



*Ve-halakhta Bi-drakhav*: Walking in God's Ways  
By David Silverberg

Much of Parashat Ki-Tavo is devoted to the description of the *berakhot u-kelalot* – the blessings and curses Moshe promises will befall *Benei Yisrael* as a result of their compliance with, or disregard for, God's laws. Amidst Moshe's presentation of the blessings, we find the following verse: "The Lord will establish you as His sacred nation, as He has promised you, because you will observe the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways" (28:9).

According to Maimonides, the verse's final two words – "*ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*" – introduce a Biblical command to "walk in God's ways." We cite here from Maimonides' *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*asei* 8):

He commanded us to resemble Him, may He be exalted, as much as possible, and this is what is meant when it says, "and you [shall] walk in His ways." This command has already been repeated, when it says, "to walk in all His ways" (Devarim 11:22), which has been explained to mean that just as the Almighty is called "gracious," so shall you be gracious; just as the Almighty is called "compassionate," so shall you be compassionate; just as the Almighty is called "pious," so shall you be pious. This command has also been repeated in a different formulation, when it says, "You shall follow the Lord" (Devarim 13:5), which has been interpreted to mean [acting in a manner resembling] the good conduct and respectable characteristics through which God, may He be exalted, is figuratively described.

The verses that speak of "walking in God's ways" or "following God" refer to an obligation to act in a manner that corresponds to the conduct ascribed to the Almighty. The divine attributes mentioned in the Torah are to serve as the model for us to follow. We are enjoined to develop our personalities in accordance with these qualities, such as those spelled out here by Maimonides – graciousness, compassion and piety. This interpretation of these verses is based on a number of Talmudic sources, including Masekhet Sota 14a, and the *Sifrei* to Devarim 11:22.

#### Condition or Command?

Before exploring the actual content and demands of this *mitzva*, let us first consider the verse to which Maimonides points as its primary source: "The Lord will establish you as His sacred nation, as He has promised you, because you will observe the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways." At first glance, the clause "and walk in His ways" appears in this verse not in the imperative form, but rather as part of the condition for earning divine blessing. Moshe informs *Benei Yisrael* that God will bestow upon them the good fortune described in the earlier verses if they observe the commandments and walk in God's ways. "*Ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*" thus refers to a condition, rather than a command. How, then, could Maimonides read these words as the source of a Biblical obligation?

This question was posed to Maimonides' son, Rabbi Avraham ben Ha-Rambam, and his response appears in Rabbi Avraham's collection of responsa (no. 63). He answers, very simply, that the inclusion of *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* as part of the condition automatically renders it a command. After all, this section of blessing begins, "If you heed the voice of the Lord your God, observing and

performing all His commands which I enjoin upon you today... all these blessings will come upon you” (28:1-2). By extension, then, when Moshe later tells *Benei Yisrael* that they will earn these blessings “because you will observe the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways,” “walking in His ways” must be included under “observing and performing all His commands.” If, indeed, one must follow the Almighty’s example as a condition to achieve the good fortune described in this section, then this endeavor must constitute a Biblical command.

### Defining the *Mitzva*

Rabbi Avraham ben Ha-Rambam addresses yet another question, as well, regarding his father’s decision to include *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* in his listing of the *mitzvot*. Rabbi Avraham’s questioners asked why this inclusion does not violate the fourth of Maimonides’ guidelines for listing the *mitzvot*, which mandates that generic exhortations to observe the Torah are not included among the 613 commandments. Maimonides’ list consists only of the Torah’s *mitzvot* themselves, and not the Torah’s warnings to abide by the *mitzvot*. Seemingly, “*ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*” is exactly that – an exhortation to *Benei Yisrael* to observe the Torah’s commands, which embody the “ways of God.” Why, then, did Maimonides count this obligation among the 613 Biblical commands, if it refers to the observance of all the *mitzvot*?

Rabbi Avraham responds with two answers. Firstly, he notes that his father simply followed the oral tradition’s reading of the verse, whereby it does not merely reiterate the importance of *mitzva* observance, but rather demands that we endeavor to follow the Almighty’s example. Rabbi Avraham digresses briefly onto the general issue of our acceptance of the oral tradition as transmitted in the Talmudic writings, and mentions the fierce controversy between traditional Judaism and Karaite teachings on this very point. Jews are bound to accept the halakhic interpretations of the oral tradition, even if the straightforward reading of the text yields a different conclusion. Therefore, since *Chazal* interpret “*ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*” to mean specifically following the Almighty’s example of conduct, rather than a generic exhortation, Maimonides accordingly listed this obligation as a separate *mitzva*.

Secondly, Rabbi Avraham adds, the verse’s syntax warrants reading “*ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*” as a specific imperative, rather than a general warning. The first section of the verse, Rabbi Avraham argues, already exhorts *Benei Yisrael* to observe the commandments generally: “because you will observe the commandments of the Lord your God.” Therefore, when Moshe adds, “and walk in his ways,” he must refer to something besides general observance of the *mitzvot*. Hence, *Chazal* – and Maimonides – naturally understood this clause as introducing a specific obligation to conduct one’s life in accordance with the qualities exhibited by the Almighty.

What remains unclear, however, is what precisely this *mitzva* entails. Recall that Maimonides cited Talmudic sources defining this obligation as follows: “just as the Almighty is called ‘gracious,’ so shall you be gracious; just as the Almighty is called ‘compassionate,’ so shall you be compassionate; just as the Almighty is called ‘pious,’ so shall you be pious.” Several scholars have noted that this obligation, to act kindly and compassionately towards others, appears superfluous, as Maimonides also lists as a separate *mitzva* the famous Biblical proverb, “*Ve-ahavta le-rei’akha kamokha*” – “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (Vayikra 19:18). We cite here Maimonides’ definition of this *mitzva* in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*asei* 206):

He commanded us that we should each love one another as we love ourselves, and that one’s love and sensitivity towards his fellow should be like one’s love and sensitivity for himself with regard to his money, body and everything in his possession: “If he wishes us, then I wish it; and anything I wish for myself, I wish for him, as well.”

Seemingly, this obligation demands acting graciously and compassionately, the very qualities enumerated by Maimonides as the requirements imposed by the obligation to “walk in God’s ways.”

How, then, should we understand these two *mitzvot*? What demands are made by *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* that are not already covered by *ve-ahavta le-rei'akha kamokha*?

Rabbi J. David Bleich (in an article that appeared in *Yekara De-chayim*, a memorial volume for the late Rabbi Chayim Yaakov Goldwicht) detected the basis of the distinction between these two *mitzvot* in a passage elsewhere in Maimonides' writings. Maimonides discusses *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* in the Hilkhot Dei'ot section of *Mishneh Torah* (1:6), where, like in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, he points to the qualities of graciousness and compassion as the practical requirements imposed by this *mitzva*. In the following passage (1:7), he adds: "How should one accustom himself to these qualities until they can be attributed to him? He should... repeat them constantly until these actions are easy for him and entail no exertion on his part, and he establishes these qualities in his soul." It appears that *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* demands more than acting kindly and sensitively; it requires that a person become a kind and sensitive person. Maimonides speaks here not in terms of acting on behalf of others, but rather honing one's personality to the point where he becomes innately kind and gracious, and acts of kindness and compassion are second nature.

Herein lies the difference between loving one's neighbor as oneself and imitating the ways of God. The former belongs to the group of commandments referred to as *bein adam la-chaveiro* – between man and his fellow, demanding treatment of others at a standard one expects for himself. *Ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*, by contrast, may be described as a *mitzva bein adam le-atzmo* – an obligation one bears towards himself. It enjoins the individual to refine his character to the point where he may be described with the same adjectives used in reference to the Almighty – kind, gracious, compassionate, and so on. Thus, if a person begrudgingly or reluctantly does a favor for another, he has indeed fulfilled the obligation to "love your fellow as yourself," but he has yet to abide by the commandment of *imitatio dei*, to resemble God. So long as one must struggle and exert himself to overcome his selfish inclination and give of himself to others, he has not become "compassionate" by nature, and therefore he has yet to fulfill the obligation of *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*.

If so, then the distinction between *ve-ahavta le-rei'akha kamokha* and *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* is the distinction between the internal and external realms, between one's conduct and one's essence. "Love your fellow as yourself" mandates affording others the courtesy and respect one expects from them, whereas "walking in His ways" demands a lifelong process of character refinement and the reversal of the otherwise innate human tendency to egotism.

A different distinction was suggested by Rabbi Menachem Schneersohn, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe (*Likutei Sichot*, vol. 34, pp. 157-8), who focused on the element of motive. In his view, the obligation to "love your fellow as yourself" demands that one act kindly, whereas *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* mandates that this conduct stem from the higher purpose of *imitatio dei*, rather than from sheer humanistic impulse. Rabbi Schneersohn draws upon an important chapter in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (1:54), where Maimonides develops the fundamental distinction between divine and human conduct. He asserts that God experiences no emotion, and thus any action He performs results not from any impulsive feeling of love or rage, for example, but rather from a purely objective calculation which determines the proper mode of conduct under the given circumstances:

We see, e.g., how well He provides for the life of an embryo of living beings; how He endows with certain faculties both the embryo itself and those who have to rear it after its birth, in order that it may be protected from death and destruction, guarded against all harm, and assisted in the performance of all that is required [for its development]. Similar acts, when performed by us, are due to a certain emotion and tenderness called mercy and pity. God is, therefore, said to be merciful; e.g., "Like as a father is merciful to his children, so the Lord is merciful to them that fear Him" (Tehillim 103:13)... Such instances do not imply that God is influenced by a feeling of mercy, but that acts similar to those which a father performs for his son, out of pity, mercy and real affection, emanate from God solely for the benefit of His pious men, and are by no means the result of any impression or change... His actions towards mankind also include great calamities, which overtake individuals and bring death to them, or affect whole families and even entire regions, spread death,

destroy generation after generation, and spare nothing whatsoever. Hence there occur inundations, earthquakes, destructive storms, expeditions of one nation against the other for the sake of destroying it with the sword and blotting out its memory, and many other evils of the same kind. Whenever such evils are caused by us to any person, they originate in great anger, violent jealousy, or a desire for revenge. God is therefore called, because of these acts, “jealous,” “revengeful,” “wrathful”...that is to say, He performs acts similar to those which, when performed by us, originate in certain psychological dispositions...they are in accordance with the guilt of those who are to be punished, and not the result of any emotion; for He is above all defect! The same is the case with all divine acts; though resembling those acts which emanate from our passions and psychological dispositions, they are not due to anything superadded to His essence.

Later, Maimonides calls upon authority figures to follow the Almighty’s example in this respect:

Acts [of punishment] must be performed by him moderately and in accordance with justice, not merely as an outlet of his passion. He must not let loose his anger, nor allow his passion to overcome him; for all passions are bad, and they must be guarded against as far as it lies in man’s power. At times and towards some persons he must be merciful and gracious, not only from motives of mercy and compassion, but according to their merits; at other times and towards other persons he must evince anger, revenge, and wrath in proportion to their guilt, but not from motives of passion.

A leader’s treatment of his subjects must resemble God’s treatment of all mankind. He must act kindly or harshly in accordance with the objective standards of justice and national concerns, rather than to release his emotions.

Rabbi Schneersohn suggests extending Maimonides’ admonition to the *mitzva* of *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*. This obligation calls upon the Jew to – like the Almighty – act intelligently and calculatedly, rather than on impulse. “Love your fellow as yourself” demands performing acts of kindness, but *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* instructs doing so in a manner resembling God’s acts of kindness, namely, with careful thought and consideration. It warns against impulsive conduct of any kind – even impulsive kindness and compassion – since under different circumstances one’s rash instincts will result in acts of violence and cruelty. Only through careful thought and consideration can one hope that he acts with propriety; instinctive, emotion-driven behavior may at times coincide with the proper reaction warranted by a given situation, but in other instances could prove disastrous.

#### *Ve-halakhta Bi-drakhav* and the Doctrine of the Mean

The Lubavitcher Rebbe applies his understanding of *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* to resolve the confusion that arises from Maimonides’ discussion in *Mishneh Torah*. As mentioned earlier, Maimonides addresses this topic in *Hilkhot Dei’ot* and defines the obligation in similar terms as he did in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*. Surprisingly, however, in this context he includes under this *mitzva* an entirely different concept, as well, that of the *mida beinonit*, often referred to as “the doctrine of the mean.” In the opening chapter of *Hilkhot Dei’ot*, Maimonides establishes that one must always conduct himself moderately, with respect to every character trait (with the exception of anger and arrogance, as he clarifies in chapter 2 of *Hilkhot Dei’ot*). One must obviously share his possessions with others and act generously, but so must he avoid reckless squandering of his assets. The Torah certainly frowns upon excessive physical and material indulgence, but it likewise discourages self-denial and self-inflicted poverty.

In concluding his presentation of this doctrine (*Hilkhot Dei’ot* 1:5), Maimonides writes, “We are commanded to follow these paths of moderation, and these are the appropriate, proper paths, as it says, ‘*Ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*.’” In this passage, Maimonides defines this *mitzva* as establishing the doctrine of the mean, which demands moderate behavior. And yet, in the very next sentence, Maimonides reiterates the definition he had presented in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*: “This is what they [the

Talmudic Sages] taught in explaining this command: just as He is called gracious, so must you be gracious; just as He is called compassionate, so must you be compassionate...” He thus appears to draw two obligations from the single *mitzva* of *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*: to conduct oneself moderately in all respects, and to follow the Almighty’s example of sensitivity, compassion and so on. How do these two values stem from the same command?

Rabbi Schneersohn resolves this inconsistency in light of his definition of *ve-halalkhta bi-drakhav*, as mandating calculated, rather than rash and instinctive, behavior. He writes:

Extreme behavior (with respect to all character traits) generally stems from a stirring (of the heart), which does not allow any room for contrary behavior, and it lacks the mental discretion needed to determine whether such conduct is appropriate or not in the given situation; it therefore brings a person to the “extremes”; but when a person acts with these qualities in order “to resemble Him to the best of his ability,” and thus his acting with these qualities naturally does not evolve (merely) out of a stir of the heart, but rather from aiming for and complying with the truth in these qualities (as they are with respect to the Almighty), he then grabs hold of the moderate measure in each and every character trait...

“Moderate conduct,” according to the Rebbe, means sensible conduct, which is epitomized by the Almighty, who acts based solely on truth and objective standards, rather than emotional instinct. Understandably, then, the obligation of *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* includes not only the development of a kind, benevolent character, but also the requirement to maintain balance and moderation in all respects. When a person measures his conduct with sound reason and careful consideration, rather than be driven exclusively by emotional drives and tendencies, he is following the example established by the Almighty and will conduct himself with moderation, in accordance with Maimonides’ doctrine of the mean.