

Is studying more important than doing?

The holiday of Sukkot begins tonight. Let me start by quoting from the shacharit prayer *Ahavah Rabbah*. It includes the following request:

וְתוֹ בְּלִבֵּנוּ לְהַבִּין וּלְהַשְׁכִּיל לְשִׁמְעַ לְלַמֵּד וּלְלַמֵּד לְשִׁמְרָה וּלְעֲשׂוֹת וּלְקַיֵּם אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי
תַּלְמוּד תּוֹרַתְךָ בְּאַהֲבָה

Make our hearts understand, comprehend, listen, learn, teach, observe, perform, and fulfill all the words of the teaching of your Torah, with love.

Wow! Eight verbs in quick succession! The first six are about studying, and only the last two are about doing, almost as an afterthought. Is studying, then, so much more important than doing?

Yes. The Talmud says:

These are the [most important] things ... Honoring father and mother, practicing loving deeds, and making peace between people. But the study of Torah is equal to all of them put together. [*V'talmud Torah k'neged kullam*]. [Kidd. 40a]

And again:

The following question was raised before [the Sages]:

Is study or practice greater?

Rabbi Tarfon answered: ... Practice is greater.

Rabbi Akiva answered: ... Study is greater, for it leads to practice.

Then they all concluded: ... Study is greater, for it leads to action. [Kidd. 40b]

An objection might be raised. When the Torah was revealed at Sinai, the Israelites said:

Naaseh venishma' -- We will do and we will listen. [Ex. 19:8]

Does this not imply action is more important? At the beginning, yes, it was, for it set the tone, much as a child acts first under direction, and then learns.

Now let's jump to Sukkot. The Midrash says that the four species we wave represent four types of people:

- The lulav represents those who are scholarly but do not perform good deeds,
- The hadass represents those who are not scholarly but perform good deeds,

- The etrog represents those who are both scholarly and perform good deeds, and
- The aravah represents those who are neither scholarly nor perform good deeds.

The Midrash concludes:

What then does the Holy One, blessed be He, do to [the last group, those who are neither scholarly nor perform good deeds]? To destroy them is impossible. But, says the Holy One, blessed be He, let them all be tied together in one band and they will atone one for another.

[Leviticus Rabbah 30:12]

So the Sukkot ceremony is deemed invalid unless all four species are present and held tightly together at the same time. So everybody gets a chance to absorb what he lacks from everyone else around him. Every person has value in the scheme of things.

But the blessing we recite is on the lulav alone! "... who has commanded us concerning the lulav -- the palm tree branch." Why is only the lulav mentioned? Didn't we just say that ALL four species must be together for the ceremony to be valid?

The Talmud answers: Only the lulav is mentioned because it is the largest and most visible of the four [Sukkah 37b]. But one could say equally logically that it is the **smallest** of the four that should be mentioned, so you become aware that it is there.

This bothered me. So I thought: The lulav represents people who are scholarly but do not perform good deeds. Scholarly people ensure continuity by keeping knowledge alive, thereby creating opportunities for future generations to be observant. So study is the most important, and that's why only the lulav is mentioned. But then, following this logic, if you are going to mention only one, shouldn't it be the etrog, since it represents people who are both scholarly and perform good deeds?

One can think of arguments against the etrog. Perhaps these people are too perfect, too intense, and represent a goal that is realistically unattainable for most of us. By doing everything, they do not help us set priorities. Also, the etrog is the most expensive of the four species, because of its shape it must be held separately from the other three (one hands holds the etrog and the other holds the other

three), and physically it does not easily mingle with the others. This whiff of elitism may have turned Tradition away from using it for the blessing.

However, why the blessing does not mention all four is still a mystery to me!

Chag sameach!