

“Destination: Sinai” Shiur #1: What is a Commandment?

Based on an article by Rav Elyakim Krumbein

Source 1: Talmud Kiddushin 31a

The Sages raised a dilemma before Rav Ulla: How far must one go to fulfill the mitzva of honoring one's father and mother? Rav Ulla said to them: Go and see what one gentile did in Ashkelon, and his name was Dama ben Netina. Once the Sages sought to purchase merchandise [perakmatya] from him for six hundred thousand gold dinars' profit, but the key for the container in which the merchandise was kept was placed under his father's head, and he was sleeping at the time. And Dama ben Netina would not disturb his father by waking him, although he could have made a substantial profit. Rav Yehuda says that Shmuel says: They asked Rabbi Eliezer: How far must one go to fulfill the mitzva of honoring one's father and mother? Rabbi Eliezer said to them: Go and see what one gentile did for his father in Ashkelon, and the name of the son was Dama ben Netina. Once the Sages wished to purchase precious stones from him for the ephod of the High Priest for six hundred thousand gold dinars' profit, and Rav Kahana taught that it was eight hundred thousand gold dinars' profit. And the key to the chest holding the jewels was placed under his father's head, and he would not disturb him. The next year the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave Dama ben Netina his reward, as a red heifer was born in his herd, and the Jews needed it. When the Sages of Israel came to him he said to them: I know, concerning you, that if I were to ask for all the money in the world you would give it to me. But I ask only that money that I lost due to the honor of Father. And Rabbi Ḥanina says: And if this is related about one who is not commanded by the Torah to honor his father, as Dama was a gentile, and nevertheless when he performs the mitzva he is given this great reward, all the more so is one rewarded who is commanded to fulfill a mitzva and performs it. As Rabbi Ḥanina says: Greater is one who is commanded to do a

בעו מיניה מרב עולא עד היכן
כיבוד אב ואם אמר להם צאו
וראו מה עשה עובד כוכבים
אחד באשקלון ודמא בן נתינה
שמו פעם אחת בקשו חכמים
פרקמטיא בששים ריבוא שכר
והיה מפתח מונח תחת
מראשותיו של אביו ולא
ציערו

אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל
שאלו את ר' אליעזר עד היכן
כיבוד אב ואם אמר להם צאו
וראו מה עשה עובד כוכבים
אחד לאביו באשקלון ודמא
בן נתינה שמו בקשו ממנו
חכמים אבנים לאפוד בששים
ריבוא שכר ורב כהנא מתני
בשמונים ריבוא והיה מפתח
מונח תחת מראשותיו של
אביו ולא ציערו

לשנה האחרת נתן הקב"ה
שכרו שנולדה לו פרה אדומה
בעדרו נכנסו חכמי ישראל
אצלו אמר להם יודע אני בכם
שאם אני מבקש מכם כל
ממון שבעולם אתם נותנין לי
אלא אין אני מבקש מכם
אלא אותו ממון שהפסדתי
בשביל כבוד אבא
וא"ר חנינא ומה מי שאינו
מצווה ועושה כך מצווה
ועושה עאכו"כ דאר"ח גדול

mitzva and performs it than one who is not commanded to do a mitzva and performs it. Rav Yosef, who was blind, said: At first I would say: If someone would tell me that the *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda, who says: A blind person is exempt from fulfilling the mitzvot, I would make a festive day for the rabbis, as I am not commanded and yet I perform the mitzvot. This means my reward is very great. Now that I have heard that which Rabbi Ḥanina says: Greater is one who is commanded to do a mitzva and performs it than one who is not commanded to do a mitzva and performs it, on the contrary: If someone would tell me that the *halakha* is not in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda, and a blind person is obligated in mitzvot, I would make a festive day for the rabbis

מצווה ועושה ממי שאינו
מצווה ועושה

אמר רב יוסף מריש ה"א מאן
דהוה אמר לי הלכה כר"י
דאמר סומא פטור מן המצות
עבידנא יומא טבא לרבנן דהא
לא מיפקידנא והא עבידנא
השתא דשמעיתא להא דא"ר
חנינא גדול מצווה ועושה
יותר ממי שאינו מצווה
ועושה אדרבה מאן דאמר לי
דאין הלכה כרבי יהודה
עבידנא יומא טבא לרבנן

Why is a mitzvah greater for someone who is commanded vs. someone who does it voluntarily?

Source 2a): Tosafot #1

גדול המצווה ועושה - נראה דהיינו טעמא דמי שמצווה ועושה עדיף לפי
שדואג ומצטער יותר פן יעבור ממי שאין מצווה שיש לו פת בסלו שאם ירצה
יניח :

It seems that the reason for this is that someone who is commanded to do a mitzvah is greater because he is worried and troubled more – lest he transgress (and not do the mitzvah) from someone who already has his “bread in the basket” – because if he wishes to, he can just leave it (and not do it)

2b) Tosafot #2

Can someone who fulfils a mitzvah voluntarily recite a bracha?

דלא מפקידנא ועבדינא - מכאן מדקדק ר"ת דנשים מברכות על מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא אע"ג דפטורות לגמרי דאפילו מדרבנן לא מיחייבי כדמוכח פרק מי שמתו (ברכות דף כ: :) מ"מ יכולות הן לברך ואין כאן משום לא תשא את שמו לשוא (שמות כ': ז') משום מברכות ברכה שאינה צריכה דאי לאו הכי היכי שמח רב יוסף והלא מפסיד כל הברכות כולן:

From here, Rabbeinu Tam derived that women recite a bracha on positive time-bound commandments even though they are totally exempt – even rabbinically. Nevertheless, they can recite the bracha and this is not considered to be reciting Hashem's name in vain. If this were not so, how did Rav Yosef initially rejoice (when he thought he was going to get more merit being exempt from these mitzvot)? After all, he would lose a chance to recite all of the brachot!?

How are we to relate to the "spirit of volunteerism" that motivated many great accomplishments?

Rav Krumbein:

The great figures of our history, who paved new paths in divine service, exercised personal initiative, and fall into the category of those who were "not commanded." Our obligations are listed in the Shulchan Arukh, and they are uniform and common to all of Israel. But what obligation did R. Chaim of Volozhin fulfill when he established his yeshiva, or the Ba'al Shem Tov when he founded Chassidism? Was it not the spirit of volunteerism that inspired them to perform their great deeds? Are we really meant to evaluate such a person's life's mission - bearing the stamp of originality and private initiative - as being worth less than his recitation of "birkat ha-mazon" or the fact that he donned tefillin?

Source 3a): Rambam, Mishne Torah – Laws of Brachot Ch. 11

וְכֵן כָּל הַמְצוּוֹת שֶׁהֵן מְדַבְּרֵי סוּפְרִים--בֵּין מְצוּוֹת שֶׁהֵן חוּבָה מְדַבְּרֵיהֶם כְּגוֹן מְקָרָא מְגֵלָה וְהַדְּלָקָת נֵר שַׁבָּת וְהַדְּלָקָת נֵר חֲנֻכָּה, בֵּין מְצוּוֹת שֶׁאֵינָן חוּבָה כְּגוֹן עֲרוּב וְנִטְיֵלָת יָדַיִם--מְבָרֵךְ עַל הַכֹּל קִדְּם לַעֲשִׂיתָן, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת .

3b) Ritvah commentary on Pesachim 7b

זה שאמרו חז"ל לברך על המצוה עובר לעשייתן כדי שיתקדש תחלה בברכה ויגלה ויודיע שהוא עושה אותה מפני מצות השי"ת

The reason that Chazal instruct us to recite the blessing just before performing a mitzva is in order that a person first sanctify himself by means of the blessing **and declare that he is performing the act because of the command of the Holy One.**

The sanctification by means of the mitzvot that is mentioned in the blessing is not referring to the Revelation at Sinai; it is something that is taking place right now, it is related to the blessing over that act.

3c) Tosafot Pesachim 7a

בפרק ר' אליעזר דמילה (שבת דף קלו : ושם) תניא המל אומר אקב"ו על המילה אבי הבן אומר להכניסו משמע לאחר המילה מקומו אף על גב דלהכניסו משמע להבא לא קשה דלא על זאת הנעשה עכשיו מברך אלא משבח ומודה להקב"ה שצונו על המילה כשתבא לידו

[The latter blessing] is not recited over that which he is performing right now. Rather, he is giving praise and thanking the Holy One, Who commanded us concerning circumcision whenever this mitzvah would become possible for one to fulfill.

Rav Krumbein: In other words, this blessing actually does relate to the historical event of Matan Torah, as part of which we were commanded concerning circumcision "when it becomes possible for us." **But the blessing for the mitzva, which is always to be recited directly prior to performing it, relates specifically to "that which he is performing right now."** It is to be understood not as, "...Who commanded us, in the Revelation at Sinai, concerning circumcision of sons who would be born to us," but rather, "**...Who commanded us concerning this specific act, which I am about to fulfill immediately, here and now.**"

A mitzva has two poles. **One is shrouded in the cloud that surrounded Mt. Sinai, from within which the voice of the Holy One emanated. This element of the command is hidden and abstract, for it is meant to be fulfilled in a reality that does not yet exist. The other pole is grounded in the here and now, the reality that a Jew encounters in his anxious quest to fulfill the holy command, to understand exactly what it is that God requires of him.** When the conditions are ripe - the festival arrives and the four species are in his hand, or his eight-day-old son is before him and the circumcision knife is in his hand - the person recognizes the connection between this reality and the Voice at Sinai; he hears the Voice calling to him and commanding him from within the reality that surrounds him. The blessing recited over the fulfillment of a mitzva is the expression of that recognition. Chazal teach that one should not perform a mitzva only on the basis of an ancient command, as the fulfillment of an obligation undertaken in the distant past. A person must declare, "...Who has commanded us concerning this thing, that we are performing right now." The command is renewed and completes itself in the immediate circumstances - but only if a person is aware of it.

Returning to Tosafot's earlier statement that women who are exempt from time-bound mitzvot can recite the brachot nevertheless. How?

Source 4: Commentary of Rabbeinu Nissim:

ולא נימא הואיל ולא נצטוו היאך יאמרו וצונו [וכדפרכינן] גבי נר חנוכה בפרק במה מדליקין (דף כג א) היכן צונו דלא קשיא דכיון שהאנשים נצטוו ואף הן נוטלות שכר שפיר יאמרו וצונו:

This presents no problem: since the men are commanded, and the women too receive a reward for fulfillment, they also can say, 'Who has commanded us.'

How would this explanation work alongside Rabbeinu Tam's understanding of women reciting brachot over the mitzvah?

Rav Krumbein: We must propose that a woman's fulfillment of such a mitzva is not an altogether voluntary act. The advantage of "one who is commanded and fulfills" exists on the level of the historical command. However, his understanding that he is commanded in the reality before him depends on his awareness of and sensitivity to his circumstances and the nature of the command. *Were it not for this consciousness, the command would remain a lonely voice calling out in the desert, devoid of any validity or force in the present.* Therefore, Rabbeinu Tam understood that the gates of Divine command are not closed before women. Even if they were not included specifically in the command at Sinai concerning certain mitzvot, who is to say that they are not capable to discerning the Divine Voice that speaks from within the WORLD? They are still able to look at reality and to understand that it obligates the fulfillment of a certain mitzva.

For example, if on Rosh Ha-shana a woman comes to the synagogue and feels in her heart that on this occasion, in these circumstances, she is OBLIGATED to coronate God, as it were, by hearing the sound of the shofar, then it is not her imagination that is guiding her. A mature consciousness gives rise to this feeling - a consciousness capable of understanding that if the conditions for the fulfillment of a great mitzva have been created, then this itself obligates its fulfillment.

There are two ways of fulfilling a mitzva in which one is not obligated. It may be fulfilled from the point of view that "I am not commanded," without any worries or difficulties. Here we are motivated by a feeling of, "If I perform this properly, it will be wonderful, but if not - nothing is lost, for I did not commit myself to fulfilling it."

However, one can also elevate oneself to the level of "one who is commanded and fulfills" as a constant state of consciousness, rather than as an experience limited to the fulfillment of the minimal halakhic requirements. If a person is imbued with such consciousness, then his whole life becomes a search for Divine command; the fire of Sinai burns for him in every situation in which he finds himself. The deeds of great individuals are great because, to their mind, they had no alternative. Reality made demands and called out for repair; those who recognized their ABILITY to respond to the challenge, understood that the Divine command OBLIGATED them to act thus. By the power of their will they elevate their endeavors to the level of "one who is commanded and fulfills."

Source 5: Siddur: Sephardic Tradition

האשה מברכת בלי שם ומלכות

A woman blesses without pronouncing Hashem's name and Kingship

בְּרוּךְ שְׁעֵשְׂנִי כְּרִצוֹנוֹ :

Blessed is He Who made me according to His Will.

Ashkenazic Tradition

נשים מברכות - בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. שְׁעֲשֵׂנִי כְרָצוֹנוּ :

Source 6: Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon

מהי ברכת 'שעשני כרצונו'?

ברכה זו אינה נזכרת בגמרא, והיא מובאת באבודרהם (סדר שחרית של חול) ובטור (מו, שכך נהגו הנשים) ובשולחן-ערוך (מו, ד).

ברוח-חיים (ר' חיים מולוז'ין על מסכת אבות, פ"ד, בסופו) מסביר כי ברכת "שעשני כרצונו" הינה כמו "בעלמא די ברא כרעותיה". כלומר, הקב"ה רצה שיתגדל ויתקדש שמו דווקא מהעולם הזה, וכך רצה שתתקבל מלכותו בעולם, דווקא בדרך זו של קבלת האישה (עיין עלי-שור, ח"ב עמ' שנא).

הרב קוק (עולת-ראיה, א, עא) מסביר, שיש צדדים אקטיביים באיש שמאפשרים לו להגיע ליצירות מיוחדות, אבל מאידך, גם מקשים ואף מתנגדים, לעתים, לעבודת ה' ולרצון ה' בעולם. גם באישה ישנם כמובן צדדים אקטיביים, אבל מטבעה יש באישה יותר מידה של קבלה. מידה זו, מאפשרת לה להתחבר בצורה יותר טבעית לרצון ה' בעולם. האישה בהתנהגותה הטבעית קרובה יותר לרצון ה', "ועל כך היא מודה בכל בוקר: "שעשני כרצונו"

דברים אלו מתחברים גם לעובדה שאישה אינה חייבת במצוות עשה שהזמן גרמא. ישנו פן אחד בכך, שהאשה בהיותה עסוקה יותר עם הריון ולידה וטיפול בילדים, לא הצטוותה על מצוות התלויות בזמן (עיסוק בילדים ועמידה בזמנים הם דבר מאוד מסובך). **אולם, מדברי הרש"ר הירש ואחרונים אחרים עולה, שהאישה מפאת מעלתה, זקוקה לפחות מצוות בכדי להגיע לשלמות.**

המצוות - משלימות את האדם. האיש, מתוך האקטיביות שלו, והדחפים שלו, יכול לעתים ליצור דברים מיוחדים מאוד בעולם, אך הוא גם זה שיוצר את המלחמות הקשות בעולם. הוא זקוק ליותר מצוות בכדי להגיע לשלמות. האישה, איננה בעלת יצרים ודחפים בעוצמות כאלו, דבר המאפשר לה ליצור בעולם בצורה טבעית יותר, ומזיקה פחות. לכן, גם עם פחות מצוות, היא מסוגלת להגיע לשלמות.

Source 7: Sefer Hachinuch – Why do we count the Omer?

.... משרשי המצוה על צד הפשט, לפי שכל עיקרון של ישראל אינו אלא התורה, ומפני התורה נבראו שמים וארץ וישראל...ומפני כן, כי היא כל עיקרון של ישראל ובעבורה נגאלו ועלו לכל הגדולה שעלו אליה, נצטוינו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשנו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד הנכסף ללבנו, כעבד ישאף צל, וימנה תמיד מתי יבוא העת הנכסף אליו שיצא לחירות, כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא....

The roots of this mitzvah: the essence of the Jewish people is the Torah; it is because of the Torah that Heaven and earth were created, as it says (Yirmiyahu 33:25) "If I had not had made My covenant, I would not have established day and night..." It is the main reason for which we were redeemed from Egypt, so that we would receive the Torah on Sinai and fulfill it, as Hashem said to Moshe, Therefore, we were commanded to count from the day after the first Yom Tov of Pesach until the day on which we received the Torah, to show how our souls strongly desire this most honored and desired day, much the same way a servant yearns for shade; a servant always counts towards the hoped-for day when he will be freed. For when a person counts, he shows that all of his hopes are to reach that day. This is why we count the Omer, ie such and such number of days have passed from the total number...

Source 8: Shemot Ch. 19

(י) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל הָעָם וְקַדְשֵׁתָם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר וְכַבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֵתָם :

(יא) וְהָיוּ נְכֻנִים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד ה' לְעֵינֵי כָל הָעָם עַל הַר סִינַי :

10. And the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and prepare them today and tomorrow, and they shall wash their garments. **11. And they shall be prepared for the third day, for on the third day, the Lord will descend before the eyes of all the people upon Mount Sinai.**

Source 9: Haketav Vihakabala

(יא) ליום השלישי - פירוש יישירו דעתם ויכוונו לבם ומחשבתם לאביהם שבשמים ולקבל את הענין הגדול שיותן להם ביום השלישי, כי מלת "כונן" על דבר המתוקן להיות מקבל ענין מה,

כמו "מקדש ה' כוננו ידיך" -- שמתוקן להשראת השכינה, "הוא עשך ויכוננך" שתקן אותך לקבל כח עליון, וכן ירח וכוכבים אשר כוננת תקנתם לקבל אור השמש, וטעם המקרא כענין (עמוס ד') "הכון לקראת אלהיך ישראל" להיות כל דעתם ומחשבתם רק בענינים הרוחניים אלקיים ומרוחק מכל מיני גשמיות:

Source 10: Pesachim 8b

....אמר רבי אלעזר שלוחי מצוה אינן ניזוקין ... בעו מיניה מרב בני בני רב דדיירי בבאגא מהו למיתי קדמא וחשוכא לבי רב ? אמר להו ניתו עלי ועל צוארי! ניזיל מאי? אמר להו : לא ידענא.

Rabbi Elazar said: People on their way to perform a mitzvah are not harmed. The students asked Rav – what of the young students who live in villages in the valley – is it permissible for them to come to the study halls early in the morning and late in the evening? He responded: I will take responsibility for them! What about going back home in the dark? He said: I do not know.

Source 11: Proverbs/Mishlei Ch. 3

בְּכָל־דְּרָכֶיךָ דַּעֲהוּ וְהוּא יִשְׂרֹא אַרְחֲתֶיךָ:

In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths smooth.

Source 12: Rambam, Mishne Torah Hilchot De'ot Ch. 3

צָרִיךְ הָאָדָם שְׂיִכּוֹן לְבוֹ וְכָל מַעֲשָׂיו כְּלָם לִידַע אֶת הַשֵּׁם בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּלִבָּד, וַיְהִי שְׁבִתוֹ וְקוּמוֹ וְדַבּוּרוֹ הַכֹּל לְעִמַּת זֶה הַדְּבָר. כִּי־צַד? כְּשִׁישָׂא וַיִּתֵּן אוֹ יַעֲשֶׂה מְלֹאכָה לְטַל שְׂכָר, לֹא יְהִי בְּלִבּוֹ לְקַבֵּץ מָמוֹן בְּלִבָּד, אֶלָּא יַעֲשֶׂה דְבָרִים הָאֵלּוּ כְּדִי שְׂיִמְצֵא דְבָרִים שְׁהַגּוּף צָרִיךְ לָהֶם מֵאֲכִילָה וּשְׂתִיָּה וּיְשִׁיבַת בֵּית וּנְשִׂיאת אִשָּׁה.

It is necessary for man to set his heart and all his efforts solely to know the Name, blessed is He! so that his sitting down, his rising up and his speech shall be facing this goal. How may he accomplish it? When he will buy, or sell, or do work for wages, he should not have in his heart the accumulation of money only but he should perform these duties as a means to acquire the necessities of the body, as food, drink, dwelling-place and marriage;

נִמְצֵא הַמְהַלֵּךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ זוֹ כֹּל יָמָיו עוֹבֵד אֶת ה' תָּמִיד. אֲפֹלוּ בְּשַׁעַה שְׁנוּשָׂא וְנוֹתֵן וְאֲפֹלוּ בְּשַׁעַה שְׁבוּעֵל. מִפְּנֵי שְׂמַחַשְׁבְּתוֹ בְּכָל כְּדִי שְׂיִמְצֵא צָרָכָיו עַד שְׂיִהְיֶה גּוֹפוֹ שָׁלֵם לְעַבֵּד אֶת ה'. וְאֲפֹלוּ בְּשַׁעַה שֶׁהוּא יֵשֵׁן אִם יֵשֵׁן לְדַעַת כְּדִי שְׂתִנּוּחַ דַּעְתּוֹ עָלָיו וַיִּנּוּחַ גּוֹפוֹ כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא יִחָלָה וְלֹא יוֹכֵל לְעַבֵּד אֶת ה' וְהוּא חוֹלָה, נִמְצֵאת שְׁנָה שְׁלוֹ עֲבוּדָה לְמָקוֹם בְּרוּךְ הוּא. וְעַל עֲנָן זֶה צִוּוּ חֲכָמִים וְאָמְרוּ (מִשְׁנֵה אֲבוֹת ב יב" (וְכָל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ יִהְיוּ לְשֵׁם שְׂמִים). וְהוּא שְׂאֵמֵר שְׁלֵמָה בְּחֲכָמְתוֹ) מִשְׁלִי ג ו" (בְּכָל דְּרָכֶיךָ דַּעְהוּ וְהוּא יִישֵׁר אֲרַחֲתֶיךָ":

He who follows the medical directions, but sets his heart merely to keep his body and limbs healthy and beget children to do his work and strive for his needs, such is not the good way. But he should set his heart to have a sound and strong body so that his soul be tranquil to acquire the knowledge of the Lord; for, it is impossible that one should comprehend and improve himself in scholarship when he is hungry, or sick, or when one of his limbs pains; but he should set his heart to have a son who, perhaps will be a great sage in Israel

Consequently, one who follows such way all of his life, is constantly in God's service, even when he is buying and selling, even when he performs the grossest duty, seeing that his thought beneath it all is to find enough to satisfy his wants, so that his body be sound, ready to serve God. Even when one sleeps, if his sleep be purposeful so that his mind be rested, and rests his body so as to prevent himself from becoming sick and be unable to serve God as a result of sickness, it will be found that even his very sleep is part of his service to God, blessed is He! And on this subject the sages commanded and said: "And let all thine actions be with devotion to the Name of God" (Pir. Av. 2.12); and, concerning this Solomon in his wisdom said: "In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will make level thy paths" (Prov. 3.6).