

In this week's Torah portion, Ekev, the Israelite people receive a charge. Moshe tells them, in Deuteronomy 10:12:

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה הָאֱלֹהִים שָׂאל מֵעַמּוֹ כִּי אִם־לִירְאָה אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל־דַּרְכָיו  
וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־לִבְבְךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ:

And now, O Israel, what does your God Hashem demand of you? Only this: to revere Hashem your God, to walk in all of their paths, to love and to serve Hashem your God with all your heart and soul. . .

Our first reaction when encountering this in Torah study was, “oh, is that all?” And in fact, in the Talmud, in Masechet Berachot, page 33b, the rabbis have a similar reaction – is acting in awe of the divine all of the time so very easy that is appropriate to say “This is all that is asked of you?” They resolve the conflict by saying such awe came easily to Moshe, who was delivering these instructions, therefore, it didn't occur to him that it might be rather a lot for the rest of us!

But even within the verse, it is clear that something big is being asked: “kol” “all” is repeated three times in this one verse. We are not just charges to walk in God's ways, as in other places in the Torah, but to walk in *all of* God's ways, to love and serve with *all* of our hearts and all of our souls.

What does this mean? Tomorrow, Ravi will explore the very large question of what we might mean when we talk about God, and how we deal with the often limiting and binary language that we use to describe something so transcendent.

For this evening, I want to consider what it might mean for us to accept this charge. This week, with thanks to Rabbi Aviva Richman, I encountered a commentary on this verse by Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner. This is Rabbi Richman's translation: "With all of your heart—with your two inclinations"— that is, integrating the binary of the “bad inclination” and “good inclination” into one entity.

“With all your life—even if [God] takes your life”—that is to say, integrating the binary of the categories of death and life into one entity.

“With all your might—with whatever measure [God] measures out for you”—that is to say, integrating the binaries of the general attributes to one entity.

The entire structure of the obligation [to love God with] “your whole life” in the Shema flows specifically from the notion of the similarity of the created to the Creator in terms of the attribute of unity...

Ravi tomorrow will be talking about the oneness of what we call God. According to Rabbi Hutner’s commentary, this charge invites us to internalize that oneness. The “all” that repeats so many times is not referring to the magnitude of the effort that we make, but the nature of it: that we seek to find divinity in all parts of our lives, including and perhaps especially in the aspects of our lives that might sometimes feel very far from divinity.

What is this “good inclination,” and “bad inclination” to which Rabbi Hutner refers? There is a strong tradition, discussed throughout the Talmud, the human beings are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but are inherently full of the possibility of both. The *yetzer hatov*, the good inclination, is restraint, the capacity to hold back from grabbing and grasping. The *yetzer hara*, often translated as the evil inclination, is understood to be the aspect of ourselves that is driven to want and reach for what is not already ours. Obviously, the fact of this drive, is not, in fact evil. The Talmud even contains several discussions about how necessary the *yetzer hara* is for our existence. In Masechet Yoma page 33b, the rabbis imagine that they have somehow captured and isolated the *yetzaer hara*, personified. But what happens? The gemara states: They imprisoned him for three days, then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it.” In Bereshit Rabbah, it is taught: without the *yetzer hara*, no man would build a house, get married and beget children. . .”

These teaching are caricatures, certainly, but they speak to a deep truth: the aspects of our own personalities that make us uncomfortable are actually vital to who we are. We can try to deny them and suffer or we can follow the charge of this week's parashah as interpreted by Rabi Hutner, and try to use our whole selves in service of the divine. If we rage, if we hunger, we can seek to recognize the divine connection within that rage and hunger, and channel it to an appropriate destination. This does not mean that we let our appetites runs unchecked, but it means that even, perhaps especially in the struggle to be in right relationship with appetite, there is divinity.

Many verses in our parashah insist that when everything in life is physically easiest, when we are prospering and at peace, that is when we are in the greatest danger of being complacent and ungenerous. Chapter 8 warns us: when you have prosperous vineyards and fine houses, beware, lest your heart grow haughty. . . and you say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." It is in those moments when we forget our obligations to each other, to the earth and to the divine.

Keeping Rabbi Hutner's commentary in mind, we can also apply this warning to our internal states: when we feel perfectly balanced, when we feel that we have overcome all of our internal struggles – those times might be the times when we are in danger of slipping into smugness, into judgment of others who struggle. But when there is internal struggle, when we know that we are imperfect, that we need connection – then we are able to be of service.

I do not want to glorify internal struggle in any of its forms – anxiety, addiction, grief, or any of the other ways it can show up. I do not claim that these are sent to us for some uplifting purpose. As Howard in Torah study commented yesterday, it is useless to ask, or to try to answer on another's behalf *why* anyone faces a particular difficult circumstance. But *what we do* with the challenges we face, *that* is a useful question.

This is why I always tell people at services to bring *all* of what you have to offer here. Holy space isn't for those who have figured out everything, who have gotten themselves perfectly ready for shabbat, logistically and spiritually. If it were, I, myself wouldn't be eligible to be here. Hashem wants our sacred service with *all* our hearts: with our exhaustion, with our resentments, with our petty rivalries and our grief, along with our gratitude and our joy. We create the holy space by bringing our struggles here, and then together transforming them into something more than what we can create on our own. Bring it all.

Shabbat shalom.