

Torah and the Ethical Impulse

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At a moment when many Jews committed to social justice work find ourselves searching for a language of Torah equal to our moral convictions — and many committed to Torah view contemporary justice movements with suspicion — it is worth asking a more fundamental question: What is the relationship between Torah and the ethical impulse itself? Is Torah meant to discipline and hone our moral intuitions, or to deepen and illuminate them? Are justice, compassion, and human dignity values we know independently and then “bring” to Torah, or are they themselves expressions of Torah woven into creation from the beginning? How we answer these questions shapes not only how we learn Torah but how we understand the religious meaning of building a more just world.

The possibility that Torah might deepen rather than override our moral intuitions is not a modern attempt to reconcile Judaism with contemporary ethics. It is already implicit within the rabbinic imagination itself. With no fanfare at all, the Talmud makes a radical claim about the nature of our world and the Torah: “Rabbi Yochanan said: Even if the Torah had not been given, we would nonetheless have learned modesty from the cat, and that stealing is wrong from the ant...”¹ Even if G!d had not given us the Torah, we would be able to derive fundamental values from the natural world around us. The Torah so fully suffuses the world that, had revelation not happened, perhaps we would still be ourselves, or at least still hold our same values. If the values core to Judaism are so deeply ingrained in the world that we could have observed them in the more than human world and cultivated them in ourselves without the theophany at Mount Sinai, what does that say about the Torah itself? Furthermore, what does it tell us about the natural world if, baked into the building blocks of all the creatures around us, are values like diligence and modesty? Perhaps it is with this notion in mind that the Gemara tells us that despite living before the giving of the Torah, “Avraham Avinu kept the entire Torah, even *eruv tavshilin* (clearly a rabbinic enactment)”². By accessing this primordial Torah within all living things, Avraham could then have inculcated the values and lessons Hashem would later communicate through the Torah.

One potentially beautiful way of reading this idea is to see the inherent Torah in all things. Rather than viewing the Torah as an extrinsic text to measure our values and

¹ Eruvin 100b

² Yoma 28b

conduct against, the encounter with Torah can instead be an act of soul searching. If understanding ants can teach us respect for one another, what can we learn from truly trying to understand human beings? Rav Kook teaches that

All ethics in the world are intermingled in every mitzvah, and all of the good in the world is intermingled in every strong ethical inclination... And this must be ethics not as a pale impression, but penetrating ethics, ethics that fills all the crevices of the body, ethics that is drawn from the wellspring of life, ethics that combines all of the most variegated feelings of the soul into a single unit and establishes them all in their full character. That precisely is the ethics of life, which proceeds from the Source of life, which pulses in individuals from the wellspring of the nation, and in the nation from the Life of worlds. "The commandment of Hashem is clear. It illuminates the eyes." (*Psalms* 19:10)³

According to this teaching, every mitzvah is fundamentally bound up in the ethical — not in some shallow sense but rather in a way that invests the entirety of one's being in the project of doing what is right. It is not for nothing that he supports this idea with a *pasuk* that tells us that Hashem's mitzvot bring literal enlightenment, reading their "clarity" as a kind of ethical clarity, acting as a kind of fulcrum for bringing our deepest selves to bear on the world.

If this were always so, the role of the Torah in social justice movements would be clear and simple. We would describe any act of self-searching ethics which pushes us to be our fullest and most authentic selves as "Torah" and the creation of a political reality out of those impulses would simply be the enactment of the Torah latent in our world. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to look around the world and see many who hold Torah and mitzvot dear and fall far short of this standard. The son of Rav Menachem Froman *zt"l*'s (1945-2013, Israel) writes, in a volume that collects many of Rav Froman's teachings that

He was also extremely sensitive about this in relation to his students and children. Whenever one of us felt satisfied with ourselves, with what we learned, he would worriedly stick a pin into the inflated balloon of Torah and spirituality. And he would often return to the saying of the Sages regarding Torah: "If one is deserving, it becomes a potion of life for him. If one is not deserving, it becomes a potion of death for him." There is no guarantee that Torah study will advance

³ Shemonah Kevatzim 1:522

one's spiritual side. Possessive learning — Torah in service of the ego — not only is this not beneficial, it really is dangerous and deadly for us on a spiritual level.⁴

As the sages note,⁵ Torah holds within it the power of life and death, and which side comes to the fore depends on the person imbibing the Torah. The Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760, Poland and Ukraine), too, was attuned to this aspect of Torah, teaching that Torah is like rain, which causes whatever seeds were planted to grow. If the rain falls upon wheat kernels, it produces wheat; if upon barley, it produces barley; and if upon thorns, it produces thorns.⁶ The Baal Shem Tov's insight is fundamentally that Torah takes what is already inside us and causes it to bloom, be that the light of ethics or, G!d forbid, the thorns of cruelty.

How then can Torah be so central for us, let alone part of our justice work, if all it does is cause what is already within us to ferment and grow? Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira *zt"l* (1889–1943, Poland), the Piaseczno Rebbe, suggests one answer. In his third essay for Shavuot, the Rebbe tells us that the very motivation to come to Torah, to seek to grow beyond ourselves to something supernal and transcendent, points to the fact that what is in us is already holy. Within each of our hearts is a seed of connection to everything, a piece of the Divine.⁷ It is that powerful desire to cultivate, that boundless hunger for connection to the Divine within the Torah and within the world that allows us to escape the narrow bonds of egoism. Thus when we come to Torah with real openness, having spiritually prepared for the encounter, with yearning to connect to something beyond ourselves, the nourishing rain of Torah is able to help that seed grow, and help us become more deeply ourselves and more in tune with all things.⁸

The Torah, then, is neither merely an external command nor simply a mirror of the self. It is a meeting point between the Divine seed already planted within creation and the human struggle to cultivate it faithfully. The world itself may whisper Torah through the diligence of ants and the modesty of cats, but revelation calls us to hear those whispers consciously and respond to them with responsibility. Torah can become a potion of life only when approached with humility, openness, and the courage to be transformed rather than affirmed. In this sense, the work of justice is not separate from Torah but one of its deepest expressions: the attempt to align our inner lives, our relationships, and our societies with the sacred interconnectedness already woven into creation.

⁴ Hasidim Tzohakim Mizeh #130

⁵ Yoma 72b

⁶ Quoted in Derech haMelech, Shavuot 3

⁷ Job 31:2

⁸ Derech haMelech, Shavuot 3



To study Torah, then, is not only to learn what Hashem commands, but to become the kind of people capable of recognizing the Divine image in all beings and building a world that reflects it. May we have the courage to encounter ourselves and the Torah anew this Shavuot.

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