

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

EIKEV 5785

The Midrash (D'varim Rabba 3:1) begins our Parsha with a halacha which at first blush appears to have nothing at all to do with the opening verse. Moreover, in general, it is also highly unusual for the Midrash Aggada to discuss halachic questions. The Midrash reads as follows:

"If a person of Israel has a menorah made of separate pieces, may one carry it on Shabbat? So taught the Sages: One who assembles the branches of a menorah on Shabbat incurs liability to bring a sin offering. For what is he liable? R. Abahu said in the name of R. Yochanan: One who assembles the menorah on Shabbat is like one who builds on Shabbat, and one who builds on Shabbat is liable... Israel said to Him: 'When will you give us the reward for the mitzvot that we perform?' The Holy One blessed be He said to them: 'The mitzvot you perform - their fruits you consume now, but their reward, I will give you at the end [B'EIKEV].' From where is this derived? From what we read in our verse: "It will be, because [EIKEV] you heed."

The connection between the halacha about assembling a menorah and the concluding message of EIKEV which promises that the reward for one's

mitzva observance will eventually be forthcoming is certainly enigmatic and unclear.

Rabbi Joshua Hoffman zt"l, in his Netvort Parsha series (Eikev, 5759) quotes the Chatam Sofer who offers an extraordinary explanation. In Rabbi Hoffman's own words: "The Chatam Sofer explains the image of the menorah mentioned in the Midrash in a way that adds yet another dimension to our discussion. He says that a man's lifetime is similar to a menorah made of pieces. Only at the end of the entire process can we step back and see what it is that has been constructed, and, therefore, only then can full reward be given. Man's life is an ongoing process, and there is never a time when one can say that what he does no longer has significance. Psychologists have noted that there is a tendency among some people to assume, at a certain point in life, that they have grown as much as they can and, from that point on, take a more relaxed, perhaps cavalier attitude to life. This approach, following the Chatam Sofer's explanation of the Midrash, is incorrect. As long as man is alive, he continues to work on the grand structure that he was placed on this earth to complete, and no period in his life is divorced from this process.

"I remember Rabbi Yosef Dov

Soloveitchik, then a man in his late seventies, saying that he does not understand the idea of the crisis of old age. As he saw it, old age is a wonderful opportunity for growth, as long as one accepts the fact that he is older and cannot necessarily do everything he could in the past. Many avenues of growth are available no matter what age a person is. In Rabbi Soloveitchik's case, of course, the major avenue was the study and teaching of Torah. Students of his in the last days of his career recall how he maintained his youthful, inquisitive attitude to learning despite his advanced age. He continued to construct his grand menorah, serving as an example to all those who encountered him."

Rabbi Hoffman continues and references the S'fat Emet who offers a similar interpretation, but broadens it considerably. He explains the Midrash to mean that there are traces of holiness scattered throughout the mundane objects of existence, and it is our task to live our lives in such a way that we extract holiness from each situation, so that we construct, in the end, a menorah that will cast light on all of creation. The seemingly unimportant events in life are, in reality, opportunities for mitzva and holiness, if viewed in the proper way. Nothing we do in life, no situation, is divorced from the purview of the Torah. Each of our individual menorahs

contributes to the construction of that great eschatological menorah which, in the end, will vindicate and grant enduring significance to each of our single efforts. With such an expansive religious worldview, we can learn how not to treat any mitzva, or any situation, in a dismissive matter, because they all contribute to that grand design which ultimately becomes the blueprint enabling the Torah to become manifest in the world.

"Based on the explanations of the S'fat Emet and the Chatam Sofer, we can better understand the further statements of Ben Azzai in the Mishna (Avot 4:3). There we are told, 'He (Ben Azzai) used to say, 'Do not be scornful of any person and do not be disdainful of anything, for you have no person without his hour and nothing without its place.'" In other words, every aspect of the world, every situation we encounter, contains within it an opportunity for growth. In addition, every person has significance, having been placed in the world for the purpose of constructing his personal menorah, and adding his light to the wider collective structure. There is, thus, no place for smallness in Judaism. Nothing that occurs, and no person we encounter, is bereft of significance. The potential for holiness presents itself to us at every corner."

No wonder then that the Torah's use of the word EIKEV, is interpreted by another Midrash (Tanchuma 1) to adjure the Jew lest he trample the seemingly light, minor mitzvot with his heels and thus not take them as seriously as the major ones. The Mishna (Avot 2:1) echoes the very same principle: "Rabbi said: ... And be careful with a light commandment as with a grave one, for you do know not the reward for the fulfillment of the commandments." Every mitzva has its place and serves a unique function in the grand scheme of things. Missing or ignoring even one threatens the integrity of the entire system.

You may recall the terrible disaster of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986. The cause of the crash was attributed to the malfunction of the rubber O-rings. Now consider: relative to the massive, technologically sophisticated and expensive shuttle machine, this item was hardly noticeable - tiny, simple and probably a few dollars each. And yet, not at all insignificant. When these O-rings tragically failed, just 73 seconds into its flight, the entire spacecraft disintegrated killing all seven crew members aboard. Small things matter!

It is rather interesting to note that in Sefer D'varim, when the Torah discusses the commandments in general, it employs the singular form

- HAMITZVA some 14 times compared to the plural form - MITZVOT, only 7 times. Of course, there may be other contextual reasons for this choice. But, could it be that the Torah is coming to underscore the indispensable and infinite value of the single mitzva!

Indeed, in our religious life - and surely in all of life - we are tested in the small things. It is when we attend to the simple gestures of kindness and charity, of attentiveness and sensitivity, that we demonstrate how much we respect and care, revere and treasure those we adore and appreciate! And, of course, with each and every MITZVA, we similarly display our deep love and profound adoration for our Gd! 🙌