

The Rebbe's Discourses

Summary of Points from the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל
כי ישאלך בנך י"א ניסן תשל"ג בלתי מוגה
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THE QUESTION

THE TORAH PRESENTS THE QUESTION ASKED BY THE WISE SON (OR DAUGHTER) AT THE SEDER. 'What are the testimonies, statutes and laws which Hashem our G-d has commanded you?'² The Torah text continues with the answer you should give: 'You should say... we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and Hashem our G-d took us out of there... And Hashem commanded us to keep all these statutes, in order to be in awe of Hashem our G-d.. for our good, always.'

Earlier Chassidic teachings have asked what is meant by this question. It is clear that the young person asking the question is wise, he or she knows that the Mitzvot are in different categories: testimonies (which testify to events in the past, like the celebration of Pesach which testifies to the Exodus), statutes (which are beyond ordinary rational understanding) and laws (meaning rational laws which all societies have, such as not to steal or murder). If the son or daughter is so wise, what are they asking? The Torah repeatedly tells us that G-d gives us various kinds of Commandment, and rewards us for keeping them. Surely they know this already?

A further point is, the answer that 'Hashem commanded us to keep all these statutes, in order to be in awe of G-d.. for our good' seems a direct response to the wise son's question about the Commandments. But why should the fact that we were slaves in Egypt be mentioned? Does this have some particular significance relating to the question asked by the wise son/daughter?

¹ Maamar Ki Yishalcha Bincha 5733 (1973), 11 Nisan. It was printed in Dvar Malchut Tazria 5784. It was not edited by the Rebbe.

² Deut. 6:20-21, Va'etchanan.

The basic explanation of this, is that the wise son or daughter knows that the purpose and effect of the Mitzvot is not only that G-d gives a command and we carry it out. The Mitzvot have a very sublime effect as well. The word Mitzvah in Hebrew means 'Command', but there is also a similar Aramaic word which means 'connection'. Through carrying out the Mitzvot one is connected and bonded to the Infinite Divine.

Since this is the case, asks the wise young person, why are the Mitzvot, whether testimonies, statutes or simple laws, all focused on our physical behaviour? If they are a means to bond with G-d, wouldn't it be more appropriate that they should be spiritual rather than practical? Mitzvot for the very spiritual Divine Soul rather than for the physical body?

This is why his question is about the 'testimonies, statutes and laws which Hashem our G-d has commanded *you*'. By saying 'you' he does not mean to exclude himself (as is the case with the Wicked Son). Instead he is contrasting you, his parents, with the Patriarchs. The Patriarchs bonded with G-d in primarily a very spiritual way³. Chassidic teachings explain that each Patriarch served G-d through a specific Divine Attribute: Abraham served G-d through love, Isaac through awe, and Jacob expresses the third Attribute of Truth. As the Midrash puts it: all the Mitzvot of the Patriarchs were like fragrance, something which relates to the soul rather than to the body⁴.

For the wise son, this makes sense. Mitzvot have an ultimate spiritual purpose, bonding with the Divine, so of course they should be spiritual in nature, as they were for the Patriarchs. In that case, he asks, why did G-d command you to carry out practical Mitzvot, whether testimonies, statutes or ordinary rational laws?

The answer to this question is that the highest purpose of the Mitzvot is to achieve awe of G-d, which means not just the emotion of awe, but total selflessness in relation to the Divine. While spiritual emotions are very beautiful, utter selflessness is on a much higher level. And the way to achieve this selflessness is precisely through practical Mitzvot, which are embedded in the physical world where G-dliness is hidden, and the Mitzvot themselves are sometimes quite contrary to reason⁵, and also often very difficult to carry out⁶.

³ The Sages also speak of practical aspects of the service of each of the Patriarchs, which are outlined in the Discourse. But primarily the service of the Patriarchs was spiritual.

⁴ Midrash Rabbah to Song of Songs 1:3.

⁵ All three kinds of Mitzvah can be seen as a form of Statute, which transcends reason, and thus should be carried out as a Command from G-d which we humans do not necessarily understand.

⁶ The discourse relates the word 'Chok', Statute, to 'engraving' in stone, which is a very difficult form of writing compared with ink on paper. So too the practical Mitzvot sometimes seem very difficult, and especially when they transcend reason.

If the practical Mitzvot are so significant, one might ask why the Patriarchs served G-d primarily in spiritual ways? The answer is that the Patriarchs lived before the Jewish people had been enslaved in Egypt.

In the time of the Patriarchs, the physical world was too coarse to be able to express G-dliness through the practical Mitzvot of the Torah. Hence their service had to be primarily through their spiritual qualities of Love, Awe and Truth. But when the Jewish people entered Egypt, the most immoral and materialist land in the ancient world, and were then enslaved there, and were finally set free by G-d acting through Moses – they purified the world as a whole.

After that they could receive the Torah at Sinai, which teaches how G-dliness can be expressed through the physical aspects of life. As a result, we the Jewish people now, are able to serve G-d through the various kinds of practical Mitzvah, and attain through them an exalted level of self-transcendence, which indeed bonds us to G-d in a wonderful way.

We now understand why the answer to the question includes mention of the slavery. It is the slavery and the Exodus which brought us to the next stage of history, in the which through the physical Mitzvot we can achieve the highest levels of self-transcendence and bonding with the Divine.

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