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Study Before Action

אם בחקתי תלכו ואת מצותי תשמרו וגשיתם אתם

This week we will read two parshiot, בהר ובחוקתי, which are generally read together except for leap years and for some other very special circumstances. How does one observe this directive? The explanation given by many Torah commentators is the requirement to learn as much as one can in order to be able to do the mitzvot properly.

As anyone who has either taught or learned in a Yeshiva environment knows, there are two levels in learning. There is the individual who tries as hard and as often as he or she can, but finds it difficult to understand. Nevertheless, he has observed the mitzvah of trying to learn

(עמלות). There is indeed a higher level and that is the individual who devoted time and effort to learn in order to actually do the mitzvah. This is the conclusion of the Gemara in Kiddushin where Rav Tarfon and the elders are asked: What is considered a greater religious act to learn the mitzvot or to actually do them? At first, a dispute is recorded. Rav Tarfon says that actually doing a mitzvah is greater and Rav Akiva says that learning the details of a Mitzvah is greater. The Sages then concluded that learning is greater. They based this on the fact that only by understanding what you are supposed to do is the Mitzvah performed properly. After you know the Mitzvah details properly, you will be given the proper reward.

Tosafot asks an essential question. If the purpose of learning is to eventually do the actual mitzvah then it seems the actual performance of the mitzvah should be considered greater. They provide a fun-

damental answer to this question. First a person must learn because without that he will be considered an עמ הארץ but after he has learned and also performed the mitzvah, the actual performance is given greater credit.

In regards to the



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heights a person can reach if he learns constantly, the אור החיים writes that when G-d created man he was not put on earth to remain a static individual without ambition to reach greater heights as this would be considered a fundamental failure in a religious person's life. Rather he should always be trying to improve himself. By learning and doing the mitzvot properly and with understanding, a human being reaches levels of existence that even the angels who are up in heaven do not reach. This was seen clearly in the story of Eliyahu, the prophet, who went up to heaven in a blaze of glory. For us, as just plain human beings, we will be given the ultimate credit by the Almighty for learning as well as we can and then doing the mitzvah as best as we can.

One more fundamental question needs to be answered: why do we not understand the rationale behind all the commandments? In most legal systems around the world, laws and amendments have a rational basis. Why can't we wear linen and wool together? Why can't we eat a cheeseburger?

Many of the meforshim say that the Almighty is testing us all the time to see if we will follow his commands only because He told us to do them, not because they make sense. According to the Ramban all 613 Mitzvot have rational, beneficial reasons, even if they are currently concealed from us. He also states that some human beings such as Moshe Rabbeinu could grasp their logic, and these deep reasons may be revealed to all of us in the future when the Moshiach comes. Hopefully, after waiting so long for his coming, may we all be rewarded soon with his appearance. ■

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