

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

TO HEAVEN AND BACK, IN SEARCH OF TORAH Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום

לא נפלאה הוא ממך

ולא רחקה הוא

לא בשמים הוא

לאמר

מי יעלה לנו השמימה ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתה

ונעשנה

ולא מעבר לים הוא

לאמר

מי יעבר לנו אל עבר הים ויקחה לנו וישמענו אתה

ונעשנה

כי קרוב אליך הדבר

מאד

בפיך ובלבבך

לעשתו

Because (כי) this mitzvah which I am commanding you today –

it is not too wonderful for you,

nor is it too distant for you.

It is not in the Heavens,

so that you might say:

"Who will rise to the Heavens for us and take it for us and enable

us to hear it?

Then we would do it!"

Nor is it across the sea,

so that you might say:

"Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and take it for us

and enable us to hear it?

Then we would do it!"

Rather (כי), the matter is close to you,

very –

in your mouth and in your heart –

to do it. (Devarim 30:11-14)

The standard formula for blessing the New Moon (Kiddush Levanah) includes the sentence "Just as I dance opposite you and am unable to touch you, so too my enemies should be unable to touch me for the sake of doing me harm." After the first moon landing, Rav Shlomo Goren ruled that this sentence should be altered, since it was no longer true. Certainly it would be odd to pray that our enemies not be able to attack us—except via rocket.

If the moon is now accessible, what about the Heavens? Rabbi Yehoshua famously quoted "lo bashomayim hi" to deny the authority of Heavenly voices in halakhic disputes, but the parallelism with "the other side of the sea" seems to make clear that shomayim in our verse really means "the Heavens" rather than Heaven. Perhaps I am guilty here and regarding kiddush levanah of taking a metaphor too literally.

Or perhaps not. On Eiruvim 55a, the Talmud cites Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Dosa:

שאם בשמים היא אתה צריך לעלות אחריה

ואם מעבר לים היא אתה צריך לעבור אחריה

*because when it is in shomayim, you must rise to go after it;
and when it is across the yam (sea), you must cross to go after it.*

The Sheiltot d'R. Achai Gaon to Parshat Toldot adds:

מיכן לתלמיד חכם שיש לו הרב במדינת הים

שצריך לילך אחריו

From here we learn that if a student/scholar has a mentor in medinat hayam (literally "the land of the sea; generally "distant land"), that he must travel to go after his mentor.

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

The parallelism with yam suggests that if the Torah is in shomayim, we must go to shomayim and learn it, and that it is as possible for the Torah to be in shomayim as it is for the Torah to be across the sea. Now it may be that for the original audience of Torah, the Desert Generation, crossing the sea was unimaginable. But Sheiltot d'R. Achai Gaon sees the verse as grounding a very practical and concrete obligation.

How would one go to shomayim to learn Torah, and would Rabbi Yehoshua object to doing so? I think that we can answer the second question by distinguishing between psak and talmud Torah. In other words, Rabbi Yehoshua means that the Torah is no longer exclusively or authoritatively in Heaven; he does not mean that the Heavens are now a Torah-free zone. Indeed, the very existence of Heavenly voices with halakhic opinions suggests that in fact there remains Torah in Heaven. But how would one reach Heaven in order to learn it?

Perhaps one learns that Torah via mystical ascent, but it is hard to make mystical ascent a universal obligation. At the same time it is hard to believe that a verse in the Torah is intended to mandate that we pursue our Torah teachers if they wander off on hot-air balloons, or emigrate to other planets, which seems to be the implication of Sheiltot d'R. Achai Gaon if we translate shomayim as referring to the physical Heavens.

If Rabbi Yehoshua's reading has a hard time with “not across the yam,” and the Sheiltot has difficulty explaining “not in shomayim” then perhaps these difficulties open the field for interpretations that take both yam and shomayim as metaphors for human psychological realities.

Back again on Eiruvim 55a, where Rava offers such an interpretation: *לא תמצא במי שמגביה דעתו עליה כשמים*

ולא תמצא במי שמרחיב דעתו עליה כים

It (Torah) will not be found in one who exalts (lit: raises up) his mind with regard to it like shomayim

nor in one who widens his mind with regard to it like yam

But this interpretation itself requires interpretation. Perhaps Rava means that “one who raises his mind over it like shomayim” is arrogant, and “one who widens his mind with regard to it like yam” is hedonistic. The problem with this otherwise reasonable reading is that Rav Yochanan immediately follows Rava on Eiruvim 55a and says essentially the same thing: “one who raises his mind over it like shomayim” is from the *גסי הרוח*, which generally refers to

arrogant people, and “one who widens his mind with regard to it like yam” is from the *תגרים וסוחרין* (merchants and sellers), which seems a reference to this-worldly focus. The standard Talmudic form here suggests that Rav Yochanan must be disagreeing with Rava, and therefore Rava must have meant something else.

Maharsha suggests that shomayim and yam refer to arrogance and complacency in the specific context of Torah study. “One who raises his mind over it” sees no need for teachers; “one who widens his mind over it” sees no need for review. However, I cannot find any other place in rabbinic literature where “wideness of mind” relates to complacency or failure to review.

The wonders of www.hebrewbooks.org brought me to Parashat Mordekhai, by Eliezer Mordechai Altschuler, whom Wikipedia may tell me was among the founders of the Chovevei Tziyyon movement in late 19th Century Europe. Rabbi (I presume) Altschuler suggests that Rava is critiquing two types of reasoning about mitzvot. Some people presume that every mitzvah has profound mystical roots—and they spend all their time preparing to do mitzvot with proper intention, rather than doing them. Others presume that every mitzvah has clear rational purposes – and they may end up waiting forever for the perfect time and place to perform them with guaranteed proper outcomes.

Rabbi Altschuler does not deny that mitzvot have reasons both mystical and practical – in fact, he understands Rav Avdimi as creating an obligation to rise to Heaven and cross the sea for the sake of understanding both categories of reasons (although epistemologically one has to begin with the words of Torah as recited orally and engraved on one's heart). But he argues implicitly that the entire phenomenon of time-bound commandments is a limit on mystical rationalization – at some point one has to stop thinking and do, or all the thinking will go to waste. (Presumably a traditional critique of chassidut is intended as well.) Next, he argues that an inherent flaw in practical rationalization is that it necessarily bounds mitzvot by time – no practical reason can always be true. (Presumably a traditional critique of Maimonides is intended.)

The question Rabbi Altschuler leaves unanswered is how we can safely see mitzvot as more than meaningless rote without risking having intent or result become more significant than action. The answer to that question, I fear, is still in Heaven, if it exists at all. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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