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Parashat Vayakhel 2008

We read in Parashat Vayakhel that Moshe assembled the nation to inform them of God's command to build a *Mishkan* and to request the donation of materials for this purpose. He instructs that "*kol nediv libo*" – "everyone generous of heart" (35:5) – should bring the required materials to the artisans assigned to construct the *Mishkan* and its accessories.

The Talmud (Shevuot 26b) derives from this phrase – *nediv libo* – that a mental commitment to make a donation to *hekdesh* (the Temple treasury, or an animal sacrifice) is binding. In the Book of Devarim (23:22-24), the Torah establishes an obligation to fulfill a verbal pledge to bring an offering to the Temple. Here in Parashat Vayakhel, the Gemara instructs, the Torah alludes to the obligation to fulfill mental pledges, as well. Even if a person was "generous of heart" – meaning, he decided in his mind to make an offering or donation to *hekdesh* – he is bidden to fulfill his pledge.

Later scholars debated the precise parameters of this *halakha*. Some understood from a comment of Rashi in Masekhet Kiddushin (41b) that a person can bestow the status of *hekdesh* upon an object by force of a mental pledge. Thus, for example, if a person decides in his mind to offer a certain animal as an *ola* sacrifice, the animal is instantly endowed with the status of *hekdesh*, and all the restrictions and laws relevant to consecrated animals already apply. From Maimonides' codification of this law, however, it appears that he disagreed:

With regard to vows and pledges, one does not have to verbalize with his lips; rather, [even] if he concluded in his mind and did not verbalize with his lips – he is obligated. For example, if he concluded in his mind that this [animal] is an *ola* or that he will bring an *ola*, he is obligated to bring it.

(Hilkhot Ma'aseh Ha-korbanot 14:12)

Maimonides speaks here only in terms of an obligation to bring an *ola*; he makes no reference to the endowment of sacrificial status upon an animal by making a mental commitment. Thus, as noted by a number of writers, Maimonides appears to maintain that a mental commitment suffices to establish an obligation, but is not capable of endowing an animal with the status of *hekdesh* as one does through verbal designation.

Halakha affords significance to a person's unspoken thoughts and attitudes, while at the same time acknowledging their limited impact in comparison to words and deeds. That a person can create a halakhic obligation through an unspoken decision indicates that thoughts cannot be ignored and dismissed. A concrete decision made in one's mind, even if it goes unarticulated, is a significant mental act to which a person becomes bound. Nevertheless, feelings and thoughts are far less influential than the spoken word. Thoughts can affect a person, but they do not have the same transformational effect of words and actions, as reflected by the inability of a mental decision to endow an item

with halakhic sanctity. The Torah's laws extend to a person's mind, but are most certainly not limited to them; a Jew cannot fulfill his religious obligations in their entirety through thoughts and emotions. Only by interacting with the world and its inhabitants through words and deeds – in addition to devoting his mind and heart to God – can one leave a truly lasting impact upon it, and thereby fulfill the mission assigned to us by the Torah.

In the final chapter of his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides addresses a pair of verses in the Book of Yirmiyahu (9:22-3) in which the prophet declares in the Name of God, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but he that glories shall glory in this – that he understand and know Me..." Maimonides infers from this verse that the knowledge of God "denotes the highest aim of man" and is "the only perfection which we should seek." Later, however, Maimonides notes that Yirmiyahu's prophecy does not conclude with the words "understand and know Me." It rather continues, "for I am the Lord who exercises loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth – for in these things I delight." Maimonides comments:

The object of the above passage is therefore to declare, that the perfection, in which man can truly glory, is attained by him when he has acquired – as far as this is possible for man – the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His Providence, and of the manner in which it influences His creatures in their production and continued existence. Having acquired this knowledge he will then be determined always to seek loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, and thus to imitate the ways of God.

The work of the mind – attaining comprehensive knowledge of God – does not complete man's mission on earth. This work must be followed by a commitment to act upon that knowledge by following the Almighty's example of "loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness."