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Miryom *bas* Munish *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Meaning of Life

PARSHAS MATTOS-MASEI 5778

There is a well-known Yiddish expression that provides a fairly accurate assessment: “*S’felt nisht meshuga’im in de velt* – There are no lack of crazies in the world.” Thus we find, for example, that there exists in the secular world a relatively popular movement featuring individuals who have foresworn childbearing. They may in fact have an inherent longing to bear children, but they also have concerns about the trees. Human beings have various needs – habitation, for instance – which require the use of lumber. More people, then, will mean less trees. And so, to address this issue, they engage in magnanimous self-sacrifice, forfeiting their right to bring children into the world in order to protect the foliage.

Now, it is true that not everyone goes to such extremes. Nonetheless, the general view of the value of human life held by a large segment of the population does not square with the Torah’s view – a point made clear by this week’s *parshah*.

Object of Flattery

There is a certain quality known as “*chanifah* – flattery”, a negative trait that Chazal urge us to avoid. Most often, it entails unwarranted and inappropriate praise and regard, which someone may direct toward a wicked individual in an attempt to curry favor.

But this trait appears in this week’s *parshah* in a somewhat unusual context – the prohibition of murder. Not only that, but the object of the *chanifah* is not even human. The Torah exhorts that a murderer not be granted unwarranted leniencies, and so urges that the mandated punishments indeed be carried out. The *passuk* concludes this warning in the following way: וְלֹא־תַחַנְּפוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם בָּהּ כִּי הַדָּם הוּא יַחַנְּיף אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא־יָכַפֵּר לָדָם אֲשֶׁר שָׁפַדְבָּהּ כִּי־אִם בַּדָּם שִׁפְכוּ – “And you shall not ‘flatter’ the land in which you reside; for it is blood that ‘flatters’ the land. The land shall receive no atonement for the blood that was spilled therein – except through the blood of the perpetrator” (*Bamidbar* 35:33). What could this possibly mean? In what way is it possible to “flatter” the earth – and what is the connection to murder?

R’ Moshe Feinstein (*Darash Moshe*) addresses this issue by taking a closer look at the general prohibition against murder. The truth is that this is a universal matter, of course; countries all over the world have laws on the books outlawing murder. Nonetheless, R’ Moshe explains, there is a fundamental difference as to the underlying rationale behind such a prohibition. The nations of the world enact such laws primarily for the purpose of maintaining order in their societies. This we see from the well-known Mishnah in *Avos* (3:2), which states:

הוּי מִתְפַּלֵּל בְּשִׁלוּמָהּ שֶׁל מַלְכוּת, שְׂאֵלְמָלָא מוֹרָאָה אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בְּלֵעוּ.

“Pray for the welfare of the government; for if not for (people’s) fear of it, each person would swallow his neighbor alive.”

By contrast, the Torah’s prohibition against murder goes beyond a simple law-and-order calculation; it is predicated, instead, on the ideal of *chashivus ha’adam* – the inherent importance and value of man.

Assessing Value

There are significant ramifications to these varying rationales – with often far-reaching consequences. What happens, for example, when a certain person or group of people are viewed as being detrimental to society? If one’s entire conception of the prohibition of murder stems from keeping societal order, it would seem not to apply in this instance. And, in fact, such a determination has been made many times throughout history – with disastrous results on both the individual and communal levels. Indeed, how many lives have been lost on account of pointless wars intended for conquest or displacement of certain peoples? But in the Torah’s view, it makes no difference whether a person is successful and productive or not; by virtue of the fact that he is a *tzelem Elokim* – (made in) the image of G-d – he has inherent and inestimable value.

Sadly, another serious area in which this notion arises is regarding end-of-life issues. This is a sensitive area, of course, but it is one in which the difference of approach is quite glaring. For if one lacks a proper appreciation of the inherent value of life, he will be much less likely to prolong it. But the Torah takes the polar opposite approach, recognizing that every life is precious and every second of life is precious. Thus, *halachah* dictates that even a *goses* (one whose passing is imminent) must be treated with utmost care; one cannot even touch or move any part of his body for fear of hastening his death. Doing so is tantamount to murder (*cf. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dei’ah 339:1*).

What happens, then, if someone follows the approach that does not accord inherent value to life, but views the prohibition of murder solely through the lens of maintaining societal order? As we have seen, the consequences can be quite sobering. What emerges, then, is that such people effectively grant more credence and value to material prosperity and “world-order” than to human life.

And this, asserts R’ Moshe, is what is meant by the Torah’s exhortation: “*V’lo sachanifu es ha’aretz* – Do not ‘flatter’ the land”. A society that grants primacy to trees over the lives of human beings has obviously demonstrated its order of priorities; they have effectively “flattered the land”, considering it more valuable than human life.

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