

Ki Tavo 5772 – The Power of *Kavanah*

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I often pose the following hypothetical with my students, which I learned from Dennis Prager:

Imagine a beggar standing on a street corner. Two people walk up to him. The first offers a crisp dollar bill, gives the man a hug, and sticks around for a few minutes of conversation. The second person takes a hundred dollar bill, crumbles it up and throws it in the beggar's face. Assuming that both contributors have identical financial portfolios, which is better?

The students usually pick the first person. He spent time with the beggar, treated him like a person, and probably brightened his day.

So then I ask: Which contributor does the beggar enjoy more? Most say that he enjoys the \$100, which begs the question: If the purpose of *tzedakkah* is to help the poor, how can you say that the person who gave less money did a better job fulfilling the *mitzvah*?

This is somewhat of a trick question. If you're going to give \$100 anyway, you might as well do it nicely. But the scenario speaks to two different aspects of the *mitzvah*: There is the deed itself, and there is what we call *kavanah* or intention or feeling. In a technical sense, it is possible to observe *mitzvot* without intention, *mitzvot eynan tzrikhot kavanah*. If you wake up in the morning and mumble through your prayers, you still get "credit" (*mitzvah* points?). But clearly something is missing.

This morning in Parashat Ki Tavo, we read the commandment to set aside a tenth of the produce of the field - in the appropriate year - for the members of society least able to support themselves. When that produce is brought to the Temple, the Torah commands the following declaration:

I have cleared out the consecrated portion from the house and I have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, just as You commanded me; **I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of your commandments, ולא שכחתי ולא עברתי ממצותיך ולא שכחתי**. I have not eaten of it while in mourning or while I was impure ... I have done just as you commanded me. Look down from your holy abode ... and bless Your people Israel and the land flowing with milk and honey, as you swore to our fathers.

The early 20th century *hasidic* Master Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, known also as the Sefat Emet, questions the formulation. "לא עברתי ממצותיך ולא שכחתי, I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of your commandments." If you fulfill the commandment, he asks, If you do not transgress, what need is there to say that you didn't forget the commandment? That should be obvious.

He answers that it is in fact possible to forget a commandment even though it appears that you are fulfilling it -- if you perform the *mitzvah* without *kavanah*, without intention.

The Sefat Emet was a Hasid who railed against what he saw as the rote practice of Judaism in his

day. To be sure his opponents were pious Jews, but they lacked enthusiasm and religious fervor. His emphasis on *kavanah* is instructive for us as we enter the High Holy Day season, beginning this evening with Selichot.

Going back to my hypothetical: one person had *kavanah* but hardly performed the *mitzvah*, while the other performed the *mitzvah* without *kavanah*. It is something to think about during this season when we receive so many requests from worthy organizations who are strengthening the Jewish community, supporting Israel, fighting poverty, and working to eradicate disease. Just writing a check certainly fulfills the *mitzvah* of *tzedakkah*, and it is better than ignoring solicitations entirely. But it is possible to elevate the act, to see *tzedakkah* as an opportunity to connect not just with an organization or individual but with the Divine, to partner with God in the ongoing process of repairing and perfecting the world.

The same is true with other *mitzvot*. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about what he called “radical amazement.” The *mitzvot* can elevate life beyond the ordinary because, in his words, “Life without wonder is not worth living.”

A colleague tells a story about a boy and his mother who arrived in the Land of Israel after spending their entire lives wandering in the wilderness. The boy looked up at the beautiful apple orchards, orange groves, and fields of wheat, and asked, “Mother, what are all these things?”

The mother remembered stories her own mother had told about the produce that was harvested in Egypt. “Those big brown pillars are called trees. The round fruits are apples and oranges. Their sweet taste is like no other. The grain is called wheat. It can be baked into a most delicious food, which we call bread.”

The little boy was astounded. “I guess God must have put these trees and the grain right in the ground for us, Right, Mommy?”

The mother explained to her son that in actuality, this produce had been begun as little seeds, planted by farmers and tended with water and sunshine. But the boy would have none of it. He shook his head and said, “Mommy, it’s not nice to try to trick me. Every day I have seen how God has given us manna from heaven. I’ve drunk water from Miriam’s well and I’ve been taught about how God parted the Red Sea and led us to safety from the Egyptians. Those things are so natural. But please ... Big, beautiful trees, fruits, grains – all coming from small, tiny seeds? Such miracles? Even I know that is not possible!”

When we recite blessings before we eat, that’s not just a rote act, but an opportunity to express wonder that with all the links in the production chain our food arrived safe and sound. I’m no expert on the FDA, but to me it is somewhat amazing that our food supply is as safe as it is – even if we’ve come to expect it. And we have to be cognizant of that.

לא עברתי ממצותיך ולא שכחתי

We can celebrate Shabbat in the same way. It's easy to focus on the requirements of what we can and cannot do. It is possible to see Shabbat as a burden that we accept or reject. But we must strive to inject *kavanah*.

- it is a somewhat arbitrary marker in time that enables us to appreciate our work on the other six days and to recognize our accomplishments
- It is an opportunity to put our priorities in perspective. I can't be the only person who becomes engrossed or overwhelmed with my work. I relish the requirement to stop, to celebrate with my family, maybe to read or take a little more time in prayer.
- And it is a chance to recharge – to borrow the phrasing of Rabbi Steve Brown, “to slow down and live”, to appreciate the significance and value of all the things that exhaust me during the week.

In a few days we will gather together to celebrate the start of our new year. For many people, the observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur amounts to “just showing up”. For some, that seems hard enough. But I want to challenge us all to add more to that experience:

- Take the time to prepare, whether it be by leafing through the pages of the Mahzor or attending Selichot services this evening or participating in our High Holy Day workshop and discussion on Tuesday evening.
- Reach out to family and friends with whom you haven't spoken for a while; if you can't invite them to your home for a meal, remind them that you care and – if necessary – make amends for any misdeeds of the past. Do this *before* the holiday; it will make the prayers more meaningful.
- If you don't have them already, think about family traditions you can start. In my family, in addition to the apples and honey, we like to eat pomegranate – following the tradition that our good deeds over the coming year should be as numerous as the seeds of the pomegranate. When I was growing up, I really enjoyed the tradition of eating a new fruit on the second night. Whatever the origin of this custom, I am sure that the only time I ate atemoya was on the second night of Rosh Hashanah!

These are all suggestions to add *kavanah*, to add meaning to our celebration of the holy days. With a little preparation, a little introspection, and a little awareness, may we have the merit – on Rosh Hashanah and throughout the year – of affirming what our ancestors affirmed so long ago in the presence of the High Priest, “לא עברתי ממצותיך ולא שכחתי”, I have not transgressed against your commandments *and* I have not forgotten them. Shabbat Shalom.