

Parashat Eikev 5772, 2012:

Making Mitzvot Real

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

The phrase “*asher Anochi metzavecha hayom...*” (“that I [Hashem] am commanding you today”) is found three times in our *parasha* (*Sefer Devarim* 7:11, 8:1, and 8:11). In addition, it is found 15 other times in *Devarim* and once in *Sefer Shemot*. Each time it is stated in reference to the Mitzvot. The multiple repetitions of this phrase clearly serve to emphasize the proper approach that we must follow regarding the Mitzvot. We are enjoined to view them each day as if they were given to us anew, as if we were standing once again upon Mount Sinai. As Rashi (1040-1105, *Sefer Devarim* 6:6) explains, based upon the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Devarim* known as the *Sifri*: “The words of the Torah should not be viewed in your eyes like old edicts of a monarch about which no one cares. Instead they should [constantly] be viewed as new royal edicts after whom all run to read.”

Unfortunately, however, our people have not always lived up to the ideal of viewing the Torah as a new and dynamic entity. We have often failed to invest our mitzvot experiences with the most precious of all capital – ourselves. Far too frequently, mitzvot are performed in an almost robotic fashion, or sadly, their significance and purpose are missed in our rush to fulfill them. As such, we often fail to apprehend the meaning of our actions and thereby squander their potential beauty. Regrettably, we are not alone in our

failures. Long ago, in the Eighth Century BCE, the prophet Isaiah (29:13) proclaimed our errors in this regard: “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*).’ ”

Mechanical repetition of the commandments is clearly something that has been a pitfall for our people since the most ancient of times. Unfortunately, this approach can ultimately lead people to repudiate the very acts they have performed. Quite simply, when we do not endow Hashem’s commandments with meaning and understanding, they can be perceived as having no inherent value. Moreover, they can even be misperceived, *chas v’shalom* (G-d forbid), as no longer being the dictates of the Almighty. Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (1809-1879), known as the Malbim, formulated these thoughts 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. Therefore, since they have become meaningless ritualistic gestures in their eyes, such people will rebel and totally deny that Hashem commanded man to perform mitzvot and *chukim* [commandments whose rationale are currently unknown]. In their rebellion, they believe that man is capable of determining the intention behind the mitzvot and their true reasons [which leads to further rebellion and denial of Hashem]. (Commentary to Isaiah 29:13, translation and emphasis my own).

What can be done to stem the tide of indifference to the depth and beauty of the mitzvot, and “make them real?” At first blush, one might think that merely thinking about the day-by-day “newness” of the commandments would be sufficient. Rav Eliyahu Dessler *zatzal*

(1892-1953), the great modern Mussar (Ethical Movement) master, however, rejected this approach as being necessary but insufficient. He opined instead, that only intense and heartfelt Torah study will bring one to a proper appreciation and understanding of the mitzvot. Rav Dessler asserts that Torah study, alone, provides protection from mere *mitzvat anashim m'lumdah* (rote *mitzvah* performance), and guarantees that the mitzvot will remain new and vital in our eyes:

How is it possible to negate the problem of performing Torah commandments by rote? It is not enough to merely concentrate on the idea that we must consider every mitzvah as if it is new. This alone will surely not work. Rather, only deep study and understanding will nullify the power of rote. Anything we learn and analyze profoundly will always bring forth new insights. We must find new insights in every mitzvah; then it will be like new. (Paraphrased from *Michtav M'Eliyahu* Volume 4, p. 339).

May Hashem help us, our children, and our children's children throughout all generations to follow Rav Dessler's approach and thereby find new and beautiful insights in His Torah and His holy commandments. If we can succeed in this task, we will truly know that the Voice emanating from Mount Sinai has never ceased, and continues to speak to us until our own historical moment. May we be *zocheh* (merit) to achieve this level of understanding, knowledge, and appreciation of the phrase "*asher Anochi Metzavecha hayom...*" *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

*** I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:
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