

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Haazinu

“MY LESSON WILL DRIP LIKE RAIN; MY WORD WILL FLOW LIKE DEW...” (DEVARIM 32:2)

Such commandments would be impossible for most people to observe

THE RALBAG, in his introduction to the Torah, explains that the Torah only commanded *mitzvos* and forbade *aveiros* that were within the ability and reach of all people. However, the Torah did not command or forbid very detailed ethical behaviors – e.g. not to get angry except in a specific type of situation and only a certain amount of anger, in the proper place and time – because such commandments would be impossible for most people to observe, leaving the majority of the population in a constant state of sin, and perhaps jeopardizing their fulfillment of the general *mitzvos* as well. Therefore, instead of detailed do’s and don’t’s regarding *midos* – ethical behavior, the Torah relates the stories of our righteous ancestors, and conversely, what befell wicked individuals for their misdeeds. This allows each person to emulate our forefathers and refine his character traits according to his individual ability.

We learn to emulate refined conduct, from the midos tovos that these stories impart

Commenting on the second *pasuk* of this week’s *parasha*, the Ralbag explains that the terms “lesson” and “word” refer to these two parts of the Torah: “My lesson” refers to the *mitzvos* of the Torah, while “my word” refers to the stories of our forefathers recounted in the Torah. The “lessons” or *mitzvos* drip like rain, the Ralbag tells us, because rain falls in drops, which are spaced apart, alluding to the gaps in the levels of spiritual improvement we can achieve through *mitzvos* alone. On the other hand, the “dew” mentioned in the *pasuk* refers to the stories of the Torah, which teach us appropriate *midos*. Unlike the drops of rain, these moral messages “flow,” just as the dew covers everything in a blanketing layer of moisture, and addresses all the levels we need to achieve. By studying role models of exemplary behavior, we learn to emulate refined conduct, from the *midos tovos* that these stories impart.

Only if we study the stories of our avos, can we cover the entire gamut of Torah growth

It seems from the Ralbag that both of these components are necessary to reach the level of human perfection. *Mitzvos* alone leave “gaps” like the space between raindrops. Let us imagine a Jew who meticulously studies and obeys every *mitzva*, every paragraph of the Shulchan Aruch – Code of Jewish Law – with all its commandments and many stringencies. All he neglects is *midos* improvement. What lack is there in his service of Hashem? If he hasn’t learned to emulate higher levels of perfection from our forefathers – which can’t be codified anyway because most people can’t reach those levels – isn’t he a good basic Jew without them? Is he missing significant levels in his spiritual growth? Is he missing an entire element of the Torah?

We see from the Ralbag that the *midos* we acquire are not merely extra-credit points. Rather, they are the connective tissue that bonds our *mitzvos* into human perfection. Without appropriate growth in *midos*, our spiritual fabric will have gaps and holes. Only if we study the stories of our *avos*, with an eye towards gleaned ethical lessons from their life stories, can we cover the entire gamut of Torah growth.

As we focus on the theme of *teshuva* in these Days of Awe, let us remember that *mussar* study and *midos* improvement are inextricably linked. If we commit ourselves to just a few minutes a day studying a *mussar* text, we can hope to win Divine mercy through our efforts to sincerely grow – in *mitzvos* and in *midos* – and merit a year of life, good health, tranquility and happiness.