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THE ROLE OF THE BLIND IN THE PERFORMANCE OF THE COMMANDMENTS

In contrast with most of the rest of the ancient world, Judaism exercised enormous compassion for the blind. However, while the Jewish tradition was most generous in providing for care and respect for the blind in the physical, economic, and social realms, what of their spiritual status? In the Halakhah this theme is formulated as: are the blind obligated to perform the commandments?

The matter is in dispute between the Tannaim R. Judah and R. Meir, the former declaring the unsighted as not obligated and the latter disagreeing. Since the Talmud holds with the view that voluntary performance of the commandments is less worthy than submission to divinely imposed obligation, it is R. Judah who appears to disenfranchise the blind from full participation in religious life.

The key to the understanding of R. Judah's view in a more benign light is the remark of Tosafot that even R. Judah would agree that the blind remain subject to the commandments as Rabbinic edict, in order that the blind feel part of the community, "for if you release him from all the commandments even Rabbinically, he will be like a gentile who has no share whatever in the Torah." Based upon this principle, we attempt to broaden the scope of obligation as a way of alleviating the spiritual isolation of the blind.

This is done by invoking the Talmudic principle of shomeia ke'oneh, that listening (to a blessing, prayer, etc.) is;

tantamount to reciting. With regard to the blind, this comes into play with regard to being called to the Torah. One tradition, beginning with RaMA based upon MaHaRiL, permits the blind to be called to the Torah and make the blessing while the reader recites the passage because shomeia ke'oneh. An opposing tradition, from R. Joseph Karo through R. Jacob Emden, disagrees and maintains that this Talmudic principle is inapplicable because of the requirement that one read min ha-ketav, from the script of the Torah scroll. We explain this controversy by distinguishing between two competing interpretations of shomeia ke'oneh: whether it implies that listening is tantamount to reciting where, as it were, the words of the reader are borrowed by the listener, or whether it implies surrogacy, i.e., that the listener adopts the identity of the reader. In the former case, the disqualification of not reading min ha-ketav remains, and the blind cannot be called to the Torah. In the latter case, the blind man adopts the identity of the reader, who reads from the script; hence, he fully participates in performing the commandment via his surrogate, the reader.

Thus, even according to R. Judah (and most authorities decide against him), the unsighted can achieve full membership in the community of the observant by endeavoring, wherever possible, to fulfill their liturgical functions via the mechanism of shomeia ke'oneh. In so doing, the blind achieve participation as an act of obligation rather than mere voluntary observance, and they thus express their linkage to the covenant of Sinai.