



SHAVUOS – TO THE SOURCE

SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. ON THE JEWS ACCEPTING TORAH

In contrast to other religious traditions the Jewish religion is based upon reasoned belief, not faith. Consider the following quote from the Torah:

SOURCE 1: Torah - Deuteronomy (4:39) Moshe Commenting on Mt. Sinai Experience

Know this day and lay it on your heart that the Lord, He is G-d in the heavens above and the earth below. There is no other. (Devarim 4:39)

יְדַעַתָּה הַיּוֹם וְהִשְׁבַּתְתָּ אֶל־לִבְבְּךָ כִּי יְהוָה
הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל
וְעַל־הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת אֵין עוֹד:

Consider the comment on this verse of the Torah by Rabbi Iben Padua, an early and important Rabbinic Authority:

SOURCE 2: Duties of the Heart. Rabbi Iben Padua p. 31

This admonition refers to everything in which rational methods of investigation can be used. Are you to accept them (the duties of the heart) on the authority of those learned in Torah and tradition and exclusively rely on their traditions? On the contrary. Torah expressly bids you to reflect and exercise your intellect on such themes. After you have attained knowledge of them by the method of tradition which covers all the precepts of law, **you should investigate them with your reason, understanding and judgment until the truth becomes clear to you and fake ideas are dispelled, as it is written in Deut. 4:39 (above)**

Similarly, Maimonides describes the first mitzvah in the Torah as **“Knowing that there is a G-d”**, not hoping or wishing there was a G-d. Although there is a place for belief, there is also a heavy emphasis on reason and knowledge. In this light consider the following source:

SOURCE 3: Torah: Exodus 24:7 Giving of the Torah

(Moshe) took the Book of the Covenant and read it aloud to the people. They replied, **“we will do and then we will understand.**

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם
וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה
וְנִשְׁמָע:

According to what we have learned above, shouldn't the Jews have said, **“We will understand and then we will do”**? Knowledge should certainly come before action. Take a look at the following Medrash which fills us in on the back story:

SOURCE 4: *Sifri on Dueteronomy (ch. 33) Do You Want to Accept the Torah?*

When G-d revealed Himself to offer the Torah, to the Jewish people, He revealed Himself not only to Israel, but to all the nations. First he went to the children of Esav and said to them, **“Do you want to accept the Torah?” They asked, “What’s in it?”** G-d replied, “You shall not murder.” They answered back, “Master of the Universe, the essential nature of our father Esav was that of a murderer! We cannot accept the Torah!” So, G-d then went to the children of Ishmael and asked them if they wanted to accept the Torah. They asked, “What’s written in it?” G-d replied, “You shall not steal.” They answered, “Master of the Universe, the essential nature of our father Ishmael was that of a robber! We cannot accept the Torah!” So, G-d then went to the children of Ammon . . . and they asked “What’s written in it?” G-d said, “you shall not commit adultery.” They answered, “Master of the Universe, our father was conceived from an incestuous relationship! We cannot accept the Torah!

Q: Isn’t the question “What’s in it?” the very question that should be asked in order to base one’s commitment on reason and not blind faith? Is there another way to look at it?

Q: It’s interesting that G-d gives a different answer to the question, “what’s in it” to every nation. Do you see a common denominator in all of G-d’s answers, and what do you think He is driving at?

Q: Lastly, when do you suppose each nation lost the right to receive the Torah: When they said, “we don’t want it” or earlier?

In fact, they rejected the Torah when they said, “what’s in it?” It’s not a crime to enter into things for one’s self interest, but rejecting a gift from G-d reveals that you have no idea who G-d is. If he’s offering you a gift, no matter what’s in it, it must be for your good. The answers highlights this faulty understanding of the nature of Torah and more importantly the nature of G-d.

That is why the Jews famously said “na’aseh v’nishma”, we will do, then understand and merited to receive the Torah. It was the only logical thing to do.

In fact, this is one of the very first and fundamental lessons that we learn in the Torah itself:

SOURCE 5: *Book of Genesis (Breishis 12:1) G-d’s First Command to Abraham*

Hashem said to Abraham, Go -Yourself- from your land, from your relatives and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ־לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ
וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
אֲרָאָה:

G-d is telling Abraham to leave his home and set out for the Promised Land.

Q: Why does He say the extra word "yourself" when telling him to leave? Certainly, that is implied by using the imperative go!

The biblical commentator Rashi relates to us that the seemingly superfluous word "yourself" contains a very important message; This very first command and all others to follow are only "for your good and for your benefit".

This is a revolutionary breakthrough in religious thinking and the very paradigm of mitzvos. If Hashem gives us a commandment, don't ask "why me?", but rather what's in it for me!

Now, the gateway to all the good that G-d has in store for us is the Torah. Consider the following interesting sources as we turn to this topic.

2. ON LEARNING TORAH

SOURCE 6: *Talmud Rosh Hoshana 28a and Rashi*

The commandments were not given to the Jewish people to be a **source of pleasure** for them; rather, the commandments were given to be a yoke upon their necks. Rosh Hashana 28a

The commandments were not given for **"physical pleasure"**. Rashi

Q: Rashi above told us that mitzvos were given for our good and for our benefit. Why does the Talmud contradict this idea saying that commandments were not to be a source of pleasure?

Rashi himself commenting on the Talmud above seems to provide a direction for an answer. When the Talmud says mitzvos weren't given as a source of **"pleasure"**, Rashi understands that to mean **"physical pleasure"**.

With Rashi's nuanced approach, the Talmud could be understood as follows: The mitzvos weren't **"merely" given for physical pleasure, but also for much deeper spiritual pleasures as well.**

Perhaps we can understand this a bit more deeply by thinking about why the Talmud refers to the Torah as a "yoke"?

Q: What is the purpose of a yoke and how can we view it in a positive light?

A yoke actually channels the energy and power of the animal effectively to achieving its goal. So, too, the Torah channels our physical, emotional and physical capacities towards spiritual goals, elevating our pleasure (both physical and spiritual) and benefit in life.

With this as an introduction perhaps we can understand the next difficult source:

SOURCE 7: *Pirke Avos 6:2 On Learning Torah*

No one is considered free except one who immerses himself in Torah study.

Q: This statement is making a categorical claim, that there is no other way to be free outside of Torah study. Wow! Why do you think learning Torah is the only real gateway to freedom?

Torah is the “user’s manual” for a soul travelling through the world in a physical body; Being immersed in Torah allows one to consistently be spiritual, while being fully occupied with the physical world. Without it, our physical side naturally and inexorably exerts dominance, and diminishes our true self – the soul. With it the physical drives, needs and wants are “channeled” into the aspirations of the soul.

3. ON BEING COMMANDED

SOURCE 8: *Talmud Kiddushin 31a Voluntary vs. Obligatory Observance*

Greater is the one who is commanded and fulfills (the commandments) than the one who is not commanded and fulfills them.

Q: If Torah is so great, why do we need to be commanded to learn it and to do the mitzvos? And why is it greater to do it because you are commanded than because you want to?

When you are commanded, you are responsible and you have a choice whether you want to shirk it or own it. Giving us commandments allows us to turn ourselves into owners rather than just the recipients of G-d’s good graces. In so doing we earn a measure of the independence that G-d Himself possesses.

4. ON PREPARATION FOR TORAH

Torah is pretty amazing and our mystical tradition speaks about being able to change nature itself through the power of one’s Torah learning. Since it is so intense and powerful there is one thing we need to be mindful of.

Q: What do you think that is? See the following source:

SOURCE 9: *Medrash Raba, Shmini 13:2/ Sota 5a*

The Holy One Blessed Be He measured all the mountains and did not find a mountain to give the Torah on except Mount Sinai.

G-d left behind all the tall mountains and let his presence dwell on Mount Sinai which wasn't tall at all.

Q: Why was Mount Sinai the only suitable mountain for the receiving of the Torah?

Spirituality and Torah learning depends upon humility, to make room for G-d's knowledge and guidance, at the same time that we grow in greatness and stature. Humility is the only trait that leaves room for others and allows for growth. This is indeed the secret to the greatness of our Torah and the Jewish People.

5. ON EQUALITY

SOURCE 10: *Maimonides Laws of Learning Torah, 3:1:*

With three crowns was Israel crowned - with the crown of Torah, with the crown of priesthood and with the crown of kingship. The crown of priesthood was bestowed upon Aaron ... the crown of kingship was conferred upon David ... but the crown of the Torah rests and stands for all of Israel ... all who want it, come and take.

We are all born with different advantages and liabilities, yet in the world of Torah all is available to whomever understand the opportunity and puts in the hard work!