

There is a well-known clause in Jewish law that states that if one is preoccupied with the fulfillment of one Mitzvah, he is exempt from fulfilling any other positive commandment. For example if one is busy helping feed his elderly parents and a friend asks him to join him in visiting several sick patients in the hospital, he would not be expected to visit the sick patients because he is already busy fulfilling the commandment of honoring his parents. Although, there are many details and minutiae to this law, this is the general principle that governs our potential Mitzvot dilemmas or conflicts. There are many reasons given to explain the rationale behind this legal principle, however the Gerrer Rebbe, R. Yitzchak Meir Alter, offers a unique explanation based on the words of the verse in this week's Parsha.

The Torah tells us (18,5) "You shall watch my laws and my statutes to fulfill them, VeChay Bahem, and you shall live by them." The classic Chassidic explanation of this verse is that the Torah is telling us that the proper fulfillment of Mitzvot is with a sense of life and passion. Mitzvot cannot be done without feeling and vibrancy, they must be done with Chay, life and feeling. However, the Gerrer Rebbe sees a much greater obligation in this verse, not just must the Mitzvot be performed with a sense of life, but they must be performed literally with one's life. The Mitzvah should be completed even to the extent that it literally drains one of his life. However, the fact that the Mitzvah figuratively comes with this heavy price is not something to be dreaded or feared because this very verse also guarantees that, VeChay Behem, we will live by them.

The Rebbe sees a true performance of a Mitzvah as an act of death and rebirth. One should not hold back in the performance of any Mitzvah, for fear of overexertion or great discomfort, because that is the price of Mitzvot. In the view of the Rebbe, Mitzvot performed with any less than this complete devotion is simply not considered a Mitzvah. However, the Rebbe assures us that a new and better person will emerge safely and surely from the performance of this great deed. The verse demands life as the price for the Mitzvah, but also promises life as its reward.

The Rebbe explains that when one is preoccupied with a Mitzvah he is exempt from another Mitzvah, because in the middle of fulfilling a Mitzvah he has already pledged his life in the Mitzvah's fulfillment, however he has not received his promised life as reward yet. In this suspended state of animation between life and death how can one be expected to take on any new Mitzvot. He has already given his entire being to fulfilling the current Mitzvah, there is no spare energy left to even contemplate taking on another Mitzvah.

While the idea of literally dying in performance of a Mitzvah seems completely foreign if not outrageous to us, it certainly represents the ultimate ideal of a dedicated mindset. It may not seem like a desired or even likely outcome but at the very least by reminding us how the great Rebbes of yesteryear viewed their religious commitments, we should at least be inspired to aspire to their lofty level.

Shabbat Shalom
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