

The Psychology of Being Commanded

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The Talmud relates that Rabbi Hanina said that one who is commanded to perform *mitsvot* (commandments) receives a greater reward for doing a *mitsvah* than one who is not commanded to keep the Torah receives for doing the same good deed, even if it is out of the goodness of his heart. Tosafot and the Ritva interpret Rabbi Hanina's principle to mean that human nature resists obeying external demands. Therefore the person who exerts greater effort to overcome his or her evil inclination deserves greater merit. Moreover, although it might sound paradoxical, choosing to obey the command of G-d is the only arena in which we truly can express free will.

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Introduction

The Talmud *Kiddushin* 31a relates a story of the great reward for honoring one's parents. The story is about an idol worshipper in Ashkelon. When sages came to his home seeking precious gems for the high priest's breastplate, because the gems were underneath his sleeping father's head he refused to sell them and receive a huge profit. In reward for honoring his father, G-d brought it about that the next year a red heifer was born in the pagan's herd. When the sages came to purchase the red heifer, although the pagan knew he could get a lot more, he asked only for the same sum that he lost due to honoring his father. Rabbi Hanina exclaimed, "If this is the reward given to one who is not commanded, then

how much more so is one who is commanded and does...He who is commanded and does is greater than he who is not commanded and does."

Rabbi Hanina articulates his principle in reaction to the great reward bequeathed by Heaven to one who performed a righteous act without being commanded to do so. The story does not, however, provide a validation or proof of the veracity of his principle.

Indeed, following this story the Talmud goes on to demonstrate that Rabbi Hanina's principle is not necessarily intuitive by telling the story of Rabbi Yosef. Rabbi Yosef was blind, and, according to Rabbi Yehudah, a blind person is exempt from the *mitsvot* (commandments). Rabbi Yosef was very happy over this exemption. He saw his merit as all the greater because he was performing the mitsvot without being commanded to do so. However, when Rabbi Yosef learned of Rabbi Hanina's principle that the one commanded has greater merit, he was greatly saddened.

Rabbi Hanina's principle might seem counter-intuitive to us today since we generally place greater merit on personal initiative, on the free exercise of will without compulsion. Nevertheless, Rabbi Hanina's principle is brought elsewhere in the Talmud as a truism without dissent:

G-d exempted the descendants of Noah, i.e., non-Jews, from even the seven commandments they originally accepted since they later rejected them. But should they benefit from their rejection [i.e., be free of culpability simply through rejecting obligation]? If so, this is like a sinner profiting from his sin! Mar berei deRabana said, "[Certainly they are not free of culpability, but rather the statement only means that]¹ even if they were to fulfill these commandments (they now rejected) they would not receive reward." Would they not? But it has been taught: R. Meir used to say, "From where can we learn that even when a gentile occupies himself with the study of Torah he equals [in status] the High Priest? It states, 'which if a man do he shall live by them' (Lev. 18:5)—it does not say 'Priest, Levi, Israel' but rather 'a man,' which shows that even if a gentile occupies himself with the study of Torah he equals [in status] the High Priest." [Mar berei deRabana] said, "I meant [in saying that they would receive no reward] that they will receive reward not like those having been commanded, but like those not having been commanded. For R. Hanina said, 'He who is commanded and does is greater than he who is not commanded and does'" (Talmud *Bava Kamma* 38a).²

The rabbis of the Talmud here do not seek to prove the veracity of this principle; rather, they employ it axiomatically in order to solve a particular

quandary: Why is an act done under compulsion held unequivocally to be of greater value than one done free of coercion?

Conquering the Self

The Tosafot commentators (*Avodah Zarah* 3a, s.v. *gadol*) reason that the one commanded always has to overcome his *yetser ha'ra*, his natural tendency to resist external demands;³ for this psychological effort expended, the act is commensurately more meritorious.⁴ Similarly the Ritva (on *Kiddushin* 31a, s.v. *d'amar*) notes the greater psychological effort involved when one is commanded and consequently invokes the famous adage, *l'fum tsaara agra* (according to the effort is the reward). According to the Ritva:

Our rabbis, of blessed memory, explicated the reason for [Rabbi Hanina's dictum] in that the Satan accuses the individual who is commanded, whereas the Satan does not so accuse the one not commanded; thus "l'fum tsaara agra"—according to the effort is the reward. And so explained Rabeinu HaGadol, that the commandments were not given for the benefit of G-d, but rather for our benefit; and he who is commanded has so fulfilled the decree of the king, and therefore his reward is greater than he who [by not being commanded] did not fulfill the decree of the king; though even he is deserving of reward, for he acted out of the goodness of his heart and benevolence and so brought himself to perform the command of G-d...

The Ritva's first point is that the greatness of the one commanded is due to the effort involved in overcoming the Satan, i.e., one's negative psychological tendencies. He then makes another point by way of analogy to servants of the king. He explains that anyone who fulfills the decree of the king is greater than one who acts simply out of "the goodness of his heart." The emphasis here is not on the act itself, for that is done by both, but rather on the fulfillment of the decree of the king. It is the obedience itself that is of inestimable value.

This point is alluded to by nineteenth-century philosopher M. Lazarus in *The Ethics of Judaism*,⁵ where he writes:

The idea underlying [Rabbi Hanina's] principle is to contrast between the Autonomy of the Will and the Law of G-d as the Authority of Man. The moral act finds its sure basis only when it is conceived as prompted by the command of G-d; when man acts in obedience thereto the merit is greater.

When a person is confronted with a choice of action, a great struggle

rages within him/her whether to choose according to his/her reason or according to an external dictate. This is the struggle between the autonomy of the will and the law of G-d. Lazarus explains that for a moral act to be carried out unwaveringly, it must be done with the understanding that the act is a command from G-d. Only thus will man's actions be free of personal agenda, subjective rationale, and egocentric rationalizations by which man justifies his actions though they may conflict with a commandment.

The Talmud *Yoma* 67b explains that the commandments of the Torah can be divided into two general categories: 1. *mishpatim*, "commandments that should have been written down even if they had not been transcribed in the Torah" due to their harmony with natural morality, and 2. *hukkim*, "commandments with which the yetser ha'ra and the heathen find fault" due to their falling outside the purview of human reason. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that ultimately all the commandments, even those that we see as having a rational basis, must be viewed as *hukkim*, performed solely because they were commanded by G-d.⁶ He writes:

A *mishpat*, even when it is based on reason, must be accepted as a *hok*; otherwise, even rational social and moral laws may be corrupted or distorted, as is often demonstrated by our modern secularized society.⁷ The *hok* differs from the *mishpat* only in the degree of its intelligibility; both, however, need the Divine imperative to sustain their religious fulfillment.⁸

And so, to reiterate Lazarus, each command finds its "sure basis," i.e., is more assured of being carried out, "when it is conceived as prompted by the command of G-d." This is due to the fact that the individual will have put aside his own personal agenda, his own self-interests, or in the words of the sages, his own yetser ha'ra. Indeed, it is precisely this setting aside of personal interest that engenders merit, for the great "merit" inherent in obedience to the will of G-d is the overcoming of the autonomous will in deference to the will of G-d.

Transcendence

This great merit is not some ethereal reward to be enjoyed in another plane of existence, but rather very tangibly benefits man "here and now," as can be understood from the words of the Ritva: "...the commandments

were not given for the benefit of G-d but rather for our benefit.”

What makes the act of obedience—regardless of the particular act itself—of great benefit can be more profoundly understood by what Victor Frankl writes on self-transcendence:

...man is responsible and must actualize the potential meaning of his life...The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or a person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is only possible as a side effect of self-transcendence.⁹

Victor Frankl teaches that if one wants to actualize the self, he is doomed to failure. The reason is that by looking inward, looking at oneself, at one's personal agenda, one thereby limits himself to the potential that he sees “in the mirror,” so to speak. In contrast, if one looks outward, at a cause external to himself, giving himself over to it, his being will correspondingly rise to the demands of that cause and he will thus transcend his own self-perceptions, including his own self-perceived limitations. As a consequence of his self-transcendence he will achieve self-actualization—quite probably one that he could not have imagined. Indeed, he will have achieved “greatness.”

The Meiri (Mishnah *Avot* 1:2) explains that human perfection is the purpose of creation. He qualifies this, however, by noting that really one cannot say that anything but performing the will of the Creator is “the purpose of Creation.” If one acts in order to fulfill that will, he will in so doing bring himself to actualize the greatness of his potential.

Greatness in Obedience

This then is the greatness of acting in obedience to the command of the Creator. When one acts in accordance with one's personal agenda or, as the Ritva stated, “out of the goodness of one's heart,” one is acting out of self-actualization, and is thus necessarily limited. However, when one acts out of obedience to the king, one transcends oneself and is only limited by the cause, in this case, the very will of the king—in our case, the Creator.

This idea, that greatness is achieved when one overcomes one's self-

centered desires in favor of obedience, is alluded to in the words of the Ritva. He explains that the greatness referred to by Rabbi Hanina is in overcoming “the Satan,” which the Ritva then links to the greatness of fulfilling the decree of the King. That is, the greatest psychological barrier one must overcome in fulfilling a command is to do it simply because it is commanded. The tendency of human nature, “the Satan,” our yetser ha’ra, is to rationalize the command to fit one’s worldview, and if that is impossible, to reject the command outright.¹⁰

Thus the yetser ha’ra referred to here is not some petty, selfish tendency, but rather the ultimate psychological drive with which a human being contends. It is precisely this drive that Adam and Eve encountered when they confronted the choice between following G-d’s irrational command, “from the tree of knowledge of good and evil do not eat” (Genesis 2:17) versus following their own rationale, “for the tree is good to eat, and desirable to the eyes” (Genesis 3:6).¹¹ And it is precisely this drive that Abraham demonstrated¹² could be overcome when he chose to put his son on the altar despite his rationale.¹³ It is the drive, which ever counsels a rational person to refer solely to his or her own sense to determine action, that one must ultimately overcome in order to make the commitment of faith necessary to do what G-d commands—if one is to transcend oneself.¹⁴

Committed Is Commanded

Rabbi David Sperber (1875-1962) wrote on this subject in his responsa *Afarkashta D’anya* (Part II, *Yoreh Deah* 109), wherein he analyzes the implications of Talmud *Bava Kamma* 38a cited earlier that discusses the reward Gentiles receive for performing the seven Noahide commandments. He quotes Maimonides’ explanation in *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Kings* 8, that if a Gentile performs a Noahide commandment due to its being a command of G-d, and not due to his own rationale, then and only then, is he considered a righteous Gentile and has a place in the world to come. The reason, explains Rabbi Sperber, is because the altruistic acceptance of the commandment moves the individual from the category of ‘not commanded’ to that of ‘commanded.’¹⁵ He writes:

One who is exempt from an act, yet accepts upon himself to do it because

it is a command of G-d in His Torah, even if the individual himself is not so commanded, if he undertakes the obligation, not based on his rationale but because it is a commandment of the Torah...., he too is then included in the rubric of "one commanded and does". ... And "one not commanded and does" is specifically an individual that does not accept upon himself the act based on its being a commandment of the Torah.

Rabbi Sperber goes on to explain that the question as to whether or not one falls into the category of 'commanded' revolves around, as Tosafot stated, the overcoming of the yetser ha'ra, i.e., the innate tendency to reject, not only that which is commanded, but more profoundly, that which does not conform to one's rationale. If one acts in order to fulfill the will of the Creator because it is such, he is then subject to the psychological battle inherent in such a decision—for he thus pits the autonomy of the will against the Law of G-d. This is precisely the same battle one wages when 'commanded,' and thus, by definition, the person who selflessly chooses to do the will of G-d falls into the category of 'commanded.'

Similarly, R. Moshe Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah*, part I:6) wrote:

Rabbi Hanina's principle does not apply to all commands, since for those decrees of the Torah that are given without reason there is no distinction [between one commanded and one not commanded] as it is clear that they are performed only because they are the command of G-d and this itself is a great thing. For regarding the need to do the will of G-d, indeed everyone is considered "commanded," and it makes no difference what specific act is the will of G-d, it is considered that the individual's intent is to fulfill the will of G-d who commands. However, an act for which there is a rational reason, it is not clear if the act is being done to fulfill the will of G-d, since it is possible that one does it for its rationale.

The point, again, is that performing the "will of G-d"—because it is such—places one under the rubric of "commanded" since one's intent is the same as when altruistically fulfilling an explicit "command" of G-d. Thus Rabbi Hanina's dictum, "greater is the one commanded and acts than the one not commanded and acts," might be more plainly translated as: Greater is the one who acts out of obedience to a commandment, than the one who acts out of personal motivations.¹⁶

Freedom through Obedience

We have now resolved our original quandary where we intuitively maintained that greatness lies in personal initiative without compulsion.

Clearly, human greatness lies in the exercise of free will, and a person who acts out of free will is greater than one compelled. Rabbi Hanina is not contrasting the compelled person to a free individual, however. Rabbi Hanina contrasts the free individual who acts out of free will based on personal motivation, out of the goodness of his heart, with the free individual who acts selflessly out of recognition of, and consequently obedience to, G-d's authority.

It is in this act of choosing obedience to G-d, and only in this act, that one truly exercises free will, as noted elsewhere in the Talmud by Rabbi Hanina himself: "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the awe (*yirah*) of Heaven" (*Brakhot* 33b).¹⁷ Thus Rabbi Hanina's two seemingly disparate dictums can be seen as corollaries, the one coming to inform the other. That is, the greatness of the individual who acts out of obedience to the will of G-d is due to his applying his free will in the battle between the autonomy of the will and the will of G-d—the ultimate struggle of the yetser ha'ra—which is the only arena in which man truly can express free will.

Indeed, Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz explains that it is only through the voluntary acceptance of a will outside his own that man expresses his freedom:

Willing acceptance of a way of life which does not derive from human nature implies emancipation of man from the bondage of raw nature... Conversely, man activated by his "own" nature is, in effect, nothing but a robot activated by the forces of nature, just like the cattle grazing in the pasture, which are also "free from Torah and Mitzvoth"; that is, from any law externally imposed.¹⁸

He explains that even when one performs mitzvot, but does so based on personal rationale, one does not express his freedom, but simply his subservience to his own needs and desires. It is only when one chooses obedience to the Divine Will that one breaks the bonds of his very nature and thus demonstrates his freedom.¹⁹

Conclusion

This then is the "greatness" of "the one commanded." Only through his acting out of obedience to Divine Will does he express his unique free

will nature. Furthermore, one who exercises his free will in deference to Divine Will, though not explicitly commanded, is considered on the same level as one commanded, because his motivation is altruistic.

In conclusion, the words of Hillel (Mishnah *Avot* 1:14) most pithily convey the themes presented here:

If I do not act for myself, who will? If I act only for myself, what am I?²⁰ If not now, when?

First and foremost, one must tap into his own sense of self-worth and aspire to actualize his potential. But then he must realize that such a world-outlook is both unworthy and unattainable; a realization that must bring him to modify his aspiration to that of self-transcendence. And finally, upon establishing this noble but daunting goal for himself, he must recognize the imperative of time, which is, as in all things in this world, of the essence.

Notes

¹ Rashi on Talmud *Bava Kamma* 38a, s.v. *lomar she'afilu*.

² Similarly, *Avodah Zarah* 3a.

³ This translation of *yetser ha'ra* will be supported further on.

⁴ Elsewhere, Tosafot (*Kiddushin* 31a, s.v. *gadol*) bring an additional, yet substantially different, psychological aspect that bears on the one commanded: the apprehension that if one is unsuccessful in his performance of the command he will have violated an obligation, whereas the one not commanded has no such concern. The Shakh (*Yoreh De'ah* 246:7) quotes Tosafot and explains that the fear of punishment causes increased psychological pressure (*yitsro mitgabber*). To understand this I suggest that it is not fear of punishment *per se* that is the driving factor—for that clearly indicates a low motivation of performance—but rather that punishment, or negative consequences in general, emphasizes the importance of the act in question. As a result, coping with the increased psychological pressure attendant on obligations accrues to one's credit.

⁵ Quoted in the *Soncino Talmud* (*Avodah Zarah* 3a, n. a1).

⁶ R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, vol. 1 (Jersey City: Ktav, 1993) pp. 99-106.

⁷ Here the Rav refers to an earlier explanation of his: "We have assumed that *mishpatim* are prompted by reason. Yet, in our modern world, there is hardly a *mishpat* which has not been repudiated. Stealing and corruption are the accepted norms in many spheres of life; adultery and general promiscuity find support in respectable circles; and even murder, and medical and germ experiments have been conducted with governmental complicity. The *logos* has shown itself in our time to be incapable of supporting the most basic of moral inhibitions." *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁹ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985) p. 133.

¹⁰ We are not arguing that there is great merit in following the irrational simply because it is irrational—to do so would be to abdicate responsibility as thinking human beings. What we are suggesting is that upon accepting G-d as the Creator and ultimate authority, one must strive to fulfill the Creator's every word, whether one has a rationale or not. The greatest level one can hope to achieve is the acceptance of the Creator so wholly that one performs His will unquestioningly. It is only at this point of total acceptance that one abdicates one's reasoning as a reflection of his commitment. Rabbi Soloveitchik (*Reflections of the Rav*, vol. 1, p. 101) explains, "Obviously, only an absolute faith in G-d as the Legislator of the *hok* would motivate such [irrational] acceptance." This level of faith is one that is to be developed, for example, by the 'test' of the manna which, according to many commentators, was to provide the children of Israel with a method of building faith in G-d (see Rashbam [Exodus 16:4], Nahmanides [Exodus 16:4], Maimonides [*Guide for the Perplexed*, III:24]).

¹¹ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains, "G-d had left it for him to decide, of his own free will, whether he would *defer to the Will of G-d* in determining what was good, and what bad, and thereby tread the path of life, or *decide himself* what was good or evil and thereby have to be fated to death" (Genesis 3:22, p. 91, emphasis added).

¹² See Rabbi David Shapiro ("The Book of Job and the Trial of Avraham," *Tradition*, vol. 4, no. 2 [Spring 1962]) who explains that the 'test' of Avraham is really a 'banner' (i.e., 'test' and 'banner' being linguistically related to the root "*nes*") in that Avraham's act stands as a banner—a demonstration to the world that man is worthy of creation.

¹³ These two events—the Eating from the Tree of Knowledge and the Binding of Isaac—are seminal events in the development of humankind. The Ramhal (*Derekh Ha'Shem* 2:4) explains that after the fall of Adam and Eve, humanity failed to rise to its initial challenge until Abraham proved himself

worthy through the Binding of Isaac. The Vilna Gaon (*Kol Eliyahu, Vayera* 17) explains that the greatness of Abraham's 'command performance' was that he acted to fulfill G-d's will against his own nature. So, too, Abarbanel (on Genesis 22:3). Rabbi M. Leibtag (Yeshivat Har Etsion Virtual Beit Midrash) derives this idea from the call to Abraham to stop, which he translates as: "Stretch not your hand toward the boy, nor do even the slightest thing to him, for now I know—*ki y'rei Elokim ata—even though you are a moral person, you have not withheld your only son from me*" (Genesis 22:12).

- ¹⁴ Indeed it is this commitment that was made by the Jews in accepting the Torah at Sinai. Rabbi Yosef Dov Ber Soloveitchik explains that "by saying, 'we will do' before 'we will listen,' [t]hey undertook to perform the mitzvos out of blind obedience..." (*Beis HaLevi, Shemos* [Jerusalem: Targum, 1991] p. 189). He then explains that the sin of the golden calf was a result of their abandoning this commitment, choosing to follow their "intellect" over the will of G-d.
- ¹⁵ He actually quotes M.R.A. Hazan, quoting Rabbi Ve'Shav Ha'Kohen.
- ¹⁶ Thus, for example a woman who performs a commandment, without personal rationale but because it is the command of G-d, even though she is exempt from the act, is adjudged of *greater* merit than a man who is explicitly so commanded but performs the act out of personal rationale.
- ¹⁷ Also *Niddah* 16b; *Megillah* 25a.
- ¹⁸ E. Goldman, ed., *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 21.
- ¹⁹ Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook expressed this idea on a national level based on the *mishpat* of giving charity: "charity practiced not as a natural law but as a divine law, uplifts the Jewish People and takes them beyond the realm of nature." See B. Naor, ed., *In the Desert – a Vision* (Jerusalem: Orot, 2000) p. 85.
- ²⁰ Victor Frankl calls upon this statement to articulate the ethic of self-transcendence in his *Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy* (New York: World Publishing Co, 1968) p. 55.