

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



RELEVANCE AND REVERENCE REVISITED

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Let's assume that a baseline degree of reverence is necessary for proper Torah interpretation. My question is whether a baseline degree of irreverence is also necessary.

Rabbi Norman Lamm liked quoting the Rav as telling him: "Your problem is that you don't bring your yetzer hora to shiur". (Oddly, I don't remember any of my rebbeim criticizing me for a similar failure.) He was presumably referencing Berakhot 54a:

and you must move Hashem your G-d with all
your heart (spelled with two **ב**s) –
with both your inclinations, with a good
inclination and with the evil inclination

and making a general claim that Torah study should engage the entire human personality.

Imagine a brainteaser about the gatekeeper of a beit midrash: what question could s/he ask that would be answered differently by a person bringing only a yetzer tov, only a yetzer hora, and a person bringing both?

Reverence for great figures of the Jewish past is often an expression of the *yetzer tov*. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein pointed out that it can also obstruct meaningful interpretation. "If the earlier ones were as angels, then we are as human beings" – how can we be expected then to match their deeds? If what we revere is the deep sense of *yir'at shomayim* which accompanied their most admirable religious acts, would following in their footsteps constitute "rushing in where angels fear to tread"?

Reverence can function like "chokification". Declaring that a particular mitzvah has no humanly knowable purpose is an acknowledgement that "My thought are not your thoughts". But it leaves the mitzvah inert, something from which nothing can be learned, and therefore one that is properly confined to the narrowest of possible halakhic spaces. Declaring a narrative action one "that could only be taken by human beings who were like angels" similarly makes it out of bounds as a precedent for our own actions.

Like chokification, this sort of declaration may express a deep moral ambivalence. Sometimes we can't imagine a rational purpose for the mitzvah, but as often we can imagine a rational purpose, and dislike it intensely. So too, the claim that an action by a revered figure "can only be done by someone like them" often means that we would be horrified if anyone else acted that way.

Reverence can also be an expression of the yetzer hora. Past actions may sometimes be effectively quarantined by saying that "only someone like them could do that". But extending that reverence is extended to contemporaries undermines our ethics rather than protecting them.

For example: a talmid chakham highly influential in Modern Orthodoxy recently wrote that the apparently unethical actions of "gedolei Torah" may be evaluated and criticized only by other "gedolei Torah". He carefully and properly clarified that non-gedolim were also forbidden to emulate those actions. But imho that strategy is pernicious in the present, as evil triumphs when good people do nothing to stop it. (Also: without evaluating, how are we to know which actions to emulate, and which not to?)

With that background, let's consider an ethically challenging episode from this week's parshah. Mosheh Rabbeinu has just heard his brother Aharon's account of the events that led up to the Golden Calf. His response is as follows (Shemot 32:26-29):

Mosheh stood in the gate of the camp, and said:

Whoever is for Hashem – to me!

All the Sons of Levi gathered to him.

He said:

Thus spake Hashem G-d of Israel:

Let every man place his sword on his calf

Pass back and forth from gate to gate in the
camp

and kill each man his brother, each man his
fellow, each man his relative.

The Sons of Levi acted in accordance with
Mosheh's word.

There fell from the nation on that day around
three thousand men.

The text can be read literally as ordering a massacre of (male) blood-relatives and friends specifically, or of random Jews without regard to blood or personal relationship. Nothing in the text suggests that the victims were chosen for their guilt. This hopefully generates ethical outrage in all of us, but especially in those of use who are deeply committed to Torah and Torat Mosheh.

Avraham ben HaRambam therefore insists that the guilty were identifiable:

אינו שיהרגו האנשים בלי תשומת לב
כמו שיעלה על הדעת ממקרא כפשוטו,
אלא שיהרג מי שעבד (עבודה זרה), והבחינו אותם
מזולתם
או בעדות כמו שאמרו החכמים ז"ל בתלמוד לקצת
הדיעות,
או בסימן כמו שאמרו שהזהב היה ניכר על
קלישותם,
או חילוק והבחנה זולת זה

**מובן ל(אנשים) דוגמתם ואינו מובן ל(אנשים)
דוגמתנו.**

This does not mean that they killed people without paying attention (to which people were being killed)

as one might consider based on the simple reading of the text

rather the ones who worshiped (the Calf) would be killed, and they distinguished them from the others

either via testimony, as the Sages say in the Talmud according to some opinions, or via a sign, as they said that “The gold was visible on their *kelisha*?

or via some other distinction and diagnostic that was understandable to people like them but is not understandable to people like us.

The last approach, which I think refers to something like an ability to read auras, ensures that no one nowadays will follow in the Sons of Levi’s footsteps. It provides a way to ethically quarantine the episode. (Note: I recognize that some contemporaries believe in or even claim the ability to read auras. The key phrase is “not understandable to people like us”, in other words: whatever you can do would not have been enough, and this was something different.)

Netziv offers a much more radical version.

“Whoever is for Hashem – to me!”

The intent here is not anyone who had not worshipped idols, as most of Israel had not worshipped idols,

rather someone who knows himself to be only for Hashem,

to the point of surrendering his life and all he has for the love and Honor of Hashem . . .

that he does no service for himself, but rather is entirely set apart for Hashem.

Mosheh needed to ask this question

because even though “mitzvah agents are not harmed” applies only where harm is uncommon

. . .

and therefore Mosheh could not (justifiably) put the killers in grave danger (from self-defenders), therefore he investigated (by proclaiming)

“Whoever is for Hashem – to me!”

because the principle “where danger is common differs” applies only to one who does a mitzvah in the manner of human nature, in the home of reward and compensation, in this world or the Coming World,

but one who is set apart for G-d should not be afraid of anything, even a common danger . . .

“Thus spake Hashem”

Certainly The Holy Blessed One commanded to do this,

but nonetheless His statement is not written explicitly,

because the commandment did not come via an

explicit decree and imperative,

because it is impossible to decree on a person to be in a state of love of Hashem transcending human nature, and to fulfill such a decree, and we have never found this sort of imperative in the Torah . . .

this is not similar to the mitzvah of sanctifying the Name,

because there the mitzvah is to actively surrender oneself to death,

and it is possible to do this for the sake of reward in the Coming World even if one has not achieved love of Hashem . . .

and via their being careful to kill only the brother who (formally) deserved execution

all Israel would recognize that they have transcended all self-will in this matter,

and they too will not find the heart to stand against them

because of their recognition that they are like the angels above.

Netziv suggests that the Levites reached a state parallel to or greater than that of Avraham at the Akeidah. They passed the test of Iyov in being able to serve G-d entirely without thought of reward. חבה יתירה, they were aware of having passed the test, and even had their self-perception ratified.

But G-d cannot command such service – it has to be offered freely. Therefore, no one can ever be commanded to follow the example set by the Levites. Moreover, their action would have been wrong had they actually put themselves in danger, i.e. had they been mistaken in their self-evaluation. Paradoxically, by being completely unconcerned about danger, the Levites make themselves invulnerable, both because they cannot be injured, and because no one will dare to injure them (here I think Netziv’s explanation runs into the sort of logical problem that often plagues superhero narratives).

The price of Avraham ben HaRambam’s approach is that this episode cannot challenge our prior hierarchy of values. The price of Netziv’s is that it can, a little bit, even if it has no immediately practicable effects.

Netziv may have missed a key danger. He describes the Levites as so exalted that no sane person could see them as personal models. But it takes much less for sane people to see their own heroes that way, and therefore as beyond ethical evaluation.

My yetzer tov prefers Avraham ben HaRambam; my yetzer hora naturally prefers Netziv. Forced to choose, one should of course bring only Avraham ben HaRambam to shiur. Maybe we should force ourselves to choose.

Or maybe the real problem is that we misidentify our willingness – nay our obligation - to challenge our teachers and leaders, their ideas and their actions, as stemming from the yetzer hora rather than from the yetzer tov. Maybe the yetzer hora is welcome in the beit midrash only when not dressed up as a tzaddik, or at least only when everyone can see through the masquerade.

Shabbat Shalom!

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