

REEH (DEUTERONOMY 11:26-16:17)

The Tire Kicker

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

How should we live our lives? What does G-d want us to do?

The answer to this question SHOULD BE simple: Open the Torah, read what it says, and do it! After all, it's the Master of the World's instructions. He made the world and He made us. Certainly He knows what's best for us.

He told us to rest on the Sabbath, so we should rest on the Sabbath. He told us not to worship idols, so we shouldn't worship idols.

But what if G-d changes His mind? Do the rules change if G-d decides to set up a different system?

What if G-d decides, "You know, I don't like the way things are working out with the current Mitzvah arrangement. The original Testament I set up isn't working so well. I think I'll write a 'New' one."

What if G-d decided to send a prophet with new instructions? What if he told this prophet to declare himself as G-d's anointed chosen one? What if this prophet told the Jews that they were exempt from the laws of Kosher, Shabbos, circumcision, and all the other things that make us distinct?

What if this prophet told us that all we have to do is believe in him, and he'll take care of everything?

The scenario I've just described should sound familiar. (No, I'm NOT talking about Obama!!! :-))

Hundreds of millions of people believe that G-d took His Chosen People out of Egypt. They believe that He sent Moses to the Pharaoh to demand the release of the slaves, and when the Pharaoh refused, He devastated Egypt with ten plagues. They believe that Moses proved, by demonstrating G-d's miracles, that the G-d of Israel is the Master of the World. Pharaoh finally figured out that you don't mess around with the Master of the World.

They believe that G-d told us at Mount Sinai to have no other gods before Him. They believe that G-d alone, and no angel or man, is deserving of our prayers.

In light of all that, why do hundreds of millions of people worship a man who changed the rules?

There is a theology that teaches that G-d changed His mind. Some people believe that G-d sent a messenger, like Moses, armed with miracles to buttress his credibility, and told that messenger to tell the world that the only way to achieve salvation is through that messenger.

There is a word for such a theology. It's called idolatry.

So why do they do it? Probably because they are impressed by the miracles that he supposedly did. After all, if someone walks on water and heals the sick, that makes for a pretty impressive résumé.

So what do we believe? Do we believe that he wasn't able to do all those things? After all, if a person backs up his claims with miracles, the way Moses did, isn't that a sign that G-d is on his side?

The fact is that the question of whether or not he performed the miracles that their "testament" claims he did is not relevant.

Let us examine the Torah's attitude about those who seek to change the rules:

*If there will stand up in your midst a prophet or a dreamer of a dream, and he will predict a sign or a wonder, **and that sign or wonder that he predicted will come true** – [so far, it sounds like a pretty accurate description of Moses coming to the Pharaoh and warning him about plagues that were on the way. However, here is where the similarity ends] – and he says, "Let us follow the gods of others that you did not know and we shall worship them!" – **Do not listen** to that prophet or to that dreamer... (Deuteronomy, 13:2-4)*

There you have it. The definition of a false prophet is one who tells you to violate the Laws of the Torah.

Now somewhere out in Cyber-Land, someone is going to read this and write in his blog, "There goes that heretic Seplowitz, trashing hundreds of millions of people, and calling their religion idol worship!"

Not quite. Many Torah authorities posit that for a non-Jew to believe that G-d has a "partner" is NOT idolatry. For Jews, however, that is not an option:

Listen Israel, G-d is our G-d, G-d is One. (ibid, 6:4)

Israel is required to declare, and to believe, that *G-d is One*. Pretty clear and straightforward. Now, which part of *G-d is One* means G-d is a trinity or a duality, or that He needs a partner to provide access of the masses to get to Him???

The Torah says very clearly that if someone tells you to violate the Torah, that you should not listen to him. It doesn't matter whether he tells us to worship idols, to eat pork, or to violate Rabbinic Law (which we are Biblically required to follow!) The Torah tells us that the suggestion that a particular Mitzvah may no longer be relevant is a sacrilegious statement that needs to be ignored.

Now all this begs the question – If G-d doesn't want us to listen to a prophet who advocates change, why does He enable that false prophet to perform miracles? Doesn't the fact that he can defy the laws of nature imply Divine endorsement? (For that matter, if He wants us to obey all the Commandments, why doesn't He give us clear-cut explanations for them?)

The Torah answers that question. Let's re-read the verse we saw before:

If there will stand up in your midst a prophet...and that sign or wonder that he predicted will come true – and he says, “Let us follow the gods of others that you did not know and we shall worship them!” – Do not listen to that prophet or to that dreamer...

Why shouldn't we listen to this miracle-maker? The verse continues:

... for G-d is testing you, to know whether you love G-d with all your heart and with all your soul.

It's easy to serve G-d when there are no challenges. I can observe Shabbos and Kashrus when I have every reason to believe that it is the right thing to do. But what happens when my faith is challenged?

Can you take the pressure? When someone comes to you and turns the natural world upside down, and “proves” to you that he speaks for G-d, will you have the strength and faith to ignore his claims? When someone “proves” to you with 21st Century “logic” that modern society knows better than to follow some of these “archaic, anachronistic” teachings, do you stick to your guns, or do you fold?

G-d is allowing the phony to appear to be for real because He is testing your faith.

What is the nature of this test? Doesn't G-d know everything? Doesn't He know my innermost thoughts? Isn't it clear to G-d before the test what the results of that test will be?

G-d tested Abraham (Genesis, 22:1) and commanded him to bring Isaac as a sacrifice. It was a command that seemed to be quite illogical. Abraham passed the test; he showed that he was willing to go through with it. G-d told him, “...now I know that you are G-d-fearing, and that you have not withheld your only son from Me.” (ibid, verse 12)

“...now I know...?!! He didn't know before? Is there anything that G-d doesn't know?!!

Rashi explains that G-d was now able to demonstrate to Abraham's detractors that Abraham was a man of unquestioning faith. G-d knew. He wanted others to know. Sometimes He wants US to know.

Life is full of tests. It is easy to believe in G-d when everything is going well. Sometimes G-d challenges us. Correction: G-d ALWAYS challenges us.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato writes that all of life is a test. Sometimes G-d tests us with poverty to see if we will remain honest and maintain our faith in Him to support us. Sometimes He tests us with wealth to see if we will maintain our humility and to be compassionate and charitable with the largesse that He has bestowed upon us.

King Solomon recognized the risks of such tests:

...give me neither poverty nor wealth...lest I be sated and deny You, saying, "Who is G-d?" and lest I become impoverished and steal... (Proverbs, 30:8-9)

Alas, we are not given a choice as to whether G-d will test our faith. To be sure, history is replete with events that have shaken our ability to believe. We do not understand all of the Commandments. It is beyond our capability to understand the divine logic behind the many holocausts our nation has endured.

I once went to visit a young woman who was sitting Shiva for her husband. She asked, with tears in her eyes, "Why is G-d doing this to me? Is He testing me?"

A young man who was visiting responded, "You know, when a pottery maker wants to show the strength of his pots, he tests them with a hammer. He doesn't bang a pot with a hammer unless he knows the pot can take it!"

I remember thinking at the time that although I agreed with that philosophy, it was really not the right answer to give at that moment to a distraught widow. I (I must add, however, that I didn't know what WOULD be the appropriate answer under those circumstances.)

After he left, the widow's sister commented, "What an arrogant young man!"

The widow responded, "No, not at all. He was very comforting."

Did you ever kick the tires on a car at the used car lot? Salesmen don't kick bad tires; it's bad for business when they burst.

No, we don't ask for challenges to our faith. But when G-d decides to send those events, it should be comforting and inspiring to know that G-d knows we have the ability to get through it.

He just wants to show US what we have the ability to do.

Have a great Shabbos.

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