

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth



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In Parashat Shofetim, we are taught about appointing a king for the Jewish nation. The Torah then goes on to warn us that the king “shall not keep many horses, so that he will not send people back to Egypt to add to his horses” (Devarim 17:16).

In the next verse, we are also warned that the king “shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray” (ibid. v. 17).

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) states that Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) said, “the Torah states the reasons for the two laws, and I know that those reasons do not apply to me, so I will not keep the laws. I will amass many horses, and no one will transgress the law because of me. I will marry many wives, and I know

that they will not turn my heart away from God, for I know myself and I am certain that no adverse effects will result from my transgressing these laws.”

During the times of the *Melachim* (Kings of Israel), horses would come from Egypt. Just like the Queen of England today, the king would require stables and workers to be present where the horses were being bred.

Eventually, due to Shlomo HaMelech's disregard for these laws, many Jews settled in Egypt because of the horse trading, and at the end of his life, his wives did “turn his heart” and he allowed many places of worship of foreign gods to be built in the Land of Israel. Remember, this is the same king that built the First Temple in Jerusalem.

Why would Shlomo HaMelech have assumed these mitzvot did not apply to him?

One explanation is that one of the Hebrew words used to express

reasons for mitzvot is *ta'amim*. The word *ta'am* means both “reason” and “taste”. The primary purpose of food is to provide us with nutritional sustenance, while the secondary purpose is for enjoyment via the taste. For instance, apples contain certain nutrients; if an apple had no taste, it would still be packed with the same nutrients. But by giving it taste, it makes that which is good for us more pleasurable. Just like taste is to food, reasons are to mitzvot. They add pleasure to something which is already good.

Shlomo HaMelech made the mistake of assuming that the reason was the essence of the mitzvah, and so determined that certain mitzvot did not apply to him. However, the *ta'am* of a mitzvah is only a “taste”, like that of the apple, to make the mitzvah more palatable to us. The reason, being only secondary, does not affect our obligation in fulfilling a mitzvah.

Parasha Quiz

1. The parasha begins with the instruction to appoint “shofetim” and “shoterim.” Who were the shoterim and what was their job?
2. This parasha tells us about four kinds of leaders among the Jewish people. Who were they?
3. What was the king commanded to do?
4. “Justice, justice shall you pursue” (Devarim 16:20). What reward is promised for following this mitzvah?

