

The Interplay Between Actions and Intentions

Based on the weekly Shmuess given by HaRav Shaya Cohen, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh

לעילוי נשמת גיטל בת הרב אליעזר מנחם | הרב יוסף חיים בן מאיר | רפאל חיים דוב בן בן-ציון שלום | ר' ברוך בן ר' יהודה | שרה בת ר' יחזקאל | ראובן יוסף בן יהושע | לרפואה שלמה יוסף בן מלכה מטל

In Parsha Vayeira, after Hashem destroys Sodom, Lot's daughters were under the impression that the whole world was destroyed, and only they and their father remained. They therefore devised a plan for the continued existence of mankind by procreating with their father. The Ralbag derives from this episode that, "It is appropriate to judge someone's actions based on their intention, and not based on the actions themselves. We can see this idea from the fact that since Lot's daughters had good intentions they were helped by Hashem, and they merited two great nations."

An important insight can be learned from this Ralbag. We would have thought that having good intentions mitigates the punishment of a terrible act. However, we see from here that good intentions not only reduce the punishment, but they are also rewarded and cause one to earn help from Hashem. This of course is not a justification to engage in an act of sin, it is rather a perspective of how we should view someone who sinned but had good intentions. Often when someone does something terrible, we tend to be overwhelmed by the ugliness of the act, and ignore the sincerity of the person's intentions. It is clear from here that the intentions make all the difference, and the very act that would warrant a severe punishment, would be rewarded with pure intentions.

The following Ralbag illustrates another insight into

the interplay between actions and intention. The Torah describes all the activities of Avraham Avinu doing Hachnasas Orchim. After, when he goes to daven for Sodom, he says, "I am dust and ashes." The Ralbag writes that, "The benefit that can be derived from here is in Middos. Specifically in the Middah of humility. It is appropriate for people to conduct themselves with the Middah of humility, because this benefits society. We derive this from the fact that despite Avraham Avinu's greatness he ran to these men immediately upon seeing them. He bowed down to them, and called himself a servant of theirs, and them his master. In addition, he escorted them when they were leaving. From these acts of humility he eventually reached new heights in humility by comparing himself to dust and ashes."

From the above we can derive an insight into Chinuch Hamussar. The Ralbag implies that a person who does an act of humility with the intent of benefitting society, will thereby increase their Middah of Anavah. Although the action was not really an expression of Anavah, the action itself has the power to impact our Middos.

The upshot of all the above-mentioned Chazals is that actions can be powerful and influence a person's Middos, even if they are lacking the full intent. On the other hand, we see that positive intentions can reframe our viewpoint of a terrible action.



Shir HaShirim Insights

In loving memory of Mr. Marvin Halpern

“Will I merit Olam Haba?”

This question was asked by one of greatest Tanayim, Rav Chanina ben Teradyon to Rav Yossi Ben Kisma at no more meritorious time than as he was risking his life to teach Torah in public.

The Gemara (*Avodah Zarah 18a*) records Rav Yossi’s response: Did any special incident occur to you which might serve as an indication? Rav Chanina ben Teradyon said to him: I confused my own coins that I needed for the festivities of Purim with coins of charity, and I distributed them all to the poor at my own expense. Rav Yossi ben Kisma said to him: If that is so, may my portion be of your portion, and may my lot be of your lot.

The question is obvious: Rav Chanina ben Teradyon was about to perform the greatest act a human can do, to give his life to sanctify Hashem’s name. If that wasn’t reason enough to assure him Olam Haba, how was his relatively insignificant act of replacing questionable Tzedakah reason enough?

The Rambam (*Mishnah, Makos 3:16*) answers this question as follows: It is among the fundamental principles of the Torah that when an individual fulfills one of the 613 commandments in a fit and proper manner, not combining with it any aspect of worldly intent but rather doing it for its own sake, out of love, then they merit the World to Come through this single act... When R’ Chanina ben Teradyon asked ‘Will I merit to life in the coming world’ and received the response ‘Have you ever done anything?’ this also indicated the same principle. The answer he received meant ‘Have you ever had the chance to do one of the commandments properly?’ His answer was that he once had the chance to give Tzedakah in a wholehearted fashion, as much as is possible, and it was through this that he merited to life in the World to Come.

But why is this true? How does the fulfillment of only one of six hundred and thirteen mitzvot wholeheartedly suffice to earn one the ultimate goal of Creation, the reward of the world-to-come?

The answer can be found in the following words of Shir HaShirim (4:9 with Rashi): You have captured my heart, you have drawn My heart to you. My sister, my bride, you have captured my heart with one [glance] of your eyes, of the many good characteristics that you possess, if you had only one, I would love you dearly, and all the more so with all of them. And similarly, with but one of the chains of your necklaces, these are the adornments of commandments through which the [Bnei] Yisroel are distinguished with one coil of your necklace.

We know Chazal (*Beresheet Rabah 44:1*) teach us that “All the Mitzvos were only given to refine our character.” It seems from the above that it is even one Mitzvah done wholeheartedly that brings out the infinitely great character deep within every Jew, capturing the heart of Hashem in infinite love, earning himself the ultimate reward of Olam Haba, to bask in his Beloved’s loving presence forever and ever!



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The Ramban in our Parsha writes:

“Know that Avraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin (on his lofty level which we can never fathom) by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear lest he be killed. He should have trusted that G-d would save him and his wife and all his belongings for G-d surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine G-d would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children.

We see from the words of the Ramban that the entire Galus of Mitzrayim was a result of a lack of Bitachon. This gives us a deeper understanding into what merited our ultimate redemption from there, as Rabbeinu Bachaya (*Kad HaKemach*) writes:

In the merit of Bitachon, Yisroel was redeemed from Mitzrayim, for Chazal state in Medrash Tehilim (22) “To You they cried out and escaped,” and why? “In You they trusted and weren’t shamed, all in the merit of bitachon.”

Being that the exile of Mitzrayim was a result of a lack of Bitachon, Yitzias Mitzrayim was made possible only through a strengthening of Bitachon!

The Rabbeinu Bachaya above beautifully finishes off this thought as follows:

And because the trait of Bitachon is one of the foundational principles of the Torah we find that the Torah is called ‘Bitachon’ after it, this is as the Pasuk (*Mishlei 21:22 with Rashi*) states, “A wise man ascended to a city of mighty men,” - this refers to Moshe, our teacher, who went up among the angels, who are mighty in strength, “and brought down its mighty Mivtachah - trusted stronghold” - the Torah.