

Chovat Ha-Melamdin

The Obligation of Teachers

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Through the first seventeen parshiyot in the Torah, the Sefer Ha-Chinukh enumerates exactly forty-one commandments. In contrast, this week's parsha alone contains, according to the Chinukh's enumeration, an astounding fifty-three mitzvot.

The Chinukh subdivides the mitzvot in the Parsha into two distinct sections; the first twenty-four are referred to as the Mishpatim, the laws, whilst the final twenty-nine belong to a distinct section opening with the mandate to extend interest-free loans, *im kesef talveh et ami*.

Together, these two sections, spanning one hundred eighteen verses of the Torah, cover an astonishingly broad scope, from the basics of business ethics, torts and civil procedure, to cases of seduction, prohibited foods, and even witchcraft.

In sum, there are twenty-three affirmative obligations (mitzvot aseh), and thirty prohibitions (lo ta'aseh). Mastering each of the fifty-three mitzvot in their own right, let alone determining the textual and logical connections between one section and the next, presents, to understate the matter, a formidable challenge. If learning Mishpatim, deeply, seems ambitious, transmitting it to a largely uninitiated group, such as the Jewish people were at the time of the revelation of these laws, might strike one as sheer fancy.

Yet, in the single introductory verse of the parshah, this is precisely the pedagogical responsibility with which Moshe is tasked. 'And these are the laws that you should place before them,' **אשר תשים לפניהם**.

The Mekhilta of R. Yishmael quotes R. Akiva as interpreting the verse in the following manner; Moshe, do not satisfy yourself with teaching them two or three times, by rote, so that they can repeat the matter, without explaining the underlying reasons and their more profound explanations. Rather, penetrate the depths of each matter with them, and place it as a set table, **שולחן ערוך**, before them.

We ought to pause to reflect for a moment on the mandate which Moshe was being given. It was, apparently, insufficient for him to educate the people in such a manner that they would simply know what to do. Rather, practical knowledge of the halakha, while vital, was meant to be transmitted in a manner which stressed both depth and conceptual understanding.

We should not underestimate the full measure of the challenge Moshe faced. Teaching, under any circumstances, is extremely difficult. It requires a mastery of the material, an understanding of the students, a high degree of organization¹, and a constant refinement of pedagogical methodology. This

¹ See Onkelos to Shemot 21:1, where he renders "tasim" as "tesader", connoting the organizational responsibility.

considerable challenge is only amplified by the Almighty's demand that Moshe not only teach material, but elucidate and illuminate the very foundations of the Torah itself. It is surely no exaggeration to say that this level of teaching is profoundly strenuous. Indeed, the word which Rashi² employs in his citation of the Mekhilta to convey this level of teaching is "*tircha*", to assume a considerable burden.

Rashi was not alone amongst the Rishonim in this regard. Ramban associates Moshe's teaching responsibilities with precisely the same root, "tarchachem"³. Rambam⁴, for his part, codified the obligation, noting that the melamed was obligated to educate his pupil *ad she-yavinu omek ha-halakha*, the fullest depth of the halakha.

And yet, if this is what the Giver of the Torah was asking of Moshe, it was surely with good reason. The pursuit of depth, it seems to me, is driven by a triple impulse.

First, it constitutes a qualitatively greater fulfillment of the mitzvah of Talmud Torah. The capacity to understand not just what one is required to do, but, as much as is humanly possible, the logic which undergirds the Torah represents a more profound engagement in the mitzvah which is *k'negged kulam*.

Second, if one understands the underpinnings of the mitzvot, observance and adherence to these commandments becomes, in many cases much more likely. As our Sages put it, *talmud mevi lidei ma'aseh*, Torah study drives observance. This credo, in a minimalist sense, relates to fulfilling the dictates of the Torah, which obviously requires basic knowledge of the actual rules. In a more ambitious sense, however, this principle establishes that the more one can identify the underlying principles and concepts which drive the halakhic norm, the greater one's resolve to maintain the norms themselves.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, when one sees the Torah not just as a very long instruction manual, but, as much as is humanly possible, with insight into the total vision with which Hashem gave the Torah, one's relationship with God is commensurately deepened and intensified.

This penetrating form of Torah study can help one achieve the ultimate form of *deveikut*, in accordance with that magnificent image in Avot, "even one who sits and studies, the Divine Presence dwells with Him". It was not for nothing that Rambam himself underscored the contingent relationship love of God has with Torah knowledge.

Every Jew desires this quality of religious life. As such, every teacher ought to make the solemn obligation given to Moshe at Sinai, **אשר תשים לפניהם**, his very own.

² Rashi to Shemot 21:1.

³ Rambam to Devarim 1:12. Note that Ramban's language conveys Moshe's obligation regarding teaching towards depth, "perusham, bi'uram, u'sodam". Admittedly, part of the difficulty of the task, according to Ramban, relates to the relative level of Moshe's target audience, a generation scarred by servitude.

⁴ Rambam Hilkhot Talmud Torah 1:4. Rambam's language was adopted wholesale by Tur and Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 246/