

The Depth of Halacha

On the Binding Nature of Jewish Law

Torah is the Word of God. Although the different streams of Jewish Thought understand the process of the revelation of God's Word in different ways, one essential idea runs like a thread throughout all its major branches. This idea is that the Torah as Word of God presents an ideal of self-transformation; of the individual, of the People Israel and of humanity. That is, the Torah provides us with an image, a map, of what we strive to be - both individually and collectively.

And thus the Torah, Written and Oral, is as complex and multifaceted as human life itself. It contains poetry and prose, history and law, philosophy and fantasy. Each of these genres serves as a prism through which Torah addresses the whole person from a different angle.

One such genre is that of Commandment: the Mitsvot. The Mitsvot touch on all of the different aspects of our existence. Some Mitsvot deal with the movement of our limbs and some with the use of our speech. Some address what we hear and some, what we eat. There are Mitsvot that structure time (like Shabbat) while others structure space (like the mikdash). And the Mitsvot address us at different levels: as individuals, as families, as the People Israel, as human beings.

If one were to draw a map or diagram of the Mitsvot, laying out the way their contents connect with our lives, that map would be a "mandala", a map of our realized selves - the selves we strive to be. It would be a mandala as painted in the medium of one specific genre or aspect of Torah, the aspect of Commandment.

But this map or diagram would only be two-dimensional; it would have East and West, North and South, but no height and depth. Such a map would be missing the third dimension.

This is because Torah is not something we talk about, but something we live. An actual human life, a life of Torah, is the third dimension of the map of the Mitsvot. A life of Torah, as refracted through the aspect of Commandment, is called Halacha. And thus Halacha, the normative way of a Jew, is the height and depth of the map of the Mitsvot that we described. The Halacha is the height and depth of the Torah as an ideal of self-transformation as expressed through one genre, that of Commandment.

To be sure, the Halacha has its own internal structure and logic, just as language has grammar and syntax. But in essence, the Halacha is the **application** of Torah (in its aspect of Commandment). The process of psikah, legal decision making, is that of delving into the layers of Written and Oral Torah to see what is revealed regarding some instance of being a human being.

In regard to the "binding" nature of Halacha, it is true without question that it binds us - for it is the Word of God. But, nonetheless, "binding" may be the wrong image. For God does not force Him or Herself on us, but rather we seek God. God does not trap us with His Word, but rather we seek it out. So perhaps a better image than "the halacha binds us", would be "we hang on to Halacha".

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