

Should we Follow Commandments only for Rewards?

Many commentators tell us to perform the commandments in the Torah for their own sake (*lishma* in Hebrew), out of love and not for the purpose of receiving rewards. Maimonides summarized this teaching as follows:

[Some ask:] "When I do these commandments ... what is the reward that I will receive for it?"... The Sages have warned about this: ... A person should not make [reward] the objective of his service to God... And this is what ... Antigonos, the man of Sokho, said [in the Mishnah]:

Do not be like servants who serve the master in the expectation of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of receiving a reward. [Avot 1:3]

And indeed ... one should believe in the truth for the sake of the truth... and "serve from love." As [the psalmist] said:

[Happy is the man] who greatly desires [God's] commandments. [Psalms 112:1]

Rabbi Eliezer said [in the Talmud]:

[Note that it says:] "Who desires [God's] commandments"; and not "who desires the reward of [God's] commandments". [Avodah Zarah 19a] ...

And even greater than this, is what they said in the Sifrei:

[Do not] say, "Behold, I am learning Torah so that I will be rich; so that I will be called rabbi; so that I will receive reward in the World to Come".

For this reason it is written in the Torah:

[Obey My commandments...], loving the Lord your God [and serving Him with all your heart and soul]. [Deut. 11:13]

[The Sifrei concludes:] All that you do shall be out of love alone. [Sifrei Devarim 41:23] ...

And this is the level of Avraham ... [Sotah 31a] He served from love.

[Rambam on Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1; see also Nedarim 62a; Avodah Zarah 19a]

Bartenura, a 15th-century Italian commentator, summarizes:

A person should not serve his Creator even for the hope of a reward... but rather out of love alone. [Bartenura on Avot 1:3]

However, there is a potential problem with this teaching. God plainly stated again and again in the Torah that the Covenant, the *brit*, is a quid pro quo: If we Jews do our part, God will do his. This is the very meaning of

the word “covenant”. It’s a two-way street. It is most clearly stated in this week’s Torah portion, *Ki Tavo*:

If you...fulfill the commandments...

God will place you supreme above all the nations of the earth...

Blessed will be the fruit of your womb, your soil, your livestock, your basket and your kneading bowl.

Blessed shall you be in your comings and blessed shall you be in your goings.

God will cause your enemies ... to be beaten...

He will establish you as His holy people...

He will open up for you His good treasury, the heaven, to give your land its rain in its season, and to bless everything that you do...

You will lend ... but you will not [need to] borrow. [Deut. 28:1-13]

It says *only*: “If you fulfill the commandments”. It does not say “If you fulfill the commandments *for their own sake, out of love*”.

Of course, one can argue that it is better, nobler, holier, more wholesome, not to expect rewards for the things we do, not to look forward to them, not to work specifically for them. But is there really a need to make those who do things for rewards feel small, mercenary, guilty, ashamed, unworthy? Should they be blamed at all?

Again, “covenant” means contract, deal, two-sided agreement. It is the very basis of Judaism.

Besides, the Midrash tells us that it’s human nature to be selfish, to have an Evil Inclination, and that it’s even good:

Naḥman said in Rav Shmuel's name: [When the Torah said:] “And, behold, it was very good”, it referred to the Evil Inclination. Can the Evil Inclination [then] be “very good”? That would be extraordinary! Yes, [because] without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work. So said [King] Solomon [in Ecclesiastes]:

And I saw that all labor and all achievement in work was the result of man's envy and rivalry with his neighbor.” [Eccl. 4:4]

[Genesis Rabbah 9:7]

This is a severe indictment of humankind. It suggests that we achieve things for specific personal rewards:

- to show off, to gain the admiration of others,
- to have more money, more possessions,
- to “get the girl” (or the boy),
- to do better than our neighbors, to be ahead of the competition,

- to win prizes,
- to satisfy our curiosity,
- to exercise power,
- to *show* those who said we would never amount to anything, or
- to leave worthy deeds behind, so as to ensure we are remembered after we die.

None of this is altruistic. But without these base incentives, we would not achieve anything. There would be no progress. They are essential for the continued existence of the world. The driving force behind most of our successes is bad impulses, not love of God or of Judaism. So it is no surprise that the Talmud says:

Abaye said: The greater the man, the greater his Evil Inclination. [Sukkah 52a]

Now we know why the great are great! Their means and motivations are not always honorable. So, apparently, everything we do in life is for a reward of *some* kind. That's how we are wired. So be it. It is not necessarily a bad thing as long as good things get done. Your thoughts are your own; it's your actions that count.

Also, note that the reward is always relative. The Mishnah says:

בֶּן הֵאָהָה אֹמֵר, לְפֹנִים צִעֲרָא אֲגָרָא

Ben He He said: The reward is according to the labor. [Avot 5:23]

Thus, mitzvot that require more effort count for more. A Jew raised Orthodox who stays Orthodox earns less credit than one who becomes Orthodox as an adult, because it's much easier for him.

So how do we reconcile these two lines of argument? Our tradition in the Talmud suggests the following resolution:

Rav Yehudah said that Rav said: "A person should always occupy himself with Torah and good deeds, even if it is not for their own sake, because doing so will lead him eventually to performing them for their own sake." [Pesachim 50b]

Thus, performing commandments in the expectation of the promised rewards is a good start, not to be minimized. Later, we will naturally come to performing them for their own sake.

Shabbat shalom.