

Date: 18 Av 5785 (August 12, 2025)

Torah Portion: Ekev

Topic: Divine Traits, Human Greats

R' Shimon ben Shetach once purchased a donkey from a certain Yishmaelite. His disciples later discovered a precious stone hanging from the animal's neck. They exclaimed to him, "Teacher! It is the blessing of YHWH that enriches" (Prov. 10:22). R' Shimon replied, "I purchased a donkey; I did not purchase a precious stone." He immediately returned the jewel to the Yishmaelite, who declared, "Blessed is YHWH, the Elohim of Shimon ben Shetach!"

According to prevailing law and practice, R' Shimon would not have been obligated to return the jewel. Nonetheless, he did so, as it is taught in the Yerushalmi that "Blessed is the Elohim of Yisrael" was to him more valuable than all the wealth in the world. Furthermore, had there been any risk that withholding the jewel might cause a desecration of the Divine Name, returning it would have been a halachic obligation.

Yet one might ask: Why did the Yishmaelite bless "the Elohim of Shimon ben Shetach" rather than the sage himself? The Dubno Maggid explains that the Yishmaelite perceived an important truth: a human being cannot, through personal effort alone, attain such a level of integrity and selflessness. If the man standing before him had done so, it was only because he had attached himself to Hashem and absorbed the traits of *kedushah* into his character. In the inspiration of the moment, the Yishmaelite praised "the Elohim of Shimon ben Shetach," Whose greatness he had glimpsed through Shimon's noble act.

The Mussar literature often emphasizes that a person can rise above himself with extraordinary restraint, humility, and altruism. Scripture abounds with examples. Ya'akov, compelled by circumstance to work for Laban, labored with unwavering dedication for many years, maintaining his diligence even after Laban repeatedly deceived him in an effort to deprive him of his rightful due. Reuben, eldest of the tribes, had forfeited his firstborn privileges to Yosef, yet it was he who saved Yosef from being killed by his brothers.

Where did such men find the moral strength to act with such nobility? The Torah teaches that Hashem created humanity in His "image" and "likeness" (Gen. 1:26). This signifies that Hashem endowed human beings with a spark of *kedushah*, granting each person the potential to connect with Him and to emulate His benevolent ways. Anyone who strives to cleave to the Creator and to walk in His ways (Deut. 28:9) draws upon this *aduk* (אֲדֻקָּה, meaning "Godly") source, thereby attaining the capacity to transcend worldly pettiness and to devote himself selflessly to the welfare of others and to the service of Hashem.

Such conduct is expected not only of renowned sages but of all who are created in the Divine image. The Torah places high demands upon us, forbidding vengeance or harboring resentment toward those who have wronged us. This level of forbearance is far from easy. Human nature inclines us to remember every injustice and to seek revenge as one of life's most tempting satisfactions. Yet the Torah requires us to conquer these instincts, to refrain from retaliation, and even to restore love for the offender as for a brother. This self-mastery is beyond the natural limits of human attainment; however, in accepting the Torah, we were granted the spiritual capacity to fulfill all of its commandments. When we make a sincere effort to carry out these obligations, we access superhuman strength, resulting in conduct that is truly otherworldly. The Torah assures us that faithful observance of the mitzvot will impress the surrounding nations:

"You shall safeguard and perform the mitzvot, for it is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the peoples, who shall hear all these decrees and say, 'Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!' For which is a great nation that has Elohim close to it...?" (Deut. 4:6)

What does this mean? Should we perform mitzvot with the aim of securing favorable world opinion? The answer is no. Rather, the Torah informs us that a life truly governed by Torah is so elevated and refined that it will compel recognition, even from skeptics, of the Torah's Divine origin. Those among other nations who encounter Torah-observant living such a life will conclude that these commandments must have been given by Hashem, for there is no natural explanation for the otherworldly qualities displayed in their daily conduct.

In conclusion, the lofty conduct of a Torah-observant person reflects the sublime attributes of Hashem, for it is derived from—and is in conscious imitation of—His example. As the Midrash teaches: from the integrity of a human being of flesh and blood, one can perceive the integrity of the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*.

Shalom.