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THE INTENTION BEHIND THE ACTION

WOULD YOU DRIVE THROUGH A RED LIGHT? Not on Shabbat, of course! If not, why not? There are a number of possible answers to this question, which may help us understand the beginning of the Sedra¹.

One answer could be: “because I might cause an accident.” A second: “because a policeman or camera might catch me, and I would be fined and my license could get endorsed.” A third: “because it is against the law.”

The first two of these answers are based on the idea that I do things, or do not do things, because I can see benefits or consequences. Stopping at the lights, although it might make me late for an appointment, will keep me and others safe. And even if there are no other cars or people around, if I am caught by a policeman or a camera there will be trouble.

The third answer is based on the simple concept that one must obey the law, irrespective of the circumstances.

Which approach is “better”? There are arguments in favour of each. But if we now transfer this discussion from the man-made laws of the highway to the Divine laws of the Torah we are able to understand a central theme of Judaism.

What should our attitude be when carrying out the Mitzvot, the commandments of the Torah? The second Sedra begins: “If you will go in the way of My statutes and guard My commandments and do them, then I will give you rain in its time; the earth will give its produce and the tree of the field will bear its fruit...”

More beautiful blessings follow. These will come to us if we keep the laws of the Torah, while severe curses are described as the result of breaking them.

Now, are we keeping the Mitzvot in order to avoid punishment? Or is our purpose rather to gain the tangible benefits which the Mitzvot provide: the wholesome lifestyle of a Jewish family living in accordance with our beautiful tradition...?

Both these approaches are quite understandable. Yet the Sages tell us that the Sedra is hinting at a third level of observance.

The name of the Sedra, Bechukotai, comes from the Hebrew word Chok, which means a “statute”. A statute is a law which has no obvious rational explanation. The Sedra uses the term “statute” and is hinting that we should consider all Torah law as “statutes” from G-d. We should carry out the law not because of fear of punishment, nor even because of the benefits it provides. Rather we should try to keep Jewish law because it is G-d’s command to us, a decree which links us with infinite G-d, who is truly beyond our human understanding.

About this the Sedra says: “If you will go in the way of My statutes...” If we approach Torah on its ultimate level, as a Divine decree from the Infinite, we “go”, we move beyond our human limitations.

Observing Torah in this way, through thick and thin, with true dedication, grants us the joy and power of a person who is in a certain sense unlimited and truly free. His or her joy comes not from a sense of a benefit gained, however wonderful this might be, but from the delight of the connection and bond with G-d which is the inner meaning of every Mitzvah..²

1. Leviticus 26:3-27:34. 2. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot* vol.1, p.282.

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SEDRA BEHAR – BECHUKOTAI

TAKING INTEREST

Danny, Nathan and Benjamin were in the queue of the Kosher Bakery waiting to buy ice cream. The three friends had together decided to treat themselves as a reward for each getting above 90% on the Science exam they had taken the week before.

“This bakery smells so good,” Nathan remarked, “makes you want to buy out the whole shop!”

“Well, I suppose that could work if we scrounge together for a few coins...” Danny replied with a wry smile.

“I wish!” Benjamin added. “Talking about coins, how much do they charge here for the ice cream?”

Danny looked up at the price list. “£1.75,” he informed Benjamin, just as their turn came in the queue. Each of the boys chose their flavour and handed their money to the cashier to pay. Nathan felt his pocket and halted. His wallet. He had left it at home. It had been a rush to be on time for school this morning and he had left the wallet on the table in his room. “Oh man...” he sighed, “guys...slight issue here....um... I left my wallet at home...”

“Oh, hey no problem,” Benjamin said, “I have some money you can borrow. It’s no big deal.”

“Oh phew, thank you so much. I’ll pay you back tomorrow!”

The next day, during the morning break after Sedra class, Nathan approached Benjamin with the money in his hand.

“Hey Benjamin, thanks so much for yesterday. Here are two pound coins. Keep the change. You did me a favour – I owe you one!”

He grinned as he handed Benjamin the money.

“Oh, great, thanks. But, hey, were you spaced out in lesson or something?” Benjamin asked

“Huh..?” Nathan wondered what Benjamin was talking about.

“We just learnt about this kind of thing. You know, paying back with interest...”

“With interest? Huh?” Nathan was confused. “Okay, I guess I was kind of spaced out... Why, what did Mr Davidson say about it?”

“Well, in this week’s Sedra Behar, it says that a Jew may not take interest from another Jew. So, you just gave me some extra money because I lent you some of mine. You shouldn’t do that, and nor should I. I’m not allowed to keep the change” explained Benjamin.

“Oh...okay!” Nathan agreed, “I guess I should’ve listened better in class. So, have you got the 25 pence change to give me?” Benjamin looked in his pocket, but shook his head.

Nathan looked in his wallet. “Let me see if I have the exact amount.”

Nathan found the exact sum in his pocket, and gave it to Benjamin. It was pretty cool. He just learnt a new Mitzvah today – and even got to perform it straight away!

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