

VaEtchanan Dvar Torah, Rabbi David Mahler

Earlier this month I read an article about cultivating creativity in children. The author was unequivocal in declaring the most important habit for creating innovative thinkers. Questions, he says, are the best way to gain deeper insights and develop more innovative solutions.

Children learn by asking questions. Students learn by asking questions. New recruits learn by asking questions. Innovators understand client needs by asking questions. It is the simplest and most effective way of learning. People who think that they know it all no longer ask questions – why should they? Brilliant thinkers never stop asking questions because they know that it's the best way to gain deeper insights.

Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google, said, “We run this company on questions, not answers.” He knows that if you keep asking questions you can keep finding better answers.

Judaism has known this for centuries already. The *Mishna* in *Avos* (2:5) teaches – “the timid cannot learn”. Many commentaries explain the student's learning disability is that his timidity doesn't allow him to ask questions which therefore impedes his learning.

I want to focus on perhaps the most pressing question a Jew must constantly ask themselves.

The *gemara* in *Sukkah*(44b) tells a story about a man named *Ayevo* who was the father of the great *Amora*, *Rav*. *Ayevo* is the narrator of the story. He has box seats to this story. A man had come to ask a question of *Rav Elazar bar Tzadok*. The questioner told the great rabbi that he is a very wealthy man who owns villages, fields and orchards. He has the ability to discharge a monetary obligation in a way that would be advantageous to him. The *gemara* is a technical one and the questioner is certain that the *halacha* permits his potential plan.

The man knows the rule but travels to his *Rav* to ask him “*Arich o' lo Arich?*” – Is it proper or is it not proper? He doesn't ask if it is allowed, permissible or legal. He asks whether it is proper, right or appropriate?

He doesn't care if it's permitted. He cares if it is the right thing to do. Is it *tov*?

This *gemara* is a most foundational one. Our whole lives should be built around it. This is the question we should be asking all the time.

In this week's *parsha*, we have a *mitzvah* that is considered meta-halachik. It is an all-encompassing commandment. Moshe implores the nation to do what is "good and just" (6:18). The *Ramban* explains that after exhorting *Bnei Yisrael* to keep the commandments scrupulously, Moshe told them that the rest of their actions, specifically their dealings with people, should be guided by a sense of what is fair and good in *Hashem's* eyes. What is right and good cannot be legislated in each situation but a person must be guided by the general mandates of the *Torah* to be able to intimate what is the proper course of action.

Law is not the whole of Judaism. *V'asita HaTov v'HayAshar* proclaims that there are matters of great religious significance which lie beyond the scope of precise legislation. They cannot be spelled out in terms of exact, exhaustive rules, because life does not obey exact, exhaustive rules.

The importance of this idea cannot be overstated.

The way I look at this idea is that one who feels that they work for G-d cares only about the letter of the law. They want to check every box. I put on *t'fillin*, kept *Shabbos*, gave *tzedakah*, etc. A person who wants to get close to *Hashem*, to feel His presence, sees himself/herself as a friend or child of *Hashem*. If that's the relationship you are seeking, you will not only do what *Hashem* asks you to do but you'll be motivated to do what G-d wants you to do.

A spouse or best friend who only does everything that is asked of them has a lot of room to grow. When you truly love and care for another, you'll go the extra mile. You'll check in more often, give unsolicited gifts and do things for the other that at times border on the absurd.

Let's strive to not only do what *Hashem* mandates, but rather what He likes and wants.

When I ask myself this question does my *Shabbos* look different?

When I ask myself this question does my tax return look different?

When I ask myself this question does my vacation look different?

When I ask myself this question does my business dealings look different?

Don't ask whether it is *Mutar* (allowed) but if it is *Tov*.

This idea is often best learned from people as opposed to books.

That's why the *gemara* says that *Rabbi Akiva* followed *Rabbi Yehoshua* wherever he went.

In Chassidic lore, it's told that the mystic Reb Leib Saras used to say that he traveled to the Maggid of Mezerich, not to learn Torah from him – but rather to see how he tied his shoes.

The best comparison might be that one can follow all the rules of a sonnet – but obeying them doesn't make you into Shakespeare.

To become a Shakespeare of a person, a Shakespeare of a Jew – one needs to ask the question (not to be or not to be)

Tov or lo Tov?