

Parashat Eikev, 5771, 2011:

*Know Before Whom You Stand*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our people have been blessed with the leadership and vision of many great prophets. One of the most famous of them was Yeshiyahu (Isaiah). His *sefer* was chosen more often than any other as the source for the weekly prophetic reading that is known as the “*haftorah*.” A towering spiritual giant, Yeshiyahu was dedicated to authenticity in prayer and mitzvot observance, and assiduously guided us to be true to our hearts, souls, and Hashem. As such, he rejected inauthentic religious gestures as being antithetical to the nation that we have the potential to be: “And the L-rd said: ‘Because this people has come near; with their mouth and with their lips they honor Me, but their heart they draw far away from Me, and their fear of Me has become a command of people, which has been taught (*mitzvat anashim m’lumdah*).’” (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 29:13) In essence, “*mitzvat anashim m’lumdah*” connotes rote fulfillment of the commandments that obscures their holy origin and desensitizes us to their stature and meaning. It is, in effect, a kind of religious posturing that is devoid of inner spirituality. Under this rubric, the mitzvot are performed in an instrumental, rather than G-d-inspired manner. Thus, while we may seem to be a “people [that] has come near,” it is really only lip service: “with their mouth and with their lips they honor Me, but their heart they draw far away from Me.”

Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (1809-1879), known as “the Malbim,” explained Yeshiyahu’s above-quoted words in the following manner:

There are those who perform the Mitzvot solely because this is what they have become accustomed to do since their youth and they are used to performing them. They perform them without any cognitive gesture (*kavanah*) and without thought – even though they may know that they are commandments from G-d. They, however, do not perform them in any way, shape, or form because Hashem commanded them to do so. Instead, they perform them because this is what they were dictated to do by their teachers and parents. They [the mitzvot] are performed without any understanding and are mere mechanical actions reinforced by past rote behaviors... (*Commentary to Sefer Yeshiyahu 29:13*, translation my own).

Allow me to briefly elucidate Rav Meir Leibush's deeply insightful words: There is a significant group of people who perform the commandments simply because they have been doing so since their youth and they feel comfortable in doing so. These individuals may know that the mitzvot are from G-d, yet, this is not why they perform them. "Instead, they perform them because this is what they were dictated to do by their teachers and parents." Such individuals often perform the commandments without *kavanah* and in a thoughtless manner. As a result, "[the mitzvot] are performed without any understanding and are mere mechanical actions reinforced by past rote behaviors..."

As our *parasha* contains 55 of the *Taryag* (613) Mitzvot, it provides us with an excellent opportunity to pause and reflect upon Yeshiyahu's particular concern regarding *mitzvat anashim m'lumdah*, and the means through which it can be circumvented. On the most basic level, we know that there is a tripartite process that forms the background of each and every commandment: Hashem as the *metzaveh* (the Commander), the *mitzvah* (the commandment), and man as the *metzuveh* (the commanded). Each time we are *mekayam* a mitzvah (fulfill a commandment), we demonstrate our loyalty to our Creator and prove to the world that the Voice emanating from *Har Sinai* (Mt. Sinai) continues to be heard in all of its power and majesty. In addition, we show the entire world that the relationship forged with our forbears in the lonely Sinai desert continues to flourish until our own historical moment. By keeping Hashem's Torah, we joyfully proclaim: "*Hashem Hu HaElokim*" ("Hashem is our G-d and Master").

In order to be on the level of declaring, “*Hashem Hu HaElokim*,” we need to develop a deep and abiding consciousness of G-d’s immanence in our lives. How can we do this? At a minimum, we need to ask ourselves a simple but vital question: “When was the last time we really thought about our relationship with G-d?” Many of us might feel that we thought about Hashem the last time we prayed or did a mitzvah. Yet, we should honestly ask ourselves if we communicated with our Creator when we performed the mitzvah, or if we engaged in a prayerful and existential dialogue with Him when we spoke to Him during *tefilah* (prayer)? As in all meaningful relationships in our lives, communication is of the essence. Experience teaches us that real communication, the kind that enables us to truly reach out to another, is impossible unless we think deeply about what the other means to us, and how we can best express our deepest and most heartfelt feelings. Beyond a doubt, the Torah teaches us that our relationship with Hashem demands nothing less: “And you shall love the L-rd, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means.” (*Sefer Devarim* 6:5)

It appears to me that one of the practical ways we can avoid the possibility of rote and, therefore, superficial prayer and mitzvot-based behaviors, is to pay close attention to a famous expression of *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory), “Know before Whom you stand.” (*Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 28b):

Our Rabbis taught: When R. Eliezer fell ill, his disciples went in to visit him. They said to him: Master, teach us the paths of life so that we may through them win the life of the future world. He said to them: Be solicitous for the honor of your colleagues, and keep your children from being overly focused upon Bible study [Rashi] and set them between the knees of scholars, and when you pray know before Whom you are standing and in this way you will win the future world. (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*, emendations and underlining my own)

Rabbi Eliezer's words, "know before Whom you are standing" were specifically stated in reference to prayer. In my view, however, they are holistic in nature and thereby encompass all aspects of the religious experience. As such, this phrase can serve as a watchword for us in our grand encounter with our Creator and His holy Torah. By focusing upon the meaning of this expression, we can expand our relationship with G-d and hopefully escape the inauthentic actions represented by *mitzvat anashim m'lumdah*.

May the Master of the Universe give us the spiritual strength and wisdom to reach out to Him from the depths of our souls, so that we may truly know before Whom we stand.

*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).