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The Whole or the Parts?

This week's Parsha thoughts are dedicated to the memory of Rav Adin Steinsaltz, z"l, whose writings inevitably stirred us to think anew. The rabbi's observations on this week's Parsha were no exception: Not only do they challenge us, but they also take us out of our comfort zone.

The opening line of the Parsha relates to one who goes out to battle with the enemy. For R. Steinsaltz, the "enemy" might well be the tendency to refer to the Torah as a glorified treatise on how to conduct our lives in humanitarian terms. For the way we view this week's Parsha, in particular, with its multitude of rules and regulations – and the way we conceive of the Torah altogether – is key to this discussion.

In Parshat Ki Tetze, there is a collection of divine directives that are so diverse (and sometimes seemingly at odds) that we cannot easily fathom what the essence of Hashem's rulings is. Moreover, from an examination of the abundant Mitzvot in the Parsha, it appears that the Torah makes no distinction between the gravity of one Mitzvah over another, whether it

refers to our relationship with Hashem or inter-personal relations, or whether it concerns major principles or seemingly marginal matters.

More unsettling, perhaps, is our understanding of the juxtaposition of "humanitarian" Mitzvot that protect fruit trees from being cut down in battle or animals from painful exertion alongside injunctions to forcefully wipe out Canaanite cities or the whole nation of Amalek.

The rabbi implies that one of the dangers of asking such questions that focus on particular Mitzvot is that the inquiry, in and of itself, might be indicative of a world-view that is narrow, if not stifling. One is reminded of the "figure-ground" debate in psychological circles whereby one questions when looking at a painting, whether it is better to view each of its items separately or view the whole picture, even if we cannot connect its parts.

Either way, R. Steinsaltz would caution: "It is far from simple to always give the Torah a friendly face." The rabbi is saying, in other words, that the Torah does not represent a corporate body that has to present a unified front or image. Paradoxically, however, the conglomerate of Mitzvot in the Parsha does enable us to see a bigger picture.

And what is that bigger picture? To cite Rav Steinsaltz, the Torah is not a book of remedies or even a guidebook for life: “The truth is that God’s commands are indeed merely decrees – and the only way to comprehend the Torah is as a bridge between us and God.”

So how do we reconcile seemingly contradictory ethics such as the “humane” approach to trees and animals with the aggressive, if not belligerent, destruction of cities? To that question, R. Steinsaltz leaves us with a quotation attributed to the Kotzke Rebbe, namely, that “A God who can be understood by anyone is not worth serving.”

In conclusion, Rabbi Steinsaltz would reiterate that the attempt to reconcile everything in the Torah, and to create a unified and complete picture, turns the Torah (and by implication God) “into a plaything.” Better to understand that the Torah is but the bridge to Hashem. “It is the bridge [the journey] that God wants us to walk; it is a path that reaches to the highest heavens.” ■

Shabbat Shalom!

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