

Mussar HaTorah

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

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Parashas Mishpatim

“AND [MOSHE] BUILT AN ALTAR...AND THEY BROUGHT BURNT OFFERINGS AND PEACE OFFERINGS...” (SHMOS 24:5-6)

Now it was necessary that they take an action

MOSHE WENT UP the mountain alone. When he returned, he built an altar at the foot of the mountain, upon which the first-born of B'nei Yisrael brought offerings. The Ralbag (Toeles 2) explains the need for these offerings: When one enters into a religious covenant, where he will be punished for violating its rules, he needs to do a “great action” in order for it to make an “impression” on him. Moshe just taught B'nei Yisrael Hashem's laws, and now it was necessary that they take an action – bringing offerings – to solidify their commitment to these commandments. Without this solidifying action, the Ralbag continues, it would not be fair to later punish them for violating these rules. (The Ralbag adds that this is the reason a convert to Judaism must perform certain actions, such as immersion in a *mikveh* and becoming circumcised.)

Let us view this situation in context. B'nei Yisrael had just received the Torah (according to the timeline of the Ralbag, note that Rashi disagrees) from Hashem at Har Sinai, witnessing incredible miracles. The very earth trembled as the Jews experienced the thunder and lightning, the ever-increasing sound of the *shofar* and the fire and smoke that enveloped the mountain. Our sages teach us that the entire world was silenced at that moment: the waves stopped crashing on the shores, and even the angels ceased their songs of praise at that moment. The people heard Hashem's voice speaking directly to them, reaching a level of prophecy never matched again. They were so frightened by this awesome interaction that after the first two commandments, they asked Moshe to be their intermediary with Hashem for the last eight. When asked for their agreement to accept the Torah, they enthusiastically answered, “*na'aseh v'nishma*” – we will do all of Hashem's commandments! After seeing and experiencing such amazing miracles and manifesting such heartfelt commitment, did B'nei Yisrael really need to take a “great action” to further solidify their commitment? Wasn't their commitment enough? Furthermore, what could bringing a *korban* add to the dedication and devotion they already felt?

What could bringing a korban add?

Apparently there is a limit to the effect of a passive experience on a person's psyche, and even one accompanied by a verbal response. The Jews could not have been held accountable for their actions based on those occurrences alone. Only the powerful impact of doing a physical action made them responsible and punishable for any future misdeeds. Witnessing the giving of the Torah on *Har Sinai* was the most awe-inspiring, once-in-history event. Nevertheless, the act of bringing a *korban* was able to bring that dedication to a deeper level of B'nei Yisrael's consciousness. A convert to Judaism must also reach that more profound level of responsibility by immersing in a *mikveh* and performing physical actions that solidify his resolve to keep the *mitzvos*.

We should do more than decide in our minds

If we want to improve our determination to keep *mitzvos* and learn Torah on a higher level, we should do more than decide in our minds, or even emphatically verbalize a promise. To truly feel bound by our decision, we must perform some action, some significant demonstration of this resolution that will impact our personality and leave a permanent impression. With our entire bodies involved, we can be sure that we have made a commitment that will endure, and bring us one step closer to our lofty goal of ultimate perfection.