

Commentary with Rabbi Benjamin Hecht

The Gestalt

It may be wise for me to first begin with a disclaimer. Nothing in what I am about to present should be understood as challenging the intrinsic value of a single *mitzvah* and the importance and significance in the performance of each individual *mitzvah*. I am one who shares the belief that, in our relationships with other Jews, we must accept the reality of inherent, contradictory natures in lifestyle and relate beyond this limitation with an eye on what can be and an ideal of future growth. I share the attitude of the many rabbis who state that once a person enters a *shul* on *Shabbat*, the question of how he/she got there should not be the focus but, rather, we should see all those who wish to *daven* together on *Shabbat* simply as that – people who wish to spend *Shabbat* morning together in prayer with other Jews. After all, everyone who is there is still doing a *mitzvah* and that singular action has value in itself regardless of what else the person may or may not do.

Yet, even as I take this stand, I have begun to wonder about the effect of this perspective on the *gestalt*, the unified *halachic* system. While a singular *mitzvah* still has immeasurable value, what happens to *mitzvah* observance, and Torah observance as a whole, when singular *mitzvah* performance is not perceived as part of an integrated entity? The issue is even further compounded if, coupled with the observance of certain *mitzvot*, there is an adamancy expressed in the non-observance of others. We often see observance of a *mitzvah* as a positive while categorizing any act or position of non-observance as simply an expression of some *status quo*, more akin to some standard of omission rather than commission. This, though, may not be the case. As much as the performance of a *mitzvah* may reflect a positive value within the *corpus* of Torah, the non-performance of a *mitzvah* may equally be a forceful expression of some negative value. Even as we promote the

observance of one *mitzvah*, can we simply ignore the effect of a violation of some other *mitzvah* on the overall expression of Torah and even on the performed *mitzvah*?

In a certain way, we can compare our promotion of *mitzvah* observance to a type of smorgasbord, offering individuals an array of *mitzvot* from among which they can choose those they may wish to observe. I present this categorization not to be critical; it may be the only way to draw one into the world of Torah. The result, though, is that each individual action and *mitzvah* is perceived as standing alone, not connected to the ones which this person has not chosen -- and not even linked with those which this person has chosen. The perception that Torah is not a smorgasbord but, rather, an integrated system that links together the individual *mitzvot* to create a complete whole is lost. The words of **T.B. Eruvin 6b** immediately come to mind. The *gemara* contends that, in this period of history, one could choose either to follow Beit Hillel or Beit Shammai but one who would either choose the stringencies of both or the leniencies of both was critiqued. While the latter was, indeed, deemed worse than the former, the overall message was still the same. Torah is an integrated system. To allow individuals to choose which *mitzvot* he/she may wish, or perceive they are able, to observe, clearly, may lead to greater individual *mitzvah* observance – but at what cost to the perception of the system as a whole?

Non-Orthodox forms of Judaism actually are also now doing the same thing, attracting people to their ways by also offering individuals the choice of which forms of Jewish expression they may wish to undertake. The non-Orthodox even can promote this more freely, further amending the offerings to include non-*halachic* practices as options to “enhance, decorate” the smorgasbord of Jewish practice. To them, furthermore, there is limited challenge from the whole as they can also further reinforce the perception that one’s choice of Jewish practice is exactly just that, one’s choice. Indeed, to maintain their ability to touch others, Orthodox outreach organizations, for pragmatic reasons, must also present, and continue to present, a similar type of smorgasbord concept – of course, still distinguished, in an important way, by only offering *halachically* acceptable individual options. Ultimately, though, they cannot truly project the concept that there really is an

allowed personal choice in the determination of the *mitzvot* that one may wish to do – yet in a certain way they still must present a perception of “do what you can or what you choose” in order to maintain their attraction to others, especially in light of the new endeavours by the non-Orthodox. Bottom line, there simply exists this powerful deterrent to the promotion of what we should be advocating, an overall objective to present the *mitzvot* as interconnected. Rather, though, than a person at least adopting the practice of one *mitzvah*, any perception of Torah as an ‘all-or-nothing’ endeavour could lead to a rejection of even that singular practice. Giving the impression that one *mitzvah* is not really interconnected to another, though, yields a misperception of Torah as a whole.

What occurs is the potential developments of what one may term personal Conservative or Reform Judaism. Each individual by choosing the *mitzvot* he/she wishes to follow and, as such, also choosing which *mitzvot* he/she does not wish to follow, essentially is left to create a personal theology to defend their choice. This personal philosophy furthermore becomes further intensified in its deviance from the *halachic* or Torah norm with any adamancy voiced in any positions of rejection, notwithstanding what is chosen to be observed. This is not to say that these personal theologies are highly sophisticated, or even thought-through on any level; the result, though, is that there is no *gestalt* in the understanding of Orthodox Judaism. The further result is that there is no standing challenge for the individual. Torah is to change us; to do so it must confront us. We can all describe *mitzvot* that we like. The challenge is in how we relate to those *mitzvot* that we find difficult.

Of course, you cannot attract one to Torah by describing demands from the system to which this individual would respond negatively. You can really only attract one to Torah by highlighting the aspects of Torah that would interest this individual. The point is, though, that at some point, for the movement to Torah to be honest, those aspects of Torah which a person may find problematic cannot simply be swept under the rug. They are part of Torah. It is in the dynamic that they bring to Torah that we actually find the essential movement of Torah. It is in our call to accept the system, the *gestalt* of Torah that we find the greatness

of this Divine system. The *gestalt* cannot be continuously ignored even if the cost is a drop in individual *mitzvah* observance. Our challenge is to know how to make this type of decision properly.

Torah isn't anyway simply a checklist of actions – it is a *gestalt* that an individual deserves and requires. It is the sum that purely and succinctly outlasts, outshines the parts. It is essential to remind everyone that the details are lines and colours toward the ultimate picture.

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