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"Greater is One Who is Commanded and Fulfills"

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OBLIGATION AND INITIATIVE

"Greater is one who is commanded [to perform a mitzva] and fulfills, than one who is not commanded but fulfills." (Bava Kama 87a and elsewhere)

Several reasons have been proposed for the above principle. Some say that a person who is actually commanded to fulfill the mitzva is burdened with responsibility and takes greater care to fulfill it properly. Others claim that the evil inclination attacks one with greater force if he is commanded, and one who is commanded must consequently exert greater effort to resist his inner rebellious urgings.

Despite the logic of these explanations, the statement itself still sounds problematic. The great figures of our history, who paved new paths in divine service, exercised personal initiative, and fall into the category of those who were "not commanded." Our obligations are listed in the Shulchan Arukh, and they are uniform and common to all of Israel. But what obligation did R. Chaim of Volozhin fulfill when he established his yeshiva, or the Ba'al Shem Tov when he founded Chassidism? Was it not the spirit of volunteerism that inspired them to perform their great deeds? Are we really meant to evaluate such a person's life's mission - bearing the stamp of originality and private initiative - as being worth less than his recitation of "birkat ha-mazon" or the fact that he donned tefillin?

Historical COMMAND AND ever-RENEWING command

Before performing any mitzva, we recite the blessing, "Blessed are You … Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and has commanded us…." Are we referring here to a one-time historical event? The Ritva (Pesachim 7b) writes:

"The reason that Chazal instruct us to recite the blessing just before performing a mitzva is IN ORDER THAT A PERSON FIRST SANCTIFY HIMSELF BY MEANS OF THE BLESSING, and declare that he is performing the act because of the command of the Holy One."

The sanctification by means of the mitzvot that is mentioned in the blessing is not referring to the Revelation at Sinai; it is something that is taking place right now, it is related to the blessing over that act.

A similar idea is expressed by Rabbeinu Tam (Tosafot Pesachim 7a). He distinguishes between the two blessings recited over the performance of circumcision: "…Who has commanded us concerning circumcision," and "Who has commanded us to introduce him into the covenant of our father Avraham." Only the former, maintains Rabbeinu Tam, is a regular blessing over a mitzva that must be recited directly before performance. However, the latter is not a blessing for a mitzva, but rather a general blessing of praise. The difference, in his view, is as follows:

"[The latter blessing] is not recited over that which he is performing right now. Rather, he is giving praise and thanking the Holy One, Who commanded us concerning circumcision WHENEVER THIS MITZVA WOULD BECOME POSSIBLE FOR ONE TO FULFILL."

In other words, this blessing actually does relate to the historical event of Matan Torah, as part of which we were commanded concerning circumcision "when it becomes possible for us." But the blessing for the mitzva, which is always to be recited directly prior to performing it, relates specifically to "that which he is performing right now." It is to be understood not as, "…Who commanded us, in the Revelation at Sinai, concerning circumcision of sons who would be born to us," but rather, "…Who commanded us concerning this specific act, which I am about to fulfill immediately, here and now."

A mitzva has two poles. One is shrouded in the cloud that surrounded Mt. Sinai, from within which the voice of the Holy One emanated. This element of the command is hidden and abstract, for it is it meant to be fulfilled in a reality that does not yet exist. The other pole is grounded in the here and now, the reality that a Jew encounters in his anxious quest to fulfill the holy command, to understand exactly what it is that God requires of him. When the conditions are ripe - the festival arrives and the four species are in his hand, or his eight-day-old son is before him and the circumcision knife is in his hand - the person recognizes the connection between this reality and the Voice at Sinai; he hears the Voice calling to him and commanding him from within the reality that surrounds him. The blessing recited over the fulfillment of a mitzva is the expression of that recognition. Chazal teach that one should not perform a mitzva only on the basis of an ancient command, as the fulfillment of an obligation undertaken in the distant past. A person must declare, "…Who has commanded us concerning this thing, that we are performing right now." The command is renewed and completes itself in the immediate circumstances - but only if a person is aware of it.[1]

Entry into the category of those commanded

In light of the above, we need to clarify Rabbeinu Tam's approach to blessings for mitzvot from which women are exempt. He rules that women should indeed recite these blessings, based on the assumption that even if women are not commanded to fulfill them, their act still constitutes the fulfillment of a mitzva, and therefore the blessing is not in vain. This approach raises a technical difficulty: How can women declare, "…Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us…," when they are not actually commanded? Is this not a false declaration?

The Rosh (Kiddushin 1:49) raises this difficulty, leaving the question unanswered. He seems to reject the simple answer brought by the Ran (on the Rif, Rosh Ha-shana 9b):

"This presents no problem: since the men are commanded, and the women too receive a reward for fulfillment, they also can say, 'Who has commanded us.'"

In other words, women are included in the GENERAL command given to Am Yisrael concerning this mitzva. The Rosh was aware that this answer would not satisfy Rabbeinu Tam, who maintains that the blessing does not refer to the general, theoretical command of Mt. Sinai. The crux of the blessing is its reference to the action that is being performed here and now, and concerning this action the woman is certainly not commanded; so how can she recite the blessing?

In order to reconcile Rabbeinu Tam's approach, we must propose that a woman's fulfillment of such a mitzva is not an altogether voluntary act. The advantage of "one who is commanded and fulfills" exists on the level of the historical command. However, his understanding that he is commanded in the reality before him depends on his awareness of and sensitivity to his circumstances and the nature of the command. Were it not for this consciousness, the command would remain a lonely voice calling out in the desert, devoid of any validity or force in the present. Therefore, Rabbeinu Tam understood that the gates of Divine command are not closed before women. Even if they were not included specifically in the command at Sinai concerning certain mitzvot, who is to say that they are not capable to discerning the Divine Voice that speaks from within the WORLD? They are still able to look at reality and to understand that it obligates the fulfillment of a certain mitzva.

For example, if on Rosh Ha-shana a woman comes to the synagogue and feels in her heart that on this occasion, in these circumstances, she is OBLIGATED to coronate God, as it were, by hearing the sound of the shofar, then it is not her imagination that is guiding her. A mature consciousness gives rise to this feeling - a consciousness capable of understanding that if the conditions for the fulfillment of a great mitzva have been created, then this itself obligates its fulfillment. In short, we must adopt the approach of the Magen Avraham (489:1) concerning women who fulfill the mitzva of Sefirat ha-Omer: "She has already made it obligatory upon herself."[2]

It was this understanding that guided the Maharil in his sermon on shofar, and he drew practical conclusions from it:

"Women are indeed exempt [from shofar], since it is a time-bound positive commandment, but they place themselves into the category of those commanded. And since they obligate themselves, they must hurry to prepare their needs in advance - whether attire or cooking - in order to be available to come to the synagogue and to be there to hear the sounding of the shofar… In Austria it was customary for the women to cook on the day preceding Rosh Ha-shana for the next day, in order to be free to attend the synagogue… And since women have included themselves in the obligation of hearing the shofar, it is proper, if at all possible, for them to leave their babies at home in order that they not interrupt their hearing of the shofar… If it is impossible for a woman to leave her child at home, then it is preferable that she keep him in the women's section of the synagogue, since SHE IS NOT OBLIGATED TO THE SAME EXTENT AS THE MEN. But one who leaves her child at home is praiseworthy, for she has placed herself within the category of those who are obligated."[3]

Turning license into command

There are two ways of fulfilling a mitzva in which one is not obligated. It may be fulfilled from the point of view that "I am not commanded," without any worries or difficulties. Here we are motivated by a feeling of, "If I perform this properly, it will be wonderful, but if not - nothing is lost, for I did not commit myself to fulfilling it."

However, one can also elevate oneself to the level of "one who is commanded and fulfills" as a constant state of consciousness, rather than as an experience limited to the fulfillment of the minimal halakhic requirements. If a person is imbued with such consciousness, then his whole life becomes a search for Divine command; the fire of Sinai burns for him in every situation in which he finds himself. The deeds of great individuals are great because, to their mind, they had no alternative. Reality made demands and called out for repair; those who recognized their ABILITY to respond to the challenge, understood that the Divine command OBLIGATED them to act thus. By the power of their will they elevate their endeavors to the level of "one who is commanded and fulfills."

"Abbaye and Rava were both descendants of the house of Eli [who had short lifespans]. Rava, who engaged in Torah, lived forty years, while Abbaye - who engaged in Torah as well as gemilut chassadim (helping others) lived sixty years." (Rosh Ha-shana 18b)

The Chafetz Chayim (at the end of his book Ahavat Chesed) questions this gemara, for a Torah scholar's ability to set aside his study in order to help others is not dependent on his own whim, but rather on specific halakhic rulings. Halakha teaches that if the mitzva can be done by others, they should fulfill it, and he should continue to study. Only if it is impossible for this mitzva to be fulfilled by others should he perform it, and then return to his study. So if we are speaking of a deed that no one else could perform, then we must question Rava, and if it was possible for it to be performed by others, then why is Abbaye rewarded - did he not act wrongly? The Chafetz Chayim answers:

"Perhaps, since Abbaye was very well-known in his generation for his involvement in helping others, he would add greatly to his trait of kindness, and performed deeds that would not have been done without him. Rava's assumption was that A PERSON IS NOT OBLIGATED to begin engaging in something UNTIL THE SITUATION PRESENTS ITSELF BEFORE HIM, and therefore he was concerned about wasting time from Torah study [if he would seek out opportunities for chesed. In other words, he felt that one should help if he found himself in a situation that demanded it, but one did not have to look for opportunities to perform chesed]. In any event, we see that God must have agreed with Abbaye, for He added twenty years to his life!"

Abbaye believed that even a deed that had not "come before him" could be considered "an obligation that rests on a person." He actively sought ways to help; he thought deeply about the problems of his generation, dug beneath the surface, investigated and tried to uncover the needs of his people. When he heard the call of reality, and understood that changing it depended solely on him, then mitzvot were revealed to him that were hidden from the consciousness of others.

Thus, we learn that the Shulchan Arukh does not exhaust a person's obligations. A person broadens the sphere of his obligations in accordance with his sensitivity to reality, and with his degree of ability and will to devote himself to the Divine command calling out to him from within it.[4]

FOOTNOTES

[1] Tosafot (Sukka 39a s.v. Over) write: "At any moment when he cannot perform the mitzva, it makes no sense to pronounce a blessing over it." They do not explain what they mean to say, and I believe that it can be understood in light of the above.

[2] The aforementioned Ran can also be understood along these lines. In light of the Magen Avraham, it seems that the general rule is that the POSSIBILITY of fulfilling a mitzva can sometimes create an OBLIGATION to fulfill it. This is how we can understand the nature of time-bound mitzvot, or the obligation of mezuza that takes effect when one moves into a house. This seems to be the understanding of Tosafot (Pesachim 113b s.v. Ve-ein) regarding tefillin.

[3] See the Eshel Avraham (Buczacz, OC 589), who rules that women should not eat before hearing shofar, though their prohibition is less severe than that of men. Rabbi Y. Gustman zt"l (Kuntresei Shiurim, Kiddushin, p.254) writes, "In my humble opinion, it seems appropriate to innovate the following law: A woman should not forego the performance of a time-bound positive commandment for no reason; rather, she should only forego its fulfillment if she is presented with another mitzva that she will not be able to fulfill later, or if it imposes a great burden upon her."

[4] Rav Y.M. Charlap zt"l (Mei Marom, vol. 1, p. 151) says in the name of Rav Kook zt"l that the goal of Amalek was to turn obligation into something optional and thereby to cool the fire of Torah and mitzvot, while Pinchas represented the opposite – turning that which is optional into something obligatory.