

The Gemara in Yoma 41b discusses the case of poor and wealthy lepers who must bring offerings because of their leprosy. In Temple times, the required offerings for a leper differed depending on one's wealth. A poor person brought two birds, and a wealthy person brought two lambs. We can see the reason why this was established, in order that the poor would not have to afflict themselves to do a religious duty and the wealthy would not be stingy.

The Gemara brings a Mishnah from Negaim 14:12: "A poor leper who brought the offering of a wealthy person has fulfilled his obligation. But a wealthy leper who brought the offering of a poor person has not fulfilled his obligation."

Regarding the poor man who brings a wealthy man's offering, the commentators say that not only is his obligation fulfilled, but it is commendable for him to go above and beyond his means to bring the wealthy man's offering.

This brings up a question. Is the poor person who brings two birds as he is required less praiseworthy than the poor person who somehow manages to bring two lambs?

For a long time I found myself struggling with a similar question when it comes to religious duty. I was raised non-denominational, choosing to become Orthodox as an adult. When I first started becoming observant, I often compared myself to others. I worried that my practice wasn't enough or that I wasn't doing things the right way. With work and college and my family, I often struggled (and still do!) to make regular minyan or to keep up with Talmud study or to remember to put tape over my refrigerator light switch before Shabbos. I felt inadequate. Was my observance good enough?

I found comfort in three things:

1. Pirkei Avos 1:15, Shammai says, "Make your study a fixed practice." He doesn't tell us we must study as much Torah as possible, he simply says we must make it a fixed practice. Some of us may fulfill this by studying for an hour a day, and some of us may fulfill this by studying for five minutes a day. We all must do what we are able. We don't have to burden ourselves to take on more than we can handle.
2. There is a legend that Hashem had to go around to all the other nations asking each of them if they would accept the Torah and nobody said yes until he asked the Jews. If observing commandments was easy, then surely everyone would be eager to embrace them! But no, only we did, the people descended from Yisroel, whose name means "wrestles with G-d." It is okay to struggle with this, as our ancestors did before us.
3. The Sages did not make a distinction between the religious and the secular. The Talmud speaks of prayer and Temple service just as it speaks of mundane things like human interaction and taxes. So it is with our daily lives. Everything we do, every action, is a spiritual act. The act of eating a meal is just as much in praise of Hashem as the blessings we say before and after it. Teaching our children how to put on their own shoes is a mitzvah just as is teaching them Torah. Every action we take can bring light into the world, whether indirectly or directly.

Returning to the topic of the offerings, surely we can say that although one offers birds and one offers lambs they are both praiseworthy. Both of them achieve the same goal and both of them fulfill their religious duty.

We must not afflict ourselves in service of Hashem. We can push ourselves, yes, and we can give ourselves high ambitions, but in the end we should not force ourselves to do more than we are able. Someone once said to me: Diamonds form under pressure, but bread only rises with rest.

May those of us who must settle for offering birds continue to grow and flourish so that one day, with the help of Hashem, we may offer lambs.

-Aryeh Leib Reynolds