

Rabbi Israel Drazin Reviews Dr. Daniel Sperber's New Book

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Dr. Israel Drazin is the author of twenty-five books, including a series of five volumes on the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, which he co-authored with Dr. Stanley M. Wagner, and a series of three books on the twelfth century philosopher Moses Maimonides, which he wrote alone. His latest book is *Mysteries of Judaism*, which has just been published by Gefen Publishing House. His website, visited by over 35,000 people annually is www.booksnthoughts.com.

Review by Israel Drazin

On the Relationship of Mitzvot between Man and his Neighbor and Man and his Maker

By Daniel Sperber

Urim Publications, 2014, 221 pages

The winner of Israel's prestigious Israel Prize, Professor Daniel Sperber, a rabbi and Dean of the Faculty of Jewish Studies at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, published an extremely significant book that should change the thinking of Jews and non-Jews about the purpose of religion. Sperber notes that Jewish law has two categories of commands, called mitzvot in Hebrew, those between people and God and those between one person and another. "The question we wish here to discuss," he writes, "is which of these two categories is, as it were, more weighty. Or formulated differently: if there were to be a clash between two different mitzvot from these two categories, which one would prevail?" Sperber shows readers many, perhaps over a hundred statements from respected Jewish authorities showing that when a conflict arises, preference must be given to "mitzvot between man and his neighbor," not "between man and his Maker." The following is a sample of these statements. The quotes are from Sperber's book.

There is the classic statement of Hillel emphasizing human relations: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend. That is the whole Torah and, as for the rest, it is commentary." The "Kabbalist R. Hayyim Vital (is quoted as saying) that when one rises in the morning, even before one goes to prayer, one should remind himself of the mitzvah 'to love one's neighbor as oneself' (Leviticus 19:18)." The famed codifier Rabbenu Asher wrote: "the Holy One blessed be He is more desirous of mitzvot that are done to the satisfaction of human beings, than those which are between man and his Maker."

The founder of the Musar (Ethics) movement Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said: "Better a failure between man and God, than between man and man." Rabbi Yosef Engel, known as the Taz, wrote that "God, as it were, would have no complaint or find any fault in one who could not fulfill His commandment (when observing a mitzvah relating to one's fellow human, such as paying a debt) and need not make it up." The Ethics of the Fathers states: "He in whom the spirit of mankind find favor, in him the spirit of God finds favor; but he in whom the spirit of mankind finds no favor, in him the spirit of God finds no pleasure." The Talmud teaches "theft from an individual is more serious than theft from that which has been dedicated to God." The Netziv wrote that "charity given to the poor is of greater virtue than money given to the temple itself." In fact, giving charity is even "seen as preferential to building a synagogue or even the Temple."

This preference is found in Jewish law. The codifier Rema wrote that the biblical mandate to dwell in a Sukkah on the holiday of Sukkot should be ignored "if a person is engaged in bringing sustenance to their families in straightened circumstances." Maimonides taught that the biblical command "of bringing the omer (the new barley harvest) before the altar of God cannot push aside those mitzvot directed to helping the poor." The Code Shulchan Aruch rules that people should not interrupt involvement in communal affairs to pray. Maimonides and Joseph Caro wrote in their codes that as important as study of Torah is, it should be interrupted to give charity. Although the law of the Shabbat is in the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments), the Jewish law is that "even the slightest suspicion of a life-endangering situation overrules the laws of Shabbat."

After showing these and many more statements and laws that support the view that Judaism considers the behavior of people to one another more important than their behavior towards God, Professor Sperber tells moving tales in close to forty pages showing how famous rabbis exemplified this teaching, people like the Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kosov, Hafetz

Hayyim, and others.

He follows this in part three by showing the many ways that Jewish congregations instituted the practice of giving charity prior to beginning one's morning prayer. This "underscores the moral priority of relationship towards one's fellow human even before one turns to one's Creator."

Thus, it is no surprise that Jewish tradition taught that prayers on Yom Kippur can annul "sins against God," but "those against fellow humans are not expiated on Yom ha-Kippurim until the sinner appeases him that was sinned against."