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Parshat Acharei Mot: To Life!

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After weeks of focus on purity and impurity, *Parshat Achrei Mot* shifts to a focus on obedience. The first chapters address the penitence rituals of Yom Kippur; the latter the "holiness code" outlining sexual boundaries. In between, a set of verses famously calls for the separation of the Israelites from other nations and their commitment to God's commands.

1 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: I am the Lord, your God. 3 Like the practice of the land of Egypt, in which you dwelled, you shall not do, and like the practice of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, you shall not do, and you shall not follow their statutes. 4 You shall fulfill My ordinances and observe My statutes, to follow them. I am the Lord, your God. 5 You shall observe My statutes and My ordinances, which a man shall do and live by them. I am the Lord.

א וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: ג
כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבַתְּם־בָּהּ לֹא
תַעֲשׂוּ וְכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ־כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְבִיא
אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּבְחֻקֵּיהֶם לֹא תִלְכּוּ: ד
אֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי תַּעֲשׂוּ וְאֶת־חֻקֵּי תִשְׁמְרוּ לְלַקֵּת
בְּהֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: ה וְשִׁמְרַתֶּם אֶת־חֻקֵּי
וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אִתְּם הָאָדָם וְחִי בְּהֶם
אֲנִי ה' (ויקרא יח: א-ה)

With Egypt behind them and Canaan ahead of them, the Jewish people are enjoined to forge an identity of otherness. As the *midrash* says, not to fall prey to the routines of the past nor to be allured by the novelties of the future, but to pledge allegiance to the path of the Jewish God alone. "You shall fulfill [only] My ordinances and observe [only] My statutes," says God. The consequence of doing so is that "[you] shall live by them" ("*v'chai ba'hem*").

This final phrase, "*v'chai ba'hem*," took on a distinctly *halakhic* meaning in the Talmud. To live by the word of God is to not die on account of it.

R. Ishmael said: Whence do we know that if a man was bidden, 'Engage in idolatry and save your life,' that he should do so, and not be slain? From the verse, ["You shall observe My statutes and My ordinances," which if a man do] he shall "live by them" [Lev. 18:5]--but not die by them. (BT Sanhedrin 74a; BT Avodah Zara 27b)

אמר רבי ישמעאל: מנין שאם אמרו לו
לאדם עבוד עבודה זרה ואל תהרג מנין
שיעבוד ואל יהרג? תלמוד לומר (ויקרא
כ"ב) וחי בהם ולא שימות בהם. (סנהדרין
ע"ב; עבודה זרה כז:)

In the event that one is asked under duress to transgress a law or die, choose life over the law, says R. Ishmael. Do not give up your own life so that God's dictates might live. There are limits to obedience and religious zeal. Do not be overly pious.

Complicated as these laws of competing interests become, the fundamental claim of this and similar legal texts is that human life trumps divine command. Where they conflict--when a human life is at risk on shabbat, for example--side with life and do whatever it takes to preserve it. Echoing our verse and channeling BT Yoma 85b, the *Aruch HaShulchan* codifies the following as law in perpetuity:

Mortal danger defers the [laws of the] Sabbath, as the verse states "[you] shall live by them" and not die by them. (*Aruch HaShulchan*, Orach Chaim 328:1).

פקוח נפש דוחה את השבת דכתיב וחי
בהם ולא שימות בהם. (ערה"ש או"ח
שכח:א)

"To live by" the law is to resist the pulls of deathly fundamentalism in favor of a more sober, life-affirming path.

But what does it really entail to live "by" (or, alternatively, "in") God's commands? For these legal scholars, it means to physically endure; to stay alive long enough to perform the next obligation. For mystical and Chassidic thinkers, though, it came to mean something quite different. "*V'chai ba'hem*" is a call to greater life--not to live "by" God's word, but to gain life by virtue of it.

Consider the words of the *Zohar*:

"And you shall live by them." Happy is one who fulfills the commandments of the Torah, for they enable a person to complete his/her spirit and soul in this world and the next...Anyone who contends with Torah, contends with life.

וחי בהם. אשרי מי שזוכה להשלים מצוות התורה, שגורם לאדם להשלים רוחו ונשמתו בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא...כל מי שמתדל בתורה משתדל בחיים.

Or the *Sefat Emet*:

"And you shall live by them." Through the fulfillment of the commandments, one can bind oneself to life, to the Holy Blessed One who is the life of Life.

וחי בהם. על ידי עשית המצוות יכולים להתחבר אל החיים, אל הקב"ה שהוא חי החיים.

To live *in* Torah is to become more alive, more awake, more integrated, and more complete through it. For the *Zohar*, just the engagement with Torah alone can yield transformative results (though fulfillment is privileged). For the *Sefat Emet*, action is the key. By doing *mitzvot*, we align ourselves with the Source of Life and thereby draw ourselves closer to life--its mystery, color, intensity, and grand complexity. In the process, says the *Sfat Emet* repeatedly throughout his work, we gain "חיות," vitality. "*V'chai Ba'Hem*" thus becomes a charge to utilize Torah, the Tree of Life, as the grounds for one's deeper engagement with life, with the dynamism of spiritual awakening. It is not offered as a restraint on religious passion, as argued by rabbis of the Talmud, but as a prod toward ever-greater passion.

How does the Tree of Life bind one to life? The *Shelah Ha-Kadosh*, Rabbi Isaiah Horovitz, writes:

"Which a man [*ha'adam*] shall do and live by them." It seems that the obligation of *mitzvot* aims at recognizing one's essential humanity, one's constitution as body and soul.

אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאָדָם וְחַי בָּהֶם. יִרְאֶה שְׂאִין חוֹבֵת מַעֲשֵׂה הַמִּצְוֹת רַק בְּהִיּוֹתוֹ אָדָם, כְּלוֹמֵר מְחוּבֵר מְגוּף וְנַפֵּשׁ...

When the wisdom of Torah reveals to us to our essential, universal humanity; when we can see in the details of Torah an engagement with the highest and the lowest aspects of our beings; when we use our actions to root us even more deeply in the world, then we might experience the "חיות," the vitality, of "*v'chai ba'hem*." May it be so.



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