

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Va'eira

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

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The Fax of Life

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GOOD MORNING! Just this week I was speaking to a reader of the Shabbat Shalom Fax of Life and she struggled a little to describe her relationship with Judaism. She explained that she really enjoys the weekly column because she loves the intellectualism of Judaism, but she doesn't know how to connect to its more ritualistic elements.

Our conversation reminded me about a column I wrote a few months ago after someone told me, "I am not religious – I am spiritual." The person who said that to me was characterizing being religious as following rituals. When it comes to religion, some people are very passionate about their apathy.

Sadly, they are not alone. There are several reasons why people shy away from following the *mitzvot* (commandments) as given to us in the Torah, and all of them are based on misperceptions of the Torah or a lack of understanding of Judaism and/or life itself. Here are the top three reasons that, in my opinion, people are disinclined to be Torah observant.

1. They don't understand what the *mitzvot* are really about or why we do them.
2. They don't want to feel controlled.
3. They don't want to feel obligated.

The first reason is usually due to a lack of proper education. A big part of that failure can be blamed on our Jewish day schools. I should know; I run a series of fairly large schools and I am as responsible for this failure as anyone else. Our schools are generally excellent when it comes to conveying the ins and outs of **how** to observe the *mitzvot*, but are terribly lacking in properly explaining the **whys** of the *mitzvot*. A classic example of this is how *davening* – prayers – are taught.

Schools teach about the obligations of prayers, but very few students understand what praying is all about or why they are doing it – not to mention that they often don't even understand the words they are saying. This has led to entire generations of Jews who pray out of habit without any deep connection to what they are doing. The only time they really concentrate on what they are saying is when they are in a difficult situation and they want something from the Almighty. It reminds me of the woman who said that her boss told her that he expects to be treated like a god; "So now I only talk to him when I need something."

The second reason – not wanting to be controlled – is quite natural, and at the same time terribly immature. Consider for a moment a child who resents being told what to do. "You're not the boss of me!" is a common refrain heard by anyone who has had the experience of raising children.

Young children don't really understand why they can't stay up all night, eat ice cream and candy every morning from 2-3 am, or play ball in the street. They consider the structure and boundaries within which we place them to be very restrictive. But, at some point, they begin to realize that we impose certain boundaries so that they will be healthy, happy, and safe.

Similarly, there are also many people who are technically Torah observant yet all the while maintain an underlying resentment toward the rules that they must follow. They feel constricted by prayer schedules, food restrictions, or prohibited actions (e.g. laws of Shabbat observance).

This is a mistake. Consider for a moment Olympic hopeful athletes. In order to maximize their physical potential, they adhere to a very strict regimen of eating, sleeping, and exercising. They do not feel like they are being controlled or told what to do; they have simply made a decision to try and get the most out their physical bodies.

In general, life without structure would be miserable. Fulfilling every random desire is impossible, illogical, and ill-advised – drinking yourself into a stupor on a daily basis, sleeping until 2 pm, and having multiple extramarital affairs would not lead to a healthier or more fulfilling life.

As we mature we recognize the value of structure and make commitments to ourselves to try and live a healthy lifestyle, to set and achieve certain goals (education, career, etc.), and to build and maintain personal relationships. In this way, we know that we are positioning ourselves for the opportunity to get the most out of life. In its purest form, religion (Judaism in particular) has the same goal and purpose.

According to the great medieval philosopher Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (aka Ramchal), it is a fundamental underpinning of Judaism that God is perfect and thus does not need anything. He does not need mankind to follow His commandments.

The only reason God created the universe was to bestow good on mankind. The handbook that contains God's formula for the best possible way for man to lead his life and receive the most amount of good is the Torah. Unfortunately, those with a myopic perspective naturally miss the greater point. Like small children, they focus on the minutiae and totally miss the larger picture, which leads to the most rewarding elements of life. The Torah offers a structure that enables one to properly maximize the experience of existence.

The third reason – not wanting to have a feeling of being obligated – is also quite natural. The fact is that no one

likes the feeling of owing another person; a sentiment we find in the *Proverbs*, “*the borrower is a servant to the lender*” (22:7).

The Hebrew word for “thank you” is “*toda*,” which is etymologically related to the Hebrew words for both admission (“*lehodot*”) and confession (“*vidur*”). Of course, this is not accidental. A “thank you” is an admission or confession that I owe you something.

This is why gratitude is so difficult for many people. It is also one of the reasons that remaining in a state of happiness is often challenging. If a person is happy then, more likely than not, they owe something to someone, which is an uncomfortable situation. As crazy as it sounds, some find it preferable to remain miserable than to feel that they owe a debt of thanks.

We find a similar lesson in this week’s Torah portion: “*And Eleazar son of Aaron took from the daughters of Putiel as a wife*” (*Exodus* 6:25). According to the sages, the woman that Eleazar married was the daughter of Jethro. The Talmud explains that Jethro was also called Putiel because “*pitaim*” means to fatten and “*el*” is a reference to a deity. Thus, “Putiel” refers to the fact that Jethro fattened calves to be sacrificed for idol worship.

The sages inform us that before Jethro converted to Judaism he engaged in all sorts of idol worship; he was searching for a meaningful connection to God and experimented with various religious services and worship before finally arriving at Judaism. Still, the name Putiel seems to have a very pejorative connotation as it refers to Jethro’s days of idol worship. In fact, he had already been introduced as Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, so why does the Torah use the name Putiel here?

The first family disagreement in the Torah is about how to serve the Almighty and it ended rather disastrously. In the book of Genesis, we find that Cain initiates the concept of “giving back” to the Almighty by constructing an altar and offering up some of the crops he had grown. Unfortunately, he chose from the lowest quality that he had. His brother Abel – who was really only inspired to bring a thanksgiving sacrifice after he saw Cain making an offering – also brings a gift to God, but he brings from the best of his animals. God chose to reject Cain’s offering, but accept Abel’s.

The difference between their two perspectives is significant: Cain felt that he owed God and wanted to pay off his obligation. Since the intention was to merely be relieved of a debt, the quality wasn’t significant. This is similar to those people who resent the obligation to pay taxes and decide to make their displeasure known by citing the coinage act of 1965 and paying their taxes by delivering many hundreds of thousands of pennies in many, many wheel barrows.

Abel, on the other hand, understood that God wasn’t looking to be paid off; rather He desires a relationship with mankind. Thus, Abel made a sacrifice of his best animals to show that he wanted to connect to God and that he considered it a privilege to be able to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

This is what the Torah is teaching us about Eleazar. Eleazar was particularly interested in marrying a woman who came from someone who realized that serving God is a privilege. Jethro, even when he was worshipping idols, instinctively understood that the right thing to do was to offer the best calves to his deity. That’s how he acquired the name Putiel.

Eleazar (who later followed his father Aaron and became the High Priest in the Tabernacle) wanted to incorporate this appreciation for serving God in the highest possible manner, so he searched for a woman who saw this very attribute in her father’s home. He married her **specifically because** her father had fattened calves for idol worship as this indicated that service to the Almighty is a privilege.

TORAH PORTION: Va’eira, Exodus 6:2 - 9:35

Here is the story of the Ten Plagues, which God put upon the Egyptians not only to effect the release of the Jewish people from bondage, but also to show the world that He is the God of all creation and history. The first nine plagues are divisible into three groups: 1) the water turning to blood, frogs, lice 2) wild beasts, pestilence/epidemic, boils 3) hail, locust, and darkness.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that these were punishments measure for measure for afflicting the Jewish people with slavery: 1) The first of each group reduced Egyptians in their own land to the insecurity of strangers. 2) The second of each group robbed them of pride, possessions, and a sense of superiority. 3) The third in each group imposed physical suffering.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 4:26 *Miami* 5:37 *Cape Town* 7:40 *Guatemala* 5:37 *Hong Kong* 5:46 *Honolulu* 5:55

Shabbat Jo’Burg 6:46 *LA* 4:53 *London* 4:13 *Melbourne* 8:23 *Mexico* 6:03 *Moscow* 4:19 *New York* 4:40 *Singapore* 6:59 *Toronto* 4:54

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Change the way you see things, and the things you see will change.

— Dr. Wayne W. Dyer

In loving memory of our husband/father

Sheldon Carl Rosenthal, OBM

On his 4th Yahrzeit - 22nd Tevet

Sarah Weissbard and Aaron Rosenthal



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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