

Sparks

by Rabbi David Aaron
Founder and Dean, Isralight
Rosh Yeshiva, Orayta

The Divine Wants You to be Happy *When Rules Become Delicious Recipes for Your Soul*

"And these are the judgments that you shall place before them."
— Exodus 21:1

"You shall place before them, that is, like a table that is set and ready for eating."
— Rashi

"Taste and see that G-d is good."
— Psalms 34

LAWS YOU CAN EAT, ENJOY AND SAVOUR

The job of a teacher of Torah is not to be a philosopher, ethical guide or law giver but rather a gourmet chef. A gourmet chef has the ability to bring the taste out of every ordinary cabbage, every simple bean sprout, as well as present it all in a delicious tantalizing way.

Once, I went to someone's home to raise funds for my institute. I thought we would have about a ten minute discussion. Instead, we were talking for five or six hours. I hadn't eaten all day, and I was starving. Finally I decided that instead of asking for a contribution, I would just ask for something to eat. So I said, "Could I just have an apple?"

She replied, "Oh, you must be starving. I'm so sorry!"

My hostess ran to her kitchen and made me a Salad Nicoise — exquisitely arranged. Now, I'm not a big salad eater, but that's what she chose to prepare for me. Well, I took one forkful, and I have to admit I had never tasted a salad like that in my life. Because this woman was able to bring out its' true beauty and taste, suddenly I had a whole new appreciation for the vegetable kingdom.

Once I tasted this woman's Salad Nicoise, I could never be satisfied with lettuce and tomato alone. The job of a Torah teacher is to present the Torah in an appetizing way; to reveal the beauty and flavour of G-d's laws for all to see and taste.

THE TASTE OF LIFE

The Zohar, which is the Jewish mystical classic, written two thousand years ago, cautions us not to perform G-d's commandments like cows eating grass. Doing so brings ruins upon us. Let's try to understand what this means.

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 Torah 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 Torah living it can become mindless and tasteless.

Imagine a person 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 sometimes 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. Perhaps it would have been better for the girl to be completely ignorant of Shabbat than to think of toilet paper in association with the most beautiful of Torah 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 problem: 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 is not just not tasteless, but perhaps even bitter tasting to 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 it all 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 some 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 clear, fascinating, relevant, inspirational and meaningful. Most people do what they want, not what they should.

When the meaning and the taste of G-d's commandments are lost, then there is no love for it and no joy in it. 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.

I think a lot of people don't have good feelings about a Torah life because they don't understand the meaning of it. They don't know the taste of it and, worse, they likely have a bad taste about it. The Talmud says that when people accept the commandments with joy and happiness, these feelings are guaranteed to be long lasting. But when people accept commandments with anger or feelings of

coercion, though they may observe them for a while, eventually they reject them and everything breaks down.

MISERABLE DANCING BEARS

This is the tragedy of religious education today. At home and in school, as children and even later as adults, we learn an incomplete and often wrong definition of our relationship to G-d. For many the word "G-d" conjures up serious negativity and distorts the meaning of any other words associated with it like Torah, commandments, Sabbath, etc..

Then, what should be holy words become, instead, triggers for our distorted images and bitter experiences from the past. Our first step in overcoming this huge obstacle is to get in touch with these triggers in order to then create a new trigger, a new identification, a new understanding, a new feeling.

How the mind stores images and then reacts to triggers is an amazing psychological phenomenon. Most of us have had the experience of, for example, driving a car and, all of a sudden, feeling overcome by a sad feeling. We get in a bad mood — doing nothing, just driving — and we don't know why.

What can happen is this: While you are driving you hear a song on the radio that happened to be playing in a restaurant when you were breaking up with your boyfriend or girlfriend. You may not have paid any attention to the song playing at the time; it could have been background music. As you were experiencing that traumatic moment, you heard the Beatles singing, "She loves you, Yeah, yeah, yeah," and you did not even notice it. Then one day you happen to be feeling really happy. You are driving down the highway, it's a beautiful day, and the radio announcer says, "Now let's hear an oldie but goldie from the Beatles: "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah." Suddenly you sense a dramatic shift in your mood and feel depressed. You don't know why, but the words "she loves you" call forth that painful break-up mood from your memory bank.

This same kind of reaction is triggered in many of us regarding G-d and religion. And when that happens our minds can bring up a lots of stuff — pain, sadness, guilt, disempowerment, etc.

I was told that some circus trainers teach bears to dance by making them walk on hot coals. When the bear is walking on hot coals, it starts to make jagged movements from the pain. As the bear is walking over the coals and shaking in pain, the trainer plays music that later becomes a trigger for the pain of the coals. At that point, they can bring out the dancing bears for all to watch with wonder and joy. When the music starts to play, the bear starts to dance. But his heart cries because is re-experiencing the painful musical association.

A similar thing happens for many people when it comes to religion. I have met people from religious backgrounds who once kept Sabbath, ate Kosher, and prayed three times a day. But these practices were joyless and came with a lot of confusion, fear, oppression, and guilt. These people's negative experiences turned into painful triggers that forced them to run from G-d and any religious institution. They don't even believe that one could enjoy and love living G-d's word.

G-D WANTS YOU TO BE HAPPY

When I was in my early 20s, I studied in a yeshiva and completed my rabbinical ordination. After many years of full-time Torah learning, I felt I would like to start reaching out and teach. Because there are so many thirsty souls in the world that know so little about the Torah, I felt that I should share what I have learned thus far. But I wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do just yet; perhaps I was too young or

perhaps I was not learned enough. I decided to ask a Torah scholar, Rabbi Joseph Shalom Eliyashuv, for advice. Rabbi Eliyashuv is considered to be one of the greatest Torah authorities of our generation, and I was a little nervous to meet him. I shared with him my dilemma and asked him, "What does G-d want me to do?"

Rabbi Eliyashuv turned to me and said, "You should sit and continue to learn for a couple more years." Hearing that, I must have made a very contorted face, like "ugh!" because he asked, "What's wrong?" Spontaneously I said, "But I'm not happy just sitting and learning. I want to go out and teach!"

"Why, then, are you asking questions?" he asked. I was shocked by his question. It is common for everyone in the Torah community to ask Torah Sages questions.

"I beg your pardon," I stammered.

"Why are you asking questions?"

"Because I want to know, what is it that G-d wants me to do?"

"Of course, G-d wants you to be happy," he answered, "and you didn't tell me you weren't happy in the yeshiva. If you're not happy just sitting and learning, and you'd be happier going out and teaching Torah, then do it. Don't you think teaching Torah is also a commandment?"

Suddenly I realized how I had missed a fundamental Torah truth. I did not understand my happiness was an important or even valid factor in religious law. In fact, I assumed that the more you suffer the holier you must be. Can you imagine my surprise and relief? Had I not made that contorted face, and had the great Rabbi Eliyashuv not been sensitive enough to see it, I would have walked out of his office and sat in yeshiva for years, feeling miserable and thinking that I am such a holy martyr — a true servant of G-d. It may sound crazy, but that was my baggage. I did not think that happiness was a consideration in Torah law. But here was one of the greatest rabbis of our time — a holy gourmet chef — saying, "G-d wants you to be happy."

Rabbi David Aaron

Author of Endless Light, Seeing G-d, The Secret Life of G-d, Inviting G-d In, Living A Joyous Life, The G-d-Powered Life, Love is My Religion and Tefillah Training