

Syncing Our Will

by Rabbi Reuven Taragin

הוא הִיהָ אֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה רְצוֹנוֹ כְּרְצוֹנְךָ, כְּדִי שִׁיעֲשֶׂה רְצוֹנְךָ כְּרְצוֹנוֹ. בְּטֵל רְצוֹנְךָ מִפְּנֵי רְצוֹנוֹ, כְּדִי שִׁיבְטֵל רְצוֹן אֲחֵרִים מִפְּנֵי רְצוֹנְךָ.
(אבות ב:ד)

We previously learned about the importance of our intentions. The Mishnah in the beginning of the second perek of Avot relates to another aspect of our psyche — our will.

He (Rabban Gamliel – the son of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi) encourages us to “Make His will as your own so that He will make yours as His” and to “Nullify your will before His so that He will nullify the will of others before yours.” (Avot 2:4)

Identification

We should aim to not only nullify our will before Hashem’s, but also transform our will to match His. Instead of (just) submitting to Hashem’s will, we should *identify* with it; in addition to fulfilling Hashem’s will, we should want what He “wants.” We should aim to value what He “values” and feel what He “feels” about what we experience in this world.¹

We can learn what this means from Pinchas, who Hashem described as someone who was “*kano et kinati*.”² Pinchas was more than just someone who took action in response to sin. His reaction was deeper — it was visceral. He felt the appropriate pain and jealousy of one who identifies with Hashem.

Rav Yechezkel Weinfeld *shlit”a* uses this idea to explain Rav Shimon Bar Yochai’s surprising interpretation of the *pasuk* (in the second parsha of *k’riat shema*) that mentions working the fields.³ Rav Shimon Bar Yochai encouraged learning all day while relying on Hashem to provide for us without having to work the field. He explains the *pasuk* that seems to endorse such work as referring to a time when people are not “*oskim b’retzono shel Makom* (involved in the will of G-d).”

Tosfot⁴ points out that the perek the above *pasuk* appears within begins by describing people fulfilling *mitzvot* and continues by describing Hashem’s reward to them for this fulfillment. How could this parsha be understood as referring to people who are not *oskim b’retzono shel Makom*? Tosfot explains that although the parsha refers to people who fulfill Hashem’s will, they are not “*osin retzono*” completely. What does this mean? What are they lacking?

Rav Weinfeld explains that the parsha refers to people who fulfill the commandments and *act* in line with Hashem’s will, but have not yet succeeded at making Hashem’s will their own.

¹ See Peirush Rabbeinu Yonah, Avot 2:4.

² Bamidbar 25:11.

³ Devarim 11:14.

⁴ Ibid., D.H. *Kan*.

They are not yet “*osin retzono shel Makom*.” Their incomplete reward mirrors their incomplete *avodah*. Hashem rewards them for their fulfillment of *mitzvot* by supporting their work in the field, but they are still required to exert effort.

The Form — Passionate Heart and Soul

Identification with Hashem’s will impacts both the form and breadth of our *avodat Hashem*.

Syncing our will with Hashem’s ensures that when we fulfill Hashem’s will, we do so with a full heart. This is how the Ramban⁵ explains the *pasuk* “And you shall serve Him with *all* your heart.”⁶ When fulfilling *mitzvot*, we should be fully invested in our *avodat Hashem* and act in a wholehearted way. The Ramban expresses this idea in a second context — his explanation for why the Torah tells of Avraham running (“*ratz*”) to serve his three guests. The Ramban explains that the Torah wants us to appreciate Avraham’s passion for *chessed*.⁷ He did not just *do* it, he *ran* to do it.

We see the relationship between “running” and “will” through the relationship between the Hebrew word for will — *ratzon*, and the abbreviated version of that word used to describe running — *ratz*. Rav Yehuda Ben Teima links the two in his statement later in *Avot*, encouraging us to “run (*ratz*) like a gazelle to fulfill the will (*ratzon*) of your Father in Heaven.”⁸

Breadth — What Hashem Wills

Having Hashem’s *ratzon* as our own means that we are passionate about not just commandments, but about *everything* Hashem “wants.” This should express itself in the way we seek to fulfill Hashem’s will — both what He made explicit, and what we infer by “reading between the lines.”

The *Mesillat Yesharim*⁹ explains that ideally, one should relate to Hashem the same way people relate to others they love and care deeply about. One who cares about another person will prioritize not only the other’s explicit requests; they will also try to anticipate and facilitate whatever might make the other happy.

We see this idea in Avraham’s actions at the *Akeidah*. After Hashem tells Avraham to spare Yitzchak’s life, he looks for something else to sacrifice.¹⁰ Avraham figures that Hashem would want him to sacrifice something, so, even though he was *not commanded* to do so, he *seeks* the opportunity.¹¹

⁵ Hasagot HaRamban, Sefer Hamitzvot L’Rambam, *mitzvat ase* 5.

⁶ Devarim 10:10. The Rambam (Sefer Hamitzvot, Mitzvat Asei 5) saw this *pasuk* as the source of the obligation to daven daily.

⁷ Ramban, Bereishit 18:7.

⁸ Avot 5:20.

⁹ *Mesillat Yesharim* 18.

¹⁰ Bereishit 22:13.

¹¹ Chazal (Mishnah quoted by Rashi on the *pasuk*) teach us that Avraham was indeed right in his understanding. The ram he saw in the thicket was not one that happened to be there. It had been created during the six days of creation for this purpose.

Understandably, Hashem blessed Avraham *only after* he offered this voluntary sacrifice.¹² The *berachot* are given to Avraham because he is not just a loyal servant, but also one who loves Hashem.¹³

Another example of pursuit of the will of G-d are the words of Mordechai to Esther in response to her hesitation to approach Achashverosh on behalf of the Jewish people. Mordechai tells her that this may be “the moment you became queen for.”¹⁴ Neither Esther nor Mordechai were commanded by Hashem to take action. Like Avraham, Mordechai reflected on the circumstances and estimated what Hashem wanted. This estimation was something he felt Esther was responsible to risk her life for!

These examples from Avraham and Mordechai highlight the need to reflect not just upon what Hashem wants from the world in general, but also what he wants from *us specifically*. The Chatam Sofer¹⁵ uses this idea to explain the surprising statement of the Gemara,¹⁶ “one who says that they have only Torah, lacks *even Torah*.” The Chatam Sofer explains that Torah, as eternal and universal, can teach only the general responsibilities all Jews have at all times. A person who identifies with Hashem’s will, must go beyond that, by using the unique abilities and circumstances Hashem created him with and then places him in to appreciate how he, personally, is meant to best serve Him. Only one who does this, *truly* has Torah.

May we successfully sync our will with Hashem’s in a way that brings us to identify with His goals and inspires us to serve him fully and comprehensively.

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¹² Bereishit 22:15–18.

¹³ It is noteworthy that Avraham is the only person called “*ohavi* (my lover)” by Hashem. See Yeshaya 41:8 and the Rambam (Yad Hachazaka, Hilchot Teshuva 10:2).

¹⁴ Megillat Esther 4:14.

¹⁵ She'eilot U'teshuvot Chatam Sofer, Chelek 1, Orach Chaim, Siman 197.

¹⁶ Yevamot 108b.