

# **A Life of Command**

**By Harav Aharon Lichtenstein**

I began this series by exploring our commitment to the universal values of "le-ovdah u-leshomrah." Simply because we are human beings, we must pursue a life of work and duty as opposed to one of self-indulgence. Today, I would like to move to the next level of responsibility which binds us: not what is expected of us as humans, but more specifically, what characterizes us as members of Knesset Yisrael?

I do not want to speak about details, but rather about the basic quality of our existence, the central category which defines our lives as Jews. Although some of what I will discuss has universal applicability, it nevertheless has a different quality and a different weight for a Jew, for my topic today is what lies at the center of Jewish existence. This is succinctly described in the verse following the one we spoke of before: "Vayetzav Hashem Elokim al ha-adam," "The Lord God commanded the man" (Bereishit 2:16); in a word - mitzva. The Jew's life is defined by being commanded.

## **SELF-FULFILLMENT**

We live in a world wherein the ideal of self- fulfillment is taken for granted. Sometimes this assumes a more obviously negative guise, such as when people espouse an ideal of pleasure-seeking. However, it can also assume a noble, moral tone: every person has a right and a duty to develop his inherent capacities. Today, this notion is so fundamental, so deeply rooted, that sometimes people don't realize just how relatively new it is as an ultimate ideal. This goal was particularly championed by the Romantic movement, and in this respect the contemporary world is still very much enchanted with Romanticism.

One area in which the changing ideal appears clearly is the realm of art. In the classical world, the function and method of an artist was primarily to express, portray or imitate some kind of objective reality, whether it be natural, historical, social or psychological. The Romantics, on the other hand, saw the role of art as being primarily one of self-expression. One had to give vent to one's own personal feelings and experiences, and to find fulfillment through doing that. The focus of art shifted from the outside to the inside. The goal was no longer to give expression to what was out there, and through that to increase one's sensitivity and sensibility, gaining a deeper insight into the nature of existence. Rather, an artist was now meant to express his inner feelings. As the function of art changed, its subject matter also changed. It no longer concerned the outer, objective order, but rather the inner order of one's own subjective world.

This change in the perception of art was just one manifestation of what was a much more radical change of sensibility. The element of subjectivity, and the sense that what one was looking for in life was self-fulfillment, extended far beyond the world of art, becoming an ideal even for people who had no inkling whatsoever of what art was all about.

If you ask people today what they're looking for - and I'm talking about serious people - the most prevalent answers are self-fulfillment and self-expression. When I taught "Freshman Composition" in the States, this almost invariably came up in my discussions with students. For them, the central goal of writing was to express their feelings.

To many, there is perhaps no other way of seeing things, and they would be surprised that this goal is even being questioned. But surely, Judaism perceives human existence differently: "*Va-yetzav Hashem Elokim al Ha-adam.*" Our perception is that man or woman is fundamentally a being who is commanded, who is called, upon whom demands are made. And the fulfillment of these demands may or may not be congruent with self-fulfillment.

### **GREATER IS ONE WHO IS COMMANDED**

There is a famous halakha, which can also be understood as a statement of machshava, that "*Gadol ha- metzuveh ve-oseh mi-mi she-eino metzuveh ve-oseh*" - "*A person who does something after being commanded is superior to one who does it without being commanded.*" In the gemara (Bava Kama 87a), R. Yosef, who was blind, initially states that he would make a party if someone would tell him that the law follows R. Yehuda's opinion that a blind person is exempt from performing mitzvot. Why? "*Because I am not commanded but I nevertheless perform [mitzvot].*" In other words, his gut instinct was identical to ours: a volunteer is more admirable than a person who is required to do something. We tend to think that there is a greater measure of identification with a cause if you do something as a volunteer. But after he heard what R. Chanina said, namely "*Gadol ha-metzuveh ve- oseh,*" R. Yosef would now throw a party if someone said the halakha does not follow R. Yehuda!

Presumably, one who is "*eino metzuveh ve-oseh*" is acting in accordance with his personal inclination and is therefore attaining more self-fulfillment than one who is simply commanded, "Do this!" No one asks the metzuveh whether he likes what he is doing. And yet Chazal said, "*Gadol ha-metzuveh ve-oseh,*" thus placing at the center or even at the apex of our spiritual lives the sense of being called and commanded. This is what religious existence in general is all about, and it certainly applies to Judaism more than to most other religions. [In lecture #9 we will return to the question of why the metzuveh is greater.]

Of course, this has very widespread implications, for example regarding career choice. Does a person look for a career where he will feel fulfilled, doing what he likes to do, or will he choose a career where he is responding to some call, to a sense of duty? A person responsive to the call of duty may sense that the historical moment has thrust upon him the need to follow a particular course, although it may not be that which corresponds most intimately and most fully to his own inner instincts.

## **THE MEANING OF MITZVA**

Judaism very much considers man a "called" being; if you wanted to single out one concept which is at the heart of Judaism, it is probably the concept of mitzva. This term has several ramifications, which are different but not conflicting.

The concept of mitzva presupposes an encounter between someone who is issuing a command and someone who is receiving it. This is one sense of the term mitzva: the act and the experience of issuing the command and absorbing it. Colloquially, it has another meaning - a good deed. There is in our minds an identification between the term "mitzva" as command and as something good. This is, in and of itself, an indication of just how deeply the notion of mitzva is ingrained in our thinking as Jews. Imagine for a moment that a non-Jew would say, "That's a wonderful thing to do. Go do that, it's a big command." It sounds ludicrous. The fact that we talk this way is a reflection of the extent to which in our minds spiritual existence and the sense of responding to a divine demand are intertwined. On the one hand, this means that we assume that something which is commanded is good; on the other hand, we could also reason that the good is commanded.

## **PICKING AND CHOOSING**

Now, to live the existence of a metzuveh, of one who is called and commanded, involves to some extent the subjugation of one's inclinations and desires. A metzuveh leads a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric life. He is guided by God's will, not by his own likes and preferences. *"Nullify your will before [God's] will" (Avot 2:4)* constitutes a cardinal principle of Judaism. Even within the realm of avodat Hashem proper, one needs to beware of imposing his own inclinations excessively. If you are commanded, you do not pick and choose among commands - that is to live an anthropocentric life, placing yourself in the center and building everything around yourself. *"Va-yetzav Hashem Elokim al ha-adam"* means, first and foremost, that God's will is at the center; your will may be factored in, but only secondarily.

A responsum of the Rambam (#263 in the Blau edition) illustrates this point. He was asked about the custom to stand during the reading of the Ten Commandments in synagogue, and replied that it is inappropriate to distinguish between them and the rest of the Torah. (Similarly, Chazal discontinued the practice of reading the Ten Commandments daily in the Temple [Berakhot 12a].) A Jew should feel that even though certain parts of the Torah may address him differently than others, they are all God's words, and that in and of itself assigns them importance.

Another important ramification is in the area of learning. The Gemara in Eruvin (64a) compares a person who says, "I like this sugya and I don't like that one; I'll learn this one but I won't learn that one," to a person who consorts with prostitutes. Similarly, the Gemara in Sanhedrin (99b) has very sharp words for a person who learns Torah on occasion, not setting fixed times for study: he is "*a heartless adulterer.*" How can learning Torah be like committing adultery or visiting prostitutes!? The essence of fornication is self- fulfillment. A man wants to extract sexual pleasure from a woman, and now that he has used her to satisfy himself, he has no responsibility towards her and continues on his way. Tomorrow he'll find another woman. This is exactly what Chazal criticized so sharply. A person has to approach Torah and avodat Hashem not as an adulterer - someone whose goal is to extract whatever pleasure he can, even spiritual pleasure. A person has to subject himself to Torah and not to subject Torah to himself. He must be willing to commit himself to it unconditionally and to accept whatever God imposes upon him.

### **ALL OR NOTHING**

I mentioned before that I want to deal today with a concept which, while it has universal elements, is more specifically central to Judaism. When a person wants to make the transition from the universal to the Jewish realm, i.e. to undergo the process of gerut (conversion), he must accept the authority of Halakha and be willing to do everything. Conversely, if a non-Jew wishes to perform some mitzvot because they appeal to him, but not to perform others because he doesn't like them, the Rambam says (Hilkhos Melakhim 10:9) that we ought not countenance this:

*"The general rule is that we do not permit them to innovate a religion and to perform mitzvot for themselves according to their own understanding. Rather, they should either convert and accept all the mitzvot, or they should remain within their own religion and not add or detract."*

What is the matter with this? If a gentile feels that the entire Torah is too much to accept, but there are certain mitzvot that appeal to him - he thinks eating matza is very nice and shofar is very elevating - why not? Why impose upon him this whole system in its totality? And why tell him that it

is all or nothing? The answer is that a person cannot come and sit in judgment upon Torah, and upon the Almighty, and enter the world of Torah and avodat Hashem as if he were shopping in a department store. One shops in a department store precisely in response to one's own needs and desires and instincts. It's part of self-indulgence and self- fulfillment. But one cannot shop around in God's world. Either one understands what it means to accept the discipline of avodat Hashem or one doesn't. Either one is called and commanded - in which case you do not pick and choose among the commands, because if you pick and choose they are no longer commands - or one cannot become a Jew.

Judaism is built on the notion of nullifying your will before God's, of defining your existence as being called and commanded. This can be construed in a narrow sense and in a broader sense. In a narrow sense, we are bound by many specific mitzvot. Part of the difference between Judaism and general existence is this range of mitzvot, the extent to which the tentacles of commandment enter into the fiber of your being and grip you in every area. Apart from the specific mitzvot which one is given, there is also the overarching concept of living a life of command, a sense which suffuses one's entire existence of living, in Milton's phrase, "as ever in my great Taskmaster's eye." This is very central to our perception. Therefore, conversion means accepting a certain system, with the understanding that you do whatever you're told. In the army, it doesn't matter whether you joined by volunteering or by being drafted - in either case, you must follow orders. A volunteer cannot say, "Since I wasn't drafted, I'm here only for my own self-fulfillment and will do what I please." Like the draftee, he is now a soldier, and does not have the right to pick and choose which orders he will obey.

(Based on a transcript by Shira and Avi Shmidman. This sicha was originally delivered to first-year students at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Winter 5747 [1986-7]. It has not been reviewed by Harav Lichtenstein.)

## **ENCOUNTER AND DIRECTIVE**

Being commanded entails both an experience of encounter as well as specific mandates which one must fulfill. Consequently, a person can adopt one of two extreme positions, both of which are counter to our view.

There are those who stress the notion of encounter and dialogue between man and God, which can even result in a general sense of subjugation to God, but not in terms of specific commands. This is the Buberian notion of "I and Thou," and is also found in many Protestant circles. At the other extreme, sometimes we become very much involved in relating to the commands but in the process we lose sight of the Commander (I believe all of us are guilty of this at some point or another). Either way, we miss part of the

essence of what mitzva means. To live a life of halakha is to try to fuse these elements, to maintain a constant sense of God's presence while striving to fulfill God's will.

Furthermore, we should seek to relate to mitzvot as being intrinsically good; in this sense, we identify with the mitzvot on a personal level. But at the same time, we must not lose sight of the element of command within them. This can explain why Chazal say, "*Gadol ha-metzuveh ve-oseh mi-mi she-eino metzuveh ve-oseh.*" If someone is a "metzuveh ve-oseh," then in addition to doing something which is good, he is also acting out of a sense of response to God's demands. The experience of being commanded is something which he has in addition to the fact that he is doing something which is right and good, and this makes him greater than one who is "eino metzuveh ve-oseh."

### **NEGATING SELFHOOD?**

I want to add one important point. Some of you probably feel that I'm being very harsh and very severe, asking a person to stifle his own being and become a robot who exists just in order to respond to commands. The notion of self-fulfillment is so deeply ingrained in us that we instinctively reject the notion that our own selves are to be almost decimated, our own desires are to be totally discarded, and we must instead respond to an external command. To be perfectly honest, we know that historically there have been many who have indeed felt that this is what a person is asked to do - more so outside Judaism than within. Many of the mystics of the Eastern world and the Western world speak in these terms. And not only mystics - part of Luther's message, for instance, is the negation of self, of "I"-hood.

I am not arguing for anything that extreme. I don't think that Judaism presents the notion of a lost self-identity as a central ideal; I'm not sure that it is an ideal at all. But what Judaism does very much stress is not that a person should have no will of his own, but rather that he should learn to identify with God's will. He must train his own instincts in such a way that he will identify with what God wants.

### **IDENTIFYING WITH GOD'S WILL**

There is an old question, going back to the Greek moralists, which the Rambam discusses in a famous passage in *Shemoneh Perakim* (chapter 6): is it better for a person to desire to sin but to overcome this desire, or is it better for him not even to desire to sin? The Rambam distinguishes between more rational mitzvot, which you should have no desire to disobey, and non-rational mitzvot, concerning which you restrain yourself only because God has commanded you to. For instance, you should not feel that you would like to steal, but are restrained by the Torah; rather, you should not even want to steal. On the other hand, you may desire non-kosher food, but you avoid it because God has said to do so.

Does this mean that we should all be burning with a lust for bacon and ham, but simply be restrained because it says in the *Shulchan Arukh* that you shouldn't eat it? Is it really an ideal that we should always be pitting ourselves against God and then letting God win,

or pitting, if you will, the biological part of ourselves against our moral and spiritual selves? Should we encourage this sort of constant conflict? I find it inconceivable that this is the way we are supposed to live.

Ultimately, the ideal for a person should be that if the Shulchan Arukh says don't eat ham, then I should feel revulsion for ham. But the question is: what is the basis of that revulsion? If a person feels revulsion against shrimp or lobster because of some aesthetic consideration and that's why he doesn't eat it, then his not eating it is simply a part of the aesthete in him. But if a person feels that on aesthetic grounds he could eat it, but now he has reached a point where his revulsion is due to the fact that God has forbidden it - how can I want something that God forbids? - then he has reached a *madreiga* (level) for which a person should strive.

If one keeps mitzvot because they happen to coincide with his instincts and intuitions, then it is all part of self-fulfillment and not part of *avodat Hashem*. *Avodat Hashem* means to serve God for His sake. But once you identify with what God wants, you can then bring your own self-fulfillment to be part of your *avodat Hashem*. Kant believed that a person must always act against his inclination, but we do not subscribe to this position. Judaism does not want a person to feel like a *shmatte* (rag) all his life, constantly fighting himself, as if the whole of spiritual existence is to be realized through inner tension and struggle.

Certainly, it is both psychologically and religiously beneficial for a person to find happiness and self-fulfillment in what he is doing. But we grant this on one condition: that the content and direction of that which makes you feel fulfilled did not start with you. It started with God, and through a process which admittedly is difficult, you have gradually been able to shape your own inner spiritual being in such a way that now there is some coincidence between what God wants and what you want.

Robert Frost writes:

"My object in living is to unite My avocation and my vocation  
As my two eyes make one in sight."

I agree that a person should strive for this goal - he should enjoy his work as if it were a hobby. In a parallel sense, a person indeed should enjoy his *avodat Hashem* and feel fulfilled by it - but not because these were initially his own desires and intuitions. These started as being God's will, which you are commanded to fulfill. But you have molded yourself in such a way that you find joy in responding to command; your self-fulfillment comes from living the life of one who is called, rather than the life of one who is guided solely by his own inner feelings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Of course, this is not easy. We born with a great measure of egocentricity and we do not initially place God at the center. Chazal say that the *yetzer ha-ra* has a big head start on

the yetzer ha-tov - the former is present from birth (or even in utero, according to one view), while the latter appears only when a person is thirteen years old. This means that one encounters the basic instinct for aggressiveness and selfishness even in "innocent" children, but it takes time until one has the ability to master these, and to nullify his own will.

Once a person attains a certain maturity, he or she becomes subject to God's commands, and these obligate one absolutely. They define one's life as a Jew, encompassing every area of his existence. He does not select between mitzvot, deeming certain areas to be irrelevant to him. At all times, one should hear God's call, and should plan even "divrei reshut" with an eye towards the overarching purpose of avodat Hashem. In fulfilling mitzvot, one should sense the encounter with God and His will, and should sense the goodness of the mitzvot. One must nullify his own will and accept God's will as the guiding force in his life. Ultimately, one should strive to reach the level where he can translate s will into his own. This is a process which takes time, and requires a great deal of effort - but it is central to what it means to be a Jew and a ben-Torah.

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