

Mussar HaTorah

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

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Parashas Mishpatim

“ALL THAT HASHEM SAYS WE WILL DO AND WE WILL HEAR.”
(SHMOS 24:7)

THE JEWISH PEOPLE’S DECLARATION of loyalty and obedience to Hashem, *na’aseh v’nishma* – we will do and we will hear – was an earth-shattering utterance. Rabbeinu Bechaya (ibid. 23:20) tells us that at the moment *B’nei Yisrael* made this statement, Hashem responded: “I gave Adam HaRishon only one commandment to fulfill, and I compared him to the angels in heaven. Certainly this generation, that accepted 613 commandments, should live forever!” The Midrash Rabbah (Shmos 32:1) relates a similar thought, opening with the statement, “[If the Jews would have not made the Golden Calf] neither exile nor the Angel of Death would have been able to rule over them.”

We could understand that an individual who has succeeded in keeping all of Hashem’s many commandments may deserve to live for eternity. The merit of fulfilling the *mitzvos*, especially those connected to the study of Torah – the “tree of life” – would provide a powerful force to ward off any negative influences, such as the Angel of Death. However, here we are dealing with *B’nei Yisrael* at the moment they said “we accept the Torah.” They had not yet even been given the Torah, much less performed even a single *mitzvah*. Why would they be deserving of eternal life? Why is the mere acceptance of the *mitzvos* so extraordinary? Similarly, Adam HaRishon received one commandment from Hashem, why does that alone deserve such a great compensation?

Why would they be deserving of eternal life?

There is a natural human tendency to judge people solely by their accomplishments. We look at someone’s resume and assign him a value accordingly. The Torah, however, has a different standard of measurement. Hashem looks beyond one’s accomplishments – He sees the potential of the person and what he can achieve in the future as well. When we said *na’aseh v’nishma* we accepted upon ourselves the lifelong, eternal goal of a life focused on serving Hashem – a life of constant struggle for spiritual growth. But it wasn’t the acceptance itself. Adam HaRishon didn’t “accept” his *mitzvah*. He was simply commanded, and still he deserved to live forever. Rather, the very fact that we are now engaged in a struggle – a struggle which pits our mind and *neschama* against our physical desires – elevates us to the level of angelic beings. In fact, we are greater than the angels, for they are created as purely spiritual creatures, and have no temptations to pull them away from Hashem and from perfection. We, on the other hand, are striving to exercise our *bechira* – our free will – to choose between our base instincts and the sublime yearnings of our souls. Just being faced with the challenge of overcoming one’s very own nature, is such a lofty privilege, so exalted and holy a status, that it deserves eternity.

The very fact that we are now engaged in a struggle elevates us

Of course, once the Jews had sinned with the Golden Calf, their sin was a negative factor that weighed against them and the scales of judgement were no longer so overwhelmingly tipped in their merit that they could live forever. Still, the greatness remains in every one of us, because we all have free will and we all can struggle to overcome our *yetzer hara*. That potential has never left us, and as we look at our fellow Jews, and perhaps more importantly, as we look at ourselves, we must see the grandeur of our potential for holiness. We should appreciate the profound love that Hashem feels for us, to endow us with this incredible blessing of *bechira*, a potential so lofty that it deserves eternity.

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