



Enlivened Living • Achrei Mot

In a time of heightened antisemitism with calls for death, violence, and disobedience on college campuses, it is important to highlight that the Torah connects and promotes following its laws and values with a commitment to life. Knowing how influenced human beings are by their surrounding cultures, toward the end of *Parshat Achrei Mot*, God exhorts the Israelites not to imitate the practices they observed in Egypt, nor mimic the influences of Canaan when they were to enter the land. Success will only be achieved by obeying the laws and rules of God: “These are the commands you shall do and live by them (*ve-chai bahem*)” (Lev. 18:5). By analyzing the various interpretations of this verse, we glean several essential insights into what it means to “live by them.”

Understanding the verse from a broad, sociological perspective, Nahmanides proposes that Jewish law provides “life” to society. The social rules delineated in the Torah offer a framework for a just and flourishing state. Instead of focusing on society, Rashi stresses the individual. Basing himself on a midrash, Rashi assumes “live by them” can’t be referring to life in this world. As is evident empirically, all people eventually die, even those who follow Jewish law. Therefore, the message is that by following these laws in this world, an individual is granted eternal life in the World to Come.

In contrast to Rashi’s metaphysical emphasis on the next world, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,

based on the Talmud, demonstrates how this verse highlights the virtue Judaism places on this worldly-living. The Talmud generates an operative legal principle from the verse: “‘You shall live by them’ - and not die by them” (*Yoma* 85b). In dire situations, all laws of the Torah (with the exception of three), can and should be violated in order to preserve human life.

In *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Soloveitchik marks this principle as an essential one to Jewish ethics. The laws of the Torah can never “oppose the laws of life and reality, for were they to clash with this world and were they to negate the value of concrete, physiological-biological existence, then they would contain not mercy, lovingkindness, and peace but vengeance and wrath.” It is precisely because of the emphasis on living that, “Temporal life becomes transformed into eternal life; it becomes sanctified and elevated with eternal holiness.” The Torah, reflecting God’s kindness and beneficence, would not endorse rules that contravene the value of human life.

The Torah promotes life, not just socially, as suggested by Nahmanides, eternally, according to Rashi, or biologically, in the view of Rabbi Soloveitchik, but in a psychological sense as well. Commenting on the verse “And man became a living soul (*nefesh chaya*)” (Gen. 2:7), Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (*Netziv*) writes that the word “living” does not just connote alive as opposed to dead, but indicates “lively, in contrast to depressed (*atzuv*).” “A Jew, born to serve God,” he writes, “is

chai only if he fulfills this mission of his life.” One can be biologically alive but languishing internally. Professor Nehama Leibowitz applies Netziv’s insight to our verse. It is precisely through the performance of *mitzvot* and the fulfillment of one’s divine purpose that one feels invigorated.

While the Torah provides a framework for prosperity, an individual also has the responsibility to imbue vitality and passion into his or her observance. Rabbi Pinhas Halevi Horowitz reads the verse not as an assurance of life but as a directive to perform the commandments *with* life! Our souls should teem with dynamic desire while serving God. Our bodies should radiate a vivacious

vigor and verve. In positive psychological research, the character strength of zest is one of the few traits that is consistently correlated with well-being and happiness. It is precisely through exuding exuberant energy in the performance of commandments that we demonstrate our passion for life and feel enlivened.

This is perhaps one effective method of counter-protest to the hatred with which we are confronted. Cherish life, embody Torah laws and values, and enthusiastically live a spiritual life worthy of the biological gift of life granted to us by God.

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Character Challenge: Choose one *mitzvah* this week and perform it with extra energy and enthusiasm. Reflect on how this impacts your happiness levels, your feelings toward that *mitzvah*, and your overall connection to God, Torah, and the Jewish people.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “Moses pleads with all the eloquence at his disposal, at times pressing against the very limits of speech. This faith I have communicated to you from heaven, he says, is not a religion of tragedy, a melody scored in the minor key, a story written in tears, a lament. It is a celebration of life. Time and again he emphasizes: “These are the commands you shall do and live by them.” “All of you who hold fast to God are alive today.” “See I have set before you the blessing and the curse, life and death, therefore choose life.” (“Judaism’s Greatest Challenge,” *Covenant & Conversation*).