

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Emor)

Many years ago, when I was in High School, my mother arranged for me to get a ride up to school once a week with one of the teachers who taught there. We lived in Manhattan, and as the Mesivta High School I attended was in Riverdale, having a ride that morning saved me a good hour I would have spent on public transportation. It also meant leaving our apartment at 7:30am instead of 6:30 for which I was understandably grateful.

In retrospect, I am not entirely certain the arrangement was purely practical, as the teacher would regularly engage me in a variety of Torah topics and philosophical and existential questions ...

One morning as we were driving up the West Side Highway, a car barreled down an entrance ramp and slammed into the front of our car. After being thrown across the highway, the rebbe managed to get control of the car as the engine pattered off, and we pulled back onto the shoulder behind the offending vehicle. Telling me to wait in the car and explaining this might take a few minutes, he went off to exchange information and discuss the accident with the other driver. Fortunately, no-one had been injured.

When he came back to the car, I silently prayed he would not be able to start the car as I had a test for which I was not ready and you could not pick a better excuse than being stuck on the highway with a teacher! Alas, after a couple of turns, his car started and after a tentative moment we resumed our drive up the highway, albeit with the engine making some funny noises and some obviously significant body damage to the front right corner of the vehicle.

He had been in the middle of a funny story when we were interrupted, and as soon as he saw we could drive safely he simply resumed his story where he had left off! I could not believe he was just resuming his story, and when he finished, he chuckled to himself and promptly launched into another story and topic for discussion! After a few minutes I could not contain myself and finally blurted out:

“Aren’t you upset your car got creamed? The whole front of your car is messed up and you now will have to go to the garage... aren’t you the least bit upset?”

Honestly, I don’t remember most of what I learned in High School, but I still remember his simple response:

“Look, I can be upset he creamed the front of my car, or I can be happy about it; but either way, the front of the car will still be destroyed, so I might as well be happy!”

There is a fascinating thought worth noting in this week’s portion of *Emor*:

Hashem tells Moshe: “Speak to the Kohanim (priests), the sons of Aharon, and say to them (each of them) shall not become impure amongst his people.” (Vayikra (Leviticus) 21:1)

Rashi, noting the obvious repetition of the enjoinder to speak, quotes the Talmud (*Yevamot* 114a) which explains this repetition to mean that the Kohanim also have to pass this on to the younger children who are also obligated not to allow themselves to become impure. The problem with this explanation is the text implies that it is all meant for the adults, why would we take this to refer to teaching the children?

Rav Moshe Feinstein (in his *Darash Moshe*) notes that the word used for speaking here (from which our portion takes its name: *Emor*) is a warmer softer form of speech (as opposed to *Dibur*, also meaning to speak, which is harsher and more direct). And that is the tone one is meant to use with children.

The first usage of the word refers to the fact that Moshe is meant to instruct the Kohanim in the limitations the Kohanim will need to accept upon themselves, something which is difficult to accept and thus best given over in a softer and warmer communication. And the second time the verse repeats the enjoinder to speak, it is referring to the Kohanim themselves being responsible to pass this along to their children as well. It's not easy to teach your children limits, and sharing the idea is a better strategy than merely issuing a command.

Furthermore, Rav Moshe deduces that the second usage implies that the Kohanim have to have a positive feeling towards the mitzvot: it has to be *chaviv* (meaning affectionate) to them. In fact, he points out, even when your children see you are willing to make sacrifices for Torah that is not what will connect them to tradition; what really impacts our children is when they see we love it.

“Precisely when children hear their parents say that mitzvot are not a sacrifice at all, we simply love them and they enrich our lives and fulfill us, which is when the children are receiving a good education...”
(*Darash Moshe, Emor* pg. 97)

How many of us wish our kids would love learning more, but neglect to ask ourselves how much we love learning? And how often do we wish our kids would be more scrupulous about wearing tzitzit, saying blessings, or even keeping Shabbat, without considering whether our kids are seeing us enthusiastic about mitzvot, and Torah study and the like.

If I had to pick what impacted me the most Jewishly, growing up, it would without hesitation be the unbridled enthusiasm many of my teachers and especially my parents had for Jewish learning, Shabbat, and Mitzvot.

Our children will most certainly learn far more what they see us *do* and *how* we do it, than they ever will form what we *say*.

The things that really last in life are the things we love, and while there are no guarantees, certainly the degree to which we love that which we do will have the most impact on what the next generation values. If we want our children to love Shabbat, they at least have to see me loving Shabbat; if they perceive Shabbat as a chore that forces me to give up my Sports games and cell phone, then why would we expect them to want to continue doing such a burdensome chore?

But if Shabbat is filled with favorite moments and experiences we love and the enthusiastic energy permeates the home, then who wouldn't want that as a part of their life?

This is not to say there is no value in carrying on with the things we need to do even when we don't want to do them; we are not talking about *living* life we are rather speaking of the possibility of elevating our experiences to *loving* life.

The allusion to the Kohanim who are meant to be our role models then is not just to do it, but to find a way to love doing it.

Nike, the bastion of Western consumer culture has taught us to Just Do It; Judaism says don't just do it: ***Love doing it!***

And that teacher, with his one simple comment, shared with me an ideal that it wasn't just about *living* life, it was about loving life.

Wishing all a Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman