

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXI: Ki Tisa (Ex. 30:11–34:35)

Essay 11. Better to be commanded

מדרש רבה על פסוק הנזכר לעיל "ויתן אל-משה ככלתו" וכו', "לך ה' הַצְדָקָה" נאָה הָיָה לְאַבְרָהָם לומר "נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע". שְׁמָא הָיָה נֶאֱמַר לומר "אַלֶּהָ אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל". קוֹשֶׁה דְהֵלָא הִתְיַנּוּקוֹת שֶׁל בֵּית רַבִּין יוֹדְעִים שָׁנָה נֶאֱמַר וְזֶה אֵינוֹ נֶאֱמַר.

There is a **Midrash Rabbah** on the verse mentioned above, “Upon finishing speaking with him on Mount Sinai, [G-d] gave Moses the two tablets of the Testimony, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of G-d”¹:

“With You, L-rd, is the righteousness, and the shame is upon us.”² . . . It was proper for our ancestors to receive the Torah and to say: “Everything that the L-rd has spoken we will do and we will hear.”³ But was it proper for them to say [regarding the Golden Calf]: “This is your god, Israel?”⁴

- Ex. Rabbah 41:1

This is difficult, for don’t even schoolchildren know that this first thing was proper, and that this second thing was not proper? I.e., it’s understood that the Midrash’s question regarding the Golden Calf is rhetorical. But why does it even need to make that point?

וְיֵשׁ לומר דִּישׁ סְלִיקָא דַּעְתָּא לומר שְׁמָא שְׁאֲמָרוּ "נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע" אֵינוֹ כֵּל כֵּד נֶאֱמַר לְגַמְרֵי, וְכֵן מַה שְׁאֲמָרוּ "אַלֶּהָ אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל" אֵינוֹ כֵּל כֵּד אֵינוֹ נֶאֱמַר לְגַמְרֵי. שְׁהֵטְעוּ שְׁאֲמָרוּ ז' לְגִדּוֹל הַמְצִנּוּהָ וְעוֹשֶׂה מִמִּי שְׁאֵינוֹ מְצִנּוּהָ וְעוֹשֶׂה, הֵינּוּ מְשׁוּם דְּמִי שְׁהוּא מְצִנּוּהָ יֵשׁ לוֹ יֵצֵר הַרְעָה תְּקִיף הַמְעַכְבוֹ מְלַעְשׂוֹת, הוֹאִיל שְׁאֵם אֵינוֹ עוֹשֶׂה יֵשׁ לוֹ עוֹנֵשׁ, אֲכַל מִי שְׁאֵינוֹ מְצִנּוּהָ וְעוֹשֶׂה אֵין לוֹ כֵּל כֵּד יֵצֵר הַרְעָה וְאֵינוֹ צְרִיךְ לְהִתְגַּבֵּר עַל יְצֵרוֹ, שְׁאֵינוֹ כֵּל כֵּד מְעַכְבוֹ מְלַעְשׂוֹת, וְלָפּוֹם צְעָרָא אֲגָרָא.

To answer, you might be inclined to say regarding those who replied “we will do and we will hear” that it’s not completely so proper, because there is a downside, as we will soon discuss. **Similarly, regarding those who said, “This is your god, Israel,” that it’s not completely improper,** as we will discuss a positive element. To counter these possibilities, the Midrash expressly states that the first statement was proper, and the second statement improper.

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¹ Ex. 31:18.

² Dan. 9:7.

³ Ex. 24:7.

⁴ Ex. 32:4.

The reason is that [the rabbis] of blessed memory said, “It’s greater to be commanded and do [a mitzvah] than one who does [a mitzvah] without being commanded.”⁵ This is because one who is commanded has an evil inclination that tries to forcibly prevent him from acting. It understands that he will be motivated to act, since if he does not act, he will receive a punishment. Therefore, it works to counter his motivation to perform the mitzvah.

But one who is not commanded and who performs a mitzvah, does not have such a great evil inclination. Since he wasn’t commanded to perform the mitzvah, he won’t be punished if he doesn’t perform it, so he won’t have an evil inclination countering a motivation to perform the mitzvah. Thus, he does not need to overcome his inclination, for he doesn’t have such a force preventing him from acting.

“According to the effort is the reward.”⁶

ואם כן ישראל שהקדימו "נעשה" ל"נשמע" אפשר שפוננתם היתה להיות בכלל מי שאינו מצווה ועושה שלא ישלוח בהם יצר הרע. ומשום הכי אמרו "נעשה" בלא שמיעה קודם, דהיינו שום ציווי. וזה אינו כל כך נאה להם, שמנה הנה נראה שלא היו רוצים לטרוח לעבוד את בוראם. אבל עם כל זה מצד אחר, הנה נאה להם לומר "נעשה ונשמע", שנגאה יותר זהירות וזריזות לעבוד את בוראם.

If so, then for Israel, which preceded “we will do” before “we will hear,” it is possible that their intention was that they would be in the category of one who acts without being commanded, so that the evil inclination would not rule over them. Because of this, they said “we will do” before first hearing what would be required of them, that is, first committing themselves without any command. This was not so proper of them, for this appears as if they did not want to bother serving their Creator, i.e., they wanted to serve Him with less effort, without the evil inclination countering them. Nevertheless, on the other hand, it was proper of them to say “we will do and we will hear,” as this appears to show more care and diligence to serve their Creator.

והנה במתן תורה פתיב "חרות על-הלח" ואמרו ז"ל חירות ממלאך המנות ומיצר הרע, אבל כשעשו העגל חזר יצר הרע למקומו. ולפי זה העבודה שיעשו לבוראם אחרי כן יתיר בטורח ובעמל, ויהיה להם שכרם כפול ומכופל דלפום צערא אגרא, אבל עם כל זה מצד אחר אינו נאה להם לעשות חטא גדול כזה. ואם כן יפה אמר המדרש נאה הנה להם לומר "נעשה ונשמע" הגם שמצד אחד אינו נאה, שמא הנה נאה לומר "אלה אלהיך ישראל" אף על פי שמצד אחד מעט נאה.

Behold, in the description of the giving of the Torah, it is written, “the writing was the writing of G-d, engraved [חרות] [*charut*] upon the Tablets.”⁷ [The rabbis] of blessed memory said this shouldn’t be read as [חרות] [*charut*] [“engraved”], but as [חרות] [*cheirut*] [“freedom”]—freedom from the Angel of Death⁸ and from the evil inclination, but when they made the Golden Calf, the evil inclination returned to its place.

⁵ Kiddushin 31a.

⁶ Pirkei Avot 5:23.

⁷ Ex. 32:16.

⁸ Eruvin 54a; Avodah Zarah 5a; Bava Batra 16a.

According to this, the service that they performed for their Creator afterward, after the Golden Calf, once the evil inclination returned to their lives, was with greater toil and labor, and their reward will be doubled and redoubled, and “according to the effort is the reward.” Nevertheless, on the other hand, it was not proper for them to act with such a great sin as this. Just because they will now get a greater reward for performing a mitzvah in opposition to the evil inclination, doesn’t mean that their sin with the Golden Calf was in any way justified or laudable.

If so, it is fine that the Midrash says it was proper for them to say “we will do and we will hear,” even though from one side it was not proper, since it suggested they wanted to serve Him without the evil inclination countering them. The Midrash suggested that perhaps it was proper for Israel to say, “this is your god, Israel.” Even though on one hand it was a little proper, as it led to a return of the evil inclination, and increased their reward for performing mitzvot, it was still on the whole not a proper action.

ועוד יש לומר שמהשקבה רעה אין הקב"ה מצרפה למעשה ואף על פי שבמעמד הר סיני כתיב "ונפתוהו בפיהם" וכו', עם כל זה נאה להם לומר "נעשה ונשמע" בפיהם. אמנם אחר כך כשעשו המעשה אז אף מהשקבה נחשבת לחטא, דהאי דאמרינו שאין הקב"ה מצרפה למעשה, היינו אם לא יחטא, ולכן אמר כשחטאו ואמרו "אלה אלהינו ישראל" ולמפרע חשב עליהם הקב"ה חטא מהשקבה, שמה הנה עוד נאה זה שאמרו מתחלה. וענין לקמן פירוש אחר בפרשת עקב על פסוק "זכר אלהיך את אשר-הקצפת" וכו'.

An alternative analysis follows. It can be said that the Holy One, Blessed be He, does not link a bad thought to an action.⁹ Even though upon standing at Mt. Sinai, it is written, “Yet they deceived Him with their speech, lied to Him with their words,”¹⁰ as how sincere were they, if they were to revert to idolatry so soon afterward, nevertheless it was proper of them to at least say, “we will do and we will hear.”

Actually, after they acted to create the Golden Calf, now even the thought would be considered a sin. For even though it is said that the Holy One, Blessed be He, doesn’t link a bad thought to an action, that is if they do not actually act on their thoughts and sin. Therefore, it is said that when they did sin and said “this is your god, Israel,” then the Holy One, Blessed be He, retroactively considered their bad thought to be an action. In light of the fact that they did sin, was it proper that they initially said “we will do and we will hear”? No! Thus, the statement “we will do and we will hear” can only be considered proper if we recognize that their later actions with the Golden Calf were completely inappropriate.

See later for another explanation of this in Parashat Ekev, essay 4, on the verse, “Remember, never forget, how you provoked the L-rd your G-d in the wilderness.”¹¹

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⁹ Kiddushin 39b.

¹⁰ Ps. 78:36.

¹¹ Deut. 9:7.