

Sparks

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You Get Back What You Put In *The Joys of a Commandment-Driven Life*

The Zohar, which is a Jewish mystical classic, written two thousand years ago, states that there will come a time when people will be performing tradition and rituals like cows eating grass.

Essentially, the cow chews its food, stores it and then chews its cud, thereby re-chewing the food, over and over again. The Zohar is using this metaphor as a symbol for something that is done mindlessly without intention or taste. In Jewish tradition, there is a concept called *taamei mitzvos*, which can be described as the "reason for the commandments." But *taamei mitzvos* can also mean the "taste of the commandments." In Hebrew, *taam* means both "taste" and "reason" — and there is definitely a connection between the two. Without understanding the reason behind the life of commandment it can become mindless and tasteless.

Imagine a man who observes Sabbath, but it has no meaning to him — no taste. The only thing that keeps him doing it is guilt, or respect for the tradition, or simply habit. Without his understanding the meaning behind the observance, it will eventually stop sooner or later, in this generation or the next.

An experience I had working with a Jewish youth group describes how this translates down the line to the grandchildren. I was hired to try to rejuvenate interest for Judaism among the participants, and I thought a "Sabbath Experience" would be a great idea. So, I presented my plan to one of the chapter presidents, a girl of about 16 or 17. She looked at me in total shock. "Sabbath!" she exclaimed incredulously. "Do you mean no tearing toilet paper?" This was the first thing that came to her mind. I said "Sabbath" and she thought "toilet paper." So, in jest I said, "Yes! Haven't you ever tried that? For thousands of years Jews get together, put a roll of toilet paper on a table, sit around the table and chant, 'Don't tear it, don't tear it!'" She looked at me with an expression that said, "Is this guy for real?" And then she said, "You know, I always wanted to ask a rabbi, 'are you allowed to flush on Sabbath?'" Imagine this is *the* question she always wanted to ask a rabbi.

Perhaps partial ignorance is even a greater problem than complete ignorance. At least when we know nothing, we don't have bad feelings. But partial ignorance can translate into a total distortion. It would have been better for the girl to be completely ignorant of Sabbath than to have been taught to think of toilet paper in association with the most beautiful of Jewish celebrations. As a result, she is not even open to experience an authentic Sabbath. Her reaction and associations are but a symptom of the real disease: she does not know (or is confused about) who she is and who her ancestors were. And she will have nothing real to say to her children about Sabbath. Sabbath has no taste for her.

We can perform the commandments and the traditions like cows eating grass. They chewed before, they chew now, and they'll chew later because they chewed before —and that's when religious life starts breaking down. That's when children say to their parents, "Why should I do this? This is not interesting. This is restrictive and meaningless." And that's when parents respond, "You should. You must. You have to." Rarely do people respond positively to empty demands; instead, they rebel against them. People respond to what they find fascinating, relevant, inspirational and meaningful. Most people do what they want, not what they should.

Smoking is a great example of this phenomenon. Tobacco companies discovered that the Surgeon General warnings on the packages actually *promote* smoking. In fact, I heard that the companies are printing the warnings bigger than they are legally required. You see, people want to feel like the macho Marlborough man. They want to face death, puff in its face, and say, "I am not afraid. I am tough. I know how to take risks." So, to say "you shouldn't" isn't always an effective way to encourage people to do what is good for them. They have to want to do it.

But getting excited about the commandment driven life requires having a reason. We're missing the real meaning behind it all. And without meaning, tradition becomes stale, and commandments become heavy burdens.

The Torah (Bible) recounts how, before Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the first set of the tablets of the Ten Commandments, G-d told him that the Jewish people have created an idol — a golden calf. But Moses wasn't alarmed; he was determined to bring the Jewish people the commandments, nonetheless. But, as he descended the mountain and saw the Jewish people dancing and singing around the golden calf, he suddenly threw the Tablets down and broke them. Why? Why did he lose his determination? The answer is that G-d told him about the golden calf, but G-d did not tell him that the people were dancing and singing. Moses may have imagined the people sitting beside the golden calf, crying, because they had lost hope in their leader returning. Surely, they would rejoice as soon as they saw him! Instead, they were happy with a golden calf. Incredulously, Moses recognized that if the people could be happy with a golden calf, they could not have comprehended the great gift that he was about to bring them from G-d. The Talmud further explains that as Moses came down the mountain, his incredulity and horror rising at the scene fore him, the letters flew off the tablets. When that happened, the tablets became so heavy that Moses couldn't hold them any longer. When the tablets lost their meaning, they became lifeless rock.

So, it is with the Torah. When it ceases to be the Book of Life then it becomes dead weight — just a heavy burden.

When the meaning and the taste of a Torah life are lost, then there is no love for it and no joy. When a person whom you love asks you for a favor, it is easy to do it, it's a pleasure. But when you don't like the person, the favor can be the hardest thing in the world because there are no good feelings surrounding it.

The Talmud says that when people accept the Torah with joy and happiness, these feelings are guaranteed to be long lasting. But when people accept Torah with anger or feelings of coercion, though they may observe its commandments for a while, eventually they reject them and everything breaks down.

Imagine somebody suggests to you that you should tell your spouse "I love you" three times a day. Sounds like a great idea. You wake up in the morning and start rushing off to work. "Oh, my gosh!" You hurry back and say, "Honey, I love you. See you later."

You're having a busy day, lots of big deals in the make, and it's now two o'clock — oh, no! You call up your wife and say, "Hey, sweetheart, it's me. I love you. I'll call you later."

You get home exhausted, fall asleep on the couch and — oh, no — it's two o'clock in the morning! You panic, run to the bedroom: "Oh, honey, honey, wake up!"

"What is it?" she asks with alarm.

"I love you, goodnight."

So, what would happen if that kind of behavior went on and on? Would it keep you ever mindful of your loved one's presence and significance in your life? Or would it become a burdensome obligation? Is it a good idea to tell your spouse "I love you" three times a day, or is it a bad idea?

The answer to that question is up to you. The intentions that you put into it are what you'd get out of it. If a person says "I love you" with no meaning, no feeling and no understanding, then those words will get in the way of the relationship. But it is a truly great idea to tell your spouse regularly that you love him or her. You just have to put a little something into it — a little consciousness and understanding.

The same thing goes for the commandments. The Torah gives us ways of connecting to G-d and each other, spiritual strategies for living a more complete, meaningful and enlightened life, but we have to put a little soul into it. I can have a powerful lamp, but if I don't know how to plug it in, it's not going to turn on.

The Zohar offers a great parable for this concept. The Zohar describes the commandments as garments. By itself a garment cannot keep you warm; it can only keep the heat inside your body from escaping. Imagine you have the flu. You can have several blankets draped over you and you can still be shaking. The blanket only reflects your own body heat, gives you back what you put out. If you are cold inside, then nothing you put on the outside is going to help you.

In this way, the Zohar is teaching us that the commandments — such as celebrating Sabbath, keeping kosher, or doing acts of kindness — can only give back to us what we put into them. The commandments are like garments. They were meant to be put on and not to be put off.

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