

MITZVAH OR AVEIRAH? PART I

There are many places in the Torah where we are commanded to do something that seems to be a result of a previous action or a condition to come. Before I present some examples, there are two things to be aware of. The first is that the ideas being discussed are מצוות that are meant as a "vehicle to take something seemingly wrong and do it right". The other matter to take into account is that the word מצוה is commonly mistranslated as a "good deed". For example, it is good to keep שבת or wear תפילין. However, the root צוה really means "commandment". Not all commandments are inherently good. They may make us better people at the end of the day, but one can't read further without first realizing that מצוה is not synonymous with "good deed".

In פרשת שופטים, we see the commandment to appoint a king. The פסוקים¹ say that once in א"י, the Jews will appoint a king to "be like all the other nations around". The תורה then goes on to delineate the special laws of a Jewish king, including the הלכה that he must write two תורה; one to keep in his hand at all times (except the bathroom), and one to keep in the palace. It's interesting to note the לשון of the פסוק² which says: "ואמרת אשימה עלי מלך" - "you will say: 'appoint for us a king'". Why does the פסוק say this as a נבואה rather than a commandment? This isn't my question, but that of many רבנים. We see the prophecy come in the times of שמואל. The נביא³ relates that as the days of שמואל were drawing to a close, בני realized that his supposed successors were unfit to lead them. They therefore asked for a king. When שמואל starts to rebuke them, הקב"ה tells him: "כי אתי מאסו" - "they rejected Me"⁴. This will prove to be crucial soon.

As we said before, the רבנן debate as to the nature of the commandment of appointing a king, using an acute reading of the פסוקים to defend their respective opinions. The רמב"ן² holds that this is a מצוה, as does רבי יהודה⁵, while others such as the ר"ן⁶, the רד"ק⁷, and רבי נהוראי⁵ hold that not only is it not a מצוה, but it was a sin that the Jews asked for a king! How do we resolve this מחלוקת?

Previously we highlighted that the Jews' rejection of הקב"ה is crucial. If we recall the פסוקים in דברים, we see that the סברא behind asking for a king was to be like the גוים. The רמב"ן has a very interesting point. He says that the Jews aren't on such a low level to be following the גוים.

The ספרי brings down a מחלוקת between רבי נהוראי and רבי יהודה. The שיטה of רבי נהוראי is that the Jews asking for a king was a disgrace, while רבי יהודה said it was a מצוה. However, those who say it was a מצוה agree that although it was a commandment (which, as we pointed out, is the definition of a מצוה), the circumstances behind the request were what made it bad. In fact, רבי נהוראי uses the פסוק of being like the גוים⁸ to show that they wanted a king to lead them to do idolatry. The פסוק says: "**And we, too, will be like all the nations**, and our king will judge us and go out before us, and fight our wars." בני placed the importance of being like the other nations before the reasons that would rationalize having a king, such as to lead the nation into battle.

Whether you hold that this ענין is a מצוה or not, it is important to realize the true nature of this

1 דברים יז.ד-כ

2 רמב"ן שם יד

3 שמואל א.ח.ה-כב

4 שם ז

5 ספרי דברים פסיקתא קנו

6 דרשות הר"ן יא.ט.יא

7 שמואל א.ח.ה

8 שם כ

ו' אלול ה'תשע"ח

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מעשה. Oftentimes, we may have good intentions, but something bad happens as a result. On the flip side, we may do something inherently good, but with the wrong intentions. People often speak about חסד like this. What is the reason you help someone out? Do you do it to benefit him, or to serve your own ego? We may say to ourselves that it's both, but here's how you know when it's not: If you see someone in distress, and as you're going to help him, someone gets there first, what do you feel afterwards? If your intentions are good, then you won't mind that someone else went to help out, because all you wanted was for the person in distress to be helped. If doing חסד was meant to satisfy your ego, then you would be upset or angry that you weren't able to help out. If you realize that the true point of חסד is to uplift one in distress, then it shouldn't matter how that happened. As we get further into אלול, and that much closer to יום הדין, we should re-examine not just our actions, but our intentions.⁹ Are we as good on the inside as we are on the outside? Perhaps that explains the line of ועל חטא שחטאנו ביודעים ובלא יודעים. It is written in the plural to show the sins that other people know about, and don't know about; the sins that may look pure on the outside, but need a brush-up on the inside. We should be זוכה to a complete change, both on the inside and out. אם ירצה השם, we will continue on this ענין next week.