

Spiritual Calculus and Utilitarian Morality

כי ד' א-להיכם הוא א-להי הא-להים ואדני האדנים הא-ל הגדל הגבר והנורא אשר לא ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד: רבותי, one of the areas in which I feel most inadequate is in giving advice. Very often, they are hoping for a simple answer. "Rebbe, should I take the job?" I have enough qualms about my ability to make my own personal decisions let alone decide for others on the basis of the information they have selected to provide. I have come to realize that more often than not the young man on the other end of the line has a particular answer he wants me to validate. I often provide only the facts that support the conclusions they are seeking. So why ask if one already the knows the answer one wants? Perhaps so that one can share the responsibility for the outcome of that decision with me.

Now I am not unwilling to share a תלמיד's emotional burdens. In fact, I can't help but do so. When two human beings develop a relationship founded on their mutual interest in understanding Torah, they already share the burden of each other's spiritual fate. Even though the teacher may have the upper hand as they debate the dialectic of Torah, both student and teacher are seekers toward the same end. A תלמיד and his רב walk together down one path. Perhaps the רב is a step or two ahead. Sometimes he may even be a step behind. The important point is that they are walking toward the same destination: דבר השם. The רב, at least in my case, is not the conduit for revelation but a fellow seeker, more skilled perhaps, certainly more experienced. When we learn together, we're both seeking clarity. I don't view myself, neither in הלכות nor in הליכות, as a fount of wisdom. That is God's role. Mine is to provide the tools and guidance in how to use them to help you uncover truth.

And so when a תלמיד turns to me for advice, I view my role as someone more experienced in making decisions guided by Torah. I've made more good and more bad decisions simply by virtue of having lived a lot longer than you have. Just as we learn together and I seek to teach you how to achieve understanding, just as I promote ידיעות התורה over ידיעות התורה which you must acquire on your own, so when it comes to advice I am there to help you think things through, not to provide clear and single-minded answers. I don't have the arrogance to presume to do so.

There is one kind of interaction that seems to happen a lot. A תלמיד wants to do something that he knows is not right. He comes to me to help him justify that behavior by a kind of spiritual calculus. This one forbidden act can pave the way for wonderful things in the future. Won't the ends justify the forbidden means?

A powerful answer may be found in עקב. A consequence of God's awesome nature is that in His absoluteness He precludes pandering and the proffering of bribes. The רמב"ם explains that this is the essential difference between the rule of God and the rule of man. Human kings and judges may be swayed by bribes. The Judge of Judges cannot.

This is in fact a careful explication of the פסוק in our פרשה. God's rejection of bribes flows from His essential nature. The connection is implicit in the oft-quoted comments at the end of his פירוש to the fourth פרק of אבות. The Incorporeal Omnipotent God cannot be bribed in the realm of morality and intention. A thousand acts of virtue cannot be offered as a bribe for one sinful act.

This is precisely why the Torah must offer a specific Scriptural source for פיקוח נפש. It is not a spiritual calculus: many שבתות outweigh one act of חילול שבת but rather the legal analysis required by a coherent system of law. Discussions, by the way, of who is covered by that היתר are not reflections of moral valuation but the necessary clarification of application in a legal system built upon the pursuit of coherence. This is a concept familiar to any student of the law who has ever read or taught Ronald Dworkin's works. אכמ"ל.

William Blake's words come to mind:

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Humanity has only the human form of morality to set before itself. It can only judge its actions against the uncertain standards of the emotion-laden interactions of fallible human beings. The Torah calls us to a higher standard. We are to set before ourselves the absolute morality of the Infinite God, to be revered and imitated, imperfectly but with high moral aspiration, by fallible beings like you and me.

As we rise for מעריב, we will focus our minds on praise of "הא-ל הגדל הגבר והנורא", the Judge to Whom we cannot pander, the Judge who accepts no bribes. We are united, you and I, in a remarkable quest to understand His Will as revealed to us at הר סיני and every day since through the careful study of His Torah. It is a rare privilege to be cherished.

שבת שלום ומבורך