

SICHA SUMMARY

PROJECT LIKKUTEI SICHOS | 5783 - YEAR OF HAKHEL



Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 17

Pirkei Avos, Perek 4

The Mishnah:

Ben Azzai would say: Run to pursue a minor mitzvah, and flee from a transgression. For a mitzvah brings another mitzvah, and a transgression brings another transgression. For the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the reward of transgression is transgression. (Pirkei Avos 4:2)

The General Question:

There are several sources that encourage alacrity in fulfilling mitzvos. One is enshrined in Alter Rebbe's Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish law:

"It is a mitzvah to run to the synagogue and to any other activity involving a mitzvah, as it is written, 'Let us run in pursuit of the knowledge of G-d. (Hoshea 6:3)'" (Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim, 90:13)

And another appears in the following chapter of Pirkei Avos:

"Yehudah the son of Teima would say: Be... fleeing as a deer...to do the will of your Father in Heaven." (Pirkei Avos 5:20) This is

also cited in the beginning of the Shulchan Aruch.

What distinguishes these directives from each other? Why are some forms of alacrity included within the manual for Jewish practice, and others left in the pietistic realm of Pirkei Avos?

The Nuanced Questions:

1. Why does Ben Azzai only encourage a person to run after a "minor mitzvah" and not all mitzvos?
2. Why does he provide two justifications for pursuing mitzvos with zeal, "For a mitzvah brings another mitzvah.... For the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah...?"

The Explanation:

Running to perform a mitzvah is an expression of suprarational joy in fulfilling G-d's will. It arises out of a sense of bittul, of self-transcendence, that allows a person to shed any inhibitions and free themselves from their limitations to joyfully run after a mitzvah opportunity.

This is alluded to in the verse that the Alter Rebbe uses to support the principle of zeal, "And let us know. Let us run in pursuit of the

knowledge of G-d." The two expressions of "knowledge" in the verse allude to two levels of perception of G-d's unity. The first, unqualified "let us know" refers to the lower level of Divine knowledge, that perceives the world as contingent upon G-d, yet recognizes it as a distinct entity. The phrase, "knowledge of G-d" refers to the higher level of knowledge, the perception that G-d and the world are totally one.

Thus, the implication is that it is this higher perception of G-d's unity that causes a person to "run in pursuit" of a mitzvah. When a person becomes aware that he and this worldly existence have no independent identity, when he loses his sense of autonomy, then he will be able to transcend his limitations and "run" to a mitzvah.

The Alter Rebbe includes this imperative in his universal code of law, even though this is a lofty standard that cannot be expected of the average person, because the practical aspect of running to do a mitzvah is easily available to all. And even though the internal state of bittul is hard to achieve, the physical alacrity itself can lead to a person developing that internal state, as implied by the verse, "let us run," then we will acquire "the knowledge of G-d," the elevated perception of Divine unity.

Thus, the bare-bones requirement of physical pursuit is included in the Code of Jewish law.

Yehuda the son of Teima refers to a higher form of alacrity, "Be... fleeting as a deer...to do the will of your Father in Heaven." Here, he is not speaking of an empty physical action, but of a general internal state of desire "to do the will of your Father in Heaven." Meaning the

alacrity is in response to feeling the urgent appeal of G-d's will. However, this is still a general appreciation of the importance of mitzvos, of the "will of your Father in Heaven." This macro awareness of the imperative of G-d's will is more approachable, and is therefore included in the beginning of Shulchan Aruch not as law, but as a general preface to the entire project of fulfilling Jewish law.

Higher still is the level of alacrity demanded by Ben Azai, "to pursue a minor mitzvah." Even in the "smallest" of mitzvos, which seem to not hold immense spiritual value and significance, he detects the full, awesome force of the will of G-d which causes him to pursue it with zeal and urgency.

There are two levels of spiritual awareness that can lead him to this desire. 1) For a mitzvah brings another mitzvah," he knows that every mitzvah, even this minor one, is a means of connection (tzavsa) with G-d. 2) If he is not at the level of selflessness that sees the mitzvah itself as having infinite value, he can be moved by the idea that "the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah," he can appreciate the tangible spiritual satisfaction, the "reward," that the mitzvah provides.

It is Ben Azai who is moved to such passion even when considering a "small mitzvah," for he was a person who was always moved to spiritual extremes: he refused to marry for "his soul desired only Torah." In every mitzvah, even one that would seem pedestrian to most, he saw the undiluted Divine will, and therefore exhorts us to run and pursue each opportunity for connection with G-d.
