Mitzvoth, Morality and Reason: Thoughts on Parashat Va'et'hanan

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By
Jonathan Arking

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IJII Student Summer Intern

One of the longest-standing debates in philosophy is that of the Euthyphro dilemma, expressed as a question by Socrates: “Is the good loved by the gods because it is good, or is it good because it is loved by the gods?” In Jewish terms, we could rephrase this question: Are mitzvoth good simply because they were commanded by God, or does God command us to do the mitzvoth because they are inherently good? This question has led to the formation of two philosophical schools, the fundamentalists and the rationalists. The fundamentalists believe that the good is only good because God deems it thus, while the rationalists believe the good is good independently of God’s approval. If the fundamentalists are correct, then any endeavor to understand the taamei hamitzvoth, the reasons for divine commandments, is not only doomed to fail, but an essentially invalid religious question. On the other hand, if God’s commands do not dictate, but only reflect, the good, then trying to understand taamei hamitzvoth will both shed light on our understanding of the commandments, as well as insight into how to carry them out.

Maimonides, one of the paradigms of Jewish rationalism, unsurprisingly takes taamei hamitzvoth extremely seriously, and devotes a significant portion of his Guide to the Perplexed to lay out his understanding of the rationales for the different mitzvoth. Maimonides cites a verse in this week's parasha as explicit reference to Judaism’s acceptance of rationales for the commandments: “Observe the [mitzvoth] faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, “Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people.”

Maimonides explains:“If no reason could be found for these statutes, if they produced no advantage and removed no evil, why then should he who believes in them and follows them be wise, reasonable, and so excellent as to raise the admiration of all nations? But the truth is undoubtedly as we have said, that every one of the six hundred and thirteen precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good manners or to warn against bad habits.”

According to Maimonides, the laws and statutes must both conform to reason and have a moral purpose. This is not to say that we can abrogate our observance in any way, or that we can ever be sure we know the exact rationale behind the commandments. Rather, it is necessary to ensure that our practice and understanding never run in opposition to reason and science or morality. It seems that this is part of the Jewish nation’s role as an or l’goyim, a light unto the nations; by demonstrating adherence to rational and constructive laws, other nations will better recognize Jewish society and its values as ideal. In a similar vein, Maimonides asserts that in cases of clash between a surface-level reading of a biblical passage and science and reason, we must reinterpret the passage to conform to reason. He therefore allegorizes any mentions of divine corporeality, angels, and more.

But this type of prescriptive understanding does not apply to understanding the Bible alone; it applies to halakha as well. For a fundamentalist, God decides unilaterally what is good, and therefore rationales behind commandments are nonexistent. This means that when deciding halakha, considerations of values or morals are entirely irrelevant. If a halakha runs counter to one’s conscience, that is of no concern. Halakha, in this sense, would be a self-contained system not dependent on any external moral standards; and those making halakhic rulings would not need to worry about the effect on any individuals or even society at large.

Yet this is clearly not the way of the halakhic system that we have inherited. We learn in the Talmud of the rabbis’ concern for the aguna and the mamzer, the poor and the downtrodden. At times, they even reinterpreted biblical verses and enacted new decrees to protect disadvantaged groups. Just as Maimonides believed we are commanded to ensure the Torah’s adherence to science and reason, the rabbis believed we are commanded to ensure the halakha’s adherence to morality. As Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, a great theologian and halakhist of the twentieth century explains: “The rabbis in the Talmud were guided by the insight: God forbid there should be anything in the application of

the Torah to the actual life situation that is contrary to the principles of ethics. What are those principles? They are Torah principles, like: “And you shall do that which is right and good in the sight of the Eternal”; or, “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (according to Talmudic teaching, this refers to the ways and paths of the Torah); or, “That you may walk in the way of good people, and keep the paths of the righteous.””

The Torah itself, Rabbi Berkovits argues, has provided a framework of moral principles that must guide our understanding of the law. Rationalism dictates that there are values and motivations behind the commandments. From the Bible itself we learn what these are: human dignity, righteousness, peace, and pleasantness. When we as Jews adhere to these values and create halakha with them in mind, we become a paragon of idealism for the rest of the world. However, when we resort to fundamentalist halakha, which can and does lead to outcomes at odds with these values, we not only create a hillul Hashem, a desecration of God’s name, but we also diminish our standing in the eyes’ of the world, acting at odds with the message laid out in this week’s parasha. For our commandments to be “proof of [our] wisdom and discernment to other peoples,” we must exemplify both rationality and morality. By following in the rationalist footsteps of Maimonides, may we live out a Judaism synonymous with reason and morality in accordance with the will of Hakadosh Barukh Hu, and help bring all the people of the world closer to the redemption.

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