



Shavuos 5778

MITZVOS

The Divine Decrees of the King

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

OUR SAGES TEACH A FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT: the beginning of a thing includes within it everything that will come afterwards, while the end of a thing serves to reinforce the beginning. In other words, the beginning of something serves as a preface, like a general discourse on a matter, with all of the details to follow thereafter, and the end of that thing serves to emphasize and support what was contained in the beginning. With this idea in mind, let's take a closer look at the first and last mitzvot in the Torah and see what we can learn from them and what this, in turn,

can teach us about every other *mitzvah* that the Torah contains.

THE FIRST MITZVAH OF THE TORAH

The first *mitzvah* that Hashem gave to the nation of Israel, even before He took us out from Egypt, was *Kiddush HaChodesh*, the sanctification of the (lunar) month – a fundamental *mitzvah* because it determines when each and every *chag* (festival) falls out, ie. *Pesach*, *Shavuos*, and *Sukkos*, as well as *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.¹ Our Sages teach that Hashem showed

Moshe an image of what the new moon must look like and said, “When it appears like this, sanctify it.” When it appears like this, sanctify it.”² This *mitzvah* is not one with which we are very familiar because, more than 1 600 years ago, Hillel HaNasi set in place the fixed 19-year Hebrew calendar as we know it, pre-determining and establishing the length of the months, along with which ones would have a one-day *Rosh Chodesh* (beginning of the month) and which would have a two-day *Rosh Chodesh*, and in which years we must insert a “leap month” (an extra Adar³, the

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last month of the year), necessary due to there being a difference of roughly 11 days between the length of solar and lunar years (approximately 365,25 days vs 354 days) and the Torah's requirement that *Pesach* always fall out in the spring (and *Sukkos* at harvest time).

The *mitzvah* of sanctifying the lunar month requires that men who have seen the appearance of the new moon travel to Jerusalem and come before the greatest Sages of Israel (the *Beis Din HaGadol*, aka the *Sanhedrin*) and testify regarding what they saw in the sky. Once the testimony of at least two of these witnesses was accepted by our Sages, the new month (*Rosh Chodesh*) was declared and messengers were dispatched to inform the Jewish people throughout the land of Israel and even beyond. Historically, this was typically one of the mitzvos that our enemies would forbid (see, for example, the story of *Chanukah*), as the reckoning of the start of the months determines also when the *chagim* fall out – here too, we see this principle that the beginning includes within it what comes afterwards.

THE LENGTH OF A LUNAR MONTH AND ITS CYCLES ARE KNOWN

So, we were commanded to sanctify each new month based upon its having been seen and then testified to by witnesses – and this is actually rather remarkable. Why? Because *Hashem* taught Moshe the precise length of a lunar month: from the appearance of one moon (the start of one lunar cycle) to the appearance of the next moon (the start of the next lunar cycle) there are precisely 29 days, 12 hours, and 793 *chalakim* (parts) – one *chelek* (part) is one 1080th of an hour, or 3,33 seconds – making 793 *chalakim* roughly equal to 44 minutes and 3 seconds.⁴ Moreover, because the moon follows a fixed, natural

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cycle, there are clear calculations for knowing where the moon will be on any given day and at any given time, including at the time of the new lunar cycle. And, our Sages were experts in astronomy; they would actually show images of the moon to the witnesses who came to testify because our Sages knew precisely how the new moon would appear in the sky and whether or not it was possible to see the new moon on any given day based upon their very precise calculations.

WHY DO WE NEED WITNESSES?

So, the obvious question we can ask is why did we wait for witnesses to come forward and testify about having seen the appearance of the new moon when it was already well known to our Sages through their calculations what those witnesses would be testifying to having seen? And, bear in mind, these witnesses were even permitted, for certain months of the calendar, to desecrate *Shabbos* in order to insure that they would arrive in Jerusalem in a timely manner and be able to give testimony – and even many witnesses were permitted to do so, in the event that the examining authority found any of them to be lacking or unfit for any reason, in order that at least two of them would be deemed acceptable from all of those who came to Jerusalem to testify. In truth, however, since our Sages knew clearly and with absolute precision where the moon was at any given moment and when each new moon would be seen, having witnesses come and testify about the birth of the new moon was no

different from waiting for witnesses to come and testify regarding their having seen the sun in the sky at high noon! There was, however, one very crucial difference.

BECAUSE HASHEM SAID SO, THAT'S WHY

What's the difference? It's very simple: testifying about seeing the appearance of the new moon in the sky each month is a commandment from *Hashem*; testifying about seeing the sun in the sky each day is not.

We learn from this *mitzvah* that the primary purpose of mitzvos in general is not some sort of benefit from what we do, rather it is this itself: the doing of the *mitzvah* – simply doing the will of *Hashem*, or, as our Sages express it⁵, “Why do we blow [the shofar] on *Rosh Hashanah*? Why do we blow [the shofar]?! Because *Hashem* said to blow it!!”

We are taught a tremendous lesson here that is often lost or obscured by other mitzvos. For example, the *mitzvah* of *parah adumah*, which involves sprinkling the ashes prepared from a completely red heifer upon someone who is impure: the person who the ashes from the red heifer are sprinkled upon becomes pure, while the person who does the sprinkling becomes impure. Because this *mitzvah* is understood to be a *chok* (a *mitzvah* whose reason is beyond our comprehension), we naturally assume that there is a benefit and a reason for why we do such a thing, but that that benefit and reason are simply hidden from us, beyond our limited understanding. But, when it comes to a *mitzvah* like the sanctification of the months, it is plain and obvious to everyone that there is no benefit whatsoever in what the witnesses come to testify to – it is only done because it is the commandment of *Hashem* to do so.

“WHY DO WE BLOW THE SHOFAR ON ROSH HASHANAH? WHY DO WE BLOW THE SHOFAR?!? BECAUSE HASHEM SAID TO BLOW IT!!”



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THE LAST MITZVAH OF THE TORAH

The last mitzvah⁶ of the Torah, known as *Hakhel*, which literally means “assembly”, is also a mitzvah with which we are not well versed because it does not apply today. It entails gathering the entire nation of Israel – men, women, and even children – at the *Beis HaMikdash* (Temple) every seventh year, in the year following the shemittah year (the year in which the land is left fallow), on the second day of *Sukkos*, to hear the King read from the Torah. Bringing children to hear the Torah being read was such an essential part of this mitzvah that if the second day of *Sukkos* fell on *Shabbos*, the mitzvah would be pushed off until the following day, as carrying small children to the *Beis HaMikdash* was prohibited on *Shabbos*⁷.

And, so too, as with the first mitzvah of the Torah, we see a similar idea with the last mitzvah of the Torah. The mitzvah of *Hakhel* requires that children be brought to the *Beis HaMikdash*, including even new-born babies! Why is it so important that young children – especially babies, who can’t possibly understand what is being said by the King – must come to hear the Torah being read by him? Our Sages also express their surprise at this unusual requirement⁸, “If men come to study, (and) women come to listen⁹, then why do small children come? In order to give reward to those who bring them!” In other words, this is the purpose of the mitzvah, just as we saw with the first mitzvah in the Torah: simply to do the mitzvah, regardless of how much sense it makes to us or whether we can even understand it or see a benefit in it – and to receive reward for doing it.

“IN OUR DESIRE TO BRING THOSE WHO ARE FAR AWAY CLOSER TO HASHEM, WE HAVE TO BE EXTREMELY CAREFUL FROM DOING SO BY SUPPLYING ‘REASONS’ FOR MITZVOS, RATHER THAN EXPRESSING MITZVOS FOR WHAT THEY TRULY ARE: DIVINE DECREES.”

“WE DO MITZVOS BECAUSE THEY ARE THE WILL OF HASHEM, BECAUSE THE KING COMMANDED US TO DO THEM – THAT, AND THAT ALONE.”

DIVINE DECREES BEYOND OUR LIMITED UNDERSTANDING

From these two mitzvos – the mitzvos of *Kiddush HaChodesh* (sanctifying the month) and *Hakhel* (assembling the people to hear the Torah being read by the King) – we can learn a principle that applies to all of the other mitzvos in the Torah: we do mitzvos because they are the will of *Hashem*, because the King commanded us to do them – that, and that alone.

As Rabbi Mordechai Gifter explains¹⁰, a man is required to ask the *t’am* (reason or flavour) of the mitzvos of *Hashem* in order that he will draw the mitzvos close to his understanding and comprehension – but, all of this is part of Torah study alone. When it comes to actually fulfilling a mitzvah, to doing it, a man has to know and to understand that every mitzvah is a *chok* (a mitzvah whose reason is beyond our comprehension) and a *gezeira* (a decree) from *Hashem*. By doing a mitzvah, a man fulfils the commandment of the King of the universe – that is the sole *kavana* (intention) that he must have in mind, and not any of the reasons behind the mitzvah as his limited mind may understand them.

A person who intentionally fulfils a mitzvah for the reasons that he perceives or understands to be behind that commandment, reduces and diminishes that mitzvah to those reasons alone, to his very limited understanding of things, and one who does so enslaves the mitzvah to his own knowledge and opinion – no longer serving the King, but, instead, his own intellect. This is not what it means to accept the yoke of mitzvos upon oneself, because mitzvos were not giv-

en to us for our benefit or utility, but, as Rashi explains, “they were given as a yoke”¹¹. A person who performs mitzvos because of his understanding of them, rather than because he understands that he is doing the will of the King, will wind up trampling upon every mitzvah in the Torah and, in the end, becoming a *kofer b’ikur* (someone who denies the existence of *Hashem*).

Rabbi Gifter strenuously cautions that in our desire to engage in *kiruv rechokim* (lit: bringing close those who are far away, ie. attracting those who are not religious to become more Torah-observant), we have to be extremely careful from doing so by supplying “reasons” for mitzvos, rather than expressing mitzvos for what they truly are: Divine decrees. If we are not exceptionally vigilant in this matter, we will, *chas v’shalom* (G-d forbid), wind up drawing people close to *Hashem*, only, ultimately, to cause those same people to become distant from Him again in the end, even to the point of denying His very existence. ■

Based on Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus, ztz”l (Tiferes Shimshon al HaTorah – Parshas Bo) and Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, ztz”l (Pirkei Torah on Vayikra, Bamidbar, Devarim – Parshas Bechukosai)

¹See Shemos 12:2

²Rosh Hashanah 20a

³There are seven additional months of Adar added in every 19 year cycle.

⁴See Rosh Hashanah 25a

⁵Rosh Hashanah 16a

⁶According to the Rambam’s enumeration of the *Taryag* (613) mitzvos, the last mitzvah is for every man to write a *sefer Torah*.

⁷See Megillah 5a where Rashi notes that the Yerushalmi offers another explanation – that the platform from which the King would read the Torah could not be erected and left to stand in the Temple courtyard over Yom Tov.

⁸Chagigah 3a

⁹Tosafos notes that the Yerushalmi says that this is not like Ben Azai who said that a man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah

¹⁰I am indebted to my brother-in-law, Rabbi Aaron Goldfein, and to Rabbi Ben Isaacson for showing me this vort from Rav Gifter.

¹¹Rosh Hashanah 28a