study and many mitzvot to fulfill!

[This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat, Parashat Ki Teitzei, 5762 (2002).]