Toldot

A Single Letter Helps Us Understand Many Halachot

In Parshat Toldot, we have the famous dramatic scene when Yaakov presents himself to his father, Yitzchak. However, he wants Yitzchak to think Eisav is standing in front of him, not Yaakov. Confused, Yitzchak declares:

"הַקֹּל קוֹל יַעֲקֹב וְהַיָּדַיִם יְדֵי עֵשָׂו"
"The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau."

The Vilna Gaon notices that when the Torah says "הַקֹּל", it's ה, ק, ל without a ו, but then the next word, "קוֹל", is ק, ו, ל with a ו. It's remarkable - the same word repeated. In the first instance, it's ק, ל; in the second, it's ק, ו, ל.

The Vilna Gaon teaches that you should actually read it "הַקַל קוֹל", which means sometimes the voice can be weak. The power of the voice might not be as impactful as it could have been. So what exactly does he mean?

There are certain scenarios in which it is a mitzvah to eat something, but let's say somebody has that item without intending to perform the mitzvah; have they performed the mitzvah? For example, eating matzah on Pesach. If someone eats matzah just for the enjoyment of it, or perhaps they were force-fed some matzah on seder night, then they didn't intend to perform the mitzvah of eating matzah. In terms of halacha, the Rambam declares: they have performed the mitzvah. They don't have to eat matzah again after that on that evening.

But now, what happens with the mitzvah relating to sound? Let's say you're on your way to shul on Rosh Hashanah, and you hear the shofar being blown from a different shul, or from a house, on your journey - and you think to yourself, "I'm not going to concentrate on this because I'm going to hear shofar when I get to shul." You then arrive in shul, and you find the shofar has already been blown, or you're distracted, you have to go to look after your kids, and you come back, and there's no shofar blowing. And then you think, "Oh, but I did hear it on my way to shul." According to the Rambam, you haven't performed the mitzvah. You now need to go out of your way to hear it properly.

So why this difference between eating matzah without intention on the one hand, where you have performed it, and hearing the shofar without intention on the other hand, but you haven't performed it. The Maggid Mishnah explains brilliantly: with regard to eating, it's a fact. You digested the food. The mitzvah is to eat it. Nobody can argue with the fact that you ate that food. But why are there mitzvot to hear something? It's not because of the physical exercise that's involved. It's because Hashem wants us to internalise those sounds. So if you hear shofar and have no intention to perform the mitzvah, it hasn't made its mark on your heart, on your mind, on your soul, and therefore you have to hear shofar again.

This provides an important message for us relating to education, the spirit of Judaism, and living an elevated form of life. Hashem gives us all of these mitzvot so that we internalise their messages, so that we can transform ourselves thanks to what we hear. Therefore, when it comes to education, it's not good enough just to take pupils through the mechanical exercise of hearing a lesson, writing down notes, watching something. We need people to live their Yiddishkeit because it's not something which is just taught. It needs to be caught. And for that to transpire, people need to internalise the message with intention.

Shabbat Shalom.

This is a transcript of a video, which is available to view via chiefrabbi.org/dvar-torah