

Parashat Vayikra, Rabbi James Proops

We read in the *parasha* of *Vayikra* the introduction and description of the full range of *Korbanot* (sacrifices) offered in the *Mishkan* and *Beit HaMikdash*. One of the *Korbanot* listed is the *Minchat Bikkurim* which consists of a mixture of flour and oil, together with the first grains. The *Gemmara* in *Menachot* (61a) explains that this is the *Korban Omer* which comes from the first of the harvested barley on the 2nd day of *Pesach*. Rashi points out that the language used in the Torah to introduce us to the *Minchat Bikkurim* is intriguing. The pasuk states, “וְאִם־תִּקְרִיב - If you bring a meal-offering of the first grain”. Rashi notes the strange use of the word “וְאִם” meaning “if” which suggests that the *Minchat Bikkurim* offering is optional. He therefore states that it is to be understood as “כִּי” meaning “when”, because certainly the *Omer* offering is obligatory.

We find a similar comment about the use of this word by Rashi at the end of *Parashat Yitro* and it is there that he cites the *medrash* which states that everytime the Torah uses the word “וְאִם” it refers to an action which is optional, except in three specific cases; i) regarding the building of a *Mizbeach* of stones (*Shemot* 20:22), ii) regarding the lending of money to someone in need (*Devarim* 15:8) and iii) regarding the offering of the *Minchat Bikkurim* in our *parasha* of *Vayikra*. Despite the fact that each of these are obligatory *Mitzvot*, they are nonetheless introduced with the word “וְאִם” (if).

The question remains, why would the Torah present these 3 *Mitzvot* using a word which implies that they are optional?

We find an insightful and beautiful answer from the Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehudah Loew. He explains that when we carry out *Mitzvot*, we generally do so out of a feeling of obligation. We fulfil *Mitzvot* because we recognize that we have a duty to follow the commandments of Hashem. However the goal is not only that we keep all the *Mitzvot* out of a sense of obligation, but there are some instances when Hashem wants us to *want* to do them. Despite the fact that they are obligatory, there are some *Mitzvot* that we should do as a result of our own desire rather than simply out of our *Chiyuv*. He continues that the three *Mitzvot* that are specifically introduced with the word “וְאִם” (if) but are in fact obligatory, represent

types of *Mitzvot* that we are required to train ourselves to *want* to do them out of our own volition.

The building of a *Mizbeach* represents *Avoda* to Hashem. Since we no longer have the option to build or utilize a *Mizbeach* for *Korbanot*, our *Avodah* is achieved through *Tefillah*. The message is that we should have a desire and drive to *want* to *Daven* to Hashem, not simply because we have an obligation to do so. This is alluded to in the *Perek* of *Tehillim* that we refer to as *Ashrei*, since it describes the privilege that we are afforded in that we are able to pray to God. While it is an obligation, it must be approached with the mindset of privilege and desire. This is certainly how we should approach the many *Mitzvot* associated with the *Leil HaSeder* on Pesach, utilizing the opportunity to connect with Hashem on a deeper level.

The lending of money and participating in acts of *Chesed* towards people who have fallen on hard times, should not be done purely out of a sense of obligation from the Torah but the motivation to help others should come from within us. We should feel deep compassion to *want* to use what we have to help others in the best way we can. For those who have not yet done so, we have the great opportunity to help those in need prepare for the coming Pesach. The donation of *Maot Chittim* should certainly not be undertaken merely from a sense of requirement and as a box checking exercise. Rather, we should be moved to give out of a genuine desire to help

Finally, the use of the word “תודה” in our *Parasha* which introduces the *Minchat Bikkurim* represents the important feeling of gratitude. While they might be obligatory, the *Bikkurim* are the offerings of the first fruits, not necessarily a substantial offering, but they represent our deeply held gratitude to Hashem for all that we have. We must train ourselves to recognize that all we have is a gift and therefore we should *want* to give thanks to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, not only because we are obligated to do so. One of the fundamental themes of Pesach is gratitude to Hashem for not only taking us out of *Mitzrayim*, but for the constant and intimate role He plays in each and every one of our lives.

We therefore see that there is a very deep and important lesson from the unusual use of the word “אָז”. When it comes to the *Mitzvot* associated with *Avodah/Tefillah* (prayer), *Chesed* (acts of kindness) and showing *Hakarat HaTov* (gratitude), the Torah wants us to have these concepts and the traits that go with them, built into our nature and mindset. Therefore in these cases, when the Torah says “If you want to”, it is not because they are optional but rather we should be motivated like they are.

Shabbat Shalom