

Commentary with Rabbi Benjamin Hecht

The Wall

Many years ago, when I was in *yeshiva*, I coined a phrase to describe a phenomenon I noticed again and again as individuals progressed through a life of Torah. It was something I clearly recognized amongst *ba'alei teshuva*, yet it was also something I saw in individuals born into *frum* families, as these individuals continued their Torah studies. I termed it “the wall.” It was a situation when people found a statement, perception, idea or value within the locus of Torah thought that challenged their very own motivation for Torah. It was the place where individuals found their most fundamental values challenged by the very system which, they believed, represented and promoted these very same values. My further observation was this: how people responded to the wall coloured their entire perception of Torah.

There always must be a motivation for why people observe Torah. The most basic motivation is *yirat ha'onesh*, fear of punishment. Whether it concerns a focus on this world or the next world (or both), such a fear of negative consequences – or a desire for positive consequences – can prompt someone to be more meticulous in Torah observance, whether in regard to a specific *mitzvah* or the entire system. This impetus, however, is, within our modern psychological, sociological and/or philosophical context, usually only short-lived. In addition, this motivation is dependent upon an acceptance of the causal reality that this behaviour has Divine consequences; this acceptance may not be easily sustained. Furthermore, given the strong negative reaction that generally exists towards not only “fire and brimstone” but even a deity or system associated with “fire and brimstone”, a presentation of potential reward and punishment could often actually lead to a person challenging the whole causal reality, the whole system, and a subsequent rejection of any

interest in Torah. Simply, a contemporary process of *kiruv*, generally, cannot begin with a presentation based upon *yirat ha'onesh*. Another starting motivation must be identified.

Other motivations for Torah observance such as *ahavat Hashem*, love of God, or *yirat haromemut*, ultimate awe of God, are, of course, found in the sources, yet these are not starting motivations. These more refined, God-centred drives are only the result of much Torah learning, work and effort. As much as one may believe that he/she is driven by such motivations, this is most often not the case. What we may perceive to be such religious motivations are, actually, just as personally motivated as *yirat ha'onesh*. One is, as in the case of *yirat ha'onesh*, really observing *mitzvot* for oneself, i.e. to avoid pain and achieve pleasure. Such motivations, though, should not be discounted. As with the case of *yirat ha'onesh*, they are most necessary to begin the whole process of Torah. We have to begin with personal motivations for the manifestation of other, less personal drives is only a result of the Torah process itself. In our modern world, these personal motivations are, as such, the necessary, starting point for Torah observance. Inherently, an eventual confrontation with “the wall” is, thereby, also a given.

Accepting Torah means that a person will abide by the decisions of God -- as expressed through the system of Torah -- in regard to proper behaviour, thus thereby, effectively, ignoring or rejecting one's own decision making process (at least to some extent). What, though, would make someone do this, push aside his/her own viewpoints to adopt the viewpoints of the Torah? More, specifically, why would someone even be interested in considering such an alternative? This is really the fundamental question of *kiruv* (although the essence of this question, in various ways, applies beyond the realm of *kiruv*). How does one get someone interested in accepting this outside method of decision making? More succinctly, though, how does one get someone interested in even hearing an argument to forego one's autonomy to adopt the direction of this external system of Torah? The most straightforward answer would be: by showing (and convincing) a person that it is actually in his/her best interests to do so.

Yirat ha'onesh does exactly this. Effectively, it contends that God can affect the circumstances or change the outcome so that the decision He wants a person to follow is, for one's own good, the behaviour one should adopt. Simply God can make you an offer that you can't refuse. That is essentially the message that *kiruv* needs to impart in any manner. As much as we may not like this reality and may try to define it in a loftier way, *kiruv* is essentially marketing, trying to convince someone that this is really what they want. Through attempting to apply *yirat ha'onesh*, this is somewhat easier. One does not have to explain exactly why this is the best choice; the argument is, simply, that God can affect the cause-and-effect of any action so that doing what He wants would have the best results (ultimate reward) and not doing what He wants would have the worst consequences (ultimate punishment). In applying any other method of accomplishing this goal, one would have to contend that the decision of the Torah is also the one that this person really wants to follow for it is also the one that really best satisfies this individual's personal motivations.

Within this perspective, the starting point of any process of this kind would, thus, be an investigation into personal motivations. In the coarsest terms, one could portray this process as finding out what people want and then presenting the Torah as the best satisfier of these wants. Of course, this may be a bit too crude. There are many personal motivations within a human being that, clearly, would seem not to find their "greatest" satisfaction within a life of Torah (although I have seen some arguments that attempt to show that any desire within the human being is ultimately best satisfied through the observance of Torah – and this actually leads to a most interesting investigation, albeit beyond the parameters of this article). Some personal motivations, though, do seem to overlap – or more easily overlap -- with our perceived understanding of the theories behind the *mitzvot*. Our interests in Jewish identity, spirituality, morality, family, for example, could fall into such a category. Thus if one can describe the observance of Torah as a strong satisfier of such a drive, one is somewhat on the path of creating an interest in Torah in another individual.

The drive that is being projected as satisfied through Torah does not even have to be directly articulated, although it can be. To get someone involved with Torah, the 'recruiter'

could begin by telling a person that what he/she really wants (what his/her *neshama* and thus his/her true self really wants) is the satisfaction of this particular drive – and then proceed to tell the person that this satisfaction is only possible through Torah. More often, all that is really said is that this action of Torah will satisfy this drive. For example, let us take the drive in many people to express their Jewish identity; you can get to them by just saying: be Jewish, do this *mitzvah*. Same with spirituality; you want a meaningful spiritual experience, do this *mitzvah*. Sometimes, a beginning explanation is not even needed; just do this event, create a certain experience and people will like/enjoy it and return for more. A personal drive is being met through the observance of Torah and so this observance becomes part of this person's set of behaviours. It can even be more subtle. A person wishes to be moral. The Torah, presented as the bastion of morality, becomes attractive to such a person. But what then happens when the Torah presents a position or commands an action that is contrary to this person's perception of morality?

Herein, we encounter "the wall." Torah has been presented as the satisfier of an individual's personal motivator. You want spirituality; Torah offers spirituality. You want to feel Jewish; Torah makes you feel uniquely Jewish. You want to be moral; Torah promotes and substantiates your moral standards. But what happens when this person comes across a view within the Torah that challenges his/her moral perspectives? What happens when this person encounters a Torah directive that lessens his/her feelings of spirituality and even seems to promote activity which this person would define as non-spiritual? What about the *mitzvot* that simply direct someone to act as any other ethical person, Jew or Non-Jew, would act and, therefore, don't trigger a feeling of unique Jewishness? A person believes – has even been led to believe – that Torah will satisfy his/her drive and now encounters a situation when it not only does not satisfy this drive but even challenges it. The whole reason this person is *frum* is because of this perception – and now this person finds this perception contested. Does the person even stay *frum*?

Many reactions can occur as a result of "the wall." Indeed, sometimes, it can cause a person to drop everything, forsake the entire system of Torah. Initial responses, though, are usually more muted. Sometimes people develop rationalizations within their minds to

explain that even these *mitzvot* still do meet the requirement of the personal motivator. “This activity just seems not to be spiritual.” “This moral behaviour may seem to be universal but we all know that only Jews can really meet this standard, so while it may be applicable to all people, its observance still is uniquely Jewish.” Sometimes, people just reject these *mitzvot* as real *mitzvot*, part of the system. Simply “the wall” creates dissonance. As with all cases of dissonance, the initial response is to try to avoid it. The initial response is to avoid this dichotomy, to not see the distinction between the personal motivations of the self and this now, fully encountered, outside, and, perhaps even, conflicting system of Torah. Yet, “the wall” stands.

While a personal motivation has an important value in bringing someone to Torah, at some point in time it is important for one to realize that one’s observance of Torah must be in response to it being the Will of God and not, simply, the satisfaction of one’s personal drives. This, in fact, is the very value of “the wall.” It forces someone to recognize that Torah initiates from outside the person, from God. Yet, it is a challenge – and so the most common response is to attempt to ignore it through denial or deception. Alternatively, it can lead to a rejection of, if not all *mitzvot*, at least, the system. Rather than dropping everything, a process of “picking and choosing” develops. One follows the *mitzvot* that satisfy one’s personal motivations; one ignores the *mitzvot* that do not or that challenge one’s viewpoints. Of course, this “picking and choosing” may have existed already but, perhaps, up until now, under a veil of an allegiance to *Halachic* authority. It is this external unavoidable *Halachic* authority that is encountered at “the wall.”

The most common response is to reject this *Halachic* authority -- which, at least, honestly describes the situation -- or to create a fantasy about *Halacha* that allows this veil of allegiance to *Halachic* authority to be maintained. Both are problematic, but given these two responses, many people believe it is better to direct someone to the latter choice than the first one, especially since rejection could include rejection of *Halacha in totum*. There is fear of “the wall.” The result is a desire for it not to be encountered. The result is a fantasy that it does not exist. The result is that personal motivations take over the *Halachic* system. How often do we hear a statement that we should not mention a specific truth within Torah

as it will cause problems? On some level, I guess I would have to agree; you don't necessarily confront the most difficult areas of Torah understanding with a novice to the whole system. But when do you also ensure that these areas are confronted? that a person does confront his/her personal wall? Not confronting the wall also has problems – the truth of Torah is otherwise hidden. There may be a problem with mentioning specific truths within Torah before one can deal with them – but there is also a problem, in my mind an even greater problem, if the answer is to simply try to avoid the truth of Torah. The result is, simply and ultimately, not Torah.

Still, how is someone to properly respond? One could contend that one should simply forsake one's personal motivations and simply follow Torah as the directive from God. But what would motivate someone to do so? The only reason this person is interested in Torah, in the first place, is because its observance is perceived to satisfy significant personal drives. It is not easy to tell, even oneself, that one should simply follow the Torah because it is the command of God – for why should someone listen to God? This simply brings us back to the entire issue of personal motivation. As we define God through our personal motivations, we actually describe a deity that we can follow. The challenge of "the wall" is not just personal. The personal motivations that lead a person to Torah observance ultimately lead someone to define a deity to whom that person can relate, can define as A Being that should be – that is, pleurably -- followed. When one confronts "the wall", the response is not simply that the person may not want to do this *mitzvah*; it often is: how could God even command such a *mitzvah*? The issue is more than personal; it is philosophical, theological. At issue is one's very understanding of Torah.

This may be the very value of "the wall. It creates creative dissonance, questioning, a challenge of being. The ultimate value of "the wall" may not be in the solution that eventually unfolds but in its very initiation of a most important learning experience. As a result of "the wall", one begins to see God outside of oneself, begins to question that which he/she has always taken as a given. "Of course, God is moral, wants me to be moral and my understanding of morality is the universal given." "The wall" brings this all into question, with further questions that only demand further contemplation. Can God not be moral?

What is morality? Do my moral intuitions not have value? “The wall” is an important starting point in this process.

It is when a person confronts “the wall” that a person begins to recognize a dichotomy between oneself and Torah. It is from the dialectic that may emerge from this realization that a person can develop a consciousness of God outside of oneself, and develop an understanding of God-centred motivations (which, albeit, still have somewhat of a personal dimension). The process may, in fact, still include attempts to define certain *mitzvot* in a manner that is more in line with personal motivations, and attempts to reject certain *mitzvot* as legitimate parts of Torah because they challenge one’s personal perspectives. The bottom line is that “the wall” has created the realm of the question. The key is the confrontation of self. There is no simple solution to “the wall.” One cannot totally deny self because, without personal motivations, there is ultimately no connection to Torah, no ability to even understand and relate to God on the minimal level that we are able to achieve. It is my perceptions that ultimately form my language in attempting to define, for myself, God. One, though, must also be wary of self for one can also define God simply through the parameters of self. “The wall” forces one to see himself/herself as distinct from Torah – and to see Torah as distinct from self. We may not know where this recognition will take us, but the movement of thought that it creates is the most essential process of Torah development. While the general attitude and instinct is to avoid this encounter as a self-preservative act, truly encountering “the wall” is a necessary, forward-moving rite and privilege of Torah.

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